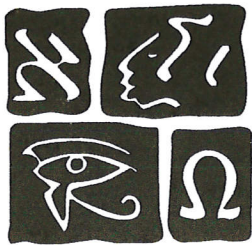




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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Robert L. Millet

The Doctrine of the New Birth

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Summary

In this lecture, Robert Millet discusses spiritual rebirth and how the passage into new life is connected to baptism and the reception of the Holy Ghost, as well as to spiritual experience. In the process of conversion we become new creatures and lose our disposition to sin. Those who are born again are part of a new family relationship as they become children of Christ. The ultimate goal is to become joint heirs with Christ.

Transcript
Book of Mormon, Teachings

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The Doctrine of the New Birth

Robert L. Millet

Let me read to you a statement, to begin with, from President Benson, to set the tone for what we want to do. President Benson said, "When you choose to follow Christ, you choose to be changed. In addition to the physical ordinance of baptism and the laying on of hands, one must be spiritually born again to gain exaltation and eternal life." He later said, "When we awake and are born of God, a new day will break and Zion will be redeemed" (*A Witness and a Warning*, p. 61, 62, 66).

The principle here is the principle in which we begin to play upon the ideas of birth and death. It's interesting, therefore, that birth and death can be defined in terms of one another. When we study the doctrine of the fall, we find that the fall brings death. Christ brings life. And so the fall brings about an alienation from things of righteousness; the atonement brings a renewal, and a refreshing, and a reunion in regards to things of righteousness. The fall brings spiritual death in the sense that we are cut off from the things of God; the atonement of Christ reestablishes, through an at-one-ment, a relationship with God.

So, today, let's make about eight points, if we can, and if we've done that we will have covered much of the waterfront.

1

One of the vital purposes of the plan of salvation is to renew men and women, to make of them new creatures in Christ. Maybe we can say that another way. It is important to belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, what the revelations call the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth. That's a great privilege. But belonging is not enough. The gospel is intended not just to get us into the Church, not even just to get us into the family, but to bring us to life. And so, the principle of rebirth entails coming to life.

If you'll open your Book of Mormon, let's go to the 27th chapter of Mosiah, and let's notice the language here. This is the account given by Mormon of the conversion of Alma the younger. Let's start with verse 23.

"And it came to pass after they had fasted and prayed for the space of two days and two nights, the limbs of Alma received their strength, and he stood up and began to speak unto them, bidding them to be of good comfort:

"For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit.

"And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again."

Let's see, we've listed there men and women, nations, kindreds, tongues, and people. Who does that leave out? That about covers us, doesn't it?

"Yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

"And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in no wise inherit the kingdom of God."

The new birth is a new creation. God is the creator. He creates, or recreates us. So the language here is very emphatic: all persons must be born again. That idea did not originate (I know we all know this, but let's state the obvious) in 100 to 92 B.C. It did not originate with Jesus, obviously, in the meridian of time. The idea is as old as the world. In fact, we could go back to the days of Adam and we would find the Lord giving instructions to Adam as follows. Adam had asked a question or two, such as, why must men repent and be baptized? The Lord gives some explanation. Then he says,

"I give unto you," the Lord says, "a commandment, to teach these things freely unto your children, saying [now this is what Adam is to teach]:

"That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so you must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory" (Moses 6:58-59).

And so, from the very beginning, with the plight and the dilemma associated with the fall, originating with Adam, the doctrine of rebirth is taught to Adam. And so that first principle: we must be born again, every person.

2

We indicated that *birth and death are defined in terms of one another*. Let's think that through for a minute. In a sense (we'll stretch it a little), we must die as pertaining to our premortal existence, in order to be born into our mortal existence. We must die in our mortal existence as pertaining to unrighteousness, to live, or be born, unto righteousness. We must die in our mortal existence as pertaining to physical life, to be born into immortality. Birth and death.

There's another way of saying that. That's this: there is a natural birth and there is a spiritual birth. The natural birth gives rise to the natural man; the spiritual birth gives rise to the spiritual man. Spiritual birth, obviously, comes after the natural birth. That same language is used, by the way, by the apostle Paul (that same genre of life and death)—this concept of being born after death. The sixth chapter of Romans:

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

"For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death," Paul writes, "we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

"Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin" (Romans 6:3–6).

