



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>

The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets

Author(s): Noel B. Reynolds

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1991), pp. 31-50.

Published by: BYU Studies

Abstract: While all the elements of the gospel as it is defined in the Book of Mormon occur in the New Testament, the formulaic relationship the Book of Mormon ascribes to them is not so obvious. Yet, once the Book of Mormon definition is understood, there is little difficulty accommodating New Testament usages to it.



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets

Noel B. Reynolds

The Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint scriptures define the term *gospel* precisely as the way or means by which an individual can come to Christ. In these scriptures the gospel or doctrine of Christ is the teaching that if people will (1) believe in Christ, (2) repent of their sins, and (3) submit to baptism in water as a witness of their willingness to take his name upon them and keep his commandments, he will (4) pour out his Spirit upon them and cleanse them of their sins. All who receive this baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost and (5) endure to the end in faith, hope, and charity will (6) be found guiltless at the last day and enter into the kingdom of God (Alma 7:14–16, 24–25).

The Book of Mormon uses the terms *gospel* and *doctrine* interchangeably in a way that is consistent with New Testament usage. The New Testament term *doctrine* is a translation of the Greek word *didaskalia*, which means “teaching.” It can be used with positive or negative implications, referring either to the doctrines of Christ or to the vain teachings of people or devils. The Book of Mormon uses both *gospel* and *doctrine* to refer to a message or teaching that can be reduced to a set of statements or “points of . . . doctrine” (1 Ne. 15:14), as does the New Testament. While all the elements of the gospel as it is defined in the Book of Mormon occur in the New Testament, the formulaic relationship the Book of Mormon ascribes to them is not so obvious. Yet, once the Book of Mormon definition is understood, there is little difficulty accommodating New Testament usages to it.

BASIC ELEMENTS

The Lord has repeatedly stated that the Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the gospel” (D&C 20:9; 27:5; 42:12). On three separate occasions reported in the Book of Mormon, the basic

Noel B. Reynolds is a professor of political science at Brigham Young University. He is “indebted to L. Tad Cowley for assistance in compiling the information in the appendix.”

elements of the gospel are explained by either a prophet or Jesus himself. In each case six central elements are repeated several times in language that is varied to enrich their meaning (2 Ne. 31:2–32:6; 3 Ne. 11:31–41; 27:13–21). Each of these long passages is framed by affirmations that “this is my gospel” or “this is my doctrine.”

These core texts present the gospel message as a six-point formula, which Joseph Smith abbreviated as the “first principle and ordinances of the Gospel” (*History of the Church* 4:541). The function of this formula is primarily explanatory and pedagogical, as it does not tell converts to Christ “all things what [they] should do” (2 Ne. 32:5). Rather, this is the function of the Holy Ghost, whose guidance the follower of Christ must constantly seek (2 Ne. 32:1–5). The formula merely spells out the larger relationship of Christians to their God and provides them the verbal essentials for communicating with one another about that relationship. The formulaic character of this list of points is suggested directly in the record of Aaron’s teachings to the Lamanite king, where it simply says that “the sufferings and death of Christ atone for [people’s] sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth” (Alma 22:14).

1. *Repentance.* As presented in the Book of Mormon, the formula usually begins with the call to repentance. People must forsake their sins and offer up “a sacrifice . . . [of] a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Ne. 9:20).
2. *Baptism.* Book of Mormon accounts of the gospel emphasize the importance of baptism. This essential ordinance constitutes a public witness to the Father that the repentant individuals, following the example of Adam and Abraham, have covenanted with God to take upon themselves the name of Christ and to keep his commandments.
3. *Holy Ghost.* While baptism ritually symbolizes purification and rising from death to life, the actual cleansing or remission of sins comes as a gift from God through the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost (2 Ne. 31:17). Upon reception of the Holy Ghost, the individual is “born again” or “born of God,” having become a new creature (Mosiah 27:24–26). This spiritual experience constitutes a witness to the convert from the Father and the Son that the sacrifice of the penitent has been accepted.
4. *Faith.* Although contemporary Latter-day Saint teaching emphasizes faith in Jesus Christ as the first principle of the gospel, Book of Mormon prophets often introduce it as the link between what one does to begin the process of salvation and what one must do thereafter. Faith in Christ means doing what the Holy Ghost tells one to do, showing thereby “a steadfastness in Christ,” and, in this manner, enduring to the end (2 Ne. 31:20).
5. *Endurance to the End.* “Enduring to the end” is the scriptural phrase describing the subsequent life of a member of Christ’s church who has embraced the first four elements of the gospel formula and has entered the gate that leads to eternal life. Once on this strait and narrow path, the new member must press forward in faith. Thus, faith is necessary both

to begin the process and to continue in a life of obedience to all the commandments of God. At this level, faith is also linked with hope and charity.

