

Thoughts on the Process of Conversion

R. QUINN GARDNER

Brothers and sisters, it is great to be with you on this wonderful campus—a few acres of land which are made most sacred by the lives of those of you who occupy them and especially by the lives of those who manage and teacher here. I'm painfully aware of the fact that normally during this hour you are instructed by one of the Lord's anointed, one of the Brethren, each of whom we love and honor so very much. I can't possibly match or seek to match them in power or wisdom, but I can speak from the heart and pray that the Spirit will give utterance. I hope that we can seek the spirit of a fireside chat and achieve edification.

I wanted to speak to you about the welfare program of the Church, a marvelous plan whereby we, through preparing for consecration, may live the covenants which we have made. But I feel constrained to talk about something more basic which will cause us to participate more fully in all of the activities and programs of the Church, and that is the process of conversion, the mellowing of the heart whereby the Lord makes us his sons and his daughters.

Developing Christlike Character

In one of the great instructional volumes of teachings of our dispensation, the *Lectures on Faith*, the Prophet makes this statement:

These teachings of the Savior most clearly show unto us the nature of salvation, and what he proposed unto the human family when he proposed to save them—that he proposed to make them like unto himself; and he was like the Father, the great prototype of all saved beings; and for any portion of the human family to be assimilated into their likeness is to be saved; and to be unlike them is to be destroyed; and on this hinge turns the door of salvation.

When you ponder this statement you are seized with the question, "How can I be assimilated into the likeness of Christ and thus secure salvation?" Developing Christlike character is the aim and goal of every Latter-day Saint. But, unfortunately, many miss the mark. Stories and books, meetings and manuals, discussions and performances are all used to aim us in the right direction. But often, because our hearts aren't right, these prove to be empty wells instead of fountains of living water.

If you will permit me, I would like to be autobiographical for a minute and admit some well-intended but rather fruitless attempts to

R. Quinn Gardner was the director of the Welfare Services Production-Distribution Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 24 June 1975.

grasp the meaning and the means of becoming Christlike. I was born and raised in the mission field, and when I was nine we were holding our meetings in the practice band room of Colorado College. Because my two older brothers were the only Aaronic Priesthood bearers in the branch, I unofficially helped them prepare the sacrament table. After each meeting when we would clean up, I would carefully sequester myself in the janitor's closet, and, while polishing the water trays, I would eat all the extra sacrament bread and drink the extra water. (Now, I know none of you brethren have done that.) But as fate would have it, one day my father caught my closet act, and, as the branch president, he requested an explanation. While I admitted that the bread was filling, I protested, "Dad, all this extra sacrament will help me be more like Jesus right through the week." Such wonderful naivete! I didn't understand that emblems, in and of themselves, could not deliver me from the power of the adversary. I was trusting in the arm of the flesh—in things. Things or possessions simply have not the power to bring forth Christlike character. I was the prototype materialist, ignorant of the powers of the Atonement commemorated in the sacrament.

Some years later, as a junior in high school, I again attempted to plumb the gospel. (After all, an eleventh grader knows about all there is to know, so why not penetrate the inner creases of gospel scholarship?) After furious labor, I emerged from my room one morning with a list of rules, seventy-two in number, and I ran upstairs and presented it rather pompously to my mother: "Here it is. If any person will live these seventy-two rules, he will receive exaltation. The Lord will have no choice but to let him in." Notice how I projected the fruits of the gospel into the next life. This life was to be only harsh realities and back-breaking laws. But how disappointed I was to learn in the ensuing weeks that I couldn't even live half the laws half the time. Like my Israelitish cousins,

I sought Christlike character in stone tablets. Measuring and calculating. I suffocated my heart in the law of carnal commandments. Unknowingly I was operating in the best tradition of Pythagoras, Bacon, Saul of Tarsus, and others.

But the Lord must have smiled at my efforts, for he had already promised Israel through Ezekiel that "I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). Indeed, the letter killeth and bringeth forth a stony heart.

