



# Embodied Knowledge of God

*by* Jennifer C. Lane

**I**n Spring 2005 I was attending a conference during the last days of Pope John Paul II. My return trip included a stopover in Atlanta where I spent several hours watching the funeral on the airport CNN broadcast. As I watched the celebration of the funeral Mass I reflected on the ease and naturalness with which Cardinal Ratzinger officiated. While I had attended Mass before, the mammoth scale of this liturgical event invited attention. I reflected on the kind of knowledge that was on display, a knowledge of what to do, how to hold oneself. This liturgical action represented a kind of embodied knowledge. By this I mean that his action was without thought, in the sense that it appeared to be purely natural. It was what the individual was. In watching it I wondered what would be involved in learning this and what it would mean to the one who embodied it.

The embodiment of knowledge I observed as an outsider caused me to reflect on knowledge and how it is conveyed in ritual and ordinance. The possibility of coming to a knowledge of God is repeated throughout the scriptures. I believe that our contemporary understanding of knowledge as acquiring a body of information is a tremendous barrier in understanding and receiving a fulfillment of those promises. Rather than attempting to offer a systematic examination of epistemology, I would like to reflect on the meaning of the knowledge of God in relation to ordinances and

ritual. As a starting point, I would like to refer to a comment made by Elder Dallin Oaks in the October, 2000 LDS General Conference. Before I return to consider the scripture Elder Oaks discusses, I will connect my discussion of embodied knowledge of God with contemporary ritual theory and a related aphorism from Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Elder Oaks began his talk “The Challenge to Become” by observing that:

The Apostle Paul taught that the Lord’s teachings and teachers were given that we may all attain ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13). This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be convinced of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are converted by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to know something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that knowledge as it is referenced in the language of scripture differs from that acquired in the “institutions of the world,” (i.e. schools, universities, and other formal educational institutions). Knowledge in the scriptural sense is not what we know, but what we are, what we have become. This knowledge is knowing how to do things, instinctively knowing how to be in situations. This knowledge is not abstract, but embodied and it is modeled for us in ritual. The ordinances point to a way of being we achieve through the process of conversion; they model a way of being in which we know God.

## RITUAL AND KNOWLEDGE

This suggestion that ritual conveys knowledge seems in opposition to the recent emphasis in the theory of ritual and performance. One of the most influential recent theorists, Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, emphasizes the *lack* of meaning conveyed by ritual actions. She argues that rather than convey ideas or worldviews, ritual actions create or embody relationships of power and create “ritualized agents.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of seeing it as a way of conveying ideas she points to it as a kind of em-

bodied knowledge. “Ritualization is not a matter of transmitting shared beliefs, instilling a dominant ideology as an internal subjectivity, or even providing participants with the concepts to think with. The particular construction and interplay of power relations effected by ritualization defines, empowers, and constrains.”<sup>3</sup> This insistence that ritual action should not be reduced to a means to convey abstract knowledge initially seems at odds with our idea as Latter-day Saints of being able to learn from the ritual of the ordinances.

I would be the first to admit that Bell’s fundamental assumptions about reality differ from those of the Restoration. For her ritual actions are social creations and can only be understood in terms of social and cultural relations. Concepts of revealed action, divine authority, covenant, and divine empowerment are for her cultural constructs rather than foundational truths. Nonetheless, I believe that in her observation about the role of ritual actions as ritualization we can learn something of one dimension of how ordinances function to allow individuals to participate in and embody the divine. In her reading of power relations she articulates something of the embodiment of knowledge that the ordinances offer. She observes:

The ultimate purpose of ritualization is neither the immediate goals avowed by the community or the officiant nor the more abstract functions of social solidarity and conflict resolution: *it is nothing other than the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies*, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Bell does not express this ritualization as individuals being “programmed” or molded, but rather as a means of becoming an agent with a sense of mastery. Ritualization thus preserves individuality rather than becoming prescriptive. She notes that

Ritual symbols and meanings are too indeterminate and their schemes too flexible to lend themselves to any simple process of instilling fixed ideas. Indeed, in terms of its scope, dependence, and legitimation, the type of authority formulated by ritualization tends to make ritual activities effective in grounding and displaying a sense

of community *without* overriding the autonomy of individuals or subgroups.<sup>5</sup>

This effort to articulate the embodiment of knowledge and its relationship with agency has close affinity to a puzzling statement of Ludwig Wittgenstein about obeying rules.

A different angle with which to approach the question of what ritual action does or doesn't convey is found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. He observed: "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*."<sup>6</sup> You will remember Bell's insistence on how ritualization creates "ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge," while at the same time maintaining that this embedded knowledge does not override "the autonomy of individuals." On the face of Wittgenstein's statement it would seem he wants to argue that "rules" create automatons. But the passage continues and here Wittgenstein, like Bell, also seems to suggest that in rule-obeying different choices are possible. In teasing out these different options within rule-giving and rule-obeying I think that he clarifies what he means in saying "I obey the rule *blindly*." Obeying *blindly* is not blind obedience. Consider the following remarks:

Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?

Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?

The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.<sup>7</sup>

Wittgenstein's point here relates to his well-known argument against a private language. In opposition to the empiricist view that understanding language is a subjective, intellectualized phenomenon, Wittgenstein shows that the meaning of a language is shown in the social practices of those who use it. Without common reactions to language according to "rules," there could be no meaning to language.

Wittgenstein's discussion of following a rule receives some elaboration

through French anthropologist/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical development of the embodied nature of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu articulates the idea of an embodied disposition of *habitus*, which explains how people can follow rules without being able to articulate them. *Habitus* describes how we follow a rule "blindly" because it locates our knowledge "in" our bodies as well as our minds.<sup>9</sup>

This knowledge of an embodied disposition can therefore be taught without needing to explain the system of thought abstractly.<sup>10</sup> Not only is behavior taught, but the significance of that behavior is also shared in this embodied knowledge. Following Bourdieu, Taylor observes: "Children are inducted into a culture, are taught the meanings which constitute it, partly through inculcation of the appropriate habitus. We learn how to hold ourselves, how to defer to others, how to be a presence for others, all largely through taking on different styles of bodily comportment[.]"<sup>11</sup> Through the formation of *habitus* knowledge becomes embodied.

Knowing how to be in the world is not innate, but something that is learned. Just as Wittgenstein seeks to describe how we know the rules without knowing the structure behind the rule, Bourdieu attempts to articulate rules of behavior without seeing those rules as a structure that is "causally operative."<sup>12</sup> We learn to "obey *blindly*" because the obedience is in our bodies rather than being an abstract concept in our minds. Bourdieu describes *habitus* saying: "The habitus is precisely this immanent law, *lex insita*, inscribed in bodies by identical histories, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for the practices of co-ordination."<sup>13</sup> We can intuitively understand how *habitus* is inculcated in family members or people with a shared culture. They have a shared history and thus a shared way of being in the world. If gaining embodied knowledge is a matter of having an "identical history," then what can this mean in light of gaining a knowledge of God and what role might the ordinances play in this process?

## ORDINANCES AS RITUAL EMBODIMENT

To connect the idea of embodied knowledge to the scriptural injunction to gain a knowledge of God, the obvious starting point is the Intercessory Prayer. Christ taught, in John 17, eternal life is to know God. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and

Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”<sup>14</sup> In this context, clearly, knowing God is not knowing facts about God. In his first epistle, John elaborates: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”<sup>15</sup> Knowing here is equated with obedience and, ultimately, knowing that “we are in him.” But what does it mean to know that “we are in him”? John clarifies that we must keep his word to have the love of God perfected in us and thus to be in him and to know him. The ordinances alone are not identical with this way of being “in him” because they model for us more than we have become. But at the same time, as ritual embodiment, through the ordinances we participate in a way of being that we are in the process of becoming.

Ordinances point us towards “being in him” in one sense because they model knowledge of and participation in the divine. Through enacting obedience in the ordinances we are inculcating the *habitus* that embodies knowledge of God. This kind of knowledge that we physically experience through ritual embodiment teaches how to obey blindly in Wittengstein’s sense: “when I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*.” We learn to “obey *blindly*” because the obedience is in our bodies rather than being an abstract concept in our minds. We are learning to be obedient to God by ritually enacting obedience rather than just learning the concept that obeying God is important. In Bell’s language this ritualization creates “ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act,” but knowing how to be through this embedded knowledge does not, as we said, override “the autonomy of individuals” and produce automatons. Obeying *blindly* is not blind obedience.

The ordinances show us how, and I believe also enable us, to “put on Christ.” Returning to Elder Oaks’ words:

The Apostle Paul taught that the Lord’s teachings and teachers were given that we may all attain ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13). This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge [I believe here he means knowledge in the contemporary sense as a body of information]. It is not even enough for us to be

convinced of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are converted by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to know something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something.<sup>16</sup>

The ordinances do not substitute for the conversion of becoming and taking on “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” but I do believe that they model this new way of being and furthermore, through covenant, empower us to become what we promise to become.

We can see this ritual embodiment of Christ in baptism and other ordinances. In the ordinances we “put on Christ” in a very literal sense, we participate in his life and his atoning sacrifice. We literally embody how Christ was in the world. We are all familiar with the explanation, clearly elaborated in Paul’s writings, that in baptism by immersion we symbolically die, bury, and are resurrected with Christ. In Galatians 3:27 Paul says that “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” In Romans 13:14 Paul tells the Saints to “put . . . on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” He explains how putting on Christ, this way of being modeled in baptism, is a separation from worldliness, the death of the man of sin. He exhorts the Saints to embody in life what they have embodied in ritual.

