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Christ, Our Advocate and High Priest

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Welcome to Easter Conference, the third in what I hope will be an enduring BYU tradition. This conference is held on the Saturday before Easter, a day that is typically treated by Latter-day Saints—who lack the tradition of Holy Week or Good Friday—as a weekend holiday for chores or recreation. This year the conference also happens to fall on April 15, tax day, the day when Americans respond to the edict of our empire that “all the world should be taxed” (Luke 2:1). I hope this conference will help you meditate for a morning on the Mediator rather than on mammon, that it will provide a measure of spiritual re-creation to supplement your recreation, and that it will help transform a holiday weekend into a holy-day weekend. I thank in advance all those who will contribute to these ends.

The occasion of our holding an Easter conference on tax day reminds me of an Easter weekend almost four hundred years ago. On Good Friday in 1613, the poet John Donne found himself riding from London westward toward Wales on a business trip. Traditionally, Good Friday is a day when the Christian world remembers the Crucifixion. It is a holy day in the Christian calendar, a solemn time when Christians are supposed to set aside worldly affairs, go to church, fast, pray, and reflect on the Savior’s suffering and death. Instead, Donne devoted Good Friday in 1613 to his business obligations rather than to his religious duties. This circumstance became the occasion of one of the finest devotional poems in English entitled “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.”¹

In the poem, Donne laments, “I am carried towards the West / This day, when my soul’s form bends toward the East.” Then, he engages in a complex but moving meditation on the Crucifixion. Donne travels in his mind from Wales back across the miles and the years to the foot of the cross. He can scarcely bear to look upon the agony there, as he imagines the Son of God “humbled below us.” Donne sees in his mind “those hands, which [once] span[ned] the poles, / And tun[ed the] spheres,” now “pierced with those holes”; “that blood,” which is the source of eternal life, “made dirt of dust”; and “that flesh which was worn / By God for his apparel, ragg’d, and torn.” Such a spectacle “made [Christ’s] own lieutenant, Nature, shrink; / It made his footstool crack, and the sun wink.” How then can Donne look upon Christ’s face in agony? How can he watch his God die? Yet Donne forces himself to turn his imagined gaze up to Christ’s face on the cross. As he does so, he imagines the Savior turning His gaze upon him, John Donne, a scandalously sinful man who, like Augustine, was notorious as a young man for having been often carried by “pleasure or business” westward into worldly ways when his soul should have inclined eastward toward the Savior. There follows this stunning conclusion, in which the poet pleads to be purified:

Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
 They are present yet unto my memory,
 For that looks towards them; and thou look’st towards me,
 O Savior, as thou hang’st upon the tree.
 I turn my back to thee but to receive
 Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
 O think me worth thine anger; punish me;
 Burn off my rusts and my deformity;
 Restore thine image so much, by thy grace,
 That thou may’st know me, and I’ll turn my face.

Brothers and sisters, like Donne, all of us need the Savior to burn off the stains and rusts we accumulate in mortality. And we, too, must look to Christ to re-form by grace what we have de-formed by sin. May this hope for wholeness point our westward-wandering souls eastward toward a garden, a cross, and an empty tomb.

When we experience the purifying power of the Atonement, we may feel to exclaim with Enos, “Lord, how is it done?” (Enos 1:7). I know of no more compelling theological question in scripture than this. I want to give some perspective on this question today. Now, I do not claim to fully comprehend the awesome arithmetic of the Atonement by which one man’s death adds up to life for all men and by which

a guiltless man's suffering cancels the guilt of all the penitent who come unto Him. Like Enos, I often wonder, "Lord, how is it done?"

Even so, I believe that scripture provides a remarkably intimate glimpse into the mechanics of mediation—that is, into how it is done—in its descriptions of Christ as our advocate and high priest. Scripture allows us to overhear the Son pleading our cause to the Father. It invites us to enter into the heavenly Holy of Holies, where God dwells with our great high priest and where every day is a Day of Atonement. The scriptures we will consider provide sacred glimpses into how it is done. So on this Saturday before Easter, let us mentally doff the shoes from off our feet and enter into the sanctuary where our salvation is wrought.

Traditionally, Christ is thought to have combined the three Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king. This triplet will be familiar to Latter-day Saints from the hymn "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," which appeared in the first Church hymnal: "He lives, my Prophet, Priest, and King."² As prophet, Christ is our teacher and exemplar whose words and actions reveal God's word to the world. As king, Christ is our ruler, judge, lawgiver, and Lord, into whose hands the Father has given the government of His kingdom. As priest, Christ is our redeemer, mediator, intercessor, and advocate with the Father, making a blood sacrifice that enables us to be cleansed from sin.

Note that I subsume the role of advocate under the role of priest. I believe that this is consistent with scripture, particularly modern revelation. Modern revelation expands and greatly develops our understanding of Christ as advocate. Jesus is called *advocate* only once in the New Testament. This occurs in 1 John 2:1: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Christ is alluded to as advocate many times in modern revelation. Modern revelation also clarifies even the verse in 1 John. The Joseph Smith Translation for this verse makes clear that Christ specifically acts as advocate for those who "sin *and* repent."

