

Be One with Christ

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We are united by our love of and faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement. The essence of truly belonging is to be one with Christ.

I have felt deeply about the Atonement of Jesus Christ since I was quite young, but the reality of the Savior's Atonement came home to me when I was 25. I had just graduated from Stanford Law School and was studying for the California bar exam. My mother called and said that my grandfather Crozier Kimball, who lived in Utah, was dying. She said if I wanted to see him, I had better come home. My grandfather was 86 and very ill. I had a wonderful visit. He was so pleased to see me and share his testimony with me.

When Crozier was just three years old, his father, David Patten Kimball, died at age 44.¹ Crozier hoped that his father and his grandfather Heber C. Kimball would approve of his life and feel he had been true to his heritage.

My grandfather's primary counsel to me was to avoid any sense of entitlement or privilege because of these faithful ancestors. He told me my focus should be on the Savior and the Savior's Atonement. He said we are all children of a loving Heavenly Father. Regardless of who our earthly ancestors are, each of us will report to the Savior on how well we kept His commandments.

Grandpa referred to the Savior as the "Keeper of the Gate," a reference to 2 Nephi 9:41. He told me he hoped he had been sufficiently repentant to qualify for the Savior's mercy.²

I was deeply touched. I knew he had been a righteous man. He was a patriarch and served several missions. He taught me that no one can return to God by good works alone without the benefit of the Savior's Atonement. I can remember to this day the great love and appreciation Grandpa had for the Savior and His Atonement.

In 2019 during an assignment in Jerusalem,³ I visited an upper room which may have been near the site where the Savior washed His Apostles' feet prior to His Crucifixion. I was spiritually touched and thought of how He commanded His Apostles to love one another.

I recalled the Savior's pleading Intercessory Prayer in our behalf. This prayer occurred in literally the closing hours of His mortal life as recorded in the Gospel of John.

This prayer was directed to followers of Christ, including all of us.⁴ In the Savior's petition to His Father, He pleaded "that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." The Savior then continues, "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one."⁵ *Oneness* is what Christ prayed for

prior to His betrayal and Crucifixion. Oneness with Christ and our Heavenly Father can be obtained through the Savior's Atonement.

The Lord's saving mercy is not dependent on lineage, education, economic status, or race. It is based on being one with Christ and His commandments.

The Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received the revelation on Church organization and government in 1830, soon after the Church was organized. What is now section 20 was read by the Prophet Joseph at the first Church conference and was the first revelation approved by common consent.⁶

The content of this revelation is truly remarkable. It teaches us the significance and role of the Savior and how to access His power and blessings through His atoning grace. The Prophet Joseph was 24 years old and had already received numerous revelations and completed the translation of the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God. Both Joseph and Oliver are identified as ordained Apostles, thus having authority to preside over the Church.

Verses 17 through 36 contain a summary of essential Church doctrine, including the reality of God, the Creation of mankind, the Fall, and Heavenly Father's plan of salvation through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Verse 37 contains the essential requirements for baptism into the Lord's Church. Verses 75 through 79 set forth the sacrament prayers we utilize every Sabbath.

The doctrine, principles, sacraments, and practices that the Lord established through Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration, are truly seminal.⁷

The requirements for baptism, while profound, are uniquely simple. They primarily include humility before God, a broken heart and contrite spirit,⁸ repenting of all sins, taking upon us the name of Jesus Christ, enduring to the end, and showing by our works that we have received of the Spirit of Christ.⁹

It is significant that all the qualifications for baptism are spiritual. No economic or social attainment is necessary. The poor and the rich have the same spiritual requirements.

There are no race, gender, or ethnicity requirements. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that *all* are invited to partake of the Lord's goodness, "black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God."¹⁰ "All men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden."¹¹

Given our "likeness" before God, it makes little sense to emphasize our differences. Some have wrongly encouraged us "to imagine people to be much more different from ourselves and from each other than they actually are. [Some] take real but small differences and magnify them into chasms."¹²

In addition, some have wrongly assumed that because all people are invited to receive His goodness and eternal life, there are no conduct requirements.¹³

However, the scriptures attest that all accountable persons are required to repent of sins and keep His commandments.¹⁴ The Lord makes it clear that all have moral agency and "are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, ... and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life."¹⁵ To receive the

blessings of the Savior's Atonement, we must affirmatively exercise our moral agency to choose Christ and obey His commandments.

During my life, the meaning of "agency" and "free will" has been dissected and debated. There have been and continue to be many intellectual arguments on these topics.

On the recent cover of a major university alumni publication, a prominent biologist-professor asserts, "There's no room for free will."¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the professor is quoted in the article as saying, "There's no such thing as God, ... and there's no free will, ... and this is a vast, indifferent, empty universe."¹⁷ I could not disagree more strongly.

A fundamental doctrine of our faith is that we do have moral agency,¹⁸ which includes free will.¹⁹ Agency is the ability to choose and act. It is essential to the plan of salvation. Without moral agency, we could not learn, progress, or choose to be one with Christ. Because of moral agency, we "are free to choose liberty and eternal life."²⁰ In the premortal Council in Heaven, the Father's plan included agency as an essential element. Lucifer rebelled and "sought to destroy the agency of man."²¹ Accordingly, the privilege of having a mortal body was denied to Satan and those who followed him.