And so this is an idea that's found just through and through the scriptures. And so our second point: birth and death are defined in terms of one another; we are born into one realm as we die as pertaining to another.

3

Baptism is a two-step process. Another way of saying that is, we might state our article of faith as follows: "We believe the first principles and ordinances of the gospel are, first, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, repentance; third, rebirth." A two-step process: baptism by water and by fire.

Go with me, if you will, to 2 Nephi 31. We're going to turn to 31:17. This is Nephi speaking concerning the doctrine of Christ, the gospel. And he has spoken at some length now about how Christ fulfilled all righteousness by being obedient to the Father, by being baptized, and so on. Now verse 17.

"Wherefore, do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and Redeemer should do; for, for this cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh the remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost."

Interesting. Notice that: "the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water, and *then* cometh [the] remission of your sins, by fire and by the Holy Ghost." Now another way of saying that is the way Joseph Smith said it; he said on one occasion, "You might as well baptize a bag of

sand as to baptize a man without giving him the gift of the Holy Ghost." And the principle at stake here is, we haven't completed the ordinance, as it were, we haven't sealed the ordinance, until the confirmation and the reception of the Spirit takes place. Or, to say that more directly, remission of sins comes through the ordinance of confirmation, not as we say, rather figuratively speaking, in the waters of baptism. ¹

Let's take one or two others. Maybe one other, Moroni 6. Moroni is here talking about what was required of people to be baptized, among the Nephites. Notice verse 2:

"Neither did they receive any unto baptism save they came forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, and witnessed unto the church that they truly repented of all their sins.

"And none were received unto baptism save they took upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end."

Now watch the language: "And after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the Church of Christ."

Now why is this true? It's because the real cleansing agent in the process is the Holy Spirit. He is not only the Revelator, but he is the Sanctifier: He is the one that burns dross, and ill will, and evil out of our souls as though by fire, thus giving rise to the expression "the baptism of fire." And so, baptism of water when not accompanied by the reception of the Holy Ghost is, as Joseph Smith would say, only half a baptism.

4

Let's state the principle first. *Rebirth consists of both a personal spiritual experience on the one hand, and a reception of ordinances on the other.* Rebirth consists of both personal spiritual experience and a reception of necessary ordinances. Now let's talk about that. It seems to me that a huge segment of Christianity today believes that being born again consists in having a personal experience with Jesus. It seems to me that a huge segment of Christianity believes that being born again consists in receiving the sacraments of the Church. Which is which? Who is this group that focuses on personal experience with Jesus, what segment of Christianity? Evangelical Christians, Protestants. The other side? Catholics focus on the ordinances or sacraments of the Church. Where would we stand on this? Well, Joseph Smith, as he so often did, said, "Truth takes the road between them both." And so he said, "Being born again comes by the Spirit of God, through ordinances." That's the way he said it. "Being born again comes by the Spirit of God, through ordinances" (*Teachings of Joseph Smith*, p. 162).

Let me take that a little farther by referring to an example in the New Testament, and then we'll come back to the Book of Mormon. If you've got the third chapter of John, let's turn to the episode with Nicodemus and analyze this a little bit—John 3, because the language here is so appropriate. We need someone to read for us John 3:1–5.

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

"The same [went] to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

"Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born [again] when he is old? can he enter [in a] second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

"Jesus answered, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus' power and his ability; and Jesus, in verse 3, as if he anticipated some question (perhaps the question, "What must I do to be saved?"), answers, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus inquires further, and Jesus says, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter."

On one occasion, Joseph Smith, while preaching in Pontiac, Michigan, took this passage we've just read, these verses, and gave a remarkable sermon. The prophet said this, "It is one thing to see the kingdom of God, and another thing to enter into it." And then he said, "A man must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God." And he said, "And then he must subscribe to the articles of adoption to enter therein." We'll talk about that latter phrase in a few moments, but think: there's a difference between seeing and entering—a man must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God (*The Teachings*, p. 328).

