



Tom Lovell, *Moroni Burying the Plates* (with scripture overlay added). Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Moroni's promise has been called "probably the most celebrated and oft-cited verses in the Book of Mormon."

Scripture Note: A Fresh Approach to Moroni's Promise

ALAN TAYLOR FARNES

Alan Taylor Farnes (alan.taylor.farnes@gmail.com) is an adjunct professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

Moroni's promise is a well-known and much-loved passage of scripture to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It has been called "probably the most celebrated and oft-cited verses in the Book of Mormon."¹ Most missionaries know it by memory and often challenge their investigators to take "Moroni's challenge." Moroni tells his readers that when they read the Book of Mormon they should ponder on the Lord's mercy since the Creation and then ask God if the Book of Mormon is not true. Then comes Moroni's promise: "If ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:4–5).

These verses have been the means of bringing many to the Church. If we are not careful, however, these verses might also be the means of keeping many away from the Church due to a restrictive interpretation of how the Holy Ghost will speak to us. Here I will outline a possible alternative application to Moroni's promise that may help more people receive answers. By reading Moroni 10:3–5 with Moroni's following discussion concerning

spiritual gifts, verses 6–18, we broaden our understanding of how the Holy Ghost will answer our prayers concerning the Book of Mormon.

Moroni promises his readers that if they will ask God with real intent if the Book of Mormon is not true then God will “manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4). But what will this answer be like, and how will someone know if he or she receives this answer? In the Church, we usually turn to Doctrine and Covenants 8:2, which states, “I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart,” or Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9, which states, “But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.” These verses tell us that the Holy Ghost will speak to our minds and hearts and that we may experience a burning feeling in our bosom. But the revelations in Doctrine and Covenants 8–9 were intended specifically for Oliver Cowdery. Therefore, the Spirit *might* speak to you in the same way he spoke to Oliver Cowdery, or he might speak to you differently than he spoke to Oliver Cowdery. President Dallin H. Oaks commented on how the Holy Ghost feels when he said:

This may be one of the most important and misunderstood teachings in all the Doctrine and Covenants. The teachings of the Spirit often come as feelings. That fact is of the utmost importance, yet some misunderstand what it means. I have met persons who told me they have never had a witness from the Holy Ghost because they have never felt their bosom “burn within” them. What does a “burning in the bosom” mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, I have never had a burning in the bosom. Surely, the word “burning” in this scripture signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity. That is the witness many receive. That is the way revelation works. Truly, the still, small voice is just that, “still” and “small.”²²

President Oaks clarifies that the Spirit might speak to you differently than he spoke to Oliver Cowdery. In order to receive an answer from Moroni’s promise, we should reconsider how we receive revelation in general. Moroni, I believe, offers insight into additional ways to receive revelation.

Moroni 10 is Moroni’s last message in the Book of Mormon. He intended this chapter to be the last message he wrote on the gold plates before he buried them. He teaches many beautiful truths in this chapter, but in between

Moroni’s last verses in Moroni 10 about being perfected in Christ and the first couple of verses about how to determine whether this book is true, Moroni addresses another topic that is not discussed as often as other parts of this chapter. Immediately after Moroni’s promise in Moroni 10:3–5 is a discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in verses 6–18. When read in context as an entire chapter rather than isolating Moroni 10:3–5, we must grapple with the question, why does Moroni address gifts of the Spirit immediately after Moroni 10:3–5? What is the connection between these verses? Are verses 6–18 a *non sequitur* that abruptly changes the topic? I think not. More likely, the entire context of Moroni 10 should be read as one coherent whole, with verses 6–18 offering insight into how we might receive an answer to the challenge in Moroni 10:3–5.

Previous commentators have often been distracted by Moroni’s discussion of spiritual gifts and quickly focus on the chapter’s affinity with 1 Corinthians 12 without considering its larger context.³ Grant Hardy seems to dismiss Moroni 10:6–18 as being an intervention by Joseph Smith, saying, “The first thing many readers will notice is a discussion of gifts of the spirit that again follows an anachronistic New Testament text, this time based on Paul’s similar list in 1 Corinthians 12 (Moro. 10:8–17; 1 Cor. 12:4–11). The presence of this passage, however, is more easily attributed to translator intervention . . . because it is much less integrated into the surrounding argument.”⁴ I, however, propose that this discussion of spiritual gifts is essential—not tangential—to understanding the promise in Moroni 10:5.

