

Lifelong Conversion

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My dear brothers and sisters, thank you for being here, early in the semester and for some of you the beginning of your university experience. Thank you for taking the time to be here. I am grateful for President Kevin J Worthen and for the remarkable things he does. I have looked up to him for a long time.

I am grateful to Sister Kaytie Kerr for her beautiful music and for the Spirit that it brought. I am also grateful for Brother Jonathan Tshibanda for his wonderful invocation. I think it is eight years ago in Lubumbashi in DR Congo that late one Saturday night Elder Kevin S. Hamilton and I went to the Tshibanda home and extended a call to Jonathan's father to be a stake president. The Tshibandas are just an extraordinary family. I am grateful now to be with you again.

In the April general conference leadership meetings, Sister Joy D. Jones, then the Primary general president, led a discussion with children. Let us learn from the interview with young Sister Charlotte Nance:

[Sister Jones:] *"I want to know, What do you remember about your baptism?"*

[Sister Nance:] *"I felt really, really happy, because, well, I just got baptized. Now I could keep being happy and be a member of the Church and get a testimony and, as some would say, live happily ever after, but it's not that simple."*

[Sister Jones:] *"Is there a little bit of work involved?"*

[Sister Nance:] *"Uh-huh."*

Let me say what we all pray for: that we will live happily ever after. But, as we learned from Sister Nance and Sister Jones, it is not that simple, and there is a little bit of work involved.

What can we do to "live happily ever after"? The road to eternal happiness depends on lifelong conversion to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Lifelong conversion means that we endure to the end, remaining firm in our commitment to keep the covenants we have made with God—no matter what. Such a commitment cannot

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be conditional or dependent upon the circumstances in our lives.

Cycling Through the Elements of the Doctrine of Christ

The best way to become a lifelong convert is to engage with the doctrine of Christ.¹ The doctrine of Christ—faith in the Savior and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost²—is not intended as a one-time event. We are invited to get on the covenant path, stay on the covenant path, and participate in the doctrine’s specified elements.

We endure to the end by repeatedly and iteratively “relying wholly upon” the doctrine and “merits” of Christ.³ “Repeatedly” means that we cycle through the elements in the doctrine of Christ throughout our lives. “Iteratively” means that we change and improve with each cycle. Even though we cycle repeatedly, we are not spinning in circles like on a merry-go-round without upward motion. If that were the case, the experience would be dizzying and unproductive. Instead, as we cycle through the elements of the doctrine of Christ, we arrive at a higher plane each time. This ascent provides new vistas and perspectives and brings us closer to the Savior. And we eventually return to the presence of our Heavenly Father as an heir to all that He has.⁴

The best way to picture this process is to imagine a long road ascending a mountain peak. If you view this road from a high altitude, all you see is a flat spiral. However, if you view the road from the side, you see an ascending spiral. If you start at the bottom, you will trace a circle around the mountain. As you continue, you spiral upward so that the course you travel becomes helical. Mathematically, it might be called an irregular conical helix.

Each element in the doctrine of Christ builds on the preceding step—repentance builds on faith, baptism on repentance, and the gift of the Holy Ghost on baptism—and then the sequence recurs. Each cycle ends progressively higher, so the subsequent cycle is higher and different. In this way the doctrine of Christ is iterative. Cycling iteratively through the elements of the doctrine of Christ enables us to endure to the end.

Enduring to the end is not a separate step in the doctrine of Christ—as though we complete the first four steps and then hunker down, grit our teeth, and wait to die. No, enduring to the end is actively and intentionally repeating the steps in the doctrine of Christ. Thus, the doctrine of Christ becomes central to the purpose of life, as stated in “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.”⁵

For those of us who have been baptized, how can the step of baptism be repeated? Well, it is through the sacrament. The covenants of baptism are renewed by partaking of the sacrament in remembrance of our Savior and His atoning sacrifice, and the blessings of baptism are also renewed.⁶ Partaking of the sacrament is the next ordinance everyone needs after being confirmed a member of the Church. The sacrament is the next ordinance needed at the beginning, middle, or end of a semester at BYU. The sacrament is the next ordinance needed after triumphantly passing a test or being miserably disappointed with the result. The sacrament is the next ordinance needed after receiving the endowment or being sealed in the temple. The sacrament is the next ordinance needed after making a good choice and the next ordinance needed after making a poor choice. The sacrament is the next ordinance needed every week for the rest of our lives.

