

Rebirth in Christ: A Latter-day Saint Perspective

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The theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is rich in both explicit language and vivid imagery that teach how salvation comes only in and through the Holy Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Only the merits, mercy, and power of Jesus Christ can rescue, ransom, and redeem any and all human beings from their fallen state and degenerative condition. Every man and woman who ever has or ever will live on this earth is totally and completely dependent upon Jesus Christ for salvation. Only a couple of verses, out of many, from the Book of Mormon (a book of scripture regarded by Latter-day Saints as a second witness for Jesus Christ, and one that has rebirth as a significant theme) are needed to drive home the point.

From 2 Nephi 2:8 we read: “Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence

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of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise.”

And 2 Nephi 31:19 says the following: “And now, my beloved brethren after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.”

Every Aspect of Salvation Centers in Christ

For Latter-day Saints, any talk about salvation, or any of its facets, is inherently “Christocentric”—it all begins with Jesus Christ. Every doctrine associated with the broad concept of “salvation,” whether it is rebirth, justification, conversion, the strait and narrow path, or sanctification, is centered in Jesus Christ—His merits, mercy, and power. Furthermore, to speak about “rebirth in *Christ*”—the title of this chapter—seems redundant. Rebirth is only in and through Jesus Christ. Any other kinds of “rebirth” of which we might speak are only pale foreshadowings and imitations of rebirth in Christ, which brings everlasting life. Christ is the essence of every aspect of salvation, and to try to step back and view all of it (or as much as we feeble mortals can see) is amazing and humbling. Thus, our finite minds are forced to talk about aspects of the same thing in order to begin to grasp the whole.

Rebirth and the Fall of Man

The standard works (the authoritative books of scripture in the Latter-day Saint canon) stipulate that rebirth is essential for salvation and needed because of the Fall of Adam and Eve. These two doctrines are inextricably linked. Adam and Eve, our first parents, were the crowning achievement in God’s work of creation. Latter-day Saints believe that they were placed on earth as nonmortal beings. They resided in the presence of God and thus possessed a rich and vibrant spiritual life because they walked and talked with Deity. In this condition there was no mortality, no corruption, no death of any kind,

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but also no procreation. Adam and Eve could have no children. But all this changed when, according to God's foreordained plan, our first parents made a choice resulting in the transgression of divine law, and they fell from their edenic state or condition.

Thus, we teach that Adam and Eve became mortal and acquired the knowledge of good and evil and the ability to have children as a result of the Fall. These are positive things. However, Adam and Eve also became subject to the negative aspects of the Fall, including all the ailments and frailties of mortal life, and, worse than that, they were cast out of God's presence. Physical and spiritual death entered the world. All created things became mortal and thus subject to pain and natural death. And yet all this was according to God's will. The Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Fall, including all of its practical consequences, is summarized in another instructive passage from the Book of Mormon:

And after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they were driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth.

And they have brought forth children; yea, even the family of all the earth.

And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents.

And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end.

And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin.

But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.

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Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:19–25)

As indicated, the most significant immediate consequence of the Fall was that Adam and Eve and all of their posterity, that is all humankind, were subject to spiritual death; they became initially dead as to the things of God. We have become heirs of our first parents' fallen condition. Like them, we in our natural state are cut off from God's presence. We have come under the unrelenting influence of Satan and the things of this world. We are natural creatures rather than spiritual beings, and, left to our own devices, would become increasingly carnal, sensual, and devilish. One Book of Mormon prophet taught this plainly when he said, "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 and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:19).

