



Tom Lovell, *Mormon Abridging the Plates*. Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Through the concept of laying hold upon every good thing, Mormon introduces the key to becoming a child of Christ.

## “After This Manner Did He Speak”: Mormon’s Discourse on Faith, Hope, and Charity

CHARLES SWIFT

Charles Swift ([charles\\_swift@byu.edu](mailto:charles_swift@byu.edu)) is an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

Literary scholar Richard Dilworth Rust calls Mormon’s discourse in Moroni 7 “one of the most tightly woven and forceful sermons in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>1</sup> It is a masterful example of a prophet not simply stating doctrinal truth but building a case for it. Mormon creates an argument that begins with teachings that seem almost completely unrelated to what he ends up saying in his conclusion, yet the argument is so tightly constructed that each step beautifully and powerfully leads to the next.

Rather than seeing this sermon as a tapestry that is tightly woven, however, I see Mormon’s masterpiece more as a tower constructed of words, each level built upon the previous with such expert skill that there is an interdependence throughout. Remove a previous section and those that follow collapse; ignore succeeding sections and remaining ones may make sense but only in very limited ways. While others have written about different aspects of Moroni 7, no one before has analyzed the entire chapter holistically to determine how the sermon builds on itself.<sup>2</sup> This paper will utilize the same literary methodology as Rust in his approach to Moroni 7, taking a close reading of Mormon’s discourse and studying the chapter intently through a

literary lens. The paper will move beyond his brief analysis, however, and help us better understand how the prophet constructs his discourse and leads us readers to the ultimate end, wherein lies a most important heavenly purpose.

### His Authority (Ethos)

Though rhetoric is one literary building block utilized throughout this sermon, a formal rhetorical analysis of Mormon's discourse is beyond the scope of this article. However, I will use, as a general framework, the rhetorical concepts of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* to help in our discussion. I do so for two reasons: (1) the framework exists organically in the discourse, so it does not make sense to ignore it, and (2) it is helpful in providing order to our discussion as well as shaping our understanding of what Mormon is accomplishing at any given point of his discourse. I emphasize, though, that I am fully aware that my briefly pointing out these rhetorical landmarks is no substitute for an in-depth rhetorical study of the sermon.

The rhetorical concept of ethos is the credibility the author or speaker has, either by establishing it in his or her work or by bringing it to the occasion.<sup>3</sup> Mormon's authority was already well established before he even spoke a single word of his discourse. First, he was well known by his listeners as a trusted individual and accepted by them as a man of God and a prophet. Second, the location and context of his discourse lends credibility: he was speaking in the synagogue to fellow believers. Despite his natural ethos, however, he still briefly establishes it in the beginning of his discourse. He indicates that he is speaking with the approval of the Father and the Son: "it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, and his holy will." He is even more specific when he explicitly refers to the Lord's "gift of his calling unto [him]" that permits him to speak to the people at that time (Moroni 7:2).

He continues to establish his character by helping his audience see that he understands to whom he is speaking. One of the keys to being able to reach an audience is to assure them that the speaker knows his or her audience. Mormon does this as he says, "I would speak unto you that are of the church, that are the peaceable followers of Christ, and that have obtained a sufficient hope by which ye can enter into the rest of the Lord, from this time henceforth until ye shall rest with him in heaven" (Moroni 7:3). The people in the synagogue do not have to be concerned with Mormon misunderstanding them, such as chastising them for their evil ways when in actuality they are keeping the commandments and living closely to the Lord. Mormon's words

help the people trust him because they can safely assume that since he knows them, he knows what they need to hear. He even explains how he knows that he is speaking with "peaceable followers of Christ"—not because he is speaking in a sacred place, the synagogue, but because the people themselves have provided the necessary evidence of their righteousness. "I judge these things of you," Mormon tells them, "because of your peaceable walk with the children of men" (Moroni 7:4). With great skill, Mormon takes this last statement in his establishing ethos and uses it as a transition to the next element of his talk: the logos.

