

## Religious Feeling and Truth

GRANT H. PALMER\*

equal-protection clauses of the Constitution. Center director Gregory S. Baylor said it reflects “an outdated understanding of the separation of church and state.”

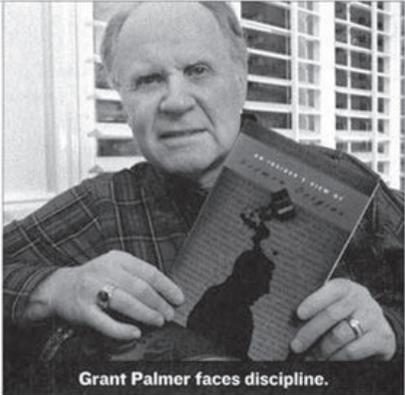
• Stephen Adams in *Colorado Springs*

[RELIGION]

### LDS ‘Insider’ Suspended

Author stands by critical book.

Grant H. Palmer had expected to be punished by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for writing the 2002 book *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*. But the delayed timing caught him off



Grant Palmer faces discipline.

damage to people’s faith by causing them to doubt Mormon foundational claims,” Palmer said. He is retired after 34 years as a college-level LDS educator.

COURTESY OF OFFICE OF SENATOR JOHN THURM

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*Author Grant H. Palmer spent his career as a teacher within the LDS Church Educational System. In 2005, he was disciplined after writing a book that called into question Mormonism’s claims about its founder, the Prophet Joseph Smith, while at the same time calling upon his church to place greater emphasis on Jesus Christ. Although Palmer is not a Southern Baptist—indeed he still considers himself a Mormon—we are pleased that he was willing to share with us how he came to the conclusion that one must not ultimately base the acceptance or rejection of religious truth on feelings. In making his case, Palmer challenges the central Mormon belief that the best (perhaps the only) way to be sure that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith really a prophet is to pray to receive a testimony, or “burning Bosom,” providing assurance that they are. (The Editor)*

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When Pontius Pilate interrogated Jesus shortly before his death, Jesus said, I came “into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice,” meaning to follow *him*. Pilate then asked his now famous rhetorical question, “What is truth?” and abruptly ended the interview (John 18:37-38). Earlier in his ministry, the Apostle Thomas had asked: “How can we know the way?” and Jesus explicitly replied, “I am the way, [I am] the truth” (John 14:5-6). The Apostles John, Paul, and Peter later repeated that “truth came by Jesus Christ,” that “the truth is in Jesus” and that Jesus is “the way of truth” (John 1:17; Eph 4:21; 2 Pet 2:2). The truth about God for the Christian is seen in the personality, character, wisdom, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. For the Christian, Christ is religious Truth.

How then does a person specifically come to know religious Truth/Christ? I like the fact that Jesus emphasized an empirical test of his teachings to “know” him rather than a metaphysical approach to truth. It is instructive to bear in mind that Jesus never invited anyone to know him by a religious feeling. Instead of advocating a controversial and highly subjective spiritual feeling methodology to know him and his teachings, Jesus taught: “If any man will *do* his [Father’s] will, he shall *know* of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” And in one of his recorded prayers, Jesus said that taking upon us the name of God and his character is to “*know* thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 7:17; 17:3, emphasis added).

The aged Peter reemphasized this doctrine to the saints —saying that the “divine nature” of Christ and his teachings can be known only by exemplifying the Christ-like characteristics of: “Diligence [in our daily walk] . . . faith [in God] . . . virtue . . . knowledge [of the Scriptures] . . . temperance [meaning self control, moderation and balance] . . . patience . . . godliness [goodness] . . . brotherly kindness [gentleness] . . . charity” [love and compassion]. Peter then explained that when these nine qualities “*be in you, and abound*” then we “*know . . . Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet 1:4-8, emphasis added). Paul also taught the saints “to put on Christ,” to strive for these characteristics, until “Christ be in you,” “until Christ be formed in you.” His list of the fruits by which a Christian is known is almost identical with Peter’s. He also lists nine qualities: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Rom 8:10; 13:14; Gal 4:19; 5:22-23).