Put another way, to overcome the effects of the Fall, to eradicate the pervasive worldly impulses and tendencies in our souls, to enjoy the influence of heaven, all of us must become new creatures. We must be born again. We must be spiritually begotten into a new life made possible through the Atonement wrought by Jesus of Nazareth—which was the very reason He came to this earth. Again from the Book of Mormon we read, "And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall" (2 Nephi 2:26). One Latter-day Saint doctrinal authority, Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, provided a nice summary of the connection in Latter-day Saint theology between the doctrines of the Fall, the Atonement, and spiritual rebirth: "To gain salvation . . . men must be *born again* (Alma 7:14); born of water and of the Spirit (John 3:1–3); born of God, so that they are changed from their 'carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness,' becoming new creatures of the Holy Ghost. (Mosiah 27:24–29.) They must become newborn babes in Christ (1 Pet. 2:2); they must be 'spiritually begotten' of God, be born of Christ, thus becoming his sons and daughters (Mosiah 5:7)."¹

*Rebirth in Christ: A Latter-day Saint Perspective**Hope of Rebirth*

Here, then, is the heart of the matter. We inherited the effects of the Fall from our first parents, Adam and Eve. As their children, we are heirs to both physical and spiritual death. We are all going to die, *and* we are all sinners. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We need redemption from the otherwise lasting effects of physical and spiritual death. We cannot provide this redemption and regeneration for ourselves. The needed regeneration and ransoming from death comes only from Jesus Christ through resurrection (to which we shall return later) and spiritual rebirth, both of which are made possible by the Atonement.

Latter-day Saints believe that the Savior offers this redemption to *any* and *all* people—even the vilest of sinners. Again, from the Book of Mormon we read: “Behold, doth he cry unto *any*, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: Come unto me *all ye ends of the earth*, buy milk and honey, without money and without price. . . . He inviteth them *all* to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth *none* that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:25, 33; emphasis added).

Thus, the Savior’s power to save all, as well as His infinite mercy and compassion, ought to give all of us great hope in the opportunity *for* rebirth and the opportunities that come *from* rebirth. All can and should have hope in Jesus Christ—even those, or perhaps better said, *especially* those, who think they have no hope (those who feel hopelessly lost). The Apostle Peter said, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope” (1 Peter 1:3). Even after we have experienced rebirth, the Savior’s power and mercy continue to provide hope. As Paul said to the Philippians, “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). Or, as the New International Version of the Bible puts it, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.”

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Of course, each individual must exercise his or her agency, or freedom of choice, to accept the Savior's grace and opportunity for rebirth and regeneration. While Jesus is "mighty to save," we must receive Him. The Lord Himself said: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, [then] I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Thus, we must "open the door," and we must choose to accept his redeeming love in order to receive the *fullest* benefits of His atoning sacrifice which come through rebirth. Regarding this principle, one Book of Mormon prophet taught:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men [the Messiah], or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator . . . ;

And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom. (2 Nephi 2:27–29)

Second Birth Parallels the First

Spiritual rebirth is also called the second birth and involves entering the second of two kingdoms with which each of us has some association. The first kingdom is the kingdom of this physical world, the animal kingdom, if you will. The second is the kingdom of God. According to Latter-day Saint theology, the first birth occurs when a premortal spirit son or daughter of God enters a mortal physical body (created through conception) and is delivered into this world as a baby girl or boy. The second birth occurs when an individual becomes alive to the things of God—that is, the spiritual dimensions of our existence, the influence of the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, the influence of the Savior in our lives, and so forth—and enters a new and different kingdom, the kingdom of God, through the ordinance of baptism as well as the follow-up ordinance referred to as the laying on of hands for receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost.

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The two births, natural and spiritual, parallel each other in that each involves the elements of water, blood, and Spirit. Latter-day Saints affirm that a knowledge of these two kingdoms and the parallel nature of the two births into these kingdoms was known and understood by the antediluvian patriarchs clear back to the time of Adam. (This also means that Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches that the antediluvian patriarchs and prophets knew and testified of the future mortal ministry and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ many thousands of years before its physical fulfillment.)