### The Argument (Logos)

The rhetorical concept of logos in a discourse is the argument itself; it is the reasoning and content of the discourse. As Professor George A. Kennedy, a scholar of early New Testament rhetoric, writes, in "classical rhetoric logos is ordinarily regarded as probable argument, not logical certainty, but Christians came to regard the arguments of Scripture as divinely revealed and thus certain."<sup>4</sup> Those who heard Mormon's discourse and those believers who read it even today would follow this same Christian pattern of accepting his arguments as not just probable, but certain and revealed. This rhetorical element of logos composes the majority of his discourse and, when carefully studied, reveals an amazing structure to the sermon that brilliantly leads these people—people who are already righteous—to the next level of spirituality and life as a disciple of Christ.

### Good Gifts and Evil Gifts

At the end of his establishing his authority, Mormon speaks of knowing that his audience is righteous, because of their "peaceable walk." He then defends this evidence by referring to the word of God as teaching that people can know others by knowing their works, "for if their works be good, then they are good also" (Moroni 7:5). This is a perfect transition to the beginning of his discourse, for he immediately follows this observation about his audience by tying this idea of knowing people by their works to the idea that "a man being evil cannot do that which is good; for if he offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing. For behold, it is not counted unto him for righteousness" (Moroni 7:6–7). Mormon knows his listeners are good people because they bring forth good works. He spends the next several verses establishing that nothing good can

come from someone who is evil and that nothing evil can come from one who is good. This approach doubtlessly helps his audience to accept the logic of his discourse: if they accept the logic that they can be considered good people because their works are good, then they will be open to extending that same logic to others as well.

These verses can be easily misunderstood if not carefully read. Some may misunderstand these verses to mean that it is better to not do something good in the absence of good motives. For example, some may claim that it is better to not go to church at all than to go without “real intent.” However, Mormon’s argument does not support that logic. He is not speaking of the typical person, who has both good intentions and less-than-good ones. He is not even speaking of people who may do some very bad things but still have it within their hearts to do good deeds as well. As is so often the case in the Book of Mormon, the argument is not nuanced or subtle but one of polar opposites. The Book of Mormon is a book with a mission to help people convert to Jesus Christ. Choices are often presented as stark contrasts: readers are challenged to choose between good and evil, between following God or the adversary, between heaven and hell. In these verses, Mormon speaks of an evil man and how such a man cannot do a good thing. For example, “if a man being evil giveth a gift, he doeth it grudgingly; wherefore it is counted unto him the same as if he had retained the gift; wherefore he is counted evil before God” (Moroni 7:8). Mormon’s purpose is not to explore the complex nature of people and how we all have strengths and weaknesses. He is painting a very stark image: “a man being a servant of the devil cannot follow Christ; and if he follow Christ he cannot be a servant of the devil” (Moroni 7:11). He is not speaking of good people who sometimes succumb to their fallen natures; he is speaking of an evil man—a man who is seemingly nothing but evil. Notice the phrasing in this part of the chapter: Mormon does not say, “if a man who does evil things . . .” or even, “if an evil man . . .” but he says, “if a man *being* evil giveth a gift . . .” (Moroni 7:8; emphasis added) and “a man *being* evil cannot do that which is good” (Moroni 7:10; emphasis added). It is as though the prophet is equating the man himself with evil; the man does not just *do* evil things—he *is* evil. Similarly, Mormon refers to such a man as “*being* a servant of the devil” (Moroni 7:11; emphasis added). This man is not the typical man, even in the world, but he is one who is like the adversary.

Mormon uses a powerful image that specifically emphasizes how this “man being evil” whom he is speaking about does not refer to most men. “A

bitter fountain,” he writes, “cannot bring forth good water; neither can a good fountain bring forth bitter water” (Moroni 7:11). If a spring is bad, then bad water comes from it. We would not take the risk of drinking from such a spring, hoping that somehow it would bring forth good water. There is no gray area in this metaphor. Mormon is talking in this part of his discourse about good and evil, not combinations of the two.