What's he talking about? You must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God? What does that mean? What comes to mind? When would someone see the kingdom of God?

Student: To be converted, to understand.

Yes. Give me an example in everyday life. When would a person come to see the kingdom of God?

Student: When he opens up his mind and opens up his heart and begins to want to understand, and then he can see.

It's as if the veil comes off his eyes, and he begins to see things as they are. That manifests itself in interesting ways. He or she asks very interesting questions. They ask sincere questions. Notice, for example, in the Book of Mormon in the eleventh chapter of Alma, how the nature of Amulek's questions changes, as he begins to be touched. Notice in the twelfth chapter how Zeezrom's questions changed when he began to ask Amulek. In the next chapter, Alma preaching, notice the questions that are posed to him, first by someone just sort of jabbing at him. Finally, the questions become very sincere. The other thing you notice is that the contact begins to believe, the investigator begins to believe what's being said—to believe the witness of the person speaking.

I've often said that people who've been touched, who've been born again, to see the kingdom, you could tell them, "Now Mr. and Mrs. Brown, you need to know that Joseph Smith built the Brooklyn Bridge." And they would say, "Oh, yes. I know he did. If you say he did, he did." Now there's something that's happened to them. They're not defensive anymore, they don't want to fight, they don't want to argue, they don't want to debate scripture; they're teachable. The other thing that happens is that their own book of scripture, the Bible, is opened up to them. They now see things they've never seen before.

One young fellow by the name of Daniel Tyler wrote the following in describing what Joseph Smith said as a part of that sermon in Pontiac, Michigan:

"The birth here spoken of [John 3] was not the gift of the Holy Ghost which was promised after baptism but was a portion of the Spirit which attended a preaching of the gospel by the elders of the Church. The people [that is, the people who are investigating the Church] wondered why they had not previously understood the plain declarations of scripture, as explained by the elder, as they had read them hundreds of times. When they read the Bible now, it was a new book to them.

"This was being born again to see the kingdom of God. They were not in it, but could see it from the outside, which they could not do until the Spirit of the Lord took the veil from their eyes. It was a change of heart, but not of state. They were converted, but they were yet in their sins." You see, if you stop a being born again to see, you stop prematurely; you've not received the full blessing.

"Although Cornelius [you remember, in the tenth chapter of Acts, the Gentile] had seen an holy angel, and on the preaching of Peter the Holy Ghost

was poured out upon him and his household, they were only born again to see the kingdom of God. Had they not been baptized afterwards, they would not have been saved." That statement from the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Now, there should be both seeing and entering, both personal spiritual experience and reception of the sacraments; now let's get to the second part of that statement. He says, it's one thing to see, another thing to enter. You see when your heart begins to be changed, and then he says, "You enter as you subscribe to the articles of adoption." We'll talk more about that in a few moments, but let's get at what he is saying. When is a person adopted? When would you ever have to bring about adoption proceedings? What are the circumstances? Anybody here adopted or have adopted children? I'm surprised. Do you know anybody that's adopted? Why were they adopted?

Student: Because they loved them.

Yes. And what do you want to do with them? You can just love them without adopting them, can't you? What is the advantage of adopting?

Student: Then you get to raise them.

Yes. You've got to get them in your family, don't you? And so the adopted child becomes a regular member of the family, and thus, legally speaking, through the legal proceedings, is entitled to all the benefits of the children who are naturally in the family. So think about what he is saying. You see the kingdom of God through having your heart changed, but you can only enter it through subscribing to the "articles of adoption." The "articles of adoption" are the first principles and ordinances of the gospel: faith, and repentance, and baptism, and the Holy Ghost. We'll talk more about the nature of this adoption in a few moments. Any comments or questions up to now?

Student: If you have a child under eight he doesn't need baptism.

That's right, that's right. But even they, after eight, will have to be, right? Prior to eight, they're covered. The atonement covers them, unconditionally. After eight, or the age of accountability at least, then they are subject to spiritual death; and any being that's subject to spiritual death, truly subject to the death, must subscribe to the ordinances.

