

# From the Pulpit

## “FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED”

*Lowell Bennion*

*In this Winter issue we present a special Christmas sermon prepared by Lowell Bennion, who has shared his understanding and appreciation of Jesus Christ and His Atonement with thousands of young men and women through his teaching and his writing for the Church; he is presently Associate Dean of Students at the University of Utah and a member of the L. D. S. Church Coordinating Committee.*

Years ago, when I was a Mormon missionary, I became anxious when a Protestant minister quoted these words of Paul: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). And I quickly countered with a familiar text from James, the book which Luther called an epistle of straw: “Faith without works is dead.”

For a number of years I continued to teach as the Latter-day Saint way of salvation, individual merit and works in contrast to the emphasis on grace in Protestantism and sacramentalism in Catholicism, both of which rely upon the grace of Deity almost entirely. With co-religionists I prided myself on a faith which stressed individual agency and responsibility, struggle and conquest, works and achievement. The only act of grace usually emphasized in the Mormon church (in my experience) was the crucifixion of Christ, through which man would partake of the resurrection and receive forgiveness. But even here, grace was qualified because one’s status in the resurrection had to be merited and forgiveness *fully* earned, I thought, through repentance.

The years have brought a change of heart. I am as committed as ever to man's responsibility for his own welfare and salvation and that of his fellowmen as viewed in the Restored Gospel. Man is not helpless nor depraved nor wholly at the mercy of an omnipotent Deity. The finest goals of life and eternal life will not and cannot be attained without maximum human effort. I am not retreating on any of the basic Mormon doctrines of man and their implications for life: man's eternal intelligence of which free agency is a part, man's inherent capacity for good and evil action — for eternal progression or regression. But what I am coming to see, as never before, is how much *grace* there is in the Restored Gospel.

And, on this eve before Christmas, it is my desire to bring to your attention some of the grace of Christ which is implied in that beautiful declaration of John:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16, 17)

In the Mormon view of eternal life, grace precedes, accompanies, and completes individual effort and merit. And by grace we mean the unmerited gifts of Deity to man given freely out of Divine love.

According to Mormon doctrine, life as we know it is the creative work of God. In our pre-earth or pre-existent state, He took the eternal, uncreated, self-existent intelligence of man and gave it a spiritual birth, through which man in a very real sense became a child of God (a divinity in embryo) partaking of His spiritual nature, hungering and thirsting to realize the attributes received of his Maker. This pre-earth, spiritual creation — belief in which is unique (in Christian circles) to Latter-day Saints — is, as far as we know, the *gift* of God, born of His love and His desire to share with others His own spiritual life.

Our faith is that *mortal life* also comes by the grace of the Father and the Son. We Latter-day Saints have been taught that we were permitted to come to earth as a reward for keeping our first estate, and by implication we have sometimes felt that we earned mortality. There is some truth here, but too often that truth is shallow and distorted. It is more accurate to say that we were, at best, prepared to profit from an experience in mortality. How does one *earn* the precious gift of life? As surely as there is a Creator in the universe, creation is an act of grace. Who knows what suffering, what effort, powers of mind, what love went into the creation of man? How could man obligate His maker to acts of creation?

I sense a lack of gratitude for life among countless human beings in our culture. Saddened by war and catastrophe, crime and delinquency, old age and cancer, and restless in our quest for material goods and entertainment, all too seldom do we look inside ourselves to discover what wondrous things God has made: eyes with which to see, ears to hear, hands to touch, hearts to feel, an imagination with which to create and reshape life (in some measure) to our taste.

I am not with this emphasis overlooking the stark tragedy of life. With many men in our century, I am saddened by the whole reality of human life, but I can also rejoice in man's capacity to bear suffering, to share its burden, and in some measure to alleviate pain. In the beauty and wonder of nature and in the presence of fellow men and all that they are and have created, I feel to thank my Savior for the gift of life and I acknowledge it as His grace.

I had a brother who always thanked the Lord for the gifts and blessings of the Gospel. The full impact of that statement is just beginning to dawn on me. In good Mormon tradition, I had been taught that each gift of the Gospel had to be earned: the Holy Ghost through faith, repentance, and baptism; the priesthood by a worthy life and a willingness to serve; an answer to prayer by faith and worthiness; and revelation by diligent search, honest inquiry, and faith. This emphasis on my "rights" through good works had blurred my vision of God's grace that comes through the gifts of the Gospel.