### *Everything Good from God*

Just as nothing good comes from such a man, so nothing good comes from the devil. Mormon continues his discourse, moving onto the next stage of his argument: “All things which are good cometh of God; and that which is evil cometh of the devil” (Moroni 7:12). Mormon then warns his listeners to be careful about how they judge so that they “do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil” (Moroni 7:14). This is a significant moment in his argument: he moves from the abstract earlier in his discourse, using hypothetical situations to illustrate his premise, to concrete counsel that his listeners need to follow in their lives. There is a danger in claiming that something is good when it comes from the evil source, and vice versa. Also, there is an important corollary: if we know something is from God, then we must seek to understand how it is good, for we know it must be good because of the source.

### *Two Different Kinds of Judgments*

The natural question that follows the counsel to not judge an evil thing to be of God or a good thing to be of the devil is simple: how are we to judge? Mormon now teaches about the method of judgment: “it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night” (Moroni 7:15). In this simple single verse, there is a wealth of truth about judging between good and evil.<sup>5</sup> First, such judgment is given to the individual to make; the individual has the means by which he or she can judge between good and evil without relying on some outside source to make the judgment for the person. Second, Mormon identifies *one* way to judge—“the way to judge”—not a number of ways to judge. Third, the way to judge is plain, implying that it is simple and readily understood. The process of judging is neither mysterious nor beyond the capacity of the common person. Fourth, the way to judge results in a perfect knowledge; the individual does



not need to be concerned about whether he or she will end up with just a good guess as to what is good or evil but will know the difference without a doubt. Fifth, that perfect knowledge results in a clear distinction between what is good and what is evil—it is as clear as day from night.

While the fifteenth verse tells us that “it is given” to us to judge between good and evil, the sixteenth verse makes plain the way to judge.

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. (Moroni 7:16–17)

If we are not careful, we can read this verse to mean that the way to judge between good and evil is to determine if the thing we are faced with invites us to do good and persuades us to believe in Christ. If those two conditions apply, then the thing is good. However, this creates a circular argument: I know something is good if it *invites me to do good* and believe in Christ. But, if I already know that what it invites me to do is good, then I obviously do not need any help determining if something is good or not. The same circular reasoning can be deduced from the next verse, if we are not careful: if something persuades us to do evil, then we can know it is evil.

As we study Moroni 7:16–17 closely, however, one interpretation is that Mormon is referring to two different judgments. The first judgment is between good and evil. The way to make that judgment, he tells us, is “plain” and can help us know with a “perfect knowledge.” What is the way to judge between good and evil? He explains that “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16). This “Spirit of Christ” is mentioned again in verse 18, “seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ,” and in verse 19, “ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil.” In other words, we all have the Light of Christ, and it is by that light that we are to judge between good and evil. We do not judge between good and evil by determining if we are being persuaded to do something good or evil; again, that would be a circular approach that offers us no help. We judge between good and evil by following the Light of Christ.

The second type of judgment Mormon teaches us in Moroni 7:16–17 is how to judge if something is from God or from the devil. If it invites us to do good and persuades us to believe in Christ, then we may know that it is from God. If, on the other hand, it persuades us to do evil, to not believe in Christ and deny him, and to not serve God, then we may know that it is from the devil. These judgment criteria do not tell us if something is good or not—we already know if it is good or evil by following the Light of Christ. They tell us if something is from God or from the devil. It makes sense that Mormon would give us this second type of judgment; he is concerned that we will make the mistake of attributing something that is evil to God, and something good to the devil (see again Moroni 7:14).

While this interpretation is based on the logic of the language Mormon uses and not on the formatting of the text, the distinction between these two judgments can more easily be seen in the formatting of this passage in Royal Skousen’s volume *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*:

Wherefore take heed, my beloved brethren,  
that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God,  
or that which is good and of God to be of the devil.  
For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge,  
that ye may know good from evil.  
And the way to judge is as plain,  
that ye may know with a perfect knowledge,  
as the daylight is from the dark night.  
For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man  
that they may know good from evil.

