

*Christmas and Christ's Invitation
to Become as a Little Child:
What Manner of Child Ought We to Be?*

SCOTT E. FERRIN

In conclusion, brothers and sisters—the Plausible Evasion Research Institute, an institute I made up, has found that “in conclusion” is the most welcome phrase for most audiences, after “there will be refreshments after this meeting.” So, in conclusion, I love Christmas and I love BYU devotionals. I am grateful to be with you, and my older siblings, graduates of BYU, are here, having traveled from Arizona and Idaho. They must have thought I was graduating today. I’m not saying my older siblings are old, but there were no history classes on campus when they attended, just current events. The deodorant Old Spice was then known as New Spice, and the Dead Sea was just mildly sick.

Since my academic focus is education law, and since much of that discipline and practice is focused on protecting the rights and persons of children, I’d like to discuss what it means in the perfect economy of the Lord’s kingdom to become as a little child. I believe Christmas and the birth of the Christ child help us explore this concept.

Becoming as a Little Child

When our Heavenly Father wanted to save the world, He didn’t take over a country or develop a militia. He sent a helpless child to a choice and worthy woman and a humble and believing man living in insecure circumstances in a conquered land occupied by a hostile force. The harsh geopolitical and military circumstances of Christ’s birth should remind us that Heavenly Father can bless us even if the external circumstances of our lives aren’t necessarily easy or peaceful.

Herod the Great ruled over that land, under Rome’s ultimate control. He was mighty and built magnificent monuments—at least one of which overshadowed the land when Christ was born, being visible in all directions for miles. We can’t help but contrast Herod’s mighty palace with the stable. If we knew for

Scott E. Ferrin was a professor in the BYU Department of Educational and Leadership Foundations when this devotional address was given on 10 December 2013.

sure where the stable was, wouldn't we wish to visit the site of that sacred birth? But who cares as much about anything Herod built, besides perhaps one or two of our learned faculty members? Most of us with a normal threshold for boredom ignore Herod.

Christ is infinitely more important. We seek Christ's words and probably have many of His words memorized. Well, not everyone does apparently, because I'm always surprised on *Jeopardy* when those brainiacs often seem to know nothing about the scriptures. We Mormons, in turn, are continually lost on the "Potent Potables" category. We celebrate and rejoice in the words and the happenings of Christ's birth. Does anyone, even the most bookishly versant among us, celebrate the words or circumstances of Herod and his birth?

The New Testament shows us something of the Christ child we celebrate at Christmas in the perfect young adult He has become. He hasn't become full of Himself and self-important, careworn, and brusque. Although Isaiah described Him as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), Christ doesn't constantly groan under the weight of His office. Rather, we read in Luke:

And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. [Luke 18:15–16; emphasis added]

When Christ says that "of such is the kingdom of God," it is possible that He is also giving us a great insight into His nature and the nature of God and godliness. Christ continued and taught, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein" (Luke 18:17).

We must "receive" the supernal Christmas gift of the kingdom of God as a little child. If you and I in our weakness follow the plan of happiness our Heavenly Father has established—made possible by the gift of His Son—we will receive the greatest gift possible: eternal life with our Heavenly Father. How are we to receive and value such a gift? Perhaps we receive and value it by living abundantly, by repenting and becoming converted, and by becoming as little children. Christ warned:

Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. . . .

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. [Matthew 18:3, 5–6]

For our purposes I wonder if we shouldn't each consider ourselves as one who might "offend one of these little ones" when we let the world destroy the believing and loving child within ourselves by being weighed down and frightened by the world and our responsibilities and challenges. Christ seems to call us to put off childish fears and instead be trustingly and courageously childlike.

I have a friend, Mossi White, who as an infant was one of the unwitting heroes of World War II. Mossi's parents, and I guess Mossi herself, were part of the underground in Norway, and she acted as an unwitting secret courier carrying secret papers hidden in her diapers, where German soldiers were unlikely to look, for obvious reasons. Think of the fears her parents had to overcome. Had they developed what Christ meant when He asked us to develop a childlike nature? Is it possible that, in their childlike nature, Mossi's parents couldn't be frightened enough to accept that

wrong was right or that there was nothing they could do to stop the evil of the Third Reich? Mossi's father was later captured by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp in Poland, which he ultimately survived. Mossi's parents saw evil, and they did what a beautiful child would do: they tried to make it all better.

