

A Complete Look at Perfect

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Let me introduce my subject with a brief story. A month or so ago, on a Saturday morning, my wife, Barbara, was busy finishing a baptismal dress for a neighbor girl, and the house was in need of a good picking up and vacuuming. The need was there, so I did what I frequently do in such situations: I pressed the children into service. Unfortunately, I sometimes become grouchy when cleaning house. I noticed, however, that every time I asked my 12-year-old son Matt to do a job, he always responded with a smile and a genuinely cheery face. He was apparently trying to overcome my grouchiness by smiling—which became obvious to me, as it did to everyone else. I apparently kept ignoring the oh-so-obvious smiles, however, because Matt finally said, “Dad, whoever said that smiles were contagious didn’t know about your antibodies.” I finally melted into a smile.

Well, my antibody against the contagion of a smile is one of my several flaws, which, like a messy house, could use a good picking up and vacuuming. And that is only one of the several flaws I am aware of, thanks to the help of my wife and children. Who knows how many more flaws are lurking, hidden away from my discernment?

Perfect Versus Complete

The thought of such imperfections—obvious sometimes, but sometimes even hidden from ourselves—can be disconcerting in light of Christ’s celebrated injunction: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Given the tough realities of everyday life, how can we be perfect, even as our Father is perfect? Such things as cleaning house, dealing with people who put us in uncomfortable situations, and reacting to smashed thumbs and road rage sometimes present us with a self-portrait, when looked at honestly, that is further removed from the perfect ideal than we would like to own up to. What we actually do when facing the problems of life compared to what we should do can sometimes lead to discouragement.

In what follows, I would like to explore the meaning of the word *perfect*, with the hope of showing that the bar that seems so high might be readily cleared by any one of us who really does love the Lord and sincerely wants to

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honor him. Simply put, I would like to show that *perfect* does not mean now what it used to mean in King James' time. Please understand that I do not aim to diminish Christ's injunction but to render it comprehensible in a gospel setting.

First, let me be clear that today *perfect* means something much more specific than it did 400 years ago. Originally, when borrowed from French, it meant "finished, complete, excellent." It came to French from Latin *per-*, "completely," and *-facere*, "to do" (see *American Heritage Dictionary*, s.v. "perfect"). In modern English, however, *perfect* always raises in our minds a much more specific idea of "flawless, without defect." We hear, for example, "he pitched a perfect game," or "she got a perfect score on the exam," and so on. But the idea of "flawless" as the principal meaning of *perfect* is new to the English language.

What happened to change the meaning of *perfect*? The word *complete* came into English in the early 1300s, but with a highly restricted meaning. It only applied to "completeness of requisite parts"; for example, a complete assembly.¹ It could not apply to actions, states, and qualities, such as "complete purity," although it would have been proper back then to say "perfect purity," meaning "complete purity." But just about the time the King James translators were at work, the meaning of *complete* was expanding to include actions, states, and qualities.² With this expansion of *complete* came the contraction of *perfect*, so that today *perfect* still means "complete," but additionally it always means "without flaw." It is for this reason that the various forms of the word *perfect* occur 123 times in the Old and New Testament, whereas *complete* occurs only three times. Furthermore, the Hebrew and Greek words that wound up being translated "perfect," in the main, have the general notion of "complete" or "end."

That said, let us take a fresh look at the notion "complete" to see what it might mean

to be complete in a broader gospel context, reminding ourselves that anything that is perfect is necessarily complete, but anything that is complete is not necessarily perfect.

Completion in Covenant

In the first place, all covenants, agreements, contracts, bonds, treaties, and the like are founded on the idea of completeness. By definition, a covenant is a set of instructions agreed upon by two parties that outlines their behavior. When I agree, as one party, to take upon myself Christ's name, to remember him always and to keep his commandments, and the Lord agrees, as the other party, that his spirit will be with me always, then we are brought together by the renewal of the baptismal covenant. A covenant is the means by which two incomplete parties become one—a completed whole. In his beautiful prayer to his Father, Christ made this point in John 17:21–23:

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . .

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one:

I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect [or complete] in one.

If we think of *perfect* as "complete," then we can see how it is possible for God, Christ, and their true followers to be *really* one, brought from incompleteness to completion by covenant.

If *covenant*—which literally means "coming together"—is an agreement by two parties to do something, there is a second part: actually doing it. If I agree that I will show up at 11 in the morning on Tuesday, July 13, 1999, to give a devotional, and either I or all of you do not come (both thoughts occurred to me), then the agreement is breached: it is a defective, incomplete contract. All covenants are validated only on condition that two parties complete what they agreed to do.

Completion in Marriage

Bringing two otherwise incomplete individuals to a complete whole by covenant is also the very definition of marriage. In a response to the Pharisees, Christ, quoting Genesis 2:24, said, “Have ye not read, that . . . for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh” (Matthew 19:4–6). Christ was essentially speaking here of a covenant, since marriage is a set of agreed-upon instructions that guides the behavior of a man and a woman. Ideally they act toward each other in ways different from anyone else in the world because of that agreement and that covenant. They become one flesh in the real sense of covenant.