Wherefore I shew unto you the way to judge.  
For every thing which inviteth to do good and persuadeth to believe in Christ  
is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ.  
Wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.  
But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil  
and believe not in Christ and deny him and serve not God,  
then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil.<sup>6</sup>

Notice how the important statement “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man that they may know good from evil” is grouped with the statement “the way to judge is as plain, . . . as the daylight is from the dark night.” That first grouping is regarding the first kind of judgment Mormon is teaching us about: how to judge between good and evil. Then, the next grouping, beginning with “Wherefore I shew unto you the way to judge,” deals with the second kind of judgment: how to judge if something is of God or of the devil.

This is a tremendously important principle Mormon teaches us: It is not enough to simply know good from evil; we must also remember that good only comes from God and evil, from the devil. If we only knew good from evil, we would run the risk of thinking that the devil might be deceiving us by telling us to do something good for some evil purposes of his. We might fall into a trap of thinking, “I know this is good, but maybe I shouldn’t do it because the devil is really the one behind trying to get me to do this.” Or we could fall into an equally dangerous trap on the opposite end of the spectrum: “I know this is an evil thing to do, but perhaps it’s the Lord’s will that I do it.” As we have discussed, Mormon goes to great lengths at the beginning of this discourse to teach us that a “man being evil” cannot do anything that is good, that “all things which are good cometh of God,” and “that which is evil cometh of the devil” (Moroni 7:12). In Moroni 7:16–17, he now makes it very clear that once we follow the Light of Christ and come to know if something is good or evil, we can rest assured that the former comes from God and the latter from the adversary. The Light of Christ tells us if something is good or evil, and the fact that something is good or evil tells us the source from which it came.

### *Becoming a Child of Christ*

All of this discussion by Mormon about judging between good and evil and between what is from God and what is not, while interesting and important in and of itself, is actually leading to a very different, and significant, principle. His point is not simply how to judge; he wants us to judge for a very particular reason: so we can “lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not.” Obviously, we cannot lay hold upon every good thing if we do not know how to judge between good and evil, nor can we avoid condemning good things if we do not understand that all good things, without exception, come from God.

Laying hold upon every good thing is not an end in itself, but a means to a far greater end: so we can become “a child of Christ” (Moroni 7:19).

Though the phrase “child of Christ” is commonly used in the Church, this instance in Moroni 7:19 is the *only* time it is ever used in all of scripture. It is never used in any of the other standard works. Significantly, the plural version of the term, “children of Christ,” is used only three times—and only in the Book of Mormon. The occurrence<sup>7</sup> that most helps us understand the concept is when King Benjamin gives his followers this name and explains

its meaning: “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; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). To be a child of Christ, according to this verse, is to be spiritually begotten of Christ, meaning to have one’s heart changed through faith on his name.



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Knowing Mormon’s definition of charity can be of great help to us as we strive to love others.

If we study the phrase “child of Christ” through a literary lens, we can further understand the truth it has to offer by exploring it as a metaphor. A child is begotten by his father. A child is less experienced and less knowledgeable than her father. A child turns to his father for guidance, protection, and wisdom. Also, often it is the cultural tradition for the child to take the surname of her father. All of these characteristics of the child and father are carried over to our relationship with the Savior by means of this metaphorical phrase. We are spiritually begotten by the Lord; we are less experienced and less knowledgeable (and less righteous); we turn to the Lord for guidance, protection, and wisdom; and we take upon ourselves his name.

### *Faith*

Through the concept of laying hold upon every good thing, Mormon introduces the key to becoming a child of Christ. He asks a rhetorical question, “how is it possible that ye can lay hold upon every good thing?” (Moroni 7:20). He hints at the answer, though he does not clearly come forth at this point with the key: “now I come to that faith, of which I said I would speak;<sup>8</sup> and I will tell you the way whereby ye may lay hold on every good thing” (Moroni 7:21). He says he comes to “that faith,” and then he says he will say how we can lay hold upon every good thing, but he does not say that the two are connected. This excellent orator continues to keep his audience’s attention.