I have been able to find only one commentator on this verse who reads the text as I do. Monte S. Nyman wrote: “Why did Moroni insert [the spiritual gifts] in the end of the book? In the writer’s opinion, this was done to teach that a testimony of the Book of Mormon may come through any of these gifts. Just as the power of God may be manifest in various ways, so may the gifts of the Spirit come, but they will come from the same God.”

Moroni 10:6 states that whatever thing is good is true and is of God. He repeats this logic again in verse 18 when he exhorts us to remember that every good gift comes from Christ. So if we receive a gift, and it is good, then we know it comes from Christ. Moroni is telling us that all good things come from God and are therefore true.

Moroni exhorts us in Moroni 10:7 to “deny not the power of God; for he worketh by power.” In the very next verse Moroni parallels his previous thought with “I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God,

for they are many; and they come from the same God.” By placing these two ideas in parallel—the power of God and the gifts of God—Moroni is equating these two ideas. He is showing that there is a link between them. And he says explicitly that all of this comes from the same God.

Moroni then discusses what we call spiritual gifts, saying that spiritual gifts are “given by the manifestations of the Spirit of God unto men, to profit them” (Moroni 10:8). He tells us that one spiritual gift is to teach the word of wisdom (Moroni 10:9) and that another is to teach the word of knowledge (Moroni 10:10). But in all these spiritual gifts Moroni is careful to clarify exactly who the spiritual gift comes from. In verse 9 he explains, “To one is given *by the Spirit of God*, that he may teach the word of wisdom,” and in verse 10 that one may teach the word of knowledge “*by the same Spirit*” (emphasis added). The rest of this section is similar, saying that everyone has different spiritual gifts, such as exceedingly great faith, healing, working mighty miracles, prophesying, beholding angels and ministering spirits, and the gift of tongues and interpreting tongues, but Moroni is careful to make sure his readers know that all of these spiritual gifts come from one source: “All these gifts come by the Spirit of Christ” (Moroni 10:17). Discussing the Corinthian church of 1 Corinthians 12, David M. Whitchurch has written that the Corinthian Saints “wrongfully assumed that spiritual gifts come from more than one source. Paul corrected such misunderstandings by repeatedly teaching that every gift, no matter how diverse, comes from the Holy Ghost.”⁵ Bruce K. Satterfield reminds us that “Moroni’s list is only a sample of the many gifts available.”⁶

So what is the logical connection between Moroni’s promise and what immediately follows? Here Moroni may be teaching that we may know the truth of all things by the power of the Holy Ghost and that the Holy Ghost may manifest the truth of it unto us in many different ways. According to this reading, Moroni tells us that if we see good things come as a result of our reading of this book that we should know that “whatsoever thing is good is just and true” (Moroni 10:6). He exhorts us that if we see good gifts come as a result of our reading of the book that we should “deny not the power of God” (Moroni 10:7). Moroni tells us to “deny not the gifts of God, for they are many; and they come from the same God” (Moroni 10:8). He adds, “And all these gifts come by the Spirit of Christ; and they come unto every man severally, according as he will” (Moroni 10:17). Moroni may be telling us that if we see spiritual gifts flow into our lives as a result of our reading of the Book

of Mormon, such as an increased ability to teach the gospel, to heal, to work miracles, to prophesy, or to speak in or interpret tongues, then the manifestation of these spiritual gifts are *in themselves* an answer to our prayer of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and we should not deny the power of God or the gifts of God. The Holy Ghost will choose one or more of many ways to answer our fervent prayers, and one of those ways might be by giving a spiritual gift. We must then recognize that these spiritual gifts come from the Holy Ghost as an answer to our prayers.

A better understanding of the word “manifest” can also clarify Moroni’s meaning in verse 4. Moroni writes that God will “manifest the truth of [the Book of Mormon] unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” The 1828 Webster’s dictionary, the common dictionary of Joseph Smith’s day, defines the verb “manifest” as “to reveal; to make to appear; to show plainly; to make public; to disclose to the eye or to the understanding” and the adjective as “plain; open; clearly visible to the eye or obvious to the understanding; apparent; not obscure or difficult to be seen or understood.” This word has much more to do with *showing* rather than telling. Additionally, “manifest” implies that such showing will be obvious and not able to be misunderstood. Understanding “manifest” to mean showing clearly rather than telling aligns with this suggested alternative reading to Moroni 10:3–5: God, through the Holy Ghost, will clearly show us through spiritual gifts whether the Book of Mormon is true. Moroni also uses a form of this word a few verses later, writing that the gifts of the Spirit “are given by the manifestations of the Spirit of God unto men” (Moroni 10:8). First, Moroni tells us that God will *manifest* truth through the Holy Ghost. Then Moroni says that gifts of the Spirit are given by the *manifestation* of the Spirit of God. By using this word repeatedly, Moroni is declaring that the manifestations sought in Moroni’s promise will come through the gifts of the Spirit.