In one of our books of scripture called the book of Moses, the following instruction is given by God to Adam:

Therefore I give unto you a commandment, to teach these things freely unto your children, saying:

That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory;

For by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified. (Moses 6:58–60)

In elucidating these verses, former Church President Joseph Fielding Smith taught the following:

Every child that comes into this world is carried in water, is born of water, and of blood, and of the spirit. So when we are born into the kingdom of God, we must be born in the same way. By baptism, we are born of the water. Through the shedding of the blood of Christ, we are cleansed and sanctified; and we are justified, through the Spirit of God, for baptism is not complete without the baptism of the Holy Ghost. You see the *parallel* between birth into the world and birth into the kingdom of God.²

Baptism in water for the remission of sins, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, constitute the birth of the water and of the Spirit. This is essential to salvation. It is more than a symbol; it is a reality, a birth in very deed.³

*Salvation in Christ**Ordinances, Authority, and Rebirth*

As implied in President Smith's comments, the second birth or spiritual rebirth officially occurs or is complete when a person has repented of his or her sins, is baptized in water, and then receives the gift of the Holy Ghost. Joseph Smith, the prophet-founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said, "Being born again, comes by the Spirit of God through ordinances."⁴ Latter-day Saint doctrine asserts that both the ordinances (sacraments) of baptism by immersion and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost are requisite for the remission of sins and entrance into the kingdom of God. In other words, rebirth is not complete without the performance of both ordinances on behalf of an individual by authorized priesthood authority.

Latter-day Saints see this pattern and requirement exemplified in episodes from the earliest period of the New Testament Church, such as the ones depicted in John 3:1–5 and Acts 19:1–6. The Savior declared to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water [i.e., baptism], and of the Spirit [i.e., receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Paul's encounter with the Ephesians as reported in Acts 19 is no less illustrative in demonstrating the need for both ordinances (baptism and laying on of hands), as well as the requirement of recognized authority to perform the ordinances:

And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,

He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.

And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.

Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

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And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. (Acts 19:1–6)

For Latter-day Saints the lessons of this pericope are clear. Baptism, performed by one possessing recognized priesthood authority, is to be followed by the ordinance of the laying on of hands for the imparting of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Each ordinance must be performed in its proper sequence and by the proper authority. Both ordinances are crucial. The Prophet Joseph Smith was absolutely clear on this issue. He said:

The gospel requires baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, which is the meaning of the word in the original language—namely, to bury or immerse. . . .

I believe in this tenaciously. So did the Apostle Peter and the disciples of Jesus. But I further believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. Evidence by Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:38. You might as well baptize a bag of sand as a man, if not done in view of the remission of sins and getting of the Holy Ghost. Baptism by water is but half a baptism, and is good for nothing without the other half—that is, the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

The Savior says, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."⁵

Thus, while the power to undergo a mighty change of heart is in Christ, complete rebirth into the kingdom of God is dependent upon and regulated by the constituted authority of Christ's Church—those having the keys of authority to perform those sacred ordinances that allow rebirth to be fully effectual. Therefore, rebirth in Latter-day Saint theology is also linked specifically to the Church of Jesus Christ, which is the kingdom of God on earth. Again, the Prophet Joseph Smith said: "Whenever men can find out the will of God and find an administrator legally authorized from God, there is the kingdom of God; but where these are not, the kingdom of God is not. All the ordinances, systems, and administrations on the earth are of no use to the children of men, unless they are ordained and authorized of God; for nothing will save a man but a legal administrator; for none others will be acknowledged either by God or angels."⁶

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Here it is also easy to detect in Joseph Smith's words a genuine sense of how ordinances or sacraments are conduits to God and affect our relationship with Him in eternity. The ordinances of rebirth are performed on earth, but they are solidly rooted in God's concern over our status in eternity.

The Process of Rebirth

One of the reasons that baptism must be performed by immersion in water is the symbolic nature of the second birth. It perfectly parallels the first birth in unmistakable imagery. And this leads us to acknowledge that, just as with childbirth in the natural world, there also exists with spiritual rebirth that which we might call the birthing process. In this context, Latter-day Saints also see John 3:1–5 as one of the most significant texts in scripture implying the *process* of rebirth. Note the implied process:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3:1–5)

In this nighttime episode, Jesus declared to Nicodemus that a person must be born again. But Latter-day Saints see in this passage a clear indication that rebirth is a process having at least two parts: *seeing* the kingdom of God and actually *entering* into it. Thus, the process of spiritual rebirth actually begins *prior* to the ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. The process starts as an individual begins to respond to promptings received by the influence of the Holy Ghost. The influence of the Holy Ghost