Advocate denotes not merely a lawyer but literally one who speaks for us. The word comes from the Latin *ad vocare*, "to speak for." First John 2:1 employs the Greek *parakletos*, which connotes one who is at our side, sometimes translated as "our helper." The same Greek term is used for the Holy Ghost in His role as comforter. The idea here is that Christ is by our side, as our helper and our defender; He speaks in our behalf.

The fullest and most intimate description of Christ as advocate in modern revelation occurs in Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5. I have

come to regard this passage much as I do Doctrine and Covenants 19:15–20, in which the Savior recounts His atoning sacrifice, “Which suffering caused myself, even God, . . . to tremble because of pain.” Both passages are remarkably intimate, first-person descriptions by the Savior of the Atonement. In Doctrine and Covenants 45, the Savior describes His sacred, saving interaction with the Father: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (vv. 3–5). So many things are noteworthy about this passage. I will mention several.

1. Note the present tense: Christ is pleading our cause—this is His constant, ongoing activity before the Father. Likewise, He points to His suffering, death, and blood as if they were present for the Father’s contemplation: “behold the sufferings,” “behold the . . . death.” As in Donne’s poem, it is as if the Son and the Father are reliving the great agony in the garden and on the cross in an eternal present. In his discussion of this idea, Elder Neal A. Maxwell notes the “ongoingness” of Christ’s atoning advocacy for us.³

2. Note the emphasis: it falls almost entirely on the Savior’s redemptive suffering and only minimally on our actions. He asks the Father to spare us based on His merits, not on ours. We have a part to play in this divine drama of salvation, to be sure. Our role is briefly acknowledged in the wording of those “that believe on my name.” But what we must do—believe—seems so small, insignificant, and disproportionate compared to what must be done for us that it is almost embarrassing. We, as believers, are the beneficiaries of the Son’s suffering and death, His perfect life, and His shed blood—not to mention the Father’s sacrifice in giving such a Son to be so treated for the sake of our salvation.

3. Note the word *wherefore*—surely there is not a more crucial *wherefore* in all scripture than that in verse five. It links the Son’s suffering to an appeal to the Father to spare us. This simple causal conjunction denotes the reason the Father should consider this appeal. The hopes of every believer hinge upon this *wherefore*.

4. Note that Jesus calls us, familiarly, “my brethren.” Of course, Latter-day Saints know that this is literally true—we are all spiritual sons and daughters of God. Christ is the firstborn and therefore our eldest brother. Nevertheless, in context, this does not sound like a mere

statement of fact. Rather, it sounds here as if Christ were reminding the Father of His kinship with us, as if we were coequal siblings rather than utterly dependent petitioners. Jesus does not have to designate us “my brethren.” He could just as well name us “these poor sinners” or even “these thy children.” Instead, He expresses solidarity with fallen humanity—with us!—in the words “these my brethren.” What a condescending, merciful, gracious phrase! Here is an advocate who loves us, even though He knows full well our weaknesses, for He has taken upon Himself our infirmities. Here is an advocate who knows how to succor us. As the Lord says in Doctrine and Covenants 62:1, “Behold, and hearken, O ye elders of my church, saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, your advocate, who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted.”

5. Note that He pleads for grace for those “that believe on my name” (present tense) in order “that they may come unto me” (future tense): the first relative clause describes the present condition of the redeemed—they are believers. The second anticipates their future conditions—as those who have been forgiven and are thus enabled to come unto Him and inherit eternal life. As our advocate, Christ pleads not only for our forgiveness or justification but ultimately for our sanctification. His intercession thus both spares us from punishment *and* enables us to come unto Him and have eternal life. It opens the door for at-one-ment with Father and Son.

6. Finally, note that both here and elsewhere in scripture, Christ is always portrayed as our advocate *with the Father*. In some ways, the relationship between the Son and Father is the most surprising and potentially puzzling feature of the doctrine of Christ as advocate. What is the role of the Father in relation to Christ as advocate? Is the Father to be considered our accuser, who stands in opposition to our advocate? No, this role belongs to Satan (see Revelation 12:10). The very word *devil* (*diabolos*) means “accuser or slanderer.” If the Father is not our accuser, is He then a stern, just judge who must be placated by a Son who advocates for mercy? Yes and no. The scriptures sometimes suggest this, as in Doctrine and Covenants 109 when Joseph prays that the Father “wilt turn away thy wrath when thou lookest upon the face of thine Anointed” (v. 53). Scripture contains several similar passages that could lead us to attribute mercy and justice to separate members of the Godhead. But surely it would be a mistake to imagine that the Father embodies merely justice and vengeance while the Son embodies exclusively mercy and compassion. Just as the Son is both our merciful advocate and our just judge, so the Father possesses in Himself the

qualities of both justice and mercy in perfect fullness. One member of the Godhead is not more merciful or just than the other. To the extent that Christ acts as our advocate for mercy with His Father, He summons forth mercy that already exists in His Father's heart.

