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The Spirit of Christ: A Light Amidst the Darkness

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Daniel K Judd

Those prophets who wrote, compiled, and abridged the Book of Mormon did so with the inhabitants of our day in mind. President Ezra Taft Benson has stated:

We must make the Book of Mormon a center focus of study because it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book, neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us. Mormon wrote near the end of the Nephite civilization. Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, he abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us. (58)

Moroni, the last of the Book of Mormon prophets, saw our day:

The Lord hath shown unto me great and marvelous things concerning that which must shortly come, at that day when these things shall come forth among you. Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing . . . the pride of your hearts . . . envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities. (Mormon 8:34–35)

From the *Wall Street Journal*, we read a sobering description of the problems in today's society which is consistent with Moroni's vision:

Since 1960 . . . there has been a 560% increase in violent crime; a 419% increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorce rates; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200% increase in the teenage suicide rate. (Bennet 59)

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We live in difficult times, and my heart goes out to all those whose lives embody these statistics in any way. While some of the problems of our day do not involve questions of morality, most do. We have all been influenced in some way by the moral decay of our culture. Many things which were once considered evil are now celebrated as “good,” and numerous things which were once revered as good are now called inappropriate or evil. Isaiah has written: “Wo unto them that call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness, that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa 5:20; also 2 Nephi 15:20).

A Light in the Darkness

Not only have prophets provided descriptions of the problems of our day, but they have also given counsel as to how to address them. As part of his record, the prophet Moroni included his father’s teaching on the most fundamental means by which God sustains man: the Spirit of Christ: “For behold, the *Spirit of Christ* is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God” (Moroni 7:16; emphasis added). The Spirit of Christ is not merely a source of truth, it is an integral part of what we are as human beings (see John 14:6, 20; D&C 93:29).

The Spirit of Christ Described

While the Book of Mormon does not provide detailed information concerning the Spirit of Christ, it does describe its purposes and its influence upon the lives of people. From modern scriptures, we learn that the Spirit of Christ is the *power* that “proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space” (D&C 88:12; see also 2 Nephi 16:3). It is the *light* of the sun, the moon, and the stars, and the *power* by which all things were made (D&C 88:7–10). It is a *spirit* that “giveth life to all things” and the “*law* by which all things are governed” (v 13; emphasis added). Also, this spirit is the power which enables God to comprehend all things (v 41). The Spirit of Christ is also that which “giveth light to every man that cometh into

the world” (D&C 88:46) and is given to everyone that they “may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:15).

The Spirit of Christ and the Holy Ghost

The Spirit of Christ is often confused with the Holy Ghost, the Gift of the Holy Ghost, and the spirit personage of Jesus Christ. Some of the confusion obviously comes because terms such as “Spirit of the Lord,” “Spirit of God,” and “Spirit of Christ” are often used interchangeably in both scripture and conversation, and it is often difficult to determine to which personage or gift the passage refers. The term “Spirit of Christ” is used only twice in the Book of Mormon (Moroni 7:16 and 10:17) while the term “Holy Ghost” is used 95 times. The term “Spirit of the Lord” is used 40 times, “Spirit of God” 20 times, and the expression “Power of God” is utilized 54 times. An analysis of the use of these terms reveals that only in a few instances is the differentiation of these terms made clear.

It is from the prophets of this dispensation that we learn that the Spirit of Christ is neither the Holy Ghost, the Gift of the Holy Ghost, nor the spirit personage of Jesus Christ; but it is the primary means by which each of these entities operate. President Joseph F. Smith taught:

The question is often asked, Is there any difference between the Spirit of the Lord and the Holy Ghost? The terms are frequently used synonymously. We often say the Spirit of God when we mean the Holy Ghost; we likewise say the Holy Ghost when we mean the Spirit of God. The Holy Ghost is a personage in the Godhead, and is not that which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. It is the Spirit of God which proceeds through Christ to the world, that enlightens every man that comes into the world, and that strives with the children of men, and will continue to strive with them, until it brings them to a knowledge of the truth and the possession of the greater light and testimony of the Holy Ghost. (67–68)

Elder James E. Talmage taught that the Spirit of Christ is the “divine essence” by means of which the Godhead operates upon man and in nature (488).

