

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Grant H. Palmer

THE “BORN AGAIN” SAINT

The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christ's.

—C. S. Lewis

EVANGELICAL Christians often employ the term and converse about the significance and process of being “born again,” whereas members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seldom do. Despite many Book of Mormon references to being born again,¹ the LDS Church neglects the topic. Recall that Jesus himself used this term and emphasized its importance during his discussion with the Jewish leader Nicodemus. He informed Nicodemus that to “enter into the kingdom” a person “*must be born again*” (John 3:5, 7, *emphasis mine*).

The New Testament is replete with many other exhortations to Christians about “being born again,” about “putting on Christ,” “Christ being in you,” and “hav[ing] the mind of Christ” (John 3:7; Romans 8:10; 13:14; 1 Corinthians 2:16). In fact, this is the central message of the New Testament. Let us examine what Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John have to say specifically about this fundamental theme.

WHILE obeying the Mosaic Law “could not make . . . [one] perfect,” Jesus said that a person becomes whole or “perfect” when exemplifying the Sermon on the Mount in his or her life (Matthew 5:48). Jesus is saying: If you will let me, I will make you perfect. The job will not be accomplished in this life; but he intends to get us as far as possible before our death.

Jesus urges us to “count the cost” before becoming a Christian. He informs his listeners: “Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple . . . [and he] that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27, 33). Jesus is putting us on notice that when we turn to Him, we should not be surprised if we are in for a rough time. Too many disciples underestimate what he means to make of us. C. S. Lewis illustrates this point:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

The command Be ye perfect is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. . . . If we let Him. . . . The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said.²

To each generation, Jesus Christ answers the ancient query of the rich young ruler, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” with the timeless response: “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:18, 22). The Sermon on the Mount reveals the essential character of Jesus. He defines the Christian as one who, like himself, practices the beatitudes. Such are promised eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit [“disciples” who continue serving diligently when discouraged in bringing others to Christ]: *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted [in the kingdom of heaven where there is

no mourning, pain, or death].

Blessed are the meek [humble, gentle, long suffering, not easily offended, exhibiting strength under control]: *for they shall inherit the [new] earth* [the kingdom of heaven].

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled [with the Spirit, the love of God, and wisdom and knowledge in the kingdom of heaven].

Blessed are the merciful [who are more forgiving than justice requires]: *for they shall obtain mercy* [in the kingdom of heaven].

Blessed are the pure [honest] *in heart: for they shall see God* [daily in the kingdom of heaven].

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children [sons and daughters] *of God* [and inherit all things in the kingdom of heaven].

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake [return good for evil when reviled, persecuted, or spoken against falsely]: *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake . . . for great is your reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:1–12; for an elaboration of these promises, see Revelation chapters 2, 3, 21–22)

Jesus is the Sermon on the Mount—the first morally perfect Christian. Each of these Christian attitude-ideals is exemplified many times throughout his ministry. In short, Jesus is asking us to:

- Be diligent in the ministry.
- Exercise self-discipline.
- Do what is right.
- Forgive others beyond what justice requires.
- Be pure in heart and honest.
- Be a peacemaker.
- Return good for evil.

In his old age, the Apostle Peter reemphasized these Christian ideals. He had carefully observed Jesus and knew him well. In one of his two surviving epistles, Peter lists nine personal characteristics for which the Saints ought to strive. He repeatedly referred to these collectively as “the way of truth,” “the right way,” and “the way of righteousness,” and he undoubtedly observed them in Jesus during the Master’s three-year ministry (2



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Peter 2:2; 15, 21). Jesus displayed “diligence” in revealing his Father’s “divine nature,” manifested strong “faith” in God, was “virtuous,” and demonstrated “knowledge” of the scriptures. He exhibited “temperance” (meaning self control, moderation, and balance) and “patience” with others. He also demonstrated “godliness” (goodness), “brotherly kindness” (gentleness), and enormous “charity” (love and compassion) for his fellow beings. Peter explained that when these nine qualities “be in [us], and abound” then we have “knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “shall never fall” (2 Peter 1:4–10). Nine small words, but in this list of Christlike traits reside eternal life!