Shortly before leaving the earth, Jesus promised his disciples that he

would send to them His agent, the Holy Spirit. Jesus then described the mission and responsibility of the Holy Spirit to his apostles: (1) He will “bring all things to your remembrance, *whatsoever I have said unto you*” —to sharpen and intensify all the words, teachings and example of Jesus’ ministry to their “remembrance” (John 14:26, emphasis added); (2) “When the Comforter is come . . . he shall *testify of me*” —he will bring “comfort,” peace and tranquility to their soul that Jesus is Christ (John 15:26, emphasis added); (3) When “the Spirit of truth, is come, he will *guide you into all truth* [about me]: for he shall . . . *glorify me*” —He will “guide” or “sanctify [them,] through the truth,” which further “glorifies” Christ (John 16:13-14, emphasis added; cf. John 17:19); (4) And after the “power . . . [of] the Holy Ghost is come upon you: ye shall be *witnesses unto me*” —He will empower, embolden, and enliven, to fill them with enthusiasm (God in us) and the confidence to compellingly *testify of Christ* to others (Acts 1:8, emphasis added). Shortly after the Day of Pentecost, all these promises are plainly manifested by the Apostles in Acts chapters 2-5. In summary, all of the statements made by Jesus about the Holy Spirit during his ministry have this in common —the Holy Spirit is all about Christ!

One of the most emphasized teachings in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is found in the oft quoted passage found in the Book of Mormon: “And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may *know the truth of all things*” (Moro 10:5, emphasis added). In this verse we see a move away from the Holy Spirit’s role of testifying of things Christ, as taught by Jesus in the New Testament, to the idea that one can *know* the truth about anything—about “all things.” An extreme example of this teaching within the Book of Mormon is when Nephi stated: “I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head” (1 Ne. 4:18). A more recent example of a Mormon being influenced by this teaching is when Ron and Dan Lafferty received a “revelation” of the “Spirit” to kill Brenda Lafferty and her infant child because, like Nephi’s rationale, Brenda was interfering with the future progress of their religious movement.

The Holy Spirit may well tell a person the Book of Mormon is true because it testifies and brings a person to Christ, who is the Truth, but not whether the Book of Mormon’s theological doctrines are true. For example, does the spirit that is felt when reading the book mean that it confirms that God and Christ is the same being [Palmer alludes to the Book of Mormon’s modalistic tendencies] or that man is more evil than good—both doctrines taught in the Book of Mormon, but later reversed by Joseph Smith? Since Mormons now believe that God and Christ are two separate beings, and that man is more good than evil, taught since the early 1840’s in Nauvoo by Smith, which confirming spirit is a true

one? Nor does the Spirit confirm the truth or falsity of whether the Book of Mormon is a real record of a historical people of the distant past. The Holy Spirit testifies of all things Christ, not “all things” as Joseph Smith taught in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants.

When a church or group embraces the idea that when preacher and hearer “are edified,” or feel the “Spirit of truth,” and thus *what they speak and hear is the truth* (D&C 50:20-21), they open up a can of worms that leads to strange mis-directions and mischief, as witnessed throughout history. For example, many followers of the LDS and FLDS churches have received the confirming and edifying “Spirit” that Warren Jeff’s or Thomas Monson is the “prophet, seer and revelator” for humankind. Moreover, some fundamentalist Mormon churches pass out literature quoting Brigham Young and others that polygamy is divine and is to be practiced. The promise being that one can know by reading, praying, pondering, and feeling the “Spirit.” Some claim they receive the edifying “Spirit of truth,” and join with these religious congregations. Some young Muslims become fully convinced through religious feeling that Allah wants them to strap bombs around their waist and detonate themselves and others for the glory of Allah. I was once invited by an enthusiastic promoter to invest \$8,000 in a Fort Worth, Texas oil well. After praying and pondering and feeling the “Spirit,” I gave him the money but lost every cent. I also felt the “Spirit” strongly after hearing the inspiring World War II stories of Paul H. Dunn and Douglas Stringfellow, which were later found to be largely bogus. Some people claim they found their car keys only after praying and being led by the Spirit where to look. These kinds of stories are plentiful. The tendency of religious people is to report only those spiritual feeling experiences that actually come true, seldom those that fail. The reality is that God’s purposes in giving the Holy Spirit did not include infallibly leading us into a very literal “know[ing] the truth of all things.”

Throughout my life I have heard the repeated phrase, “I know the church is true,” “the only true church on earth” (D&C 1:30). I have come to believe that Christian churches are not true or false, but rather good or bad depending on the degree to which they focus on the life of Jesus, his teaching ministry, his character, his wisdom, atonement, and Christ-like service. Churches that emphasize Christ and his core teachings, such as the importance of being “born again” and the sanctifying role of God’s grace in that process resulting in Christ-like love and service to the less fortunate, are the most valuable. Churches that allow Jesus to fall through the cracks, that occasionally instead of regularly focus on Christ himself, that are largely preoccupied with their own peculiar beliefs and intuitional needs, with emphasis upon service within the organization, are less valuable.