

Do You Know Who You Really Are?

Cynthia Doxey

Cynthia Doxey (cynthia_doxey@byu.edu) is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

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What a great blessing it is for me to be here with you on this lovely campus! I was impressed with the students and the campus when I was here with the Tabernacle Choir a few years ago and have looked forward to being here again. There is a great spirit here at Brigham Young University–Idaho. Not only are you students blessed to be here but you are also a blessing to those you meet throughout the world as you carry forth the banner of truth and righteousness in your words and actions.

We are all brothers and sisters in an eternal family and need to love and care about one another. You already know that premortally we lived with our Heavenly Father, who taught us the great plan of happiness. Most of you remember the teachings found in the Primary song “I Am a Child of God.”¹ The song’s lyrics teach profound truths in a very simple way. From these teachings, we learn not only that we are spirit sons and daughters of God but that we have a purpose here on the earth. We were sent here by a loving Heavenly Father to live with earthly mothers and fathers and to learn how to return to Him again. This concept is understood even by young children.

One day, my mother was shopping with her two preschool daughters. The two-year-old became upset at being confined to the grocery cart and not being able to roam about freely like her four-year-old sister. She began to cry in frustration. All attempts to calm her were to no avail. As

she began to wail louder, the four-year-old said to her sister, “Christie! You don’t need to cry. Don’t you know you’re a child of God?”

Do you know who you really are? Think about that question. If you were asked by a stranger, “Who are you?” most of you would probably say your name, thinking that would be a sufficient answer. Or you might say that you are a son or daughter of your parents. If that person knows your parents or siblings or some other relative, the stranger may feel he or she knows something about you. But you all know that is not the whole story.

You Were Chosen Before You Were Born

Elder Russell M. Nelson says, “If my fondest wish could be granted, it would be that we know who we really are, and that we know we come from premortal realms where we were numbered ‘among the noble and great ones’ who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God.”²

You were selected to come to earth at this time, in this place, doing what you are doing under these favored circumstances. You are among the noble and great ones of our Father’s kingdom. President Gordon B. Hinckley once told the youth of the Church: “You are not ‘dead-end’ kids. You are not wasting your lives in drifting aimlessly. You have purpose. You have design. You have plans that can only lead to growth and strength.”³

So how did you get to this point in your life? As the turtle said when he looked around and found himself on top of a fence post, “It’s clear I didn’t get here all by myself.” To whom do we owe our thanks for our situation?

First, we must acknowledge that we are children of God with divine potential and that He has blessed us to come to earth at this time. The gospel has been restored in this dispensation, and we have had the opportunity to accept it and to receive the blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. You can draw upon His power to help you become like Him. We are eternally indebted to our Father and our Elder Brother for this great plan of happiness.

Second, we are blessed to have come to earth to reside in a family. Families are to love and nurture children, providing opportunities for learning and growth. Regardless of how good or bad we think our families are, we owe our thanks to them because they have given us life.

Third, our present situation has been affected by the lives of many people who have gone before us. We may not realize it, but our ancestors played a role in how we have become who we are. For example,

many of you might have ancestors who accepted the gospel and remained faithful to the Church. Without their influence, you might not be here at BYU–Idaho. Perhaps you do not know your progenitors personally, but they know you and are depending on you to carry on their name. Let me illustrate this idea with a story about a family.

Generational Effects

Last year, I attended a play at Brigham Young University in Provo called *Handing Down the Names*, by Steven Dietz. Although the characters were fictional, the play was a family story based on historical facts. The play begins with a woman named Irina living in Colorado in the 1940s. She introduces the play by saying that each family has a history but that the beginning is difficult to find. She takes off her wedding ring and places it on the table.

The play then steps back in time almost two hundred years as we see a young widow named Ruth Dorn in Germany. She picks up the wedding ring, saying that it belonged to her husband, Henry. He had just been killed in a war. His brother then arrives for the funeral. Ruth is expecting her first child, and the brother offers to marry her so the child can have a name and a family. The young family decides to travel to Russia to colonize an area along the Volga River. The mother dies during the journey, and the father cares for the child, eking out an existence in the harsh land. Even though that baby daughter is not his biological child, she gives his life a purpose.

The play then shifts to the early 1900s, showing descendants of the Dorn family leaving their home along the Volga River to come to America. Unfortunately, the mother dies on the ship, but the father carries on with his three adult children. Upon arriving at Ellis Island, one of the daughters, Katie, is found to have an eye infection. She is sent back to Russia, and the rest of the family helplessly watch her leave. They move to Colorado, where they work hard to raise enough money for Katie and her husband to join them. They pray constantly that their family can be reunited. One year follows the next, and they cannot understand why Katie's family does not come. We find out later that Katie never received the money or the letters because of political interference.