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leads a person to a conviction of the truth and then on to baptism and the receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained: "There is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Cornelius [described in Acts 10] received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized, which was the convincing power of God unto him of the truth of the Gospel, but he could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost until after he was baptized. Had he not taken this sign or ordinance upon him, the Holy Ghost which convinced him of the truth of God, would have left him."⁷

Put in contemporary parlance, Latter-day Saints would say that when an individual "sees the kingdom of God" it means that the power of the Holy Ghost has been poured out upon that person to testify to him or her that Jesus is the Christ. Thus, he or she needs to act on those promptings to enjoy continued spiritual growth, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the opportunity and right to have the third member of the Godhead with him or her *constantly* (and thus is even greater than the *influence* of the Holy Ghost).

At the time a person "sees" the kingdom of God, he or she may not necessarily receive an unqualified remission of sins. The Holy Ghost has merely taught to him or her the doctrine of Christ, that the Church of Jesus Christ is on the earth, and what must be done in light of this knowledge. It is absolutely true to say that Latter-day Saints believe in the doctrine taught by the Apostle Paul: "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3). However, as Joseph Smith explained: "It is one thing to see the kingdom of God, and another thing to enter into it. We must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God, and [then to] subscribe the articles of adoption to enter therein."⁸

Subscribing to the articles of adoption mentioned by Joseph Smith means being baptized by an authorized priesthood holder and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. In this regard Elder Orson Pratt, a nineteenth-century member of the Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said:

Faith, repentance, baptism and the laying on of hands, are the four rules of adoption. Remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy

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Ghost, are the two blessings of adoption which are inseparably connected with obedience to the rules. Both the rules and the blessings of adoption are the same in all ages and dispensations of the gospel. No man or woman ever entered into the Church or kingdom of God on this earth, and became a legal citizen thereof, without complying strictly with these rules. Indeed, it is the only door or entrance into the kingdom.⁹

Thus, for Latter-day Saints, participation in ordinances is a crucial step in the process of spiritual rebirth and is usually referred to as “keeping the commandments.”

Elder Marion G. Romney, a member of the Church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who later became a member of the First Presidency, once described the process of overcoming sin, becoming clean, and being spiritually reborn in these words: “The sequence is something like this. An honest seeker hears the message. He asks the Lord in prayer if it is true. The Holy Spirit gives him a witness. This is a testimony. If one’s testimony is strong enough, he repents and obeys the commandments. By such obedience he receives divine forgiveness which remits sin. Thus he is converted to a newness of life. His spirit is healed.”¹⁰

In one of the great doctrinal statements on the process of rebirth, the Book of Mormon prophet Mormon put the sequence this way:

For repentance is unto them that are under condemnation and under the curse of a broken law.

And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins;

And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. (Moroni 8:24–26)

Mormon’s statement helps to demonstrate that the effects of rebirth continue long after the inauguration of our newness of life and entrance into the kingdom of God. For all intents and purposes we could say that rebirth “endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when the saints shall dwell with God.” That is, through

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diligent prayer, true rebirth leads to continual growth in spiritual power over time. We eventually become sanctified and purified from *all* unrighteousness until we become Saints, or holy ones, in the fullest sense of the term.

Another Book of Mormon prophet linked this ongoing process of sanctification to prayer. Speaking of those who had entered the kingdom (that is, become members of Christ's Church through baptism and the laying on of hands), the prophet Helaman said: "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 the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God" (Helaman 3:35).

Dramatic versus Gradual Transformation

The scriptures, both biblical and uniquely Latter-day Saint, contain many examples of individuals who are converted in a dramatic and remarkable fashion—in an instant, as it were—causing some students of the scriptures to wonder if indeed they have been born again because their personal experience is so much different. I would suggest that rather than equating these dramatic conversion episodes with the whole of the rebirth process, we could more profitably view these "instantaneous" conversion stories as manifestations of the first step in the rebirth process—the step which Joseph Smith equated with first seeing the kingdom of God, as described in John 3:3.