Perhaps because she was raised by such parents Mossi has become a woman of great strength and courage today. She is a cancer survivor who served for years as president of the Provo School Board and as president of the American Association of School Boards, traveling and speaking extensively nationally and internationally, seeking only to bless the lives of children. Does Mossi's parents' situation and response remind us of the birth of the Christ child in a land and among a people oppressed by both military might and false tradition, just as Norway and the world were oppressed by the Third Reich?

Developing Childlike Wonder and Belief

Christmas gives us time to make memories in our quest for conversion to the childlike. I always tell my children, and I remind you, that we only get a finite number of Christmases on this earth, so we should enjoy each one and never get too mature to enjoy all the classic Christmas traditions, Christmas movies, and Christmas-themed jokes. (What did the snowman order at the restaurant? A hot chocolate and a mop. What did Santa call the reindeer that couldn't fly? Venison.) I often invite my children to stop and consciously imprint a memory or a mental snapshot during Christmas, perhaps of a snow-covered mountain on the continental divide in New Mexico while cross-country skiing or of hiking to the top of a 12,000-foot peak in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Or, in the case of my sister Paula's family, taking mental snapshots of scaring other family members by sending agents (and I have been that secret agent before) to leave a creepy snowman outside the

front door of some lucky selected member of their family around the country. They open their front door to find this creepy snowman staring balefully, broodingly, and ominously at them.

I regularly enjoin my children to treasure and keep these mental snapshots from Christmas—and to not fear snowmen, a disorder labeled hominochionophobia. By the way, fear of Santa is the disorder labeled Claustrophobia.

I know Christmas is a mixed blessing for BYU students and professors. Beautiful Christmas lights appear, thanks to the efforts of our grounds crew on campus, but also worries over finals and final papers stalk the campus. Students are making plans to travel home, where they will dramatically collapse into their loved ones' arms, withered husks of their former selves, blighted and trembling from stress and lack of sleep and appropriate nutrition during finals.

Christmas is really most wondrous for little children and for withered BYU students. I hope it is not shocking to reveal to my own daughters (the youngest is fifteen and the oldest is a BYU senior on a mission in Nicaragua) that on Christmas Eve, after we put out the horse feed in buckets for Santa's reindeer, I was the one who emptied the buckets after they went to bed. What about childlike wonder and hope do we all try to preserve in ourselves and in our children through Christmas and its gentle deceptions? Is it a sense of wonder, a sense of the possible, as an antidote to fear? I suggest we all need to develop a sense of wonder as we ponder the Atonement and the childlike nature Christ wants each of us to develop.

I remember Christmases from my childhood, and they remind me of the love and preparation that my parents went through to provide great experiences for us at Christmas. To show my age, I remember a Christmas when I dearly wanted what some of my friends already had: J. C. Penney walkie-talkies. We

used them to play army. Imagine the dim recesses of time before the cell phones and twittering you now experience. Contact was not constant then. I know there are some here managing text and twitter contacts even as I speak, arranging dates or Christmas travel or taunting a Yankees fan that the Red Sox won the World Series.

On that Christmas long ago in the sixties, I thought walkie-talkies cost so much that I had no hope of getting a set. When I got one, it was a miracle that I still remember with a little frisson of happiness. Almost immediately I went out with my friends on that Christmas day in Arizona to use our walkie-talkies to play army, as was our custom in those days, complete with gun sounds and medics who would attend to you after you had been wounded. Those medics would come up to the wounded and shamanistically wave their hands, muttering the magic words “Fix, fix, fix,” and you were back in the game.

I realize that acting out such a bloody scenario today could be seen as troubling and would violate most schools’ safe-school policies if it occurred during recess. Times have changed. Television in my childhood consisted of a grand total of three to five channels—one from Mexico showing bullfights and one an educational channel. Then prime time included weekly doses of the popular TV show *Combat!* with Vic Morrow, et al., or *Twelve O’Clock High* and other such shows based on World War II.