President Dallin H. Oaks taught:

We are commanded to repent of our sins and to come to the Lord with a broken heart and a contrite spirit and partake of the sacrament. . . . We witness that we are willing to take upon us the name of Jesus Christ and always remember Him and keep His commandments. When we comply with this covenant, the Lord renews the cleansing effect of our baptism. We are made clean and can always have His Spirit to be with us.⁷

When we worthily partake of the sacrament, we qualify for the cleansing power of Jesus Christ.⁸ But, a word of caution: we cannot willfully sin Saturday night and expect to be miraculously forgiven by taking a piece of bread or drinking a little water on Sunday. Preplanned repentance is offensive to God.⁹

The sacrament does not replace baptism, but it provides the link between the initial steps in the doctrine of Christ—faith and repentance—and the later step of receiving the Holy Ghost. In the cycle, it serves a similar function as does baptism. This allows for the elements in the doctrine of Christ to be experienced iteratively in our lives.

The sacrament “unlocks the power of God”¹⁰ for you and me. However, we frequently miss out on this power. Before sacrament meeting, we may scurry about, text on our phones, or otherwise be preoccupied. We may enter the meeting late or worry about how someone is reacting to the sacrament service. With these distractions, the blessing of the sacrament is diminished for us.

We should conscientiously prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament. This preparation should happen in the days leading up to the sacrament meeting. Decide what aspect of the Savior’s mission you are going to think about during the sacrament and perhaps consider one thing you can do to increase your faith, to change in a positive way—which is another way to say repent—and follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost. When the sacrament hymn begins, focus on the Savior and His Atonement. This directs us toward Him and away from ourselves. We should pray to be renewed as we partake of the sacrament and remember Him.

Sacramental covenants are made anew each week. The sacramental prayers indicate that we *are* willing to take upon ourselves the name of Christ, using the present tense of the verb.¹¹ The prayers do not use the past tense of the verb, saying that we *took* or *have taken* upon ourselves the name of Christ. The promised blessing does not use the past tense either. The promise is that the Holy Ghost *will* always be with us, not that the Holy Ghost *was* given or *was* with us.

After instituting the sacrament among the Nephites, the Savior commanded them to regularly partake of it. He warned them that if they did not, they would

*not [be] built upon [His] rock, but [would be] built upon a sandy foundation; and when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, and beat upon them, they shall fall.*¹²

Lifelong conversion requires that we access the Holy Ghost,¹³ and we do that by focusing on the sacrament throughout our lives. By iteratively claiming the cleansing effect of baptism through the sacrament, our own personal conversion becomes lifelong.

In the course of my lifetime and because of my chosen profession, I missed many sacrament meetings. I recognized that this was dangerous. So when I knew I was likely to miss a sacrament meeting, I tried to compensate for it. I prayed and studied more. But these things did not adequately compensate for missing the sacrament.

Now, if you know you are going to not be able to sleep for a while, wouldn’t it be nice to practice defensive sleeping, storing that sleep for later? It does not work; I have tried it. Similarly, you cannot adequately compensate for missing the sacrament. When circumstances preclude it, so be it; do the best you can. But to willfully choose to not partake of the sacrament when you could is a spiritual death trap. This seemingly small action jeopardizes things of an eternal nature.

The Trajectory Has to Be Upward

For this repetitive cycle of the doctrine of Christ to be iterative, the trajectory has to be upward. For that to happen, we need to be similarly engaged with the other elements of the doctrine of Christ: faith and repentance.

Choosing to believe in Jesus Christ and the validity of the Restoration of His Church is crucial.¹⁴ Alma encouraged the Zoramites to experiment on the word. But this experiment differs from today’s standard scientific experimental protocol. It begins by choosing and desiring to believe—not with a skeptical or even a neutral bias. It treats Christ’s gospel as a seed, planting it and then acting in faith to nourish it.¹⁵ As the seed grows, not only is faith increased, but we can also know that the seed is good. Let me repeat: we can know that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a good seed. As Alma said:

And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know, for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that

it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.

*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.*¹⁶

There is no better foundation for lifelong conversion than to know that the word, the gospel of Jesus Christ—which is the doctrine of Christ—is good and true. That knowledge prompts us to trust the faith we already have and then to act in faith.

Acting in faith enables faith to grow stronger.¹⁷ When we act in faith by studying “the scriptures to understand better Christ’s mission and ministry,” we come to “know the doctrine of Christ” and to “understand its power” in our lives.¹⁸ We seek to recognize how Jesus Christ, through His Atonement, brings blessings to all aspects of our lives. We act in faith by asking Heavenly Father for help. President Russell M. Nelson said, “Ask, and then ask again,”¹⁹ because God knows what will help faith grow.

Increasing faith in Jesus Christ naturally leads to repetitive and iterative repentance, which leads to eternal progression.²⁰ Repentance and lifelong conversion go hand in hand. Repentance is not to be feared. Fearing repentance blocks lifelong conversion because it hinders cycling through the elements of the doctrine of Christ.