Twenty months later, when I came here to BYU as a robust freshman, I had gone full circle from being a marshal of the gospel law to a wide-eyed idealist. The practical had yielded to the theoretical. I wasn't prepared to live those seventy-two laws and a few others I discovered—including the one my brother taught me upon returning from his mission when he indicated that kissing was not Christlike dating etiquette. I didn't have the wisdom to heed that good counsel. Fresh from having discovered Plato and enthralled with Nephi's dream, I set my heart on principles, not so much to live them but to discuss them. Since I couldn't be bothered with mundane things, my home teaching was rather sporadic, my service to others largely self-serving, and my aspirations rather romantic. In the midst of this sentimentalism, my heart, while sensitive, went untamed. Christlike I hadn't become. My feet were not even on the path, because my head was so far in the clouds.

Experiencing a Change of Heart

In this condition I was called on a mission to teach the humble as well as the great of Uruguay, but to my amazement neither my appeal to gospel ordinances, nor my grave explanations of gospel laws, so long studied but not practiced in high school, had much effect. Not even my stunning explanations of

sacred principles moved these dear people to conversion. I felt a failure, and my heart was very sick. And in this unsettled condition I found myself reading in Mosiah one day when the teachings of King Benjamin sank deep into my soul:

And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.

For behold, he judgeth, and his judgment is just; and the infant perisheth not that dieth in its infancy; but men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man. [Mosiah 3:17–19]

For one so full of pride who hadn't heard of developing a broken heart and a contrite spirit, these were hard teachings. Like Laman and Lemuel I stiffened my neck; nevertheless, I was touched by the prayer of King Benjamin's people. Listen to their plea as recorded in Mosiah:

And they viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God And it came to pass after they had spoken these words, the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience. [Mosiah 4:2–3]

At that moment I greatly desired to share this peace which passeth understanding and to have my heart made right before the Lord. But I learned in the ensuing weeks that I wasn't yet prepared to pay the price of conversion in terms of study, prayer, repentance, and personal discipline. Because of my spiritual weakness, I didn't grasp the meaning of the change of heart which they experienced, for after they covenanted to live the royal law, the celestial law, we read that the Spirit regenerated their hearts:

And now, it came to pass that when King Benjamin had thus spoken to his people, he sent among them, desiring to know if they believed the words which he had spoken unto them.

And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. [Mosiah 5:1–2]

Think of that: "having no disposition to do evil but to do good continually." I am persuaded, my brothers and sisters, that this is the heart of the matter. This is what we are questing for: to have our hearts changed through the baptism of fire and lose the propensity to sin. King Benjamin, this wise prophet, knew that his life and these teachings had borne sweet fruit:

Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant.

And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name. [Mosiah 5:6–7]

Through adoption they had taken upon themselves the name of Christ and desired to live after the manner of Christ. This, I believe, is a living example of the Prophet's teachings when he said, "We must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God, and subscribe the articles of adoption to enter therein" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 328). Knowing that conversion was a process—sometimes slow, sometimes fast—and realizing the saints must endure to the end, King Benjamin gave them this last bit of counsel: "I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the left hand of God, but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also, the name by which he shall call you" (Mosiah 5:12).

These teachings of King Benjamin are profound and significant, brothers and sisters. They define for us the gifts and powers of the Atonement, by which we may have our hearts renewed, have Christ's name written thereon, and then lose the desire for sin. But isn't that what we renew each Sunday when we partake of the sacrament and think in our minds and in our hearts these words: "That they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he has given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them"? Have we understood? Have we fully sought these gifts of the Atonement? Joseph Smith taught that to be made like the Father and the Son is to be saved, and to be unlike them is to be destroyed. I am persuaded that the assimilation process is centered primarily in experiencing this change of heart. That is really what makes possible the development of Christlike virtue.

It would be valuable to weigh the testimony of a second witness regarding these matters, and so I would like to read from Alma, as

he is speaking to the saints of the stake in Zarahemla:

Behold . . . did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believed them?

And according to his faith there was a mighty change wrought in his heart. Behold I say unto you this is all true.