The Gift of the Holy Ghost has been likened to the “continuing blaze of the sun at noonday,” and the Holy Ghost as “a flash of lightning blazing forth in a dark and stormy night” (McConkie 262). Perhaps it would be appropriate to liken the Spirit of Christ to the

faint and yet fixed light of the moon and stars which precedes the brighter light of dawn.

Prophets, both ancient and modern, have taught that the Spirit of Christ is *preparatory* in purpose. It prepares God's children to receive the temporary witness of the Holy Ghost, followed by the more constant Gift of the Holy Ghost, which is bestowed upon those who are baptized (see D&C 130:23). An example of this progression can be identified in the Book of Mormon account of the conversion of king Lamoni. Even though Lamoni had the autocratic authority of a king and had been taught that "whatsoever [he] did was right," the text suggests that he still knew it was wrong to slay those servants he judged had not served him well: "Notwithstanding [king Lamoni and his father] believed in a Great Spirit, they supposed that whatsoever they did was right; nevertheless, Lamoni began to fear exceedingly, with fear lest he had done wrong in slaying his servants" (Alma 18:5).

We may conclude from this verse that the Spirit of the Lord is *not* simply the internalization of the expectations of the culture in which one lives (see JST John 7:24), but it is a part of what we are as human beings (see also Rom 2:14). Though the truth was eclipsed by tradition and sin, a spirit was working upon king Lamoni that revived his sense of right and wrong.

King Lamoni's experience continued and intensified as he "fell unto the earth, as if he were dead" (Alma 18:42). Note the description of Lamoni's experience during the time he was overcome:

Ammon . . . knew that king Lamoni was under the power of God; he knew that the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the *light* which did *light* up his mind, which was the *light* of the glory of God, which was a marvelous *light* of his goodness—yea, this *light* had infused such joy into his soul, the cloud of darkness having been dispelled, and that the *light* of everlasting life was lit up in his soul, yea, he knew that this had overcome his natural frame, and he was carried away in God. (Alma 19:6; emphasis added)

Ammon seems to be describing the light of Christ that was working on the king, preparing him to receive the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. King Lamoni and all of his servants were then baptized and even though it is not detailed in this scriptural account, we can be confident that precedent was followed and, after being baptized, they were given the Gift of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 31:14).

The additional light which comes with the reception of the Gift of the Holy Ghost is demonstrated by Ammon's experiences as he worked with king Lamoni. In addition to the great physical power demonstrated by Ammon, he was also "filled with the *Spirit of God*, therefore he *perceived . . . the thoughts of the king*" (Alma 18:16; emphasis added). Ammon also described additional blessings in the following: "I am called by his *Holy Spirit* to teach these things unto this people, that they may be brought to a knowledge of that which is just and true; And a portion of that *Spirit* dwelleth in me, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God" (Alma 18:34–35; emphasis added).

The Light of Creation

The scriptures also teach us that one of the fundamental functions of the Spirit of Christ was in the creation of the earth (D&C 88:7–9). This strongly suggests that the Spirit of God that "moved upon the face of the water" mentioned by Moses in the various Creation accounts was the Spirit of Christ (see Moses 2:2–5; Gen 1:2–5). Parley P. Pratt wrote that it is the "true light" or the Spirit of Christ that permeates all nature and provides the life-sustaining instincts found in both men and animals (41). As stated earlier, the Spirit of Christ is not always something that is external to us; it is also a part of what we are as living creatures. The scriptures imply that without the Spirit of Christ, which gives us life "from one moment to another," life would cease to exist (Mosiah 2:21; see also D&C 88:50).

The Light of Discovery and Intellect

The Spirit of Christ is also the power that enlightens our intellects as we seek to discover the mysteries of heaven and earth (D&C 88:11). Nephi tells us that "the *Spirit of God . . . wrought upon the man*" Columbus in his discovery of the new world and that "the *Spirit of God . . . wrought upon other Gentiles [ie, Pilgrims]; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters*" (1 Nephi 13:12–13; emphasis added). We also read of the Lord's promise to Nephi to be his "*light in the wilderness*" as he sought to find the promised land (17:13; emphasis added).

Alma wrote of hearts being changed and souls being “illuminated by the *light* of the everlasting word” (Alma 5:7; emphasis added). He also described the “discernible” nature of light in the following passage: “O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is *light*; and whatsoever is *light*, is good, because it is discernible, therefore ye must know that it is good” (Alma 32:35; emphasis added).