We cannot—we must not—dictate to a member of the Godhead exactly how to answer our prayer. He will choose however he may to answer our prayer. It is our job to recognize how he answers us. If we pigeonhole the Holy Ghost’s available options for answering our prayer into one tiny possibility, then we may miss when he is actually answering our prayer. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught that “these gifts are infinite in number and endless in their manifestations because God himself is infinite and endless, and because *the needs of those who receive them are as numerous, varied, and different as there are people in the kingdom.*”⁷

This broader interpretation of these verses is especially important to those desperately and honestly seeking an answer to their fervent prayer concerning whether the Book of Mormon is the word of God. If we or the missionaries tell our children or investigators that the Holy Ghost will answer them in one specific way and they do not receive an answer in that one specific way, then what will happen? They might either conclude that the Church must not be true since they did not receive an answer or that perhaps there is something wrong with them since everyone else seems to have received an answer. The Prophet Joseph Smith specifically addressed this problem, saying:

Various and conflicting are the opinions of men in regard to the gift of the Holy Ghost. Some people have been in the habit of calling every supernatural manifestation, the effects of the spirit of God, whilst there are others that think their is no manifestation connected with it at all; and that it is nothing but a mere impulse of the mind, or an inward feeling, impression, or secret testimony or evidence which men possess, and that there is no such thing as an outward manifestation. . . . Hence it not unfrequently [*sic*] occurs, that when the elders of this church preach to the inhabitants of the world, that if they obey the gospel they shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, that the people expect to see some wonderful manifestation; some great display of power, or some extraordinary miracle performed; and it is often the case that young members in this church, for want of better information, carry along with them their old notions of things and sometimes fall into egregious [*sic*] errors. We have lately had some information concerning a few members that are in this dilemma [*sic*], and for their information make a few remarks upon the subject.⁸

The Prophet Joseph Smith says that some believe that any outward manifestation is not a sign of the Holy Ghost but only impulses of the mind or inward feelings. He says that this misunderstanding has hampered missionaries (“the elders”) in their efforts. He then states that the whole point of this entire editorial in *Times and Seasons* is to speak to this problem. And, as the title of the editorial betrays, the whole of the editorial concerns the gifts of the Spirit. The very next words of the editorial continue:

We believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost being enjoyed now, as much as it was in the apostles days;—we believe that it is necessary to make and to organize the priesthood; that no man can be called to fill any office in the ministry without it; we also believe in prophecy, in tongues, in visions, and in revelation, in gifts and in healings; and that these things cannot be enjoyed without the gift of the Holy Ghost; . . . we believe in its being a comforter and a witness bearer, “that it brings things past to our remembrance, leads us into all truth, and shews [*sic*] us of things to come:” we believe that “no man can know that Jesus is the Christ; but by the Holy Ghost.” We believe in it in all its fullness, and power, and greatness, and glory: but whilst we do this we believe in it rationally, reasonably, consistently, and scripturally, and not according to the wild vagaries, foolish, notions and traditions of men.⁹

Joseph Smith then explains the various manifestations of the Spirit, including the gifts of the Spirit. In fact, Joseph mentions the gifts of the Spirit *before* he mentions that the Holy Ghost is a comforter and witness bearer. Joseph’s editorial balances the idea that the witness of the Holy Ghost is *only* an inward feeling with the fact that it is indeed sometimes outwardly manifest. He explains that spiritual gifts are the outward manifestations of the Spirit and comments, based on Paul’s writings in 1 Corinthians 13, that those Paul was writing to in 1 Corinthians must not have been enjoying the “outward manifestations”¹⁰ of the Spirit. It seems, to Joseph, that the gifts of the Spirit were the primary means of receiving an answer about the truthfulness of the Church and that an emotional impression was a subset of the gifts of the Spirit. Joseph’s primary interpretation seems to be that an answer to Moroni 10:5 would come through the gifts of the Spirit. Such a manifestation does indeed include inward feelings but inward feelings are only one of many ways the Spirit may be made manifest. An answer received through an inward feeling and an outward manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit are both gifts of the Spirit. Since one of the gifts of the Spirit is revelation, revelation is one subset of the spiritual gifts.¹¹ It is incorrect to bifurcate inward feelings and outward manifestations—they are both gifts of the Spirit and, as Moroni and others have taught—they “come from the same God” (Moroni 10:8).