6. *Eternal Life*. In addition to the daily blessings that come from following the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, the gospel of Jesus Christ promises that those who comply with the preceding five points will be saved, which means that they will receive *eternal life* by entering into the kingdom of God. As revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith, this salvation entails becoming heirs to the celestial kingdom (D&C 76:50–70).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not synonymous with the plan of salvation (or plan of redemption), but is a key part thereof. Brigham Young stated that the “Gospel of the Son of God that has been revealed is a plan or system of laws and ordinances, by strict obedience to which the people who inhabit this earth are assured that they may return again into the presence of the Father and the Son.”¹ While the plan of salvation is what God and Christ have done for mortals in the creation, the fall, the atonement, the final judgment, and the salvation of the world, the gospel contains the instructions—the laws and ordinances—that enable human beings to make the atonement effective in their lives and thereby gain salvation.² The plan of salvation, therefore, forms the larger context for all scriptural references to the gospel of Jesus Christ (3 Ne. 27:13–15; Moses 6:62; D&C 20:17–25; 76:40–53). The gospel message makes no sense apart from an understanding of the historical reality of the fall, the atonement of Christ, and a final judgment for each person.

THE GOSPEL IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Jacob, one of the first Nephite prophets, used the phrases “doctrine of Christ” and “gospel of Christ” interchangeably. In speaking to Jacob, Sherem, who denied anyone could know that Christ would come, said that Jacob went about “preaching that which [he called] the gospel, or the doctrine of Christ” (Jacob 7:6). Nephi seems to have also interchanged the two terms. Shortly after leaving Jerusalem, he had prophesied to his brothers that “the fulness of the gospel of the Messiah” would come to the Gentiles (1 Ne. 15:13). Speaking to his brothers further of a future restoration to their seed, Nephi said that their descendants would come to “the knowledge of *the gospel of their Redeemer*” (1 Ne. 15:14, italics added; compare 2 Ne. 30:5). This statement implies not only that they would come to know their Redeemer, but also that they would have knowledge of “the very *points of his doctrine*.” And it would be by knowing these points of doctrine that they would “know how

to come unto him and be saved” (1 Ne. 15:14, italics added). The gospel contains points of doctrine that teach people how to come unto Christ. It will be demonstrated below that the two Book of Mormon chapters that define the “doctrine of Christ” and the one chapter that defines “the gospel of Christ” all say essentially the same things.

THE GOSPEL AS TAUGHT BY NEPHI

The first comprehensive statement of the gospel or doctrine of Christ in the Book of Mormon occurs in 2 Nephi 31. These twenty-one verses are framed by bookend statements, the first of which says that Nephi will present a few words “concerning the doctrine of Christ” and that he will write “plainly, according to the plainness” of the preceding prophetic summary (2 Ne. 31:2). (In the previous chapter, Nephi had spoken of this same teaching as “the gospel of Jesus Christ” [2 Ne. 30:5].) In chapter 31 Nephi again emphasizes the simplicity of his account, indicating that he will put the matter as plainly as possible, according to human language and understanding (2 Ne. 31:2–3; compare 32:4). The nineteen-verse explication that follows concludes with the reaffirmation that “this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:21). This is a chapter of major importance for the rest of the Book of Mormon, as it establishes a pattern for all later Nephite prophets. It also formulates a complex of ideas that informs every major sermon and gives rich meaning to stories related later in the text. Nephi signalled its importance by prominent placement of this passage at the end of his writings, even though its content is an elaboration of materials presented in undeveloped form much earlier. The importance of Nephi’s formulation was resoundingly emphasized by the Savior himself during his visit to the Nephites five and a half centuries later.

Chapter 31 of 2 Nephi appears to be an amplification of the visions of Lehi and Nephi reported in 1 Nephi 10 and 11, in which each had seen the necessity and mission of the Redeemer. Lehi explained that a redeemer was necessary because “all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state” (1 Ne. 10:6; see also 1:19). Nephi saw that Jesus was “the Redeemer of the world” (1 Ne. 11:27). Just as Nephi derives from this vision his account of “the doctrine of Christ,” so Lehi uses the vision of Jesus’ baptism as the introduction to his presentation to his sons “concerning the gospel” that Christ preached among the Jews (1 Ne. 10:11). Although Nephi gives only minimal details of Jesus’ baptism in the account summarized in 1 Nephi, there are enough similar details in 2 Nephi 31 that one

can assume this chapter gives a fuller account of what Lehi and Nephi saw in their first camp in the wilderness. For example, Nephi's first account of Jesus' baptism is followed by a description of the heavens opening and the Holy Ghost descending in the form of a dove (1 Ne.11:27). The descension of the Holy Ghost is also repeated in the extended second account (2 Ne. 31:8). Nephi even calls on his readers to remember the earlier account as the context for the additional details he will now report (2 Ne. 31:4). He adds to the second report that Jesus then "said unto the children of men: Follow thou me" (2 Ne. 31:10, 12). The major elaboration in the second account is a set of quotations that Nephi attributes to the voices of the Father and the Son, presumably as narrators explaining the vision to him at the time it was first received. He concludes the chapter with a complex summary that weaves together all the points that have been introduced in the descriptive and narrative sections.