Katie eventually has a son named Adam. Before she dies, she tells him to do whatever he can to go to America and join her family. Just as World War II is starting in Europe, Adam finds someone who offers to help him leave Russia and go to America. However, as he enters Hamburg, Germany, preparing to board the ship for his journey across the Atlantic, he is seized and conscripted into the German Army.

He is captured and sent to America as a prisoner of war. Ironically, or maybe providentially, his imprisonment is in the same area of northern Colorado where his now deceased grandfather and uncle had lived. The prisoners are forced to work for farmers in the area, and that is where he meets Irina, a young woman whose father was also from the German colonies along the Volga River. He recognizes that she is one of his own people. After the war, he is sent back to Germany but later manages to return to Irina in Colorado, bringing the wedding ring that had been handed down for many generations. Ruth Dorn, from two hundred years earlier, then enters the stage, saying, “He farms now, on land where he’d been held prisoner. She wears a ring that I wore, nearly two hundred years ago. And their son, Henry, wears a name that belonged to my husband—a name seven generations in the making.”⁴

This family story touched me because it showed how the individuals who lived in the twentieth century were profoundly influenced by their family members from previous generations. You may not realize it, but your life and situation have come about in part because of the decisions made by your ancestors. As the playwright Steven Dietz states, “We can look back . . . because they chose to look forward.”⁵

We may not understand why we were born to our particular family with its unique heritage, but we can be sure that our ancestors are a part of us. Our current lives are like a tapestry being woven with threads coming from various people and places. God is the master weaver. He can help us gather the loose ends of the tapestry, enabling us to turn our hearts to our fathers, as Malachi prophesied (see Malachi 4:6).

The Role Our Ancestors Played

An example of a tapestry being woven by the hand of God can be found in the life and family of the Prophet Joseph Smith. During the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, we were often reminded of his foreordination to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ. His life was dedicated to the service of the Lord, and the work he brought forth in restoring the gospel has blessed millions of people. President Brigham Young taught that Joseph Smith was foreordained before the world was to be the man who would “receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God. The Lord had his eyes upon him, and upon his father, and upon his father’s father, and upon their progenitors clear back to Abraham, and from Abraham to the flood, from the flood to Enoch, and from Enoch to Adam. He has watched that family and that blood as it has circulated from its fountain to the birth of that man.”⁶

Think about that statement for a moment. What might it mean to you? You may not have been foreordained to be a prophet, but is it not possible that you have some special mission on the earth? In Alma 13:3, we learn that individuals who are ordained and called to holy callings in the priesthood were “called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works” in the premortal world. Although they are not mentioned in this scripture, I believe faithful women also were chosen before they were born to carry out our Father’s work. If you, then, were one of the “noble and great ones” that Abraham saw in vision (see Abraham 3:22–23), is it not possible that the Lord had His eye on your ancestors, just as He watched over Joseph Smith’s progenitors? I believe He did. All people who have accepted the gospel are counted among the descendants of Abraham, and because of this lineage, we can expect that Heavenly Father cared for our ancestors as much as He cares for us (see Abraham 2:10–11).

For example, many of my ancestors were early members of the restored Church. They were pioneers who left their homes and families and journeyed to the Great Salt Lake Valley. They had the faith to wade through affliction, even though it meant losing loved ones along the way. They walked over a thousand miles, sometimes wearing only rags to cover their feet after their shoes were worn out. Yet they did it all in response to a prophet’s call.

My third-great-grandmother was known as “Wee Granny” because she was a very tiny Scottish woman. She and several of her family members heard the gospel and joined the Church in Scotland. Her son, John, brought his family to Utah in the early 1850s. Several years later, Wee Granny boarded the ship to join her son here and was assigned to the Martin handcart company. Being in her seventies, she found the journey to be very difficult. By the time the company arrived at Chimney Rock, Nebraska, she was overcome by exhaustion and could go no farther. Just before she died, she said to those with her, “Tell John I died with my face towards Zion.” This example of faith has been taught to my family for generations and has been a lasting legacy for us to follow.

Essentially, our lives have been greatly influenced by the lives of many people who came before us. You might be saying to yourself, “I don’t have any pioneer ancestors. What have they done for me?” Even those who have found the gospel in recent years have been influenced by the faith of the early pioneers.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve grew up in Germany. His family joined the Church when he was a young child

and became pioneers of the Church in their land. Even though he has no ancestors among the nineteenth-century pioneers of the Church, he said he feels “a close kinship to those early pioneers who crossed the plains. They are my spiritual ancestry, as they are for each and every member of the Church, regardless of nationality, language, or culture. They have established . . . a spiritual foundation for the building of the kingdom of God in all the nations of the world.”⁷ You and your family might be today’s pioneers of faithfulness, just as Elder Uchtdorf and his family were in their land.