In marriage we are complete, as our Father and Mother in Heaven are complete.

But in another more literal sense, the married couple can become one flesh. We know by modern science that before each one of us here was anybody, we were two distinct germ cells: one a meiotic cell of 23 chromosomes from our biological father and the other a similar cell from our biological mother. We were nothing until the union of those two incomplete cells, yielding a full complement of 46 chromosomes.

At the instant of union, our parents became “one flesh” through us, which miracle of new life constitutes possibly the highest form of all covenants. Indeed, by becoming one flesh, parents not only create new life but a new family—the very foundation upon which all enduring societies rest. The evidence is overwhelming that children do better with the appropriate contributions of both a mother and a father. It is not difficult to see that social systems founded on such families likewise do better. The good health of a nation and even the international community really is founded on the family as defined in the proclamation set forth by the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve (see “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, p. 102).

With the biological covenant of new life and

the consequent social covenant of new families comes the need for connection to all those families that preceded us.

Completion in Temple Work

This brings us to a related but different kind of completion, one without which the Lord will

come and smite the earth with a curse.

. . . It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children. . . . For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. [D&C 128:17–18]

In reference to this scripture, Elder Russell M. Nelson made the point that “*perfect* was translated from the Greek *teleios* meaning ‘brought to its end, finished, complete’d” (“A New Harvest Time,” *Ensign*, May 1998, p. 36, footnote 10). With the restoration of all these and other keys of past dispensations, we have “a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories” (D&C 128:18).

Again, the doctrine of completion is manifest, because we become, as it were, “saviors on Mount Zion” by being proxies for those who otherwise do not have earthly access to saving ordinances. We become one with our ancestors through temple work. Joseph Smith said:

But how are they to become saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah. [Teachings, p. 330; see also pp. 191 and 366]

It is this grand vision of completion—Elijah’s magnificent mission of binding all Adam and Eve’s children into one unbroken whole—that finds concrete manifestation in the current explosion of new temples and genealogical interest. There are currently 57 complete temples and another 57 under construction (see LDS Gems on the Internet), and there are millions of hits each day on the Church’s new genealogy Web site. Elder Nelson has told us that “microfilming has been done in 110 countries, accumulating more than 2 billion exposures with approximately 13 billion names” (Nelson, “A New Harvest Time,” p. 35). This stunning growth was unimaginable just a few short years ago.

“As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be” (Lorenzo Snow, in Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Company, 1884, 1975], p. 46; see also *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, comp. Clyde J. Williams [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984], pp. 2, 5). We have the potential of becoming complete even as our Father in Heaven is complete. What a sweeping, vast vision Joseph was able to share with us.

The Completion of the Resurrection

The stern reality of our own death also requires the doctrine of completion, since death in its broadest sense is a disjoining of parts that are otherwise properly intact. The Doctrine and Covenants makes it clear that “spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy; and when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33–34). Elder Melvin J. Ballard’s poignant description of how we might long for our bodies in the spirit world underlines one of the unique and wonderful doctrines of Mormonism (see *Melvin J. Ballard: Crusader for Righteousness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], p. 213). Contrary to beliefs held by others, one of Mormonism’s great contributions to theology is that the body is not evil, but good. We need to be complete—spirit and element—even as our Father in Heaven is

complete, so that we, like him, can receive a fullness of joy. It is probably significant that in the Old World Christ said, “Be ye therefore perfect [complete], even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48); whereas in the New World, *after* his resurrection, he said, “Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). The Resurrection made him complete—like his Father. In the Resurrection we will be made complete, even as our Father and now Christ are complete.

The Completion of the Atonement

If the Resurrection is Christ’s universal gift to God’s children, then the Atonement is his particular gift, given only to the penitent. And if the Resurrection welds spirit to body to overcome physical death, then the Atonement joins our spirit to the Holy Spirit to overcome spiritual death. And, as the Resurrection brings completion, the Atonement also brings completion, but unlike the Resurrection, completion comes in two distinct but related ways:

First, our sins bring an imbalance to the scales of eternal justice; paying for our sins, Christ brings those scales back to a complete and perfect equilibrium. In the words of Mosiah, God gave “the Son power to make intercession for the children of men—Having . . . taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice” (Mosiah 15:8–9). We are justified through Christ: the price has been paid to the last farthing, and equilibrium is complete.

Second, the Atonement—literally *at-one-ment*—is the completion of a covenant, which in its simplest form is this: We stop sinning and Christ pays for our sin. There are those who say that salvation comes from works—from the absolution that comes from the sacraments. Others say that it comes from faith—from declaring Jesus to be the Savior. This is the ancient debate of faith and works. Works are

defined as the sacraments (or, in our terms, ordinances). Faith is defined as proclaiming Jesus as the Savior of the world. But we know from modern scriptures that remission of sin comes from sacrifice—sacrifice on Christ’s part and sacrifice on our part:

Behold he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered. [2 Nephi 2:7]

And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away. . . .