But I think there is yet another way of looking at this divine drama between the advocate Son and His Father. I believe that as our advocate *with the Father*, Christ is not so much placating a wrathful God as He is claiming His rights under the covenant—the new covenant—to redeem those who repent. This covenant and these rights are predicated on the blood of one who “did no sin.” Through the Atonement, Jesus earned a place at “the right hand of God,” as Mormon says, “to claim of the Father his rights of mercy . . . ; wherefore he advocateth the cause of the children of men” (Moroni 7:27–28). Likewise, as Jesus tells the Prophet Joseph Smith, “I am Christ, and . . . by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them” (D&C 38:4). As advocate, Jesus claims His rights of mercy with the Father, which He earned by virtue of the blood He spilt for us.

This is the way I read the extraordinary first-person glimpse we get from Doctrine and Covenants 45 into the Savior's role as our advocate *with the Father*. In effect, Christ is saying to His Father, “Behold the fearful price that has been paid for salvation; wherefore spare these my beloved brothers and sisters who believe in me so that they may become one with us and receive eternal life.”

As advocate, Christ intercedes for us as our great high priest. He prays to the Father “for them . . . which shall believe on me” (John 17:20): “Sanctify them through thy truth: . . . that they may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be one in us . . . that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:17, 21, 23). Advocate and priest are both intercessory and mediatorial priestly offices.

Let me now speak briefly about the Savior's role as high priest. This is described most fully, of course, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In fact, it forms the controlling idea of Paul's epistle. Paul recognized that the high priest who entered into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement was but a “shadow of heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5). In New Testament times, once a year the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple with a censer of incense to make a blood offering that would cleanse the people from sin. Paul explains that, similarly, as high priest, Christ has entered the Holy of Holies in heaven through the offering of His own blood. He combines in Himself, as it were, the role of both priest and sacrificial animal: “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place,

having obtained eternal redemption for us” (Hebrews 9:12). “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24).

But this is not all. Not only has Christ entered a heavenly Holy of Holies for us but also He has made it possible for us to enter too. In ancient Israel, only the high priest could pass through the second veil into this inner sanctuary where stood the mercy seat. Christ’s atoning sacrifice has opened the sanctuary of God to all believers. Paul says that Christ opened unto us “a new and living way” (Hebrews 10:20), through the veil of His own flesh and blood, whereby we can enter the holiest place. “Therefore, brethren,” Paul goes on to say, let us have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19).

This understanding of Christ as our great high priest and advocate offers stunning, sweet, and hopeful doctrine. It has caused me to pray more earnestly of late for forgiveness through the atoning blood of Christ. I have echoed in my devotions the prayers of the people of Benjamin: “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mosiah 4:2).

I have imagined the Savior, as advocate and high priest, coming before the Father to plead for me. How grateful I have felt to have such an advocate, “who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted” (D&C 62:1). Likewise, I take comfort in Paul’s descriptions of Christ as high priest, who “took not on him the nature of angels” but was “made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful . . . high priest. . . . For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:16–18). Consequently, He “can have compassion on . . . them that are out of the way; for he himself also is compassed with infirmity” (Hebrews 5:2). This knowledge ought to embolden us to come to the Father’s throne: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15–16).

I began with quoting a great seventeenth-century religious poet. Let me end with another: John Milton. At the end of *Paradise Lost*, Milton beautifully describes the Son acting in the priestly office as intercessor and advocate in behalf of fallen Adam and Eve, who have just offered a heartfelt, penitent prayer consisting not only of words

but also of unutterable sighs. These ascend to heaven, where Christ, “their great Intercessor,” clad like a priest with incense, comes before the Father’s throne and says:

See Father, what first fruits on earth are sprung
 From thy implanted Grace in man, these Sighs
 And Prayers, which in this Golden Censer, mixt
 With Incense, I thy Priest before thee bring,
 Fruits of more pleasing savour from thy seed
 Sow’n with contrition in his heart, then those
 Which his own hand manuring all the Trees
 Of Paradise could have produc’t, ere fall’n
 From innocence. Now therefore bend thine eare
 To supplication, heare his sighs though mute;
 Unskilful with what words to pray, let mee
 Interpret for him, mee his Advocate
 And propitiation. . . .
 . . . let him live
 Before thee reconcil’d . . .
 To better life shall yeeld him, where with mee
 All my redeemd may dwell in joy and bliss,
 Made one with me as I with thee am one.

And the Father answers:

All thy request for Man, accepted Son,
 Obtain, all thy request was my Decree.⁴

I testify that Christ is our advocate and priest. He pleads for us. He prays for us with the Father. He has entered the heavenly Holy of Holies through His own blood and made Atonement so that we can have “the boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.” “Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!”⁵ **RE**

Notes

1. All quotes from the poem are in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 1986), 1:101–2.

2. Samuel Medley, “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 136.

3. Neal A. Maxwell, *One More Strain of Praise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 44–45.

4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book 11, lines 22–47 (see Thomas H. Luxon, ed., *The Milton Reading Room*, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton>, accessed January 2007).

5. Charles H. Gabriel, “I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, no. 193.