Another aspect of how baptism embodies how Christ was in the world is found in 2 Nephi 31. Nephi explains how the ordinance of baptism is an embodiment and participation in Christ because Christ’s own baptism was an embodiment of submission. Christ, in submitting to immersion, “according to the flesh he humbleth himself before the Father and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments.”<sup>17</sup> The ordinance is way in the sense that Christ is the Way. Baptism “showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them.”<sup>18</sup> The submission embodied in being immersed in water models an entire life of submission, the life of Christ. “And he said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father?”<sup>19</sup>

The ritual embodiment of Christ in baptism is extended in the ordinances of the temple. President Harold B. Lee commented that “The receiving of the endowment requires the assuming of obligations by cov-

enants which in reality are but an embodiment or an unfolding of the covenants each person should have assumed at baptism. . .”<sup>20</sup> Through the ordinances we gain a knowledge of God as we ritually embody the kind of obedience and submission that we need to develop in our lives through the process of conversion and becoming.

This discussion of ritual participation in Christ’s obedience could be taken as somehow antithetical to the good news of the gospel in its emphasis on obedience. This can only happen, however, if obedience is understood as something we do independently of Christ. If our obedience is seen as our own capacity to save ourselves then it is a profound misunderstanding of the very essence of the gospel.

Instead I think the key here is reading obedience as submission. Christ said: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”<sup>21</sup> When we see the ordinances’ ritual embodiment of Christ as the means of accepting this invitation then I think obedience in *all* our life makes sense in light of the gospel. Obedience is not about our capacity, but our willingness.

Obedience is the choice to exercise faith and submit. The submission of our will, as Elder Neal Maxwell so often emphasized, is the only thing we have to offer.<sup>22</sup> Our submission to the will of the Father is the only way we can put on Christ. In our echo of, “thy will, not mine be done” we then connect ourselves with the grace of Christ. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”<sup>23</sup> Putting on Christ through the ordinances is accepting the invitation to know God. The ritual embodiment of Christ is accepting the invitation to eternal life because it is Christ’s life, God’s life, that we are choosing to receive.

The connection of additional ordinances and the knowledge of God is made explicit in Doctrine and Covenants section 84:19–22

And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof,



and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.

The ritual embodiment of the ordinances points to and empowers true embodiment and true knowledge which is possible only through conversion and sanctification. As we accept the invitation to “come unto Christ and be perfected in him” we come to know him as we become like him.<sup>24</sup>

The ordinances point to a way of being in which we know God. They model a way of being in which we have “the mind of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> The knowledge of God which the ordinances allow us to experience through ritual embodiment points us to a life in which the Spirit of the Lord is in us so that we can “obey blindly” because this is who we are, knowing what to do, what to say, how to live in a holy and godly manner, but without this being blind obedience. Through obedience and submission in ritual action we consent to be and learn to be in the world as Christ was. In the ordinances we come to know Christ because we become Christ through ritual embodiment. We participate in an embodiment of submission and willingness to obey as he did. This embodiment is the knowledge of God as referred to in the Intercessory Prayer, knowing God as life eternal (see John 17:3).

Allowing people to come to a knowledge of God seems to be the very purpose for which the Restoration was brought about. Some may look back to the early days of the Restoration with nostalgia and long for a time when knowledge was poured out on the Saints. I believe that such a view rests on a limited understanding of knowledge. With a broader sense of knowledge as embodied, both in ordinance and in converted lives, I believe that now is the time when the knowledge of God is positioned to be poured out more than at any other time in history. I believe that through the expansion of the Church and temple building throughout the earth we are seeing the beginning of the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, . . . . After those days, saith the LORD, *I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts,* and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And *they shall*

*teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*<sup>26</sup>

Elder Oaks observes that “in contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to know something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to become something.” As Latter-day Saints we should not be content with the intellectual knowledge that comes in a form understandable to the “institutions of the world.” We should not be disheartened because there are not new sections added to the Doctrine and Covenants. The knowledge of God is available. The key of the knowledge of God has been restored. “Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.” The ordinances were “given that we may all attain ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13).” As we attain the “stature of the fulness of Christ” we will know God because we will have become like him (see 1 John 3:1-6; Moroni 7:48).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221. At the same time Bell acknowledges that ritual acts take place within a culture and that they “must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting” (ibid., 220).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 221-22.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillian, 1958), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>8</sup> See Charles Taylor, “To Follow a Rule . . .” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Calhoun, Craig and Edward LiPuma and Moishe Postone (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 45-60.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, 45-48 and 54. Bourdieu uses Marcel Mauss’s term *habitus* to describe what he himself calls the practical logic of participants. For a reflection of Mauss’s

influence on ritual theory see Amy Hollywood's "Practice, Belief, and Feminist Philosophy of Religion," in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack, 52-70 (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Taylor argues that Bourdieu's insistence on our embodied state goes against the philosophical emphasis on "monological consciousness which stems from Descartes and Locke" (Taylor, 49).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>14</sup> John 17:3.

<sup>15</sup> 1 John 2:3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," 32.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Nephi 31:7.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Nephi 31:9.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Nephi 31:10.

<sup>20</sup> Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee: Eleventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams 584 (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1996), 574.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Neal A. Maxwell, "Willing to Submit," *Ensign* (May 1985): 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> John 15:4-5.

<sup>24</sup> See Moroni 10:32-33 and Moroni 7:48.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:16.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34; emphasis mine.