Sister Elaine S. Dalton, a counselor in the Young Women general presidency, said that during a trip she made to Nauvoo, she pondered how her ancestors could have given up everything they had, suffering persecution and trials as they traveled across the plains. She wondered why they had sacrificed so much for their testimony of the gospel. She had the impression come to her that her ancestors and those early Saints would say, “We did this for you.”⁸ If they did so much for us, we need to do something for them. One thing we can do is live up to the heritage we have been given.

Our Responsibility to Live Up to Our Name

I remind you of the story about President George Albert Smith. He was very ill and one day lost consciousness. In that state, he felt he had gone beyond the veil into the spirit world. He saw a man whom he recognized as his grandfather, the Apostle George A. Smith, after whom he had been named. They approached each other; then his grandfather stopped and said, “I would like to know what you have done with my name.” President Smith saw his whole life pass before him in review, and afterward he smiled and said to his grandfather, “I have never done anything with your name of which you need be ashamed.” What joy and gratitude he had in knowing that he had kept his grandfather’s name unsullied.⁹

Remember, you also have taken upon yourselves the name of the Lord Jesus Christ through baptism into the Church. With this name comes the obligation to honor Him and follow Him, just as you might honor your own parents. There will come a day when you will meet Jesus Christ, and the question might be asked of you, “What have you done with my name?”

To help us see the eternal view of the family, President Gordon B. Hinckley talked about being at a temple dedication along with his daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter. As he sat there, he

reflected on his heritage. His great-grandfather was the first one in his line to join the Church. His grandfather had been baptized in Nauvoo, and his own father had also served faithfully in the Church. He said, “I suddenly realized that I stood right in the middle of these seven generations—three before me and three after me. In that sacred and hallowed house there passed through my mind a sense of the tremendous obligation that was mine to pass on all that I had received as an inheritance from my forebears to the generations who have now come after me.”¹⁰ He said he recognized that his family was a long chain of people connected together, and he did not want to become the weak link in the chain. He then counseled all of us to remain faithful to the Church so we do not become the weak link in the chain of our generations. We owe it to our ancestors and our posterity to pass on a name that is untarnished and pure.

You might be familiar with the comic strip “Pickles,” by Brian Crane. On July 15, 2001, the cartoon showed a grandfather and his grandson talking to each other. The grandfather asks, “Have you been a good boy lately, Nelson?”

The grandson’s reply is, “Yeah, I guess.”

The grandfather says, “Good. A lot of people are counting on you.”

“Like who?” asks the little boy.

The grandfather then reminds him that he has two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and sixteen great-great-grandparents and then pulls out his calculator and figures out that in the previous five hundred years there were 1,048,576 people all involved in the creation of his grandson. Then, he points out, “That’s a lot of folks counting on you to make something of yourself, boy. So . . . *don’t let us down!*”

Nelson walks away, commenting to his dog, “Peer pressure is nothing compared to ancestor pressure!”¹¹

That little boy recognized that he had a name to live up to. He understood that he not only has a really big fan club of people who are concerned about him but also has a lot of people who are depending on him. That “ancestor pressure” can be a positive influence in our lives.

You each have your own personal fan club, even if you don’t realize it. Perhaps someone like a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or a friend cheers for you when you do great things and sorrows with you when you are discouraged. In addition, somewhere beyond the veil, many people are cheering for you and depending on you because you belong to them and they want you to succeed.

Our Responsibility to Help Our Ancestors Receive Salvation

In addition to living up to our heritage, what else should we do to handle that “ancestor pressure”? Think of all those people who have gone before us and are now watching over us and depending on us to help them. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead.”¹² Why would he say that? I believe it is because of the eternal nature of families and the importance of the plan of happiness. Heavenly Father invites all of His children to return to live with Him someday.

There are some requirements for entering into the celestial kingdom, however. Jesus taught, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). According to this statement, all men and women who have ever lived on the earth or who will live on the earth must be baptized by proper authority if they are to enter into the celestial kingdom.

Many Christians throughout the world have wondered what happens to the billions of people who have died without the knowledge of Christ. The Lord revealed the answer to the Prophet Joseph Smith, as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 137. The Prophet had a vision of the celestial kingdom in which he saw the Father and the Son, along with prophets such as Adam and Abraham. In addition, he saw his brother Alvin, who had died before the Church was organized and consequently had not been baptized. Joseph said he “marveled how it was that [Alvin] had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom” (D&C 137:6). Verse 7 records: “Thus came the voice of the Lord unto me, saying: All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom” (D&C 137:7). What a comforting promise! It means that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are both just and merciful. A way has been provided for all of our spirit brothers and sisters to have the opportunity to hear the gospel and be baptized so they can return to our Father in Heaven.

