My normal articles are confident in the doctrine I teach, because I feel confident that I can back up my doctrine with statements from scriptures and prophets. This topic is different. I am exploring something I have never heard directly addressed by anyone before. After you have read the article I invite you to add your thoughts and opinions in the comments.

Assumption

At the outset let me say I am assuming that some things pertaining to access to God, our Father, have absolutely nothing to do with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For example, I can be a member of an aboriginal tribe in the deepest of jungles, and pray to my deity for the welfare of my family, and I believe God will, and does, answer that prayer. No prior knowledge of Christ or his gospel is needed. Just being a child of God is enough for such a prayer to be answered, if the person is willing to exercise enough faith in something, anything higher than themself to ask for help.

In Moroni 7:16 we are told the following:

> 16 For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil …

Jesus has always taught that all good originates and comes from God. That makes sense since mankind has always been able to discern good from evil and right from wrong. True, some societies may be more in tune with this ability than others, but every society has the light of Christ within them to help them tell the difference between good and evil.

Important questions

If we all have the ability to tell the difference between basic good and evil, and that knowledge comes from our universal and common Father, how does that affect our ability to pray, exercise faith, and repent? The scriptures teach us that Christ has spoken to all nations of the earth and has given them a portion of his word. I have

always assumed that a nation or culture who has received a lesser portion of God's gospel will still be blessed by living the portion they have been given. That makes sense. And things like prayer and faith, I believe, lie outside the actual gospel Christ delivered to Joseph Smith and the Nephites, for faith is a general principle of growth that only requires the object of the faith be based on truth.

What about prayer for those who have received a lesser portion of God's word? Won't God answer a prayer just because He loves His children, despite their mortal circumstances? Prayer is supposed to be the universal gift to all of God's children that allows them to speak directly with their Heavenly Parent.

How about the process of repenting or changing for the better? Isn't history replete with stories of people who have gone off track but finally were able to make a mighty change that affected their life forever after? In this manner, isn't repentance a universal constant, like prayer - it is available to all? Let's look at each of these more closely, one at a time.

Prayer

Jesus has always been very specific that we are to pray in his name. Can we still expect our prayers to be answered if we don't close our prayer in Jesus' name? This would be true of anyone who is definitely not a Christian. Muslims don't pray in the name of Christ. Do they have their prayers answered? Buddhists don't pray in the name of Christ. Do they have their prayers answered?

I think they do have their prayers answered, at least after a fashion. I can't imagine God ignoring the pleas of His children just because they don't use the correct wording, or because they have the wrong idea about who it is they are seeking to address in the expression of the desires of their hearts. This creates a very divided method of praying, for only a small portion of humanity actually prays to God and considers themselves Christian. The rest of humanity either doesn't believe Jesus has anything to do with their prayers or they may believe their god is a spirit of nature or something carved out of stone sitting in their courtyard. Yet for all of these people, God still answers prayers.

Faith

Faith is a power that can operate outside the doctrines of the Lord's Church. A person can exercise faith in a good seed just as effectively in Bangladesh as in Bora Bora or Timbuktu. You don't even need to know of Christ to learn to use faith and be blessed by it in your life. I believe this is one of those things that Christ has taught all nations as part of the basics of using the light of Christ in their lives. Faith is required of all people if they are ever to come to Christ, so everyone needs to know how to use it. It is an essential part of the curriculum in the class labeled mortality 101.

Joseph Smith referred to faith as a principle of power. The planets are held in their orbits by faith. What is the difference between the faith those who know nothing of the gospel of Christ and the faith of those who are covenant-making and keeping members of the restored gospel?

Repentance

Everyone is capable of changing for the better, so some form of repentance is possible for everyone. To simplify the discussion a little bit, let's ask this question: What is the difference between the repentance of a Methodist, a Catholic, or a born again Christian, and a member of Christ's restored gospel? If Christ can help anyone become a better version of themself through their repenting and wanting to be a better person, which we see happen all the time in addiction recovery programs, then what difference does it make that we have made covenants with the Lord? Is our repentance and its outcome any different than the Christian down the street?