Given the extraordinary significance of Nephi's presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is of some interest to know what sources he might have been using. From the text we learn of no definite source beyond the revelation reported in 1 Nephi 11, in which Nephi saw the baptism of Christ in vision and heard the voice of the Son saying to "the children of men: Follow thou me" (2 Ne. 31:10) and "follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do" (2 Ne. 31:12). Nephi clearly interprets this message to mean that people should follow the example of Jesus Christ. Nephi's analysis of that example provides him with the formula he uses to teach the doctrine of Christ to his own people and to readers of the Book of Mormon.

The Structure of 2 Nephi 31

The six major points of doctrine, noted above, emerge clearly in this nineteen-verse presentation. Nephi develops these points of doctrine through a complex presentation that advances five versions of his central message, each of which contains some instructive variation:

Variation 1. The example of Christ is given as a first explanation of the gospel (2 Ne. 31:4–10). By humbling himself before the Father, being baptized by water, witnessing unto the Father that he would be obedient in keeping his commandments, and receiving the Holy Ghost, Christ showed the "straitness of the path, and narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter" (2 Ne. 31:9).

Variation 2. The voices of both the Father and the Son are heard identifying the aspects of Christ's example that are expected

of all individuals—repentance and baptism in order to receive the Holy Ghost (2 Ne. 31:11–12).

Variation 3. Nephi offers his personal testimony to his brothers (2 Ne. 31:13). If they will follow the Son sincerely, repenting of their sins and witnessing to the Father by baptism that they are willing to take upon them the name of Christ, then they will receive the Holy Ghost and “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.”

Variation 4. The voices of the Father and Son are invoked again to repeat and explain the central elements of the formula (2 Ne. 31:14–15). The voice of the Son repeats each of these points and warns that those who follow this formula but then deny him will be in a worse condition than before. The voice of the Father endorses the words of the Son as “true and faithful” and adds the promise that those who endure to the end will be saved.

Variation 5. Nephi gives a final summary: people cannot be saved unless they endure to the end. Repentance and baptism by immersion are the gate by which they must enter the kingdom of God. These steps will be followed by a remission of sins by fire and the Holy Ghost. But individuals must remember that all steps in this process are possible only through faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, Nephi writes that enduring to the end implies pressing forward with steadfastness (faith) in Christ, which is to be complemented by “a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men” (2 Ne. 31:16–20).

The Content of Nephi’s Message

Nephi’s five-fold presentation reinforces through repetition, variation, and augmentation. The result is the following enriched account of the six basic points of the doctrine of Christ sketched above.

Repentance. Repentance is always the starting point, part of the gate by which one should enter the strait and narrow path (2 Ne. 31:17). In being the example, Christ did not need to start with repentance because, as Nephi states three times, Jesus was holy. Yet, even being holy, Jesus humbled himself before the Father (2 Ne. 31:5, 7). This example identifies humility and total sincerity as the key to repentance. People must follow the Son “with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of [their] sins” (2 Ne. 31:13).

Baptism. Baptism is the other part of the gate. It is by repenting and being baptized that one follows the Son through the gate and enters the strait and narrow path that leads to eternal life (2 Ne. 31:17). Baptism is an external witness to the Father of an internal commitment that individuals are “willing to take upon [themselves]

the name of Christ, by baptism” and that they are “willing to keep [Christ’s] commandments” (2 Ne. 31:13–14).

Holy Ghost. Christ promises that “the Father [will] give the Holy Ghost” to any repentant person who is baptized in Christ’s name (2 Ne. 31:12). Using an alternative description of this gift, Nephi explains to his brethren that, only after repentance and baptism “cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:13). This gift from the Father appears to have multiple functions.

The first function mentioned is the ability to communicate divine knowledge, the power to speak things not previously possible. In Nephi’s words, “then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel” (2 Ne. 31:13). After concluding his presentation of the doctrine of Christ, Nephi perceives that this matter has not been understood. In chapter 32 he provides further explanation, indicating that “angels speak by power of the Holy Ghost”; therefore, men need the Holy Ghost to speak with the tongue of angels (2 Ne. 32:2–3).

The language of fire in chapter 31 seems directed at a second function of the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, that of cleansing the recipient from sin. In the third use of this phrase, Nephi says that the remission of sins comes “by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:17).

The third function is that of giving a witness to the convert from the Father and Son. Just as baptism of water constitutes a witness of the convert to the Father, so the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost is a witness from the Father and the Son to the convert. It “witnesses of the Father and the Son,” thereby fulfilling the promise of the gospel that “if ye entered in by the way [repentance and baptism] ye should receive” (2 Ne. 31:18). Nephi further warns in connection with this spiritual baptism that, if after all this one denies Christ, it