Mormon explains how God sent angels to minister to people and to “make manifest concerning the coming of Christ,” and then he makes a very significant claim: “in Christ there should come every good thing” (Moroni 7:22). Note that this claim, as important as it is, is still not the key we are waiting for. This statement tells us the origin of every good thing—Christ—but it does not tell us how we can lay hold upon every good thing. Once again, Mormon implicitly refers back to the beginning of his discourse, when he discussed how nothing good can come from a bad source and nothing bad from a good source. That second type of judgment we discussed, that of being able to discern when something is from the Lord and when it is not, comes into play. The statement “in Christ there should come every good thing” reaffirms the concept that he is the source of all that is good. But how can we lay hold upon all these good things?

The suspense builds.

Before he explicitly tells us how to do this, Mormon helps us understand that we should not make the mistake of thinking that we can lay hold upon

these good things by our own power and effort. He repeats that “all things which are good cometh of Christ,” and then he explains that we would fail to gain these good things without Christ because “otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them” (Moroni 7:24).

Now that he has established our human limitations, he finally states the key we have been waiting to learn: “by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing; and thus it was until the coming of Christ. And after that he came men also were saved by faith in his name” (Moroni 7:25–26). Before the coming of the Savior, people laid hold upon every good thing through exercising faith in Christ. And, once he came, they still laid hold upon every good thing by the same divine means.

Mormon lays out for us a very careful and thorough explanation of how people were able to exercise faith in Christ through different periods of time. Before the Savior came, people depended upon the “ministering of angels” and “every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God” (Moroni 7:25). While the Lord was on the earth with the Nephites, people relied upon his own words: “And as surely as Christ liveth he spake these words unto our fathers, saying: Whatsoever thing ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is good, in faith believing that ye shall receive, behold, it shall be done unto you” (Moroni 7:26). And, after the Lord’s personal ministry to the Nephites, angels still ministered to people and showed themselves

unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness.

And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him.

And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts. (Moroni 7:30–32)

Even though the Savior was no longer living among the people, they could benefit from the ministering of angels and follow the inspired teachings of those whom the Lord called to the ministry. By this process, the “residue of men” (those to whom the Lord did not personally minister when he was among the Nephites) could have faith in Christ and have the Holy Ghost with them—and, we can properly conclude, people could exercise this faith in Christ and lay hold upon every good thing.



For the next several verses of his discourse, Mormon discusses faith. He teaches a number of important concepts related to faith in a fair amount of detail: if you have faith in Christ you will have the power to do whatever is “expedient” in the Lord (Moroni 7:33); having faith in Christ is essential to salvation (Moroni 7:34, 38); it is by faith that miracles happen and that angels appear and minister to people (Moroni 7:37); if miracles have ceased it is because people no longer exercise faith (Moroni 7:37–38); one indication of faith in Christ is meekness (Moroni 7:39); and if you do not have faith in Christ, you “are not fit to be numbered among the people of his church” (Moroni 7:39).

### *Hope*

At his point in his discourse, Mormon adds another level of depth to what he is teaching about faith in Christ. He writes:

I would speak unto you concerning hope. How is it that ye can attain unto faith, save ye shall have hope?

And what is it that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you that he shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in him according to the promise.

Wherefore, if a man have faith he must needs have hope; for without faith there cannot be any hope. (Moroni 7:40–42)

While some may interpret the first part of this passage (“How is it that ye can attain unto faith, save ye shall have hope?”) to mean that Mormon is claiming that we must have hope in order to have faith, the context indicates otherwise. First, Mormon has already discussed faith. If hope were necessary for faith, it would make logical sense, especially in this carefully constructed discourse, to discuss hope before he discussed faith. Second, verse 42 clearly states, “without faith there cannot be any hope.” And third, Mormon explains in verse 41 that the object of our hope—to be raised unto eternal life—is based on our faith. That would appear to make the interpretation of “How is it that ye can attain unto faith, save ye shall have hope?” to be that we cannot have faith without having hope as a natural result. (Instead of meaning that we cannot have faith without having hope first.) In other words, how can you have faith without having hope, its natural fruit?<sup>9</sup>