Now I realize that what we do by our own effort is to *prepare ourselves* to receive the gifts of Deity. Christ is under no obligation to send the Comforter. This Divine influence is given freely to those who will be sufficiently humble and penitent to be capable of accepting it. And why should God delegate His priesthood — the very power of God to man? How does man *earn* the right to divine power? Surely one cannot speak of divine obligation here.

For years I have taught that revelation usually, if not always, comes to the mind of the prophet and through him to mankind when man is aware of his need, when he thinks, struggles, searches, and somehow turns to God for help. This I still believe. Revelation is a teaching process, and an unwilling, or deaf and blind student cannot be taught. But what I have neither taught nor heard sufficiently is that God's response to man — His revelation of Himself, His Spirit, His mind and will — is not really earned but is born of love, of grace. Why else should He be concerned with man, to hear his plea, to touch his heart, to illuminate his mind?

Gospel teaching itself, through the Spirit of Christ and particularly that by the Master Himself, is a manifestation of divine grace. When a man is paid for his teaching and goes about it in routine

fashion it may be called void of grace. But Christ taught voluntarily, and with artistry and extraordinary intellectual, ethical, and spiritual insights; surely His teaching is one of His greatest gifts to man. I am grateful to have been born after Him. How less rich life would be without His words.

There was a day when the resurrection was mainly a doctrine to me. But as the years pass and my days become numbered I can no longer relegate the subject to theological discussion. I love life and would gladly continue living beyond the grave. Without the Christ, I must confess I would probably be agnostic about personal immortality. Through Him I entertain a hope and a joyful strong trust in the reality of the resurrection. He is in very deed my present Savior from death. How mortal man can earn immortal life as a resurrected, tangible, spiritual being I know not. I accept it on faith as the greatest gift of God to man, and it comes through His Son.

No longer do I believe that a person must earn forgiveness. If he had to then only justice and reciprocity would prevail in relationships between man and man and man and God. But "give" is the main root of the word forgiveness. And there is grace operating whenever anyone is forgiven.

Man is asked to repent to receive forgiveness, I believe, not because the Lord is not forgiving whether we repent or not, but because He knows that man cannot accept forgiveness and renew his life without himself taking some steps to change it.

And Christ is not only forgiving but He is a source of strength to those who would change their lives so they can be forgiven, not least of all by themselves. I met a man years ago in another land, who was in great turmoil because of his shallow and evil life (as he described and judged it). He had tried for years to create a new mind within him — but in vain. I asked him to render a particular service to the Christ each Sunday morning. It was a simple and rather ordinary task in the eyes of most. He was to set the Lord's table with a cloth and trays of bread and water. Mark you, he was not privileged to offer prayers, just to set the Lord's table.

One Sunday morning I met him in the aisle of the church alone before service. He was going about his work. I extended my hand in brotherhood, as is customary in the Church, but he refused and put his hand to his back.

"Have I offended you, brother?" I asked.

"Oh no," he replied, "I have just washed my hands with soap and hot water so they would be clean enough to set the Lord's table; I cannot shake hands with you or with any man until my work is done."

He came to me one evening after church and said, "I'm a new man. I have found my integrity again." Service to Christ, thinking about Him, giving to Him and "to the least of His brethren" in a very simple way led to better things and to a change of mind to repentance and forgiveness.

I suppose the greatest gift we have received from the Christ is the gift of Himself. He lived among men. He revealed to us in word and deed the meaning of humility, meekness, mercy, love, and of moral courage. In our doctrine, God sent his Only Begotten Son into the world because that son had already offered to come — to live and die for men, to give life "and to give it more abundantly" in those dimensions of life most worthy of man.

Christmas is a time of giving in honor of the Christ-child. One of the most obvious evidences of grace in His Gospel is that He asked nothing for Himself:

Peter, lovest thou me?  
Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.  
Feed my sheep. (John 21:16)

What gift can we bring to him this Christmas season? What need does He have of us? He asks just one thing:

Feed my sheep.

He is asking us also to believe in grace, to learn in our dealing with fellowmen to rid ourselves of prejudice, intolerance, covetousness, and hate, and even to rise above justice and to live life on the plane of grace.

In our homes, neighborhoods, communities, the nation and among nations, men need to learn to treat each other with profound respect and with mercy and this without regard to merit or reward. This, I believe, is the Spirit of Christ and the meaning of Christmas.