However, baptism and other gospel ordinances are earthly experiences. The third article of faith states: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” Through the great gift of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity to repent and gain forgiveness of our sins, ultimately receiving an inheritance in the celestial kingdom if we are worthy. People who did not hear or accept the gospel in mortality but who receive it in the spirit world can obey

the laws and ordinances of the gospel because of the work done in the temples on their behalf (see D&C 138:32–35). You can each perform these saving ordinances in the temple for your progenitors. Soon, a new temple will be dedicated right here in Rexburg, which will give you more opportunity to fulfill your responsibilities to your ancestors.

The foundation of the work for the redemption of the dead was laid in 1823 when Moroni came to Joseph Smith and restated Malachi's prophecy that Elijah would come to turn "the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Significantly, Joseph Smith learned of this prophecy prior to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the Church. Temple and family history work must be very important to the Lord. This prophecy was fulfilled on April 3, 1836, in the Kirtland Temple. On that day, the priesthood keys of the sealing power were given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery under the hand of Elijah. The hearts of the children began to turn toward their fathers at that time, as people throughout the world became interested in their heritage.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has provided many resources to help us fulfill our obligation to our ancestors. The Family History Library in Salt Lake City and the more than four thousand Family History Centers throughout the world are available for anyone who desires to search for their ancestors. The Internet site www.familysearch.org is a great place to begin your family history research. There is so much we can do to learn more about our ancestors, and the opportunities become greater as technological advances make family history research easier and easier.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Presidency of the Seventy reminded us that the time and the resources the Church puts behind the commitment to redeem the dead are "an expression of our witness concerning Jesus Christ. It constitutes as powerful a statement as we can make concerning His divine character and mission."¹³ The Church would not expend the resources and energy it does to build temples and provide family history data to the world if we did not believe that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" and has invited all people to come unto the Father through Him (see John 14:6).

Our ancestors need our help to receive the blessings of the Atonement through the proxy temple ordinances we can perform for them. The work we do in the temple also blesses our own lives. We can go forth from the house of the Lord "armed with [His] power" (D&C 109:22). What great blessings are in store for us when we participate in this work of redeeming the dead! I am grateful that our Heavenly

Father would allow us to take part in saving His children who did not have the opportunity to receive the gospel in mortality.

Joseph Smith taught that “they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect” (D&C 128:15). Salvation is a family affair. If we want to be united eternally with our family, we need to help our brothers and sisters who have gone before us to be sealed as eternal families as well. We can pray that the Spirit of Elijah will enter into our hearts and assist us with our obligation of redeeming our ancestors.

Conclusion

In summary, we need to remember that our family heritage, both earthly and celestial, has enabled us to be who we are today. We can learn who we really are by finding ourselves in our ancestors. In this process, we will feel gratitude, admiration, and love for them. We will recognize how their lives are intertwined with ours, and one day, when we meet them beyond the veil, we will know them. I offer you a challenge to prepare for the dedication of the Rexburg Idaho Temple by searching for your own family names to take to the temple when it opens. Attending the temple will have a great deal of meaning for you if you can perform ordinances for individuals whom you have researched. Just think “how great shall be your joy” if you bring souls unto Christ through your family history research and temple work (see D&C 18:15–16).

My testimony is that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have provided a plan of happiness through which we and our families can progress to become like Them. Performing temple ordinances allows our ancestors to have access to these eternal blessings. I testify that you will gain a greater love for your family and for the Savior and our Heavenly Father as you participate in the redemption of the dead. You *will* learn who you really are. I know this to be true. **RE**

Notes

1. Naomi Ward Randall, “I Am a Child of God,” *Children’s Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 2.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Integrity of Heart,” *Ensign*, August 1995, 23.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To the Boys and to the Men,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 51.
4. Steven Dietz, *Handing Down the Names*, manuscript, 1994, 115.
5. Steven Dietz, April 25, 1995, Seattle, playbill for the premier production of *Handing Down the Names* at A Contemporary Theatre, Seattle, June 1995;

quoted in BYU College of Fine Arts and Communications, *Handing Down the Names* playbill, 2005, 19.

6. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 108.

7. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Global Church Blessed by the Voice of the Prophets,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 10.

8. Elaine S. Dalton, “We Did This for You,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 89.

9. George Albert Smith, *The Teachings of George Albert Smith*, ed. Robert and Susan McIntosh (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 131–33.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Keep the Chain Unbroken,” Brigham Young University devotional address, November 30, 1999, in *Speeches: Brigham Young University 1999–2000* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2000), 108.

11. Brian Crane, “Pickles,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 2001.

12. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 356.

13. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Redemption of the Dead and the Testimony of Jesus,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 10.