President Nelson taught, “Repentance is conversion! A repentant soul is a converted soul, and a converted soul is a repentant soul.”²¹ President Nelson also warned of thinking of

*repentance as punishment—something to be avoided. . . . This feeling of being penalized is engendered by Satan. He tries to block us from looking to Jesus Christ, who stands with open arms, hoping and willing to heal, forgive, cleanse, strengthen, purify, and sanctify us.*²²

For those of us with overexpressed guilt genes, we need to remember the following words by Nelson Mandela. He frequently deflected accolades for his role in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa by saying, “I’m no saint—that is, unless you think a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying.”²³ While we know that we are not perfect,

we may be perfected by relying on Jesus Christ. God cares a lot more about who we are and who we are becoming than about who we once were.²⁴ He cares that we keep on trying.

Augustine of Hippo, a Christian theologian of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, argued that the church is not made up of inherently good people but of people who were in the process of being transformed. From his writings derive the insightful phrase that the church is not a museum of saints but a hospital for sinners.

Engaging with each element of the doctrine of Christ iteratively is vital to lifelong conversion and to becoming who God wants us to be. As we iteratively cycle through the doctrine of Christ, we learn of and develop Christlike attributes. Our faith increases, we become a little better, we are better prepared to partake of the sacrament next Sunday, and the Holy Ghost will have a greater influence in our lives. Our hearts are changed, and “we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.”²⁵ We become more outwardly directed and less self-centered.²⁶ And we can endure to the end.²⁷

Developing Spiritual Sisu

Let us look at the mountain road again. Note that nowhere on the upwardly spiraling road is it perfectly horizontal; nowhere is the slope zero; there is no plateau; there is no place to pause and rest; and the course either goes up or down. Similarly, faith is either becoming stronger or weaker.²⁸ Being converted is an ongoing—even a lifelong—process.

That means that you can become “unconverted” at least as easily as you can become “converted.”²⁹ Your faith and commitment are going to either increase or decrease. The increase depends on your upward movement on the covenant path, cycling through the elements of the doctrine of Christ. The decrease happens if you disengage from the doctrine of Christ.

Imagine driving a powerful sports car with dysfunctional brakes up the mountain road. What happens if you shift the gear into neutral? The powerful engine is disengaged from the drive-train and wheels. Once the forward momentum stops, does the car remain where it is? No, slowly

at first and then faster and faster it goes backward. Revving the powerful engine will do nothing to halt the decline. What a terrifying descent! When you are rolling backward, you navigate or drive using only the rearview mirror.

The Lord has said:

*I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.*³⁰

As Alma taught:

He that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.

*And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction.*³¹

The Lord has warned:

There is a possibility that man may fall from grace and depart from the living God;

Therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation;

*Yea, and even let those who are sanctified take heed also.*³²

Ultimately, whether we remain converted throughout our lifetimes depends on our determination to be engaged with the doctrine of Christ. The type of determination we need can be explained by borrowing a word from the Finnish language. That Finnish word is *sisu*. It has no good or complete translation in English. *Sisu* has been described as stoic determination, tenacity of purpose, resilience, and hardiness. *Sisu* expresses a characteristic that manifests itself in displaying grit, resolve, and courage in the face of extreme adversity or against the odds. Someone with *sisu* decides on a course of action and then adheres to

it—no matter what.³³ *Sisu* is the type of determination we need to stay on the covenant path. With spiritual *sisu*, we are committed to conscientiously prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament every week.

Spiritual *sisu* is not conditioned on the circumstances in our lives. In the Savior's parable of the wise and foolish men who built houses, "rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon" both houses; only one stood because the builder listened to and followed the commandments of the Savior.³⁴ Our continued righteousness does not preclude the occurrence of adversity. Opposition and adversity come to all.

With spiritual *sisu*, we have settled it in our hearts that we "will do the things which [Jesus Christ] shall teach, and command."³⁵ We are spiritually resilient and are better able to withstand challenges without falling or faltering.

With spiritual *sisu*, we "grow up in" the Lord and seek to "receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost."³⁶ Because we choose to take the Holy Ghost as our guide, we are not deceived, and we remain steadfast despite adversity.

Spiritual *sisu* means that we speedily repent and return to the covenant path when we have transgressed, thereby qualifying for God's promised blessings. We are "armed with [God's] power" so "that no combination of wickedness shall have power to . . . prevail over [us]."³⁷ With spiritual *sisu*, we engage with the doctrine of Christ and fulfill the covenant to live the law of the gospel that we made in the temple. We will then receive all promised temple blessings.