5

The new creation is a change of attitude and a change of state. Think with me for a moment. Do you remember the occasion in the Book of Mormon in the fifth chapter of Mosiah, when King Benjamin has preached his powerful sermon. The people have been deeply touched. Maybe we ought to turn to

that; let's do that. It's worth looking at. Mosiah chapter 5, we need someone to read for us verses 1 and 2, first of all.

"And now, it came to pass that when King Benjamin had thus spoken to his people, he sent among them, desiring to know of his people if they believed the words which he had spoken unto them.

"And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually."

What does that verse say to you?

Student: Complete conversion to Jesus Christ.

Have any of you ever felt that? Are these the only people in the world who've ever had that experience? Their change is such that they "have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually." Has anybody here ever felt that? Of course you have. You or I have been in meetings, or in conferences, or sessions, where we've been so moved by what was said, by what we felt, that there came into our minds and our hearts an honest and genuine resolve that we didn't want to do anything bad again. How long does it last? A half-hour sometimes. Let's suppose a half-hour later you did do something wrong. You snapped at someone, or you were uncharitable. What is a disingenuous resolve? Was it not a true feeling you had? Was it not born of the Spirit? Do you see what I'm driving at? My question to you is, do we have any indication in the Book of Mormon that the people of Benjamin never sinned again? What's your guess? That they did. But why? They didn't want to. The principle here is, the new birth is a change in feelings and desires. It isn't that a person becomes perfect. It isn't that a person never makes mistakes again. It's just that they don't stay long in the darkness.

One day I came home from work very, very tired, distressed, stressed, and stretched, and sat in my chair just wanting to be alone. My wife, who is a very sweet, kindly person, came in and said, "How are you doing?" I was not in a kindly mood, and I snapped at her. I said something that offended and hurt her. I saw it. My first thought was an interesting one. My first thought was, "Oh crud, I've lost the Spirit of the Lord now and it won't be back for a week." My second thought was, "The heck of it! That's not true. Go deal with this." I went into the other room. I said to her, "I'm really sorry. I don't have an explanation for that. I'm just really tired. Will you forgive me?" And she said, "Well, sure." I said to the Lord, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to do that. I have bad flesh or something. I just can't help it."

Now I was genuine in that repentance, too. And you know what I just did? I repented fast. And may I say that this is a true principle, that J. Golden Kimball was onto something; he said they can't excommunicate him because he repented so darn fast. He's onto something, and that is, the God-fearing and the faithful repent quickly. Why? Because they've lived in the light, and they know what it feels like to be in the light, and they don't handle darkness well at all. Do you see what I'm saying? And so the issue here is not that they never made a mistake, it's that they didn't stay in sin very long.

I'm interested, for example, that in the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, Joseph Smith prayed as follows (Doctrine and Covenants 109:21):

"When thy people transgress, any of them, they may speedily repent and return unto thee."

Now he means that. That's a true principle. The righteous and the God-fearing repent quickly. They don't linger and languish in transgression or in darkness. One of my colleagues on campus, Terry Olsen, said it, I think, sweet and simply, when he said to a group once, "I can't promise you that you'll never step into the darkness or that you'll never step out of the light, but I can promise you that you don't have to stay in the darkness." That's the promise of the atonement, through Christ.

Now about this change, a change in feelings, a change in desires, let me throw one at you. What would you make of this? I'm going to read you now from one of John's epistles. This could cause some heartache. What if I read to you this: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." I'm reading it right there—1 John 3:9. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Now that just isn't consistent with what we've been saying, is it? Thank heavens for the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, which reads, "Whosoever is born of God doth not continue in sin." That's the principle we've been talking about: "doth not continue in sin." We may sin, we may make mistakes, but less and less and less it's a factor of premeditation, because of a change of feelings, a change of desires.

Look at the 28th chapter of Mosiah. Let's turn to that for a second. After the conversion of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, where do the sons of Mosiah want to go preach? What's their desire? What mission field do they want to labor in, or open up? The Lamanites. Now I don't know—what would you liken that to today? I want to go work in the Bronx, New York? I would liken it more to, I want to go work in Bosnia. They're wanting to go to a place where the people are not likely to receive them well, to state it lightly. But look at verse 3. Why?

"They were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble."