The Apostle Paul also taught the Saints to strive for these characteristics “until Christ be formed in you.” His list of the fruits of the spirit by which a Christian is known is almost identical to Peter’s. He also lists nine qualities: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Galations 4:19; 5:22–23). Taking upon us the name of Christ and his character is to “know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” and thus receive “life eternal” (John 17:3; cf. 10:27–28). Being like Jesus is far more ambitious than saying that we know he lives.³

The Apostle John explained what being born again means. He taught that those who are born again “walk, even as he [Jesus] walked,” then explicitly described them as:

Every one that doeth righteousness is born of him. . . . Whosoever is born of God doth not [continue to] commit sin. . . . Every one that loveth [others] is born of God, and knoweth God. . . . Whosoever believeth [i.e., has a trusting relationship in his heart] that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. . . . Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world. . . . He that hath the Son [in him] hath life. . . . Whosoever is born of God . . . that wicked one toucheth him not [meaning temptation has lost its power over him].⁴

Perhaps the most observable of these characteristics is that a “born again” person has “life.” The Apostles Peter and Paul referred to such disciples as “lively stones,” and say that “Christ liveth in [them]” (1 Peter 2:5; Galations 2:20). But who are these saints who exhibit life, joy, enthusiasm, happiness, and optimism? They are around us, but we have to look for them. C. S. Lewis observes:

Every now and then one meets them. Their very voices and faces

are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant. They begin where most of us leave off. They are, I say, recognizable; but you must know what to look for. They will not be very like the idea of “religious people” which you have formed from your general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves. You tend to think that you are being kind to them when they are really being kind to you. They love you more than other men do, but need you less. . . . They will usually seem to have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. When you have recognized one of them, you will recognize the next one much more easily. . . . [They are found] across every barrier of color, sex, class, age, and even of creeds.⁵

WHAT is the role of churches in bringing about the “born-again” saint? The high aspiration of “Christ being formed in us,” of becoming “a son of God,” a “real son” is not just one among many jobs a Christian has to do, but as C. S. Lewis declares:

It is the whole [purpose] of Christianity. Christianity offers nothing else at all. . . . It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. . . . The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.⁶

In other words, a church may receive high marks in a dozen different areas of its concern, but if its leaders are not notably talking about Christ—his life, example, and ministry—and accentuating on a regular basis the importance and process of “putting on Christ,” they have largely failed in their stewardship.

Jesus invites us to make him the central focal point in our meetings and lessons. Teaching principles to others is much more meaningful when viewed in the context of a life, and Jesus has asked repeatedly that we focus our attention directly on him: “Come unto me,” “learn of me,” “continue with me,” “draw nigh unto me,” “come after me,” “watch with me,” “hearken unto me,” “look

unto me,” “follow me,” “hear me,” “confess me,” “gather with me,” “remember me,” “seek me,” “believe on me,” “find me,” “live by me,” “know me,” “serve me,” “see me,” “receive me,” “love me,” “dwell in me,” “honour me,” “abide in me,” “ask me,” “testify of me,” and “be witnesses of me.”⁷ Jesus uses the phrase “follow me” more than fifteen times when speaking to different individuals and groups in the Four Gospels.

A church fulfilling its stewardship encourages and facilitates the process of one’s becoming “born again.” But ultimately that process is more about our own personal relationship with Christ than with an institution. Jesus has assured disciples who seriously covenant to take his “divine nature” upon them: “I am with you alway[s].” “My peace I give unto you.” “[My Spirit] shall teach you all things . . . whatsoever I have said.” And “I will love [you], and will manifest myself to [you]” (Matthew 28:20; John 14:26–27; John 14:21). In short, Jesus is affirming that true followers will be “born again.” It is our diligence but especially God’s “gift” of enabling grace that empowers us to fully employ the characteristics of Christ—that increases desire beyond our natural abilities—that make it possible for us to “overcome the world” (Ephesians 2:8; John 16:33).

THROUGH the centuries, many Christian church founders have come and gone. They have enticed us to embrace the beauty of their theological systems. But for Jesus, the gospel was not about theology or philosophy but about emulating the divine nature, about being born again, about doing and becoming like him. It was more about right actions than “right beliefs” (Matthew 7:21, 24; John 7:17). “The way” and the power of “overcoming the world” are clearly taught in Jesus’ life, example, ministry, promises, spiritual grace, and atonement—and that is enough. ❧

NOTES

1. See, for example, Mosiah 27:25, 28; Alma 5:14, 49; 22:15; 36:5, 23.

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1960), 174–75.

3. The above four paragraphs on Jesus, Peter, and Paul are also found in Grant H. Palmer, *The Incomparable Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2005), 2–4, 9–10, 27–28.

4. 1 John 2:6, 29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 12, 18.

5. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 187–88.

6. *Ibid.*, 166, 169–70.

7. See Matthew 11:28–29; 15:8, 32; 16:24; 26:38; Mark 7:14; Luke 7:20, 22; 10:16; 11:23; 12:8; 22:19; John 6:26, 47, 56–57; 7:34; 8:19, 54; 12:26, 45; 13:20; 14:23; 15:4, 26; 16:5; Acts 1:8 (*some verb forms adapted*).