It’s a little different today. Today most of you don’t know that Jimmy Stewart, star of the Christmas classics *Mr. Krueger’s Christmas* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*, served through the horrors of World War II as a wing commander flying B-17s with great courage and skill. Most of you were not raised by a decorated World War II combat veteran who saw and inflicted horrific death as a B-17 pilot, flying daylight bombing raids over Germany when he was younger than most of you. And yet

after the hell that such parents and society had experienced, such men and women as my parents, and perhaps your grandparents or great-grandparents, through Christmas and throughout our lives, protected us and let us be children untouched by the horrors they had waded through. They even let us play war without scaring us too much about what it actually meant. They knew that Christ hasn’t promised we can avoid the horrors this world is capable of inflicting upon us. They also knew that we are to become as little children by choice, despite the world’s horrors.

Living Life with Childlike Courage

When you were a child, you probably also knew what you wanted for Christmas. Similarly, when you were asked what you wanted to be, you had wonderful plans. How has your career path changed since then? I don’t notice a plethora of cowboys, firemen, or Disney princesses on campus. When you were a child, did you say, “Well, I don’t know if I’m quite up to the preparation and entrance exams necessary to be a doctor or the physical preparation required to be a fireman”? Did you decide you couldn’t live on the low wages paid to cowboys?

To a child, at least to a healthy child who hasn’t been harmed by abuse, the world and Christmas itself are all still fresh and possible. So what happened to you and to me as we grew older, and, most important, what happened to us that Christ wants us to combat in our maturity in order to become as little children? Why do we tend to become stuffy scaredy-cats?

There’s nothing sadder than youth being wasted on the young. As an old guy, I admonish you young BYU students to not waste your youth and to not be big scaredy-cats. We’re supposed to become as little children, and that shouldn’t include a lot of fear about our future.

In heaven's economy, true maturity is the conversion of becoming childlike. With all the duties and responsibilities that weigh him down, I'd submit that our prophet President Thomas S. Monson is a prototypical example of maturing into this childlike ideal:

*I reiterate that, as holders of the priesthood of God, it is our duty to live our lives in such a way that we may be examples of righteousness for others to follow. As I have pondered how we might best provide such examples, I have thought of an experience I had some years ago while attending a stake conference. During the general session, I observed a young boy sitting with his family on the front row of the stake center. I was seated on the stand. As the meeting progressed, I began to notice that if I crossed one leg over the other, the young boy would do the same thing. If I reversed the motion and crossed the other leg, he would follow suit. I would put my hands in my lap, and he would do the same. I rested my chin in my hand, and he also did so. Whatever I did, he would imitate my actions. This continued until the time approached for me to address the congregation. I decided to put him to the test. I looked squarely at him, certain I had his attention, and then I wiggled my ears. He made a vain attempt to do the same, but I had him! He just couldn't quite get his ears to wiggle. He turned to his father, who was sitting next to him, and whispered something to him. He pointed to his ears and then to me. As his father looked in my direction, obviously to see my ears wiggle, I sat solemnly with my arms folded, not moving a muscle. The father glanced back skeptically at his son, who looked slightly defeated. He finally gave me a sheepish grin and shrugged his shoulders. ["Examples of Righteousness," *Ensign*, May 2008, 66]*

I know only a little about the many challenges our prophet is faced with regularly, but I do know they are weighty, and yet he does not appear careworn and beaten by maturity into losing the child within. What can we learn about becoming as a little child from our beloved prophet?

I hope it isn't inappropriate to say that my wife is not that mature. For one thing, she's about the only person, outside of kindergarteners, who laughs reliably at my jokes. She has been a professor in Boston University's School of Management and a highly paid consultant in the petroleum industry and in other management settings, including Boeing. Now she teaches kindergarten. One beautiful day she had the courage to say, "Although I like being a management consultant, what I really want to do is to teach kindergarten" (and be poor), so she made a major career change. You should see her in kindergarten. She reminds me of those Disney princesses when she is surrounded by her kindergarten kids. I expect to see singing birds and butterflies around her. Life is great in kindergarten, and you get to wear costumes at Halloween.