Just as faith in Christ is necessary to lay hold upon every good thing, hope is also essential. And it is not just any hope; it is “hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and

this because of your faith in him according to the promise” (Moroni 7:41). Our faith must be in Christ, and our hope is through his Atonement; both faith and hope are centered in the Savior and made possible because of him. We are not to go through life constantly doubting whether we are good enough to return to God’s presence and be blessed with eternal life. Instead, we are to have hope that we will be raised to eternal life—not because we are so good that we have earned it but because he is so good that he has blessed us through his Atonement. It is the kind of hope that “maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God” (Ether 12:4). This, of course, does not mean that we can rely on his goodness and then go about breaking the commandments and ignoring our covenants. A life that truly includes the faith and hope in Christ that Mormon is talking about is a life of following the Lord and keeping covenants. We must put forth our efforts, but our faith and hope are not in our efforts; they are in Christ.

We learn a new concept from Mormon when he teaches that we cannot have faith or hope unless we are “meek, and lowly of heart” (Moroni 7:43). Our faith and hope are vain if we lack meekness and lowliness in heart, because being meek and lowly in heart is necessary for us to be “acceptable before God” (Moroni 7:44) What good is it to have faith and hope if God rejects us for not being meek and lowly in heart? This idea of meekness now leads us to the climax of Mormon’s discourse.

### **The Emotions (Pathos)**

Professor Kennedy writes that another element of rhetoric, pathos, as found in the New Testament, “inheres in the audience and may be defined as the emotional reactions the hearers undergo as the orator ‘plays upon their feelings.’”<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that while pathos is the audience aspect of rhetoric, it relates to what the speaker said to create the emotions in the audience, not to the audience’s reaction itself. For example, Kennedy explains that in “the New Testament its commonest form is the promise of eternal life or threat of damnation.”<sup>11</sup> The pathos of the discourse is speaking about eternal life and damnation in hopes of moving people to change their lives.

While there are not always clear distinctions in a discourse among ethos, logos, and pathos—some parts of the talk can contain two or three of the elements at the same time—this last section of Mormon’s discourse is the one

most full of pathos. This is the passage in which the prophet most directly, and powerfully, calls his audience to live a certain way.

### Charity

In order to be meek and lowly in heart (in other words, to be acceptable to God) and confess “by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus is the Christ,” Mormon teaches that we must have charity. Without charity, we are “nothing” (Moroni 7:44). Using words similar to those Paul wrote in discussing charity,<sup>12</sup> Mormon describes this concept:

And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail. (Moroni 7:45–46)

And, while the traditional Christian world makes the distinctions among affection, friendship, Eros, and charity,<sup>13</sup> Mormon brings a depth to the doctrine of charity that ventures well beyond even Paul’s words: “charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever” (Moroni 7:47). It is the love that Christ possesses; the love that he has for us. When we have charity in our heart<sup>14</sup> for others, we have the love Christ has for others in our hearts. Knowing Mormon’s definition of charity can be of great help to us as we strive to love others. For example, we now understand that when we read Moroni 7:45 we are reading a description of Christ’s love; we understand that reading that verse helps us know how to love others if we wish to love as our Savior loves.

### The Children of God

In the concluding verse of the chapter, the last words of his sermon, Mormon tells us how to be blessed with charity and the blessings that come with having this all-important gospel characteristic:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; *that ye may become the sons of God*; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. (Moroni 7:48; emphasis added)

This verse could be read in at least two different ways. One reading could be that we are to pray to be filled with this love for a number of reasons: (1) that we may become the sons (and daughters) of God; (2) that when he shall appear we shall be like him; (3) that we may have this hope; and (4) that we may be purified as he is pure. Though we certainly do not want to base our interpretation solely on punctuation, the series of semicolons may lead us to infer that Mormon is giving us this list of blessings to pray for.