And behold, he preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was also wrought in their hearts, and they humbled themselves and put their trust in the true and living God. And behold, they were faithful unto the end; therefore they were saved. [Alma 5:11–13]

Later Alma confronted the people of Zarahemla with a question, and by virtue of inspiring Moroni to record it, he asks you and me this same question: "And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14). Isn't that the crucial question of life? I think so. And yet it seems hard to face. In defense of self, we say, "Well, now isn't that kind of righteousness reserved for the General Authorities or for my religion professors or perhaps the stake president? Again the Lord provides the answer:

Now they, after being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God, could not look upon sins save it were with abhorrence; and there were many, exceeding great many, who were made pure and entered into the rest of the Lord their God. [Alma 13:12; emphasis added]

Seeking Total Faith

My dear friends, it's so easy to avoid the basic issues of life, but we soon discover with

Lehi that the fruit of the tree of life is sweet above all that is sweet and desirable above all that is desirable. Finding the Savior, taking upon us his name, and renewing our hearts compose one of the most primary purposes of life. Yet once we come to understand this doctrine, we often get discouraged and say in our hearts, “But often I don’t even have the faith to get an answer to simple prayer. Where will I generate the faith and the courage to lose the very desire for sin?” Well, I daresay that misconstruing the answers to prayers is something that we’ve all faced, something that Satan loves to nettle us with, but the Lord in his infinite mercy and goodness has again provided the answer. He has said it many places in many ways, but I understood it best when I read this valuable statement:

Nevertheless they did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God. [Helaman 3:35]

There they were, these seventh-generation Nephites, working out their salvation one day at a time, line upon line and precept upon precept.

Now I understood why President McKay was denied of the Lord when, as a young man riding in the cornfields, he slipped from his saddle and dropped to his knees and cried out to the Lord, hoping for the vision of Paul or the reawakening of Alma the Younger. For the vast majority of us, it doesn’t come that way. It isn’t quite so dramatic, but every bit as significant, when we finish our round and our course and keep the faith. So it was with the original Twelve, wasn’t it? They had to be instructed until they understood, until they were prepared. Then on the day of Pentecost the spiritual endowment was given. As I understand

it, it wasn’t greatly different for some of the Twelve when originally called in 1836, for we read in the Doctrine and Covenants: “And after their temptations [speaking of the newly called Twelve], and much tribulation, behold, I, the Lord, will feel after them, and if they harden not their hearts, and stiffen not their necks against me, they shall be converted, and I will heal them” (D&C 112:13).

Preparing for Sainthood

Brothers and sisters, the profession of sainthood requires career preparation. Just like the fields that each of you is seeking to enter, full conversion is a process. Losing the propensity to sin usually takes time. So if every prayer doesn’t seem to be answered, don’t give up. And if every desire isn’t immediately filled, don’t slacken your faith. Abraham waited ninety-two years for his own promised son. If we can agree to be patient and to wait upon the Lord, let’s not fall into the trap that so many do, expecting that by having our names on the records of the Church and being part of the kingdom we will somehow become automatically Christlike. It’s just not so. It requires constant struggle and effort and great self-discipline, relying continually on the merits of him who is mighty to save. For without the Spirit, this conversion process simply won’t culminate.

It’s so easy to veer from one side to the other, either expecting sanctification immediately—now, because I want it!—or assuming it will happen at the time of resurrection and I won’t worry about it. May I suggest that either course can prove fatal.

Let me outline for you briefly four vital signs by which we can monitor our progression toward full conversion. Like the vital signs of physical health, blood pressure, pulse rate, and respiration, which indicate very basically if we’re in good physical health, these vital signs similarly indicate how healthy we are, spiritually.

I would name, as the first sign of a changing heart, an *increased capacity for meaningful prayer*. “Watch and pray always,” the Lord instructed. And why? President Clark supplies the answer: “Because the royal road to heaven is traveled through prayer.” Now, sisters, do you spend half as much time praying as you do combing your hair? I know you love your spirit more than half as much as you do your body. And brethren, do your lips form the words *thee*, *thine*, and *thou* with anything near the frequency that they form *sports*, *girls*, *homework*? Tough questions? Perhaps, but not half as tough as the questions posed to those people in Zarahemla when Alma said, “Can you look up to God at that day with a pure heart and clean hands?” I say, “Can you look up, having the image of God engraved upon your consciences?” From Adam to Enoch, from Nephi to the Prophet Joseph, from Brigham Young to President Kimball—each received what he sought because of mighty supplication, which bringeth forth a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

Second, I think a person can judge if he’s becoming mighty in the Lord and losing his propensity to sin by whether or not he is *becoming increasingly sober*—sober in the sense that Alma taught to his sons. I believe this means that our capacity for lightmindedness and frivolity simply decreases. Sacred things are more carefully handled, and taking the name of the Lord in vain is made nigh unto impossible. Respect increases for the Lord’s anointed and for all duly appointed priesthood leaders, and honor for parents is made most genuine. The sober-minded individual, I believe, characterizes his life by increasing calm and subdued feelings, and greater reverence is shown for every living thing. Further, one gives up excess, extravagance, and exaggeration, and from major and measured self-control he emerges a temperate person.