I invite us to become like her and like her kindergarteners, with their fresh and courageous approach to careers and the future.

I'd suggest, my young brothers and sisters, that you and I may have lost some hope as we've matured. Moroni said in Ether 12:32: "Wherefore man must hope, or he cannot receive an inheritance in the place which thou hast prepared."

God hasn't sent us here to fearfully creep through our lives and education. I suggest that even in our hardest classes we could act this out a bit more by worrying less about what the professor thinks is important or what will be on the test and by worrying more about exploring what we find fascinating in the subject matter of our classes—and by taking time to prepare to serve our fellows and our world. One day soon you'll leave BYU—an extraordinary place. Will you have crept through this experience, preserving a businesslike GPA but not fostering childlike wonder and not making a powerful impact on hearts and individuals' circumstances? Do you fear and tremble before graduate school entrance requirements? Without hope, you

cannot be pleasing to God, and, as a little secret, without hope, curiosity, and wonder, you can't really be too pleasing to your professors either.

Availing ourselves of hope, curiosity, and wonder, and adding faith to the mix, we should not choose too safe of a plan in our lives. We all know that if at first you don't succeed, then skydiving is not your sport. I'm not suggesting risking anything that is likely to foreshorten your time in mortality. I am suggesting getting a little more childlike joy out of trying more things, even if they seem beyond us. I'm suggesting not being slavishly concerned about convention, future earnings, or society's expectations if they run counter to the core of our best and most unique childlike nature individually. We need to be fearless and not fainthearted.

As a BYU student long ago, my brother-in-law was an example of fearlessness and not faintheartedness. Since the statute of limitations has run out, the story can now be told. In the dim recesses of time, when phones were rotary and thumbs were for hitchhiking, not texting, computers were huge and programs and data were entered into them on computer cards.

This gentleman, whom we'll call Frank, because that's his name, was an electrical engineering major here at BYU. The by-product of entering data onto computer cards then was that in punching them there were resulting leftover tiny bits of paper or cardstock.

Frank, and some undisclosed accomplices, collected and introduced this computer confetti, or chad, into the ventilating ducts of my sister's BYU apartment so that later, when they turned on their cooler or heater fan, they would be greeted by a Christmas-like shower of paper snow. Unfortunately, such chad or confetti didn't all come out at once. In fact, due to static electricity cling and the interactions of metal ducts and energized small bits of paper, there was a shower of confetti from then on

every time the fans went on. I daresay that someone in this audience has just learned why the vents in their apartment still occasionally waft stray bits of computer-card chad gently onto their carpet.

Unsurprisingly, this greatly annoyed my sister's roommates—who were not sufficiently childlike, I guess—but Frank's pluck and daring warmed the cockles of my sister's heart. The point is that although Frank may have exercised questionable judgment, it was kind of cool. He dared and he won the fair maid because his own heart was not faint. Now, President Samuelson and members of the campus law-enforcement and student-discipline community, I'm not advocating any types of pranks; it's more a mind-set and a childlike courage I advocate.

A safer example may be my current colleague here at BYU, Chris Sorenson. When he was the principal of an elementary school here in Utah, a young man with a disability that confined him to a wheelchair appeared at his school with his parents to enroll. Chris wondered what class to assign him to. While the school secretary gave the boy and his parents a tour of the school, Chris privately knelt in his office and prayed about this student. He felt directed to assign him to the largest class, one already much larger than the other two sixth-grade classes. He didn't know why; nevertheless, he took courage and trusted in the prompting he'd learned to recognize. He ignored the possible displeasure of a teacher with an already large class size. He ignored any other concerns, because he had learned not to fear when had received an answer in prayer.

To his surprise, when Chris walked this student to his new class, as soon as this new student wheeled into the class, he lit up and addressed the teacher by name, with evident relief and joy. Unknown to anyone at the school, the two knew each other well. That particular teacher had been a loved and

trusted Scout leader in a previous ward, and the families had lost touch with each other. Taking the courage to seek and obey the Spirit's promptings resulted in a successful start in a new school for a child who probably needed such a start.