Now why would it "cause them to quake and tremble"? What has gone on? What's happening? These are men who are described as "the very vilest of sinners" before. What's happened to them?

Student: They've had a change of heart.

Yes, a massive change in heart. They've been there, for one thing. That is, they've experienced hell temporarily and they don't want to go through that, and they don't want anybody else to go through it either.

Let me share with you how President Joseph F. Smith described his own experience. This is a very touching thing. "I speak of the influence and power of the Holy Spirit that I experienced when I was baptized for the remission of sins. The feeling that came upon me was that of pure peace, of love, of light. I felt in my soul that if I had sinned, and surely I was not without sin, that I had been forgiven; that I was indeed cleansed from sin. My heart was touched and I felt that I would not injure the smallest insect beneath my feet." You see, his change of heart extended to kind of a reverence for life. Do you see that? "I felt as if I wanted to do good everywhere, to everybody, and to everything. I felt a newness of life, a newness of desire to do what was right. There wasn't a particle of desire for evil left in my soul" (*Gospel Doctrine*, p. 96).

That's what we're talking about. Maybe no one has said it more eloquently than our own President Ezra Taft Benson (at General Conference, October 1985): "Would not the progress of the Church increase dramatically today with an increasing number of those who are spiritually reborn? Can you imagine what would happen in our homes? Can you imagine what would happen with an increasing number of copies of the Book of Mormon in the hands of an increasing number of missionaries who know how to use it, and who have been born of God?" When this happens we will get the harvest our prophet envisions.

He then said (this is a masterpiece), "The Lord works from the inside out; the world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums; Christ takes the slums out of people and they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment; Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature." He goes on, "Yes, Christ changes men; and changed men can change this world. Men changed for Christ will be captained by Christ." Finally, "Men captained by

Christ will be consumed in Christ. To paraphrase President Harold B. Lee, they set fire in others because they are on fire themselves."

Look back at that Mosiah passage. There's something else that's going on. Mosiah 5, the people of King Benjamin. We read verses 1 and 2; look at verse 3. We said they had a change in their feelings, their desires—what else? Verse 3:

"And we, ourselves, also, through the infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit, have great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, we could prophesy of all things."

What kind of a change is that? Yes, it is mighty. What kind of a change—if the first one is a change in desires, what's this a change in? Could we say perspective? Resolve? Notice this: "Great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, we could prophesy of all things." This is a people who are so moved upon they not only want to change their hearts, and their hearts have not only been changed, but they've been born again to see things as they really are. Theirs is the prophetic spirit. They're able to not only prophesy of the future, but see things as they are today.

So the new birth is a matter of change, a change of heart, a change of mind.

Student: When you see things as they really are, you're seeing the real world, which is more than just the physical world that we're living in.

That's right. It seems to me that the more we live a life that's of the world, the less we see things as they are. As we live according to truth—what is truth? Knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come. So therefore the principle is, that the closer I live to the Spirit of the Lord, the more I see things as they really are, or as God sees them. The more I stray from that, my view is warped.

6

6) *Those who are born again are received into a new family relationship: they become the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ.* Now the principle operating here—again, we can't understand it unless we understand the fall. The fall brought an alienation, not only from things of righteousness, but from the divine family relationship.

Paul was perhaps the most abrupt in the way he said it, in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, when he said that if we're not willing to be chastened or to take counsel from God, we will be familyless; and he was bold enough to call it as it is. He said, you're "bastards," meaning you have no family. People, therefore, who put on the atonement of Christ and thus put off the natural man, not only overcome the nature, but they reestablish themselves

into the family. And thus they become members of that royal family and are entitled to the family name.

Let's go back to that fifth chapter of Mosiah and notice what is maybe the best statement of this principle. To get it in context let's pick up with verse 4. Who wants to read for us now? Chapter 5 of Mosiah, verses 4 through 7.

"And it is the faith which we have had on the things which our king has spoken unto us that has brought us to this great knowledge, whereby we do rejoice with such exceedingly great joy.

"And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment, as has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God.

"And now, these are the words which King Benjamin desired of them; and therefore he said unto them: Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant."