And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost. [3 Nephi 9:19–20]

If we are justified through Christ’s absorbing our sins, we are sanctified through a process involving three steps: First, we genuinely suffer a broken heart and a contrite spirit for our sins. Second, we consequently manifest our sorrow by leaving behind us those sins; we go our way and sin no more. Third, we are sanctified through the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost.

The bottom line is this: We were once spiritually dead through a separation from God by the absence of his spirit, but we are now, so to speak, resurrected—spiritually made alive—by the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost. We were once sinful and incomplete, but through the process of the Atonement we are both justified and sanctified, completely and wholly.

We are in this sense complete, even as our Father in Heaven is complete—and one step nearer to being like him, too.

Completion Through the Church

I have always appreciated Paul’s wonderful metaphor comparing the body of Christ—the Church—to the body of a person. He said that

the body is not one member, but many. . . .

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. . . .

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. . . .

Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. [1 Corinthians 12:14, 21, 25, 27]

To me, what he is saying is that each of us as a member of Christ’s body is incomplete—as incomplete as any given organ of our body is incomplete: “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?” (1 Corinthians 12:17), and so on. Truly, none of us *can* be saved as individuals. We are saved as Zion, because you and I complement each other. What I cannot do, you can do. What you cannot do, I (or someone else) can.

My daughters Kirsten and Jennifer recently came home from girls’ camp. Having four teenagers (I count my 12-year-old because he acts like one), my wife and I are acutely aware that we cannot be all things to our children. We cannot do some things that others can. We are incomplete. From my point of view, it is almost incalculable the preparation, work, time, energy, and goodwill that the Young Women leaders of our ward did to bring girls’ camp to its successful conclusion. And I believe that the eternal good that was done, spiritually and physically, in behalf of those girls truly is incalculable. All that my ward sisters did, multiplied by the millions who oversee girls’ camps and Scout camps, who teach Sunday and weeknight lessons, who home teach and visit teach, who work on welfare farms, who go on missions, and so on, contribute to the general good. All of us in our incomplete states need each other to bless and receive blessings. We complete each other.

I believe that the Lord in his genius set up the Church in such a way that we do not go and pay

someone to give us a beautiful Sunday lesson. He requires sacrifice from us. When we accept a calling, we agree to prepare a lesson and be there to teach the nursery—whether it is convenient or not. It is a kind of covenant. The older I get the more I am convinced that all sin—all of it—has its roots in the dirty soil of self-gratification and self-absorption. Any sin I can imagine—from stealing to covetousness to adultery to murder—has at its core an exaggerated sense of self. But the Lord has set up an organization that is *structurally* designed to combat the over-exaggerated self, since every Church calling I know of is premised on service to others.

I think it is for this reason that Paul says that the body of Christ is for the perfecting [completion] of the Saints:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. [Ephesians 4:11–13]

As committed workers in Christ’s Church, we learn to be Christians, both inside and outside the Church. In his Church, we are completed.

Completion of This Talk

At this point I can imagine you might be anxious for the completion of this talk. I am prepared to satisfy your anxiety. Just let me conclude by saying this: I believe that God, in his genius, has made it possible for us, in a very practical way, to become complete like him. He has given us great and true covenants, including especially the baptismal covenant and those wonderful guides to life, the temple covenants. He has given us the institution of marriage, where spouses complete each other

and become one flesh through their children. He has given us—in all our imperfections—the opportunity to be saviors on Mount Zion, to be a part of the complete, eternal linking of all of Adam’s children. He has given us his Son to bring body back to spirit to overcome physical death and to bring the Holy Spirit back to our spirit to overcome spiritual death. He has given us his Church to help us overcome the vanity of self through service to others.

In short, he has given us a practical religion, which, if lived, brings us “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ”—and to his Father. I could not say it better than Brigham Young:

I am decidedly in favor of practical religion—of everyday useful life. And if I today attend to what devolves upon me to do, and then do that which presents itself tomorrow, and so on, when eternity comes I will be prepared to enter on the things of eternity. But I would not be prepared for that sphere of action, unless I could manage the things that are now within my reach. You must all learn to do this. [JD 5:3–4; text modernized]

The gospel is true. I love it and would recommend it to anyone who wants to live a complete life in this imperfect world and in the worlds to come.

I leave these thoughts with you in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Notes

1. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “complete,” *a.*, section 1: “1597 Hooker *Eccl. Pol.* v. §19 (T.) When one doth wait for another coming, till the assembly . . . be complete.”

2. For example, see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “complete” *a.*, section 1: “1645 *Ord. Lords & Com., Susp. fr. Sacram.* 1 Sincerely to endeavour the compleat establishment of Purity and Unity.”