In harmony with Joseph’s explanation, Moroni seems to be teaching that the Holy Ghost is free to answer us in many ways. By teaching investigators and our children to recognize how the Spirit may speak to them, it will prime them to be more perceptive to the Spirit and to recognize the Spirit each day in their lives. If they do not receive an intense burning in their bosom, they will not feel as if there is something wrong with them because they will find other ways that the Spirit talks to them, such as any of the previously listed spiritual gifts. We must not dictate to the Holy Ghost how he must answer us, and we must not tell those seeking answers that he will only answer them in one way. Moroni teaches us that whatsoever thing is good is just and true and that when we see increased spiritual gifts in our lives we must not deny the power of God. As we heed Moroni’s exhortations, we will expand our circle of fellowship to those who may receive the Spirit in other ways. We will be more inviting and welcoming and ultimately more able to bring more souls to Christ. **RE**

Notes

1. Ed J. Pinegar and Richard J. Allen, *Commentaries and Insights on the Book of Mormon: Alma 30–Moroni* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2008), 611.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997, 13. Elder Jay E. Jensen also wrote about “the different ways in which the Spirit of the Lord works.” Jay E. Jensen, “Have I Received an Answer from the Spirit?,” *Ensign*, April 1989, 21–22.
3. See, for example, Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 413–16. Gardner states that “Moroni’s purpose in cataloging the gifts of the Spirit is to emphasize the Book of Mormon and the ability to know, as a spiritual gift, that it is true” (416). See also Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 4:367: “We see that it is in the context of encouraging his future readers to read, ponder, and pray about the Book of Mormon, with faith in the gifts and wonders of the Holy Messiah, that Moroni launches into a lengthy discussion of the gifts of the Spirit. It is surely his way of illustrating that the power and gifts of God are real, that they should be sought after and acquired, and that the Saints of God in any age are living beneath their privileges if these gifts are not conspicuously evident in their midst. That the topic is of rich importance to the Lord is seen in the fact that it is found in three places in the standard works—the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12–14), the Doctrine and Covenants (section 46), and here in the Book of Mormon.” See also George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 4:361–62; D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon*, vol. 2: *Alma 30 through Moroni 10* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 312; and Pinegar and Allen, *Commentaries and Insights*, 611.
4. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 261. Hardy’s praiseworthy book views the text from a different angle than I do. I would rather start with the premise that the text originates with the author rather than translator intervention. Only after we have exhausted reasonable possibilities to explain that the text originated with the author should we move to attributing it to translator intervention. I see no plausible reason why, if we accept the gift of prophecy, Moroni could not have received the same information as did Paul concerning spiritual gifts. Similarly, while these verses do indeed appear to not be very well “integrated into the surrounding argument” (261), I would prefer first to ask why the author placed them there rather than attributing the verses to translator intervention and use the broader context of the chapter to illuminate Moroni’s inclusion of this material.
5. David M. Whitchurch, “The Unifying Power of Spiritual Gifts,” in *Shedding Light on the New Testament: Acts–Revelation*, ed. Ray L. Huntington, Frank F. Judd Jr., and David M. Whitchurch (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 105.
6. Bruce K. Satterfield, “Moroni 9–10: Remember How Merciful the Lord Hath Been,” in *Fourth Nephi, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman, and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995), 281.
7. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 270, emphasis added. Elder Marvin J. Ashton listed a few more possible gifts of the Spirit such as “the gift of asking; the gift of listening; the gift of hearing and using a still, small voice; the gift of being able to weep; the gift of avoiding contention; the gift of being agreeable; the gift of avoiding vain repetition; the gift of seeking that which is righteous; the

gift of not passing judgment; the gift of looking to God for guidance; the gift of being a disciple; the gift of caring for others; the gift of being able to ponder; the gift of offering prayer; the gift of bearing a mighty testimony; and the gift of receiving the Holy Ghost.” Marvin J. Ashton, “There are Many Gifts,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 23.

8. Joseph Smith, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 June 1842, 823.
9. Smith, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” 823.
10. Smith, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” 824.
11. See Doctrine and Covenants 46:13. See also Joseph Smith’s editorial on spiritual gifts, where he lists gifts of the Spirit: “We also believe in prophecy, in tongues, in visions, and in revelation, in gifts and healings.” Smith, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” 823.