A second justifiable reading is that Mormon is instructing us to pray to be filled with this love so that we may become the sons (and daughters) of God and then explains what it means to be the children of God: when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is—as his children we may have this hope and we may be purified even as he is pure. It is worthwhile to include the same verse from Professor Skousen’s edition of the Book of Mormon:

Wherefore my beloved brethren,  
 pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart  
 that ye may be filled with this love  
 which he hath bestowed upon all  
 who are true followers of his Son Jesus Christ,  
 that ye may become the sons of God,  
 that when he shall appear, we shall be like him  
 —for we shall see him as he is—  
 that we may have this hope,  
 that we may be purified even as he is pure.  
 Amen.<sup>15</sup>

While I am not basing this second interpretation on the lack of semicolons, this version does make this alternative reading of the verse more readily apparent.

This passage concerning charity is the climax of Mormon’s address because it is the most important part of his teaching and is the doctrinal point that his entire discourse has been leading up to. It is most important because it teaches us how to become the sons and daughters of God. All of the other concepts Mormon discusses—good and evil, things that are from God and things from the adversary, laying hold upon every good thing, exercising faith in Christ, hope, meekness and lowliness of heart—are extremely important and not to be minimized, but they are not what charity is. Charity “never faileth,” it is the “greatest of all,” it is “bestowed upon all who are true followers of . . . Jesus Christ,” and it makes us “the sons [and daughters] of God.”



While laying hold upon every good thing through exercising faith in Christ helps us become children of Christ, Mormon may be teaching us that the gift of charity helps us become even more: the children of God. It is not uncommon for people to assume that being a child of Christ and a child of God are interchangeable—that the two terms basically mean the same thing. While there may be instances in the scriptures, in talks by modern Church leaders, and in works by scholars in which the two terms do carry the same meaning,<sup>16</sup> it may be significant that Mormon uses the two terms in the same discourse. Perhaps he is using them in two distinct ways. It may be telling that “child of Christ” is used early in the sermon while “the sons of God” is used later in a discourse that is constructed in a progressive way in which each section builds upon previous sections, working towards the climax of the sermon. It makes sense, within the context of the sermon, that the two doctrinal concepts could be carefully used for two different purposes.

We are all children of God in the sense that he is the Father of our spirits, but this last verse of Mormon’s discourse may be referring to something beyond our being the Father’s children because he is the Father of our spirits. The first step is for us to become the children of Christ (see Moroni 7:19 and our discussion above). However, we also want to become “joint-heirs with Christ”: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are *the children of God*: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and *joint-heirs with Christ*” (Romans 8:16–17; emphasis added). If we do not progress and *remain* a child of Christ, then we cannot be a joint-heir with him; we cannot inherit what he inherits *as his child*. But if we progress and become a son or daughter of God, then we become a joint-heir with Christ.

In what sense might Mormon be meaning the term “sons of God” in verse 48? In what sense might being a child of God be a progression from being a child of Christ? Perhaps the Doctrine and Covenants provides an answer:

And again we bear record—for we saw and heard, and this is the testimony of the gospel of Christ concerning them who shall come forth in the resurrection of the just—

They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized. . . .

That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit . . . ;

And who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.

They are they who are the church of the Firstborn.

They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—

They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fullness, and of his glory;

And are priests of the Most High. . . .

Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the *sons of God*. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:50–58; emphasis added)

As we discussed earlier, King Benjamin teaches that to become the children of Christ is to be “spiritually begotten” of Christ; it is the result of our hearts having been “changed through faith on his name” (Mosiah 5:7). The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that to be the children of God is to be “sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise,” to be “the church of the Firstborn,” and to be given all that the Father has. To become a child of Christ is one of our greatest desires, but we do not want to remain a child; we want to mature in our discipleship and become a joint-heir with Christ. And what is it that comprises all that the Father has? Fundamentally, it is eternal life, “which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7).