Many of the world’s great leaders, scientists, artists and philosophers have also been influenced by “a portion of God’s light.” In 1978, the First Presidency stated:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. (Faust 12)

It was also the Spirit of Christ that led to the scientific discoveries of Gutenberg, Edison, and Bell, and others. Joseph Fielding Smith wrote:

Those who make these discoveries are inspired of God or they would never make them. The Lord gave inspiration to Edison, to Franklin, to Morse, to Whitney and to all of the inventors and discoverers, and through their inspiration they obtained the necessary knowledge and were able to manufacture and invent as they have done for the benefit of the world. Without the help of the Lord they would have been just as helpless as the people were in other ages. (1:147)

The Light of Conscience

While the Spirit of Christ is manifest in a multitude of ways, the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to the dimension of the Spirit of Christ which deals with conscience, the knowing of “good from evil.” In addition to what was stated earlier concerning “every thing which inviteth to do good” being “sent forth by the power and gift of Christ” (Moroni 7:16), Mormon also teaches us about discerning that which is evil:

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no

man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. (Moroni 7:17)

Though we live in marvelous times when the gospel of Christ has been restored to the earth in its fulness, many have come to a distorted view of good and evil for they “denieth the *power* of God” because of the “precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28:26; emphasis added). The good and evil spoken of in scripture has been replaced by the dogmatism of some and the relativism of others. The Book of Mormon anti-Christ, Korihor, taught that “every man prospered according to his genius” and justified his own evil deeds and those of others by teaching that “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). The Apostle Paul warned of those who would come to associate righteousness with prosperity and competence (see 1 Tim 6:5). All of these false philosophies lead to serious distortions of conscience.

The Lord has warned us that the day would come when men would “perceive not the light” (D&C 45:29) and reject the fulness of the gospel because they would come to believe in false philosophies. President Joseph Fielding Smith warned of relying solely on the power of intellect:

The worship of reason, of false philosophy, is greater now than it was [in the days of the Son of God]. Men are depending upon their own research to find out God, and that which they cannot discover and which they cannot demonstrate to their satisfaction through their own research and their natural senses, they reject. They are not seeking for the Spirit of the Lord; they are not striving to know God in the manner in which he has marked out by which he may be known; but they are walking in their own way, believing in their own man-made philosophies, teaching the doctrines of devils and not the doctrines of the Son of God. (3:275)

We ought not interpret this to say that reason and intellect should be rejected, but rather that reason should not be exercised without regard to the morality of which it is inextricably a part. Nephi taught that we should not “hearken unto the precepts of men, *save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost*” (2 Nephi 28:31; emphasis added). His brother, Jacob, taught that “to be learned is good if [the learned] hearken unto the counsels of God” (9:29). Note the following counsel from Elder Hugh B. Brown:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts newly revealed truth, whether it comes through direct revelation or from study and research. We deny the common conception of reality that distinguishes radically between the

natural and the supernatural, between the temporal and the eternal, between the sacred and the secular. For us, there is no order of reality that is utterly different in character from the world of which we are a part, that is separated from us by an impassable gulf. We do not separate our daily mundane tasks and interests from the meaning and substance of religion. We recognize the spiritual in all phases and aspects of living and realize that this life is an important part of eternal life. (458)

We need to make “righteous judgment[s]” (JST Matt 7:2) concerning the knowledge we obtain, whether it comes from secular or sacred sources. Mormon teaches us that the way to make these judgments is as plain as day and night: “For every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God” (Moroni 7:16). However, this does not say that we will always be able to discern right from wrong in the present moment. From the Doctrine and Covenants we read: “But as you cannot always judge the righteous, or as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto you, hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter” (D&C 10:37). There will be times when we must exercise patience and faith as we “wait upon the Lord” for the understanding that is sought (2 Nephi 18:17).

Moral Agency

We live in a day when many are claiming that all truth is relative and there are no absolutes. Moral agency, which invites the choice between right and wrong, has been replaced by a distorted notion of free agency—the choice between alternatives. Elder Boyd K. Packer clarifies this point of doctrine in his discussion of the “pro-choice” philosophy in his conference talk entitled “Our Moral Environment”:

Regardless of how lofty and moral the “pro-choice” argument sounds, it is badly flawed. With that same logic one could argue that all traffic signs and barriers which keep the careless from danger should be pulled down on the theory that each individual must be free to choose how close to the edge he will go. . . . The phrase “free agency” does not appear in scripture. The only agency spoken of there is *moral agency*, “which,” the Lord said, “I have given unto him, that every man may be *accountable* for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78; emphasis added). (66-67)

Just as the scriptures contain accounts of lives being changed for the better in days of old, lives continue to be changed in the present as we come to understand and exercise the moral agency we have been given. Elder Spencer J. Condie has shared the following story of a man whose life was changed as he was true to the light within:

I know [a] good man who was reared in a family without the blessings of the gospel. Through a series of unfortunate events in his early youth, he was introduced to homosexuality, and gradually he became a prisoner of this addictive behavior.