Here's the key verse: "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters."

Now, go ahead and read the next verse. Verse 8 is a good one too.

"And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free. There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives."

It occurred to me a few months back that we can't fully appreciate the seriousness of taking the name of God in vain unless we know the seriousness of taking the name of God. We take the name of God when we take upon us the name of Christ.

It's interesting to me, though, that Elder Dallin Oaks, some years back in General Conference, made this observation (this was at the April 1985 conference). He said it's interesting that in the sacramental prayers, we witness that we are *willing* to take upon us the name of Christ, implying something future. He said, we now, by taking the sacrament, witness our willingness to be candidates for ultimately taking the name of God. When do

we ultimately take the name of God? When, as the scriptures speak, the Lord places his name upon us forever. And so it would be spoken as revelation, as the 133rd section of the Doctrine and Covenants indicates, people standing upon Mount Zion with the name of God sealed upon their foreheads, indicating God has placed his name, and thus his powers, upon them.

It occurred to me too that thus taking the name of God, or the name of Christ, in vain entails far more than profaning, although that's what we spend most of our time talking about when we talk about that one of the ten commandments. Profaning the name of God is of course a heinous sin. But taking it in vain—think of what “vain” means: light, substanceless, without meaning. And so, when I take the name of Christ lightly—there's a passage in the Doctrine and Covenants that really gets my attention. Let me just share it with you.

I remember sitting in a sacrament meeting many years ago where the first speaker, who was new to the area, stood up and said, “I've been told that I need to get a group laughing to get them with me, and so I want to get you laughing.” And so he did proceed to get us laughing. He said, “I'd like you to consider what it would be like if the President of the United States were to take the missionary lessons.” He then proceeded to impersonate President Reagan taking the missionary lessons. This was at the pulpit. The congregation just roared. It was funny. It got my attention when at a certain point he stopped, looked at his watch, and said, “Oh, my goodness, we've got another speaker yet. I say all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.”

If somebody had come and sent a spear through my heart it wouldn't have affected me as greatly as that did. Never before had I sensed the significance of doing something “in the name of” the Lord. Think about it. We act in the name of the Lord, and in so doing what do we do? We do what the Lord would do under those circumstances. We speak in the name of the Lord, we speak (we hope to, at least) what he would speak under those circumstances. We perform ordinances, we take the sacrament, we function. Thus, when we speak or act or in any way perform a duty in the name of the Lord, and do it lightly, flippantly, without thought as to its significance, we take the name of the Lord in vain.

And thus, in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord would say this: “Behold, I am from above, and my power lieth beneath. I am over all, and in all, and through all . . . things.

“I am Alpha and Omega, even Jesus Christ.

“Wherefore, let all men beware how they take my name in their lips—

"For behold, verily I say, that many there be who are under this condemnation, who use the name of the Lord, and use it in vain, having not authority."

Then he goes on to say, "Remember that that which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken with care" (Doctrine and Covenants 63: 59–64).

And so, we take a name upon us. Elder Oaks indicates we take upon us, now, candidacy for the name of Christ so that one day we can be worthy, truly, of having the name of Christ upon us.

One other illustration of this, if you will. Let's go to the fifteenth chapter of Mosiah. Here's Abinadi's discussion of this principle from another perspective. Remember in chapter fourteen, Abinadi had read from Isaiah 53, the great Messianic prophecy. Chapter 15 represents Abinadi's commentary on chapter 14. Now, by chapter 15, verse 10, Abinadi is explaining much that's in Isaiah 53, the previous chapter.

"And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation [Christ's generation]? Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed." That's right out of Isaiah 53, "when his soul has been made an offering for sin, he shall see his seed."

"And now, what say ye? And who shall be his seed?" Who are the seed of Christ? "Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God."

Now that's the restatement of the principle we've already said. That is, those who are faithful, who follow the words, hearken to the words of the prophets and seek to live their covenants, these are the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ. These are they who have been born again; these are the seed of Christ.