Purpose of covenants

The most basic truth about covenants is that in the gospel a covenant serves one main purpose, and that is as a contract offered by God only to those who declare their desire to become like Him. Covenants are the property of the celestial pursuit. No other kingdom has or requires covenants, just the celestial. This fact alone makes me think that there is a qualitative difference between the use of covenants, and what they affect in the lives of the Latter-day Saints, when contrasted with the lives of anyone who has not made covenants, be they Christian or not.

If covenants produce different results for the same behaviors then what might those be? Both Latter-day Saints and atheists can exercise faith in something true, so what blessing comes to the Latter-day Saint exercising faith that doesn't come to the atheist?

Both a mainstream Christian and a Latter-day Saint can pray and repent, but what a mainstream Christian expects to receive from their prayers and repentance is a far cry from what the Latter-day Saints expect to receive. Why? Is this difference in expectation based on the covenants we make?

Qualitative difference

I have already stated that I believe both members of the Lord's Church and those outside of the Church can repent, pray, and exercise faith. If that is true then what is the difference between any Christian's efforts and our efforts, besides the covenants we have made through the authorized priesthood? This is where I must state my personal opinion, because I have never heard a prophet directly discuss this point. And this is where I would like you to consider for yourself this argument and comment on it.

I believe that the qualitative difference between a non-covenant maker, and a covenant maker and keeper, is that in accepting the covenants offered by our Father in Heaven then keeping those covenants faithfully, the Holy Ghost is able to change us not just for the better, like He can do for any Christian who exercises faith in God, but He can purify us and make us holy in the process. Purity and holiness are both required in order to be exalted.

Holiness is not available to those who don't make covenants. At least I am not aware that it is. The whole purpose of making covenants is that by doing so we begin to make the changes that make us more like Christ, Himself. Our prayers are not just supposed to be answered, but because of the gift of the Holy Ghost we should be receiving regular and even constant revelation that brings us ever closer to the mind of God.

Our faith, because of our covenants, which brings with it the gift of the Holy Ghost, means we learn to think more and more like Christ and our Father. When we exercise our faith we learn to be more wise in how we use our faith, and how we place our faith. Our faith bears greater and greater fruit as we continue to keep our covenants.

Finally we get to repentance. The purpose of repentance is to have our hearts permanently changed so we lose the very desire for sin. Repentance is meant to help us replace our habits of our telestial or terrestrial natures with the habits that become increasingly celestial in nature. Again, this goes back to the gift of the Holy Ghost, that

member of the Godhead who, AFTER we have made our baptismal covenant, we are given as a companion to teach us of the ways of God.

The Holy Ghost leads everyone to the point of making covenants, if He can get them there. But He cannot help them make the changes needed to sanctify them or purify them so they become holy in nature and behavior, until they have made at least the first basic covenant of baptism. And this includes, of course, the need for the proper priesthood authority.

Final Thoughts

After much mulling about of these ideas, my final conclusion is that every child of God has far more access to God than I previously thought they had. I got it in my head that only those who made covenants could get prayers answered, or exercise faith, or repent of sins. I no longer believe this is true. But I do believe that there is a huge difference between those who have made and keep covenants and those who do not.

Making covenants opens doors that lead to a life of improvement and perfection that is simply not available to the same degree without the covenants. We do not make these covenants. The covenants we accept and keep are those given to us by God. They are designed to help us become celestial people. This is why only those who want to become celestial people have to make covenants. The covenants make all the difference. With the acceptance of the first priesthood covenant we are immediately given the gift of the Holy Ghost, and it is through the covenants we accept and keep that the Holy Ghost is able to teach us and bless us in all the ways we need to be taught and blessed to become like Christ.

I often have to judge whether something is correct or not by how it feels. To me, this doctrine feels right. What about you? How do you feel?

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Covenants - How Do They Affect Prayer, Faith, and Repentance?