Thus, individuals may experience a sudden and dramatic awakening to the things of God, a miraculous and somewhat instantaneous awareness of Christ's gift to us through His Atonement. They see quickly and comprehensively. But complete rebirth still comes by way of compliance with the ordinances of rebirth. Therefore, we might also suggest that while there is a process of rebirth or conversion for everyone (steps that everyone follows), the duration of those steps may vary. Some may see the kingdom of God more quickly and dramatically, and hence experience a sudden transformation, while others come to an awareness of the kingdom more slowly and less dramatically but, in the end, just as surely. This conversion process, as it has been labeled

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by some theologians, is more often gradual and less dramatic for most of us. Again, we quote from Elder McConkie: "A person may get converted in a moment, miraculously. But that is not the way it happens with most people. With most people, conversion is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness. Now this means that an individual overcomes one sin today and another sin tomorrow. . . . And the conversion process goes on until it is completed, until we become, literally, as the Book of Mormon says, saints of God instead of natural men."¹¹

We might also suggest that on occasion the steps of rebirth are out of order. Individuals are baptized and then, later on, come to know Christ and His kingdom. God honors their journey as well.

Change of Heart

Rebirth in Latter-day Saint theology has much to do with the heart—a profound change of the heart. By the phrase change of heart, Latter-day Saints mean change of mind or change of disposition resulting in changed behavior, that which the Apostle Paul called the "new man" (Colossians 3:10) or the "inward man" (Romans 7:22). This change occurs as a person becomes aware of the kingdom of God and the desires our Father in Heaven has for us as His children, and embraces Christ's offer to change our lives. With His help we are able to curb the impulses of fallen man so that we do not continue in sin but finally arrive at a point where "we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). President Ezra Taft Benson, thirteenth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught us about the magnitude of Christ's power to change our hearts, far beyond any other influence: "The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature."¹²

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The Book of Mormon preserves a seminal discourse on spiritual rebirth in which a prophet named Alma describes the inextricable link between rebirth and the change of heart evident in all true disciples of the Lord. Quoting a few key verses here from Alma's discourse will help to demonstrate the significant role of the changed heart in the Latter-day Saint doctrine of rebirth. Speaking to a group of people who had at one time been active members of the Church of Christ in their land on the American continent, Alma attempts to rouse them to a renewed sense of their continuing need for God:

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, you that belong to this church, have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and longsuffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?

Behold, he *changed their hearts*; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word; yea, they were encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction did await them. . . .

Behold, I can tell you—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 believe them?

And according to his faith there was *a mighty change wrought in his heart*. Behold I say unto you that 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 until the end; therefore they were saved.

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?* . . .

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye *have experienced a change of heart*, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now? (Alma 5:6–7, 11–14, 26; emphasis added)

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Perhaps some of you are thinking that this has a familiar ring. Indeed, similar sentiments are preserved in the books of 1 Samuel (“God gave him another heart” [1 Samuel 10:9]), Jeremiah (“I will give them an heart to know me” [Jeremiah 24:7]), and Ezekiel (“make you a new heart and a new spirit” [Ezekiel 18:31]). But Alma’s language also bears a resemblance to Paul’s writing (“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” [Galatians 2:20]). Certain portions of the selection I just quoted from the Book of Mormon may even sound a little bit like an illustration of what I have heard described in non-LDS circles as prevenient grace, “the priority of God’s gracious initiative on behalf of humans . . . which precedes all human response to God’s initiative.”¹³

In fact, Latter-day Saints do hold that God reaches out to all of us, the righteous and the wicked, in all kinds of matters, just as Alma taught (“Behold, *he* [God] changed their hearts” [Alma 5:7; emphasis added]).