Now to say that another way: when Christ had made an offering for sin, that is, when the atoning sacrifice, the work of redemption, had taken place, and Christ entered, after death, into the spirit world, there he saw his seed. And who are his seed? The faithful from the days of Adam to his own time in the meridian day—as President Joseph F. Smith called them, "an innumerable company of the spirits of the just." Christ saw his seed in the spirit world upon entering therein following his atoning sacrifice.

So a new family relationship. Let me summarize this principle by just reading something that I really like that Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated in *The Promised Messiah*, page 363:

"Family members bear the family name. By it they are known, called, and identified. It sets them apart from all those of a different lineage and ancestry. Adopted children take upon themselves the name of their new-found parents, and become in all respects as though they had been born in the family. And so it is that the children of Christ, those who are born again, those who are spiritually begotten by their new Father, take upon themselves the name of Christ. By it they are known. In it they are called. It identifies and sets them apart from all others. They are now family members, Christians in the real and true sense of the word."

Now we said earlier, Joseph Smith's statement was, "In order to see the kingdom of God you must have a change of heart. In order to enter you must subscribe to the articles of adoption, meaning those first principles and ordinances which open the door whereby we become adopted members of the family of Christ."

7

This is not directly a Book of Mormon doctrine, so we won't take long on it, but let me state it. *It was never intended that we remain children forever, even children of Christ.* The gospel plan has been given that we might mature spiritually to the point where we become joint-heirs, or co-inheritors, with Christ, and thus become sons and daughters of God, meaning the Father. Now that's a long way of stating the principle. Let me state it shorter. It was never intended that we remain children forever, even the children of Christ.

We've learned, now, that through faith and repentance and baptism and through the reception of the Holy Ghost and the maintaining of that Spirit in our lives, we now become alive to things of righteousness. We become sons and daughters of Jesus Christ. But it is not intended that we stay that way forever. If we then receive the ordinances of the temple, specifically the endowment and the ordinance of eternal marriage, and prove worthy of those covenants and ordinances, the day can come when you and I can qualify to be known as a joint-heir, meaning a co-inheritor, with Christ to all that the Father has.

Now, as a son and daughter of Christ, you are not a joint-heir with Christ. That means that Christ has to raise us to his level of inheritance, which he does. He is the firstborn, he is the natural firstborn. And thus he raises all others who prove worthy of it, to inherit as the firstborn. Thus the scriptures speak of the organization made up of those who are inheritors of the blessings of the firstborn as the "church of the Firstborn."

Again, a statement from Elder McConkie on this:

"Baptism standing alone does not transform people into family members, but it opens the door to such a blessed relationship. And if men so live as to obtain the Spirit, and are in fact born again, they become members of the holy family. Then if they press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, keeping the commandments and living by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God, they qualify for celestial marriage, and this gives them power to become the sons of God, meaning the Father.

"They thus become joint-heirs with Christ, who is his natural heir. Those who are sons of God in this sense are the ones who become Gods in the world to come. Celestial marriage standing alone does not transform them into the sons of God, and make them joint-heirs with Christ, but it opens the door to that greatest of all blessings. Through Christ and his atoning sacrifice, they can become begotten sons and daughters unto God, meaning the Father" (*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:474-75).

8

To round this off in a reasonable and appropriate way, we need to make a point; and that is this: *the new birth, of which we have spoken this hour, is most often a process.*

I remember very well something that proved to be life-changing for me. I was in a meeting with a large number of Church Education System personnel, maybe 17 years ago. Elder Bruce McConkie came to speak to us, and he spoke for about 25 or 30 minutes. He talked about priesthood; he talked about the recent organization of the quorum of the seventy; and then he opened the meeting just for questions, and some of the questions were very interesting.

But I remember one of the very first questions was a question from a young man, a young seminary teacher way in the back of the chapel, who stood and said, "Brother McConkie, we're teaching the New Testament this year. How can we keep our students from being discouraged when they read the scripture that says, 'Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it.'"

I'll never forget the way he answered that. He said, "You tell your students that far more of our Father's children will be exalted than will not." A kind of "uh!" went through the room, and there began to be a rumble. The young man stood back up and said, "I don't understand that. Will you explain?" Elder McConkie said, "Yes. I will be pleased to." And he did, for about a half hour.