Rising to Life's Challenges as a Christlike Child

In our lives, perhaps we could in a like way overcome fear more, seek wonder more, follow the promptings of the Spirit more, and develop a bit more childlike tenacity in action and belief. Often we slink away from a challenge before we even rise to that challenge. We should consider aiming a bit higher than we are in our imagination, our love, our lives, and our academic pursuits.

As I think of rising to the challenges life provides us, I'm reminded of one of the authors of the book *We Were Not Alone: How an LDS Family Survived World War II Berlin* by Patricia Reece Roper and Karola Hilbert Reece. Karola Reece spoke to our youth in our ward some years ago. Her family suffered because they, as pioneer members of the Church in Berlin, didn't fully join and support the Nazi Party. Her father had difficulty getting work since he was not a member of the Nazi Party. Later her brother was drafted into the military and was put on the Russian front. He made his own private covenant with God that he would not take a life for "Hitler's war," as he put it.

When Russian soldiers approached his foxhole from time to time in advances on the Russian front, he would shoot to the right or to the left or into the ground, but he would not shoot at his fellow humans for Hitler. This was his own decision, and I'm not criticizing any others who made different decisions in that war or in other wars. He and his fellow soldiers often would laugh and say, "Hey, what's wrong with us?" because repeatedly his portion of the lines would be ignored and not attacked. He survived the war without taking

a single life in a cause he did not support. This also exemplifies to me the childlike nature we are asked to develop—of courage and of deciding not to collaborate with something the child within us feels is wrong.

As a further example of rising to life's challenges as a Christlike child, I'm reminded of one of my father's experiences in World War II. He was the pilot of a B-17, flying daylight bombing raids over Germany and experiencing and inflicting horrific deaths when he was younger than almost everyone here. Thanks, Dad, to you and to other men and women like you. At one point, after completing a bombing run over Germany, his formation was attacked by German fighters and flack, and his plane lost an engine. This meant that the rest of the formation had to leave them behind since they could not keep up. They knew full well that they would probably be killed because they had lost the protection of the interlocking fields of fire and the protection that a formation with its many guns provided. Then they lost a second engine. B-17s weren't necessarily able to fly with only two engines, but my dad broke the throttle quadrant and could over-rev the engines, buying time for some airspeed and altitude.

The fighters swarmed to this lone plane, ready to finish it off with relative ease away from the protection of the other gunners and planes. Dad began to pray, and he also thought, "Dad, pray for me."

In the Gila Valley in Arizona, his father—my grandfather—Ether Samuel Ferrin, got his wife and said, "Leven's in trouble. We need to pray for him." They knelt in humble prayer for his safety far across the world. These discrete actors' stories were obviously pieced together later. My Dad recounts that when they were sure they were going to be destroyed, it seemed as if they suddenly became invisible to the fighters, which would just fly past.

They were able to return home to England with that plane, which Dad safely landed.

After that the plane was useless in the war effort. The ground crew presented Dad with the placard from that now useless B-17. He has that placard in his home in the Gila Valley today. The key point for me in recounting this story is that as a courageous child, my father not only prayed but cried out for his father to be alerted and pray as well, because he knew and believed in his father's faith.

Fostering the Child of God Within Us

So what manner of child ought we to become this Christmas season? As King Benjamin counseled, "Submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us], even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:19). He didn't counsel us to be fearful or to settle for a safe but boring job or career instead of a challenging and exciting mission in life. I submit that we should be ready to be cowboys if that is what our

hearts and the Spirit dictate—or kindergarten teachers or doctors or molecular biologists—and we should live our lives with courage and submission to the Lord.

This Christmas season I invite each of us to foster and care more for the child of God within us and bend to the exigencies of life and finances less—to take joy in the wonderful and simple journey to be the child that is like those who make up the kingdom of God. Paul reminded us in Romans 8:15, "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father."

May we trust our Father and develop the childlike attributes Christ and our prophet exemplify. May we cry out "Abba, Father," lovingly in words and action during this Christmas season, during our academic careers at BYU, and throughout our lives as joint heirs with Christ, I pray, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.