The actual agent of change in our lives, the instrumentality used by God to bring about the mighty change of heart, according to Latter-day Saint belief, is the Holy Ghost acting under the direction of Jesus Christ. By this I mean both the *influence* of the Holy Ghost before baptism and the *gift* of the Holy Ghost upon baptism. Elder Orson Pratt, the oft-quoted nineteenth-century Church leader, described the workings of the Holy Ghost in the rebirth process this way:

Water baptism is only a preparatory cleansing of the believing penitent . . . whereas, the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost cleanses more thoroughly, by renewing the inner man, and by purifying the affections, desires, and thoughts which have long been habituated in the impure ways of sin. Without the aid of the Holy Ghost, a person would have but very little power to change his mind, at once, from its habituated course, and to walk in newness of life. . . . So great is the force of habit, that he would, without being renewed by the Holy Ghost, be easily overcome, and contaminated again with sin. Hence, it is infinitely important that the affections and desires should be, in a measure, changed and renewed, so as to cause him to hate that which he before loved, and to love that which he before hated. To thus renew the mind of man is the work of the Holy Ghost.¹⁴

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Returning to the scriptural passage with which we began this section of our discussion, we see the prophet Alma posing to his audience a question that is, for Latter-day Saints, perhaps the single most important, powerful, penetrating, personal query that can be posed regarding the nature of one own's spiritual status relative to rebirth: "Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances?" (Alma 5:14). What this articulates is the belief in Latter-day Saint theology that rebirth in Christ ultimately brings, in mortality, both an outward change in physical appearance that bespeaks a newness of life and a discernible inward transformation.

An image is not just an outward visual impression but also a vivid representation, a graphic display, or a total likeness of something. It is a person or thing very much like another, a copy or counterpart. Likewise, *countenance* does not simply mean a facial expression or visual appearance. The word comes from an Old French term originally denoting "behavior," "demeanor," or "conduct." In earlier times the word *countenance* was used with these meanings in mind. Therefore, to receive Christ's image in one's countenance means to acquire the Savior's likeness in behavior, to be a copy or reflection of the Master's life. This is not possible without a mighty change in one's pattern of living. It requires, too, a change in feelings, attitudes, desires, and spiritual commitment.

Rebirth and Resurrection

Spiritual rebirth not only parallels the process of natural birth, but in a most significant way it also parallels and points to the Resurrection, especially the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not surprising since rebirth is a complete and perfect symbol. On at least a couple of occasions, the Apostle Paul referred to himself and others who had committed their lives to Christ as having been crucified with Christ (see Galatians 2:20) or having crucified their flesh—meaning they had their fallen natures eradicated or destroyed and enjoyed rebirth (see Galatians 5:24). But notice the way Paul, in his letter to the Romans, links the concept of being "crucified with Christ" to resurrection as well as rebirth through the ordinance of baptism by immersion, which, as we have already explained, is one of the official steps of rebirth in Latter-day Saint doctrine:

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Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

For he that is dead is freed from sin.

Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. (Romans 6:3–8)

The waters of baptism symbolize both our new birth into a new kingdom and our new life after the grave through resurrection. The old man of sin is crucified (destroyed) as we emerge from the waters of rebirth. Also, when we emerge from the waters of baptism we begin to look forward to that new life that will come about as a result of the resurrection. Rebirth and resurrection are all about new life. Rebirth and Resurrection are equivalents. The Atonement of Christ has made both of these possible. Both center in Christ.

Fruits of Rebirth

As we are reborn into newness of life and receive the image of God in our countenances, we become the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ—members of His family and citizens of His kingdom (see Ephesians 2:19–20). The Lord said to the prophet Alma, “Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 27:25).

The Apostle Paul indicated that the sons and daughters of Christ enjoy the fruits of rebirth and no longer have to wallow in the miserable effects and feelings of this fallen world precisely because “they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh” (Galatians 5:24). “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, [and] temperance” (Galatians 5:22–23).

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Feelings of joy and peace (including peace of conscience) are truly some of the most marvelous fruits of spiritual rebirth. They are also two of the most consistent themes in Latter-day Saint scripture and prophetic statements that discuss the effects of rebirth or true conversion. The Book of Mormon prophet Enos said of his rebirth experience: “My guilt was swept away” (Enos 1:6). And Alma said he could remember his “pains no more,” that he was no longer “harrowed up by the memory of [his] sins” (Alma 36:19). He indicated that he experienced the peace and joy that attend rebirth as intensely as he had known the pain and torment of former days: “And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain” (Alma 36:20).