One day two young missionaries knocked on his door and asked if he would be interested in learning of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. In his heart of hearts he wanted to be freed from his prison of uncleanness, but feeling unable to change the direction his life had taken, he terminated the missionary discussions. Before leaving his apartment, the two elders left a copy of the Book of Mormon with him, and testified of its truthfulness.

My friend placed the book on his bookshelf and forgot about it for several years. He continued acting out his homosexual tendencies, assuming that such relationships would bring him happiness. But alas, with each passing year, his misery increased.

One day in the depths of despair, he scanned his bookshelf for something to read which might edify and uplift him and restore his self-worth. His eye caught hold of the book with a dark-blue cover, which the missionaries had given him several years before. He began to read. On the second page of this book, he read of Father Lehi's vision in which he was given a book to read, and "as he read, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord" (1 Nephi 1:12). And as my good friend continued reading, he too was filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

He read King Benjamin's benedictory challenge to undergo a mighty change of heart—not a little change, but a mighty change. He was given hope by the comforting conversion stories of Enos, Alma, Ammon, and Aaron. He was also inspired by the account of the Savior's visit to the ancient Nephites. By the time he reached the final page of the Book of Mormon, he was prepared to accept Moroni's loving invitation to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness" (Moroni 10:32).

My friend contacted the Church and was taught the gospel and was baptized. Within a relatively short time, he married a lovely young woman, and they are the parents of several beautiful children. He and his wife are very dynamic and committed servants of the Lord, influencing many others for good. (15–17)

In the following passage, the prophet Mormon summarizes for us the great sorrow of those who reject the light of Christ, and the great rejoicing experienced by all who follow him: "And thus we see the great reason of sorrow, and also of rejoicing—sorrow because of

death and destruction among men, and joy because of the *light of Christ* unto life” (Alma 28:14; emphasis added).

Promptings of Conscience

It is through our conscience we first come to perceive the love of a Father in Heaven who does “all things for the welfare and happiness of his people” (Hel 12:2). The word “conscience” literally means to know within oneself. Elder Boyd K. Packer has written about the word conscience:

It is made up of the prefix *con*, meaning “with,” and the word *science*, meaning “to know.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* says it comes from the Latin *conscientia*, meaning “knowledge [knowing] within oneself.” The first definition listed there is “inward knowledge, consciousness, inmost thought, mind.” The second one is “consciousness of right and wrong,” or in just two words, “moral sense.”

Our conscience might be described as a memory, a residual awareness of who we really are, of our true identity. *It is perhaps the best example of the fact that we can become aware of truths because we feel them rather than by knowing them because we perceive them through the physical senses.* (“The Law and the Light” 2–3)

We can experience our conscience, *or* “light of Christ” or “Spirit of Christ”—in different ways. If we are living truth-full-y (consistent with light and truth), we will experience our conscience as a gentle invitation persuading us to follow its prompting to do good. We may have even reached a point of self-less-ness, where we aren’t even cognizant that we are being prompted or acting upon the prompting. When this is the case, we will live spontaneously, without self-regard (see 3 Nephi 9:20). When we are not living truthfully, we will experience our conscience as a demanding and irritating mandate.

Following our conscience leads us to peace and greater understanding, while acting against what we know to be right leads to distress and confusion and is often the beginning of greater problems. Large, ominous problems typically begin as small, simple ones. While the problems most of us face are neither as dramatic as Lamoni’s nor as complicated as the individual’s described by Elder Condie, we still confront them on a daily basis. A friend told me the following example of a prompting of conscience with which most of us can identify:

My wife had asked if I would rock the baby to sleep. I knew I should, but I really wanted to watch the football game. I quickly settled on a compromise, I could take the baby into my room, watch the football game on the portable television and rock her to sleep at the same time. A real “win/win” situation! I would miss the color screen, but what a small price to pay for being a good Dad.