I think the third vital sign of our changing disposition to desire no sin at all is *avoiding contention*. Contention robs us of the Spirit.

The less we fight back, the closer we come to the Lord. Most of you have roommates, and in dorms and apartments you develop what can be called “community property.” Sisters, the last time you reached for *your* can of hairspray and found that someone else had used the last drop, how did you react? The big date was at hand and your hair was going to be a mess. And when Dad’s letter came with no money in it but just counsel that those shoes would have to do for another month, did you think ill of your state of life? And brethren, how do you feel when someone else takes our *your* girl? Or better still, how do you feel when you are unfairly criticized or otherwise have your feelings hurt? Do you seek retribution? Do you fight back? Do you contend with the Lord or with your neighbor? When we can properly respond to these common occurrences—so-called little things—then we will be responding to the Lord’s dictum when he said, “And behold it is written also, that thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy; But behold I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you” (3 Nephi 12:43–44).

Finally, I would name *malleability*. There are many words that could be used to express the sentiment—*submissive*, *humble*, *meek*—but so often we concentrate on the negative connotations of those words, and we conjure up in our minds the perfect milquetoast person. That’s not what the Lord meant. Paul, I believe, has given an apt word picture to describe what I consider malleability, in these most significant words: “O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay?” (Romans 9:20–21). The malleable soul listens to President Kimball with an active ear, seeking how to obey his counsel rather than determining in what ways that message does not apply to him. When the prophet states that every

young man should go on a mission, the malleable soul says, “How can I get ready?” The unmalleable seeks excuses in education or finance or marriage. Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. Eventually, as with Job, we must learn who is the master and who the servant. When we can do that—when we can understand that the Savior’s yoke is easy and his burden is light—then we can gracefully submit to being reforged in his image.

Now can we chart our progress in these areas? I think we can. I think we know if we are praying frequently enough and if we are really communing with the Lord. I don’t think it’s so hard to tell if we’re sober-minded and if we’ve gained the maturity to handle sacred things properly. Surely we know when we are avoiding contention and if we are permitting the Lord to mold our lives. I submit we can know, if we seek to measure. Think of the words “Yea, we know with a surety. We believe these things, for the Lord has wrought a mighty change in us or in our hearts that we no longer have disposition to do evil but to do good continually.”

I believe we can bring these thoughts to a meaningful close if we will simply look—and I would invite you to study it in your spare time—at the fruit of the labor of those who followed the commandments of the Savior at the time of his great preaching to the Nephites. After receiving these instructions, here is what

happened to those wonderful people: Jesus prayed and said, “I pray thee that thou wilt give the Holy Ghost unto those who believe on my words.” And as he looked upon them, their garments were made white, even as white as the garments of Jesus. And then he prayed again:

Father, I thank thee that thou hast purified those whom I have chosen, because of their faith, and I pray for them . . . also . . . who shall believe on their words, that they may be purified in me. . . .

Father, I pray . . . that through faith on their words they may be purified in me and be one with us.

And when Jesus had spoken these words he came again unto his disciples; and behold they did pray steadfastly, without ceasing, unto him; and he did smile upon them again; and behold they were white, even as Jesus. [see 3 Nephi 19:28–30]

My brothers and sisters, may we seek the Lord with all our hearts, might, minds, and strength and experience this change of heart, which will culminate this assimilation process that the Prophet said was the hinge on which the door of salvation turns. I bear you a witness that Jesus is the Christ, that he lives, that he loves us, that he seeks our hearts to write his laws thereon so that we might be his sons and his daughters. This prayer I leave with you in gratitude for this testimony and all that I have in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.