Other premortal spirits exercised their agency in following Heavenly Father's plan. Spirits blessed by birth to this mortal life continue to have agency. We are free to choose and act, but we do not control the consequences. "Choices of good and righteousness lead to happiness, peace, and eternal life, while choices of sin and evil eventually lead to heartache and misery."²² As Alma said, "Wickedness never was happiness."²³

In this extremely competitive world, there is a constant effort to excel. Striving to be the best we can be is a righteous and worthwhile endeavor. It is consistent with the Lord's doctrine. Efforts to diminish or deprecate others or create barriers to their success are contrary to the Lord's doctrine. We cannot blame circumstances or others for a decision to act contrary to God's commandments.

In today's world, it is easy to focus on material and occupational success. Some lose sight of eternal principles and choices that have eternal significance. We would be wise to follow President Russell M. Nelson's counsel to "think celestial."²⁴

The most significant choices can be made by almost everyone regardless of talents, abilities, opportunities, or economic circumstances. An emphasis on putting family choices first is essential. This is clear throughout the scriptures. Think of the account in 1 Nephi where Lehi "departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family."²⁵

As we face the vicissitudes of life, many events occur over which we have little or no control. Health challenges and accidents obviously can fit into this category. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted people who did everything right. For the most important choices, we do have control. Going back to my missionary days, Elder Marion D. Hanks, our mission president, had all of us memorize part of a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

There is no chance, no destiny, no fate,
Can circumvent or hinder or control

The firm resolve of a determined soul.²⁶

On matters of principle, conduct, religious observance, and righteous living, we are in control. Our faith in and worship of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, is a choice that we make.²⁷

Please understand I am not advocating less interest in education or occupation. What I am saying is that when efforts relating to education and occupation are elevated above the family or being one with Christ, the unintended consequences can be significantly adverse.

The clear and simple doctrine set forth in Doctrine and Covenants 20 is touching and compelling as it amplifies and clarifies sacred spiritual concepts. It teaches that salvation comes as Jesus Christ justifies and sanctifies repentant souls because of the Savior's grace.²⁸ It sets the stage for the preeminent role of His Atonement.

We should strive to include others in our circle of oneness. If we are to follow President Russell M. Nelson's admonition to gather scattered Israel on both sides of the veil, we need to include others in our circle of oneness. As President Nelson has so beautifully taught: "On every continent and across the isles of the sea, faithful people are being gathered into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Differences in culture, language, gender, race, and nationality fade into insignificance as the faithful enter the covenant path and come unto our beloved Redeemer."²⁹

We are united by our love of and faith in Jesus Christ and as children of a loving Heavenly Father. The essence of truly belonging is to be one with Christ. The ordinances of baptism and the sacrament set forth in Doctrine and Covenants 20, together with our temple covenants, unite us in special ways and allow us to be one in every eternally significant way and to live in peace and harmony.

I bear my sure and certain witness that Jesus Christ lives, and because of His Atonement, we can be one with Christ. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. David, at age 17, had helped carry some of the Saints across the ice-filled Sweetwater River when they were stranded on the high plains of Wyoming (see *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, volume 2, *No Unhallowed Hand, 1846–1893* [2020], 237).
2. See Moroni 7:27–28.
3. The Chief Rabbi of Norway, Rabbi Michael Melchior, and I were the keynote speakers at a Jewish–Latter-day Saint scholars' dialogue held on June 5, 2019, at the BYU Jerusalem Center in Israel.
4. See John 17:20.
5. John 17:21–22.

6. See “The Conference Minutes and Record Book of Christ’s Church of Latter Day Saints, 1838–1839, 1844” (commonly known as the Far West Record), June 9, 1830, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (2008), 75.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 20 was the first revelation published in the Church newspaper and was utilized by missionaries with respect to both doctrine and the administration of the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament (see Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 75).
8. See 2 Nephi 2:7.
9. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:37.
10. 2 Nephi 26:33.
11. 2 Nephi 26:28.
12. Peter Wood, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (2003), 20.
13. Nehor took this position (see Alma 1:4).
14. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:49–50.
15. 2 Nephi 2:27–28.
16. *Stanford* (publication of the Stanford Alumni Association), Dec. 2023, cover.
17. In Sam Scott, “As If You Had a Choice,” *Stanford*, Dec. 2023, 44. The article identifies the professor as Robert Sapolsky, a Stanford professor of biology, neurology, and neurosurgery and a best-selling author of science books. The article contains opposing views, including from Alfred Mele, a professor of philosophy at Florida State University who headed a large John Templeton Foundation project on free will. He stated, “Scientists most definitely have not proved that free will—even ambitious free will—is an illusion” (in Scott, “As If You Had a Choice,” 46).
18. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency” (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 31, 2006), speeches.byu.edu.
19. See Doctrine and Covenants 58:27.
20. 2 Nephi 2:27.
21. Moses 4:3.
22. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (2004), 12.
23. Alma 41:10.
24. See Russell M. Nelson, “Think Celestial!,” *Liahona*, Nov. 2023, 117–20.
25. 1 Nephi 2:4.
26. *Poetical Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* (1917), 129.

27. I have always loved the quote shared by Elder Neal A. Maxwell that stated this in a most succinct fashion: “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead” (attributed to William Law, an 18th-century English clergyman; quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Response to a Call,” *Ensign*, May 1974, 112).
28. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:29–31. Calvinist theology emphasized justification and sanctification of fallen souls through the grace of Jesus Christ. It taught that once God had predestined a soul for salvation, nothing could change the outcome. Doctrine and Covenants 20 makes a clean break with Calvinism. It reads, “There is a possibility that man may fall from grace and depart from the living God” (see Doctrine and Covenants 20:32–34; Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 74).
29. Russell M. Nelson, “Building Bridges,” *New Era*, Aug. 2018, 6; *Liahona*, Dec. 2018, 51.