He said, "Reason with me for a moment." He said, "How many little children do you suppose there will be, from the days of Adam to the end of the world, who will die before the age of accountability, and of which the scriptures say they are heirs of exaltation? A sizeable number."

Then he asked, "How many people, do you suppose, will there be who never had the opportunity to receive the gospel, but would have if they had received it, who are also heirs to the Celestial Kingdom?" We agreed that was a chunk of folks.

"How many people," he asked, "do you suppose were in the cities of Enoch? Melchizedek? Other translated cities of which we have no knowledge?" We agreed that was at least a few stakes.

"How many people," he asked, "shall live in the millennium, in a day when it says that people shall raise their children, and their children and their children shall grow up without sin unto salvation?" We agreed that was something; in fact, the longer we talked about it, we agreed that probably more persons would live in the millennium than had lived in the earth's entire history.

So he's got us built up to a certain point; we're pretty positive at this point. Then he said, "But all of that doesn't have much to do with you and me, does it?"

And you could see us drop, and he says, "But," and then he taught this great principle. "Latter-day Saints who chart their course, who set their eyes and their hearts upon eternal life, who receive the ordinances and covenants of salvation and labor to keep those covenants to the best of their ability, even though they are not perfect, they will go on and receive eternal life hereafter." And he talked to us about why that was the case, and how important it was that the heart was focused on righteousness.

Well, I heard that and I was deeply moved. Only a matter of weeks later I was sitting at home one Sunday evening and knew there was a BYU devotional to be rebroadcast. I flipped it on, and there was Elder McConkie again, and he was speaking at BYU, without notes. I remember him standing and saying, "I would like to go without notes and say what ought to be said," and he gave a masterpiece of an address entitled "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified," and taught that same lesson, about the fact that salvation is a process, that perfection is a process.

Then he said this—let me read to you how he said this:

"We are born again as we die as pertaining to unrighteousness and when we live as pertaining to things of the Spirit. But that doesn't happen in an

instant, suddenly; that is a process. Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the Church are concerned, we are born again by degrees and we are born again to added light and added knowledge and added desires for righteousness.

"As members of the Church, if we chart a course leading to eternal life; if we begin the process of spiritual rebirth, and are going in the right direction; if we chart a course of sanctifying our souls, and degree by degree are going in that direction; and if we chart a course of becoming perfect, and step by step and phase by phase are perfecting our souls by overcoming the world, then it's absolutely guaranteed—there's no question about it—we will gain eternal life.

"Even though we have spiritual rebirth ahead of us, perfection ahead of us, the full degree of sanctification ahead of us, if we chart our course and follow it to the best of our ability in this life, then when we go out of this life we will continue in exactly that same course" (1976 *Devotional Speeches of the Year*, pp. 399–401).

That's a comforting message. Now I close with this thought from President Benson along the same lines. President Benson says:

"We must be careful, as we seek to become more and more godlike, that we do not become discouraged and lose hope. Becoming Christlike is a lifetime pursuit and very often involves growth and change that is slow, almost imperceptible. The scriptures record remarkable accounts of men whose lives changed dramatically in an instant, as it were: Alma the Younger, Paul on the road to Damascus, Enos praying far into the night, King Lamoni. Such astonishing examples of the power to change even those steeped in sin give confidence that the Atonement can reach even those deepest in despair."

Now notice: "But we must be cautious as we discuss these remarkable examples. Though they are real and powerful, they are the exception more than the rule. For every Paul, for every Enos, and for every King Lamoni, there are hundreds and thousands of people who find the process of repentance much more subtle, much more imperceptible. Day by day they move closer to the Lord, little realizing they are building a godlike life. They live quiet lives of goodness, service, and commitment. They are like the Lamanites, who the Lord said 'were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not' " ("A Mighty Change of Heart," *Ensign* [October 1985]: 5).

The principle, brothers and sisters, is a true one. I know it is. Unless and until the Spirit of the Lord gets in our lives, we remain in a state of sort of

being spiritually still-born. Membership in the Church is intended not just to build our social skills, as important as those must be, but to bring us alive to the things of righteousness. That's the burden of the Book of Mormon: ye must be born again. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.