An even richer and fuller description of the same kind of feelings accompanying spiritual rebirth was described by Joseph F. Smith, sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as he spoke of the fruits of rebirth:

The feeling that came upon me was that of pure peace, of love and of light. I felt in my soul that if I had sinned—and surely I was not without sin—that it had been forgiven me; that I was indeed cleansed from sin; my heart was touched, and I felt that I would not injure the smallest insect beneath my feet. *I felt as if I wanted to do good everywhere to everybody and to everything. I felt a newness of life, a newness of desire to that which was right. There was not one particle of desire for evil left in my soul. . . .*

Oh! that I could have kept that same spirit and that same earnest desire in my heart every moment of my life from that day to this. Yet many of us who have received that witness, that new birth, that change of heart, while we may have erred in judgment or have made many mistakes, and often perhaps come short of the true standard in our lives, we have repented of the evil, and we have sought from time to time forgiveness at the hand of the Lord; so that until this day the same desire and purpose which pervaded our souls when we . . . received a remission of our sins, still holds possession of our hearts, and is still the ruling sentiment and passion of our souls.¹⁵

The feeling of peace, particularly peace of conscience, is the surest way one can know that he or she has experienced spiritual rebirth.

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Elder Marion G. Romney made the following comment in a general conference of the Church, thus giving his statement the weight of an official pronouncement: “Somebody recently asked how one could know when he is converted. The answer is simple. He may be assured of it when by the power of the Holy Spirit his soul is healed. When this occurs, he will recognize it by the way he feels, for he will feel as the people of Benjamin felt when they received remission of sins. The record says, ‘. . . 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 4:3).”¹⁶

Conclusion

To speak of peace of conscience and the healing of the soul is simply to highlight a couple of the greatest of the many fruits that flow from the process of spiritual rebirth. These fruits come to each of those who are reborn as a result of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and in no other way. Ultimately, as with any fruit, the fruits of rebirth must be carefully tended and preserved if they are to remain fresh and desirable to us. In returning again to the prophet Alma, we are given some profound points to ponder in order to help us determine if we are doing all we can do to remain true and faithful to the covenants we made to that Savior who has spiritually begotten us. They are put in the form of very personal questions in the Book of Mormon text (paraphrased here):

- ◆ Do you exercise faith in the redemption of Him who created you?
- ◆ Do you look forward with an eye of faith to the Resurrection and Judgment?
- ◆ Can you imagine that you hear the voice of the Lord blessing you and praising your righteous efforts?
- ◆ Do you imagine that you can lie to an omniscient Savior?
- ◆ Can you imagine the guilt you will feel at the Judgment if you have defied or purposefully ignored the commandments?
- ◆ If you ever experienced a change of heart, do you feel that same way now?
- ◆ Have you been sufficiently humble?

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- ◆ Are you stripped of pride?
- ◆ Are you stripped of envy? And so forth (see Alma 5).

In all of this, Alma really seems to be harking back to what we earlier identified as the most penetrating and important question about rebirth in Christ. After all is said and done, have we received His image in our countenances? My sincere hope is that we will be able to say yes. Or, better still, others will be able to answer that question by what they see in us.

Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 100–101; emphasis in original.
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:324–25; emphasis in original.
3. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 190.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 162.
5. Smith, *Teachings*, 314.
6. Smith, *Teachings*, 274.
7. Smith, *Teachings*, 199.
8. Smith, *Teachings*, 328.
9. Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt's Works* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News Press, 1945), 48.
10. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, October 1963, 24.
11. Bruce R. McConkie, “Be Ye Converted,” in *BYU Speeches of the Year*, February 11, 1968, 12.
12. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1985, 5.
13. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith De Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 95.
14. Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt: Writings of an Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Mormon Heritage Publishers, 1976), 56–57.
15. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1939), 96; emphasis added.
16. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, October 1963, 24.