The problem came after about two minutes of watching the game. My daughter began to fuss. The thought came in my mind that if I turned the television off, walked with her and sang to her, she might be soothed. I knew it was the right thing to do, but did I do it? No, I spent the next thirty minutes struggling to watch the game and rock my child, all the while resenting the fact that I couldn't do what I wanted to!

One of the characteristics of persons who go against their conscience is that they have to justify their actions. These justifications come in the forms of rationalizations, thoughts, blaming emotions, and in some cases, physiological responses. In Proverbs we read, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes” (12:15). Having discussed this story with the individual who lived it, I can detail for you what his self-justifications were: (1) “I’ve been working with difficult situations all day, I need some time to myself”; (2) “My wife is much better suited to deal with children than I am, she should be doing this”; (3) “My wife doesn’t appreciate all that I do, it’s really unfair she would have me do this”; (4) “I’m so tired, I need to lie down”; and finally, (5) “Why did we have all these kids anyway?”

We often think of “sin” as being something grievous like murder, adultery, or some other form of gross immorality, and while they are among the most serious of sins, the scriptures teach that anytime we “knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, . . . it is sin” (James 4:17). When my friend didn’t arise and walk with his child, he went against that which he knew was right (conscience), and that in a word is sin.

I know from personal, professional, and ecclesiastical experience that most of the problems we face in life begin when we deny the promptings of conscience we experience daily. President Spencer W. Kimball made this same observation in the following:

There are many causes for human suffering—including war, disease, and poverty—and the suffering that proceeds from each of these is very real, but I would not be true to my trust if I did not say that *the most persistent cause of human suffering, that suffering which causes the deepest pain, is sin*—the violation of the commandments given to us by God. . . . If any of us wish to have more precise prescriptions for ourselves in terms of what we can do to

have more abundant lives, all we usually need to do is to consult our conscience. (155)

While many of us go against our conscience by not doing those things we know are right, others of us confuse conscience with societal expectations and get lost in the artificial light of perfectionism. Consider the following story of Esther, published in the Sunday School manual, *Teach Them Correct Principles*:

Esther was trying to be the perfect wife and mother. Every morning she woke up announcing to herself: "This is the day I will be perfect. The house will be organized, I will not yell at my children, and I will finish everything important I have planned." Every night she went to bed discouraged, because she had failed to accomplish her goal. She became irritable with everyone, including herself, and she began to wonder what she was doing wrong.

One night Esther knelt in prayer and asked for guidance. Afterward, while lying awake, a startling thought came to her. She realized that in focusing on her own perfection she was focusing on herself and failing to love others, particularly her husband and children. She was being not loving, therefore not Christlike, but essentially selfish. She was trying to be sweet to her children, but not freely, out of love for them, but because she saw it as a necessary part of *her* perfection. Furthermore, she was trying to get a feeling of righteousness by forcing her husband and children to meet her ideal of perfection. When her children got in the way of her "perfect" routine, she blamed them for making her feel "imperfect," and she became irritated with them and treated them in a most unloving way. Likewise, if her husband did not meet her idea of perfection when he came home from work, she judged him as failing and was critical of him as a way of reinforcing her sense of her own righteousness.

Esther remembered the Savior's commandment to be perfect *as he is perfect* (see 3 Nephi 12:48). She realized that this perfection includes loving as he loved (John 13:34), and realized she had been pursuing the wrong goal. (7)

As with Esther, most of us who have challenges with perfectionism are not committed to selflessly serving others, but in serving ourselves by showing the world how competent we are. We are constantly on the run, doing a lot of things for a lot of people and, sometimes, becoming physically ill in the process. Like Martha of New Testament times, those who struggle with perfectionism are "careful and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:41). A perfectionist's flurry of activity is often a type of "virtuous" excuse for not being true to simple promptings of conscience.

It is through these simple promptings of conscience that the Lord continually attempts to get us to be one with him. He will never invite

us to fall short or go “beyond the mark” (see Jacob 4:14). He promises us that if we are true to the light given us, he will give us greater light: “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I give you my own witness that I have felt the love and direction of my Father in Heaven through both the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Ghost. I have also been privileged to work with many people who have experienced a “mighty change” (Mosiah 5:2) by first coming to recognize and then by being true to the Spirit of Christ within them. I know that if we are true to the portion of the Light given us, we will receive more. “Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren [and sisters], that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ” (Moroni 7:19).

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