## Conclusion

Mormon’s discourse in Moroni 7 is a masterful example of a carefully constructed discourse that builds to a most important message. As Rust writes, the “sermon progresses in a simple yet subtle interlocking of parts.”<sup>17</sup> While it is often known for “faith, hope, and charity,” the discourse began with a thoughtful discussion of good gifts, evil gifts, and their respective sources. This prophet and master orator would work his way through a number of different concepts, building teaching upon teaching, before he would even arrive at the three doctrinal pillars for which his sermon is best known. Mormon teaches us something that no other prophet had taught before—that charity is the pure love of Christ, and that being filled with this pure love leads to becoming the children of God. This entire discourse is a beautifully and powerfully constructed doctrinal edifice that leads us to the essential understanding of what we need to do to ultimately gain eternal life. **RE**

## Notes

1. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 140. See this section of Rust’s chapter on sermons for a broad overview of Mormon’s discourse.

2. For examples of articles and book chapters that deal with certain aspects of Moroni 7, see H. Dean Garrett, “Light in Our Vessels: Faith, Hope, and Charity,” in *Fourth Nephi: From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious

Studies Center, 1995), 81–93; Duane Boyce, “Faith as a Holy Embrace,” *Religious Educator* 13, no. 2 (2012): 107–27; Candice Wendt, “Mormon’s Question,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 248–53; Gayle O. Brown, “Love in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1988), 151–63; Sidney B. Sperry, “Literary Problems in the Book of Mormon Involving 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and Other New Testament Books,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4 (1995): 166–74; Daniel K Judd, “A Light amidst the Darkness,” in *Fourth Nephi: From Zion to Destruction*, 133–46; and Timothy G. Merrill, “What Love Is Love but God’s? A Case for Charity,” *Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium, 2006* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2006), 73–85.

3. See George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 15. Kennedy notes that while Aristotelian theory considered ethos to be an entirely internal element within the speech, as a practical matter the authority which the speaker or writer already possesses, independent of the speech itself, is also part of the ethos. This is especially true in the New Testament. Considering the authority prophets in the Book of Mormon possess, even separate from their teachings, this same characteristic of ethos applies to that book as well.

4. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 15–16.

5. Elder Dallin H. Oaks teaches that “a righteous judgment will be guided by the Spirit of the Lord, not by anger, revenge, jealousy, or self-interest.” “Judge Not and Judging” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 1 March 1998), 4, [https://speeches.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Oaks\\_Dallin\\_1998\\_03.pdf](https://speeches.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Oaks_Dallin_1998_03.pdf). Elder Oaks relies on this verse and the rest of Moroni 7 to support this statement. See his entire talk for an excellent discussion on the proper role of judging.

6. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 721–22.

7. The other two instances in the Book of Mormon in which “children of Christ” appears are 4 Nephi 1:17 and Mormon 9:26; neither of these verses, however, offers as much insight into the concept as does Mosiah 5:7.

8. Interestingly, though he mentions that he has said earlier that he would speak about faith, nowhere previously in this discourse has he mentioned speaking about that topic. This discourse seems to begin at the beginning: “And now I, Mormon, speak unto you . . .” (Moroni 7:2). Perhaps in a previous discourse he promised that he would speak of faith and is just now getting to that topic.

9. Professor Larry E. Dahl makes a similar argument in “Faith, Hope, Charity,” in Cheesman, *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, 137–50.

10. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 15.

11. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 15.

12. Compare Moroni 7:44–46 to 1 Corinthians 13. The reasons for the similarities between these two passages of scripture are beyond the scope of this paper. For an important discussion on Book of Mormon and New Testament intertextuality, however, see Nicholas J. Frederick, “Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 1–30.

13. See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988).

14. For an insightful discussion of the “pure love of Christ,” see Matthew O. Richardson, “‘The Pure Love of Christ’: The Divine Precept of Charity in Moroni 7,” in *Living the Book*

*of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 290–301.

15. Skousen, *Book of Mormon*, 726. Similarly, in the first edition of the Book of Mormon, there is no series of semicolons to mislead us: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son Jesus Christ, that ye may become the sons of God, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is, that we may have this hope, that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen.”

16. For example, Professor Jared W. Ludlow understands Alma’s teaching about being born again and becoming the sons and daughters of God in Mosiah 27:25–26 as meaning either being the children of God the Father or the children of Christ. See “The Father in the Sermon on the Mount,” in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture*, ed. Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 140–56.

17. Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, 141.