Brothers and sisters, young Sister Charlotte Nance was right: to live happily ever after is not that simple. But it is also not really that complicated either. As we engage with the doctrine of Christ, we develop spiritual *sisu*, the spiritual resilience that is essential to lifelong conversion.

I testify of the Savior's living reality, of His atoning sacrifice, of Heavenly Father and His plan, and of the Restoration of the Lord's Church in these latter days. I know these things are true. I know that our Heavenly Father lives and that He loves you. He loves us so much that He sent His Son to earth to live and die as the Savior did. Jesus Christ rose the third day and ascended to heaven,

and there He claimed from the Father the rights of mercy on our behalf. He has become our advocate with the Father. He is not only our judge, but He is also our advocate. He is advocating what Heavenly Father has wanted all along for you and for me, to return to our heavenly home as a co-inheritor with Jesus Christ of all that He, Heavenly Father, has. God bless you, my dear brothers and sisters, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Just so there is no confusion, the phrase “the doctrine of Christ” means the same as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

2. See 2 Nephi 31:2–21; 3 Nephi 9:14–22; 3 Nephi 11:7–41; 3 Nephi 27:1–21.

3. 2 Nephi 31:19.

4. See Doctrine and Covenants 14:7.

5. See “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World,” 5 April 2020; introduced in Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020.

6. See *PMG*, 66, 216; see also Gordon B. Hinckley, “Find the Lambs, Feed the Sheep,” *Ensign*, May 1999.

7. Dallin H. Oaks, in “Special Witnesses of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2001.

8. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:9.

9. Elder James E. Talmage wrote, “The sacrament has not been established as a specific means of securing remission of sins” (*The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975], 175). See Dallin H. Oaks, “Sacrament Meeting and the Sacrament,” *Ensign*, November 2008; see also Hebrews 10:26–27.

10. Russell M. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” *Liahona*, May 2021.

11. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79; Moroni 4:3; 5:2.

12. 3 Nephi 18:13; see also verse 12.

13. See Spencer W. Kimball, “First Presidency Message: ‘It Becometh Every Man,’” *Ensign*, October 1977; quoted in *TSWK*, 570.

14. See Nelson, “Christ Is Risen.”

15. See Alma 32:27.

16. Alma 32:34–35.

17. See Nelson, “Christ Is Risen.”

18. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen.”

19. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen.”

20. See Alma 32:40–43; Ether 12:4, 6, 12; Doctrine and Covenants 63:9–12.

21. Russell M. Nelson, “Repentance and Conversion,” *Ensign*, May 2007.

22. Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019. See Doctrine and Covenants 6:36; see also Deuteronomy 26:8; 2 Nephi 1:15; Mormon 6:17; Doctrine and Covenants 6:20.

23. See, for instance, Nelson Mandela’s address at Rice University’s Baker Institute on October 26, 1999, bakerinstitute.org/events/1221. He was likely paraphrasing the well-known statement attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson: “The saints are the sinners who keep on trying.” Over the years many have expressed similar sentiments. For instance, Confucius is credited with saying, “Our greatest glory lies not in never falling but in getting up every time we fall.”

24. Saying that God cares a lot more about who we are and who we are becoming than about who we once were does not mean that the Savior is dismissive of the consequences of an individual’s sin on others. In fact, the Savior cares infinitely about those who suffer hurt, pain, and heartache because of another’s transgressions. The Savior “will take upon him [His people’s] infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12).

25. Mosiah 5:2.

26. This outward direction blesses others and manifests our changed hearts. Outward direction is not a checkbox on a to-do list. President Marion G. Romney said, “Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made” (“The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance,” *Ensign*, November 1982).

27. See, for instance, 2 Nephi 31:2–21; 3 Nephi 11:23–31; 27:13–21; Moroni 4:3; 5:2; 6:6; Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79; 59:8–9.

28. See Neil L. Andersen, “Faith Is Not by Chance, but by Choice,” *Ensign*, November 2015.

29. Harold B. Lee, address to Ricks College student body and student leaders, 3 March 1962; in *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 138; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (2000), 42–43.

30. 2 Nephi 28:30; see also Doctrine and Covenants 50:24.

31. Alma 12:10–11.

32. Doctrine and Covenants 20:32–34.

33. The Finnish usage of *sisu* derives from *sisus*, which means “entrails.” The English concept of “guts” can similarly evoke the metaphor grit.

34. 3 Nephi 14:25; see also verses 24–27.

35. JST, Luke 14:28.

36. Doctrine and Covenants 109:15.

37. Doctrine and Covenants 109:22, 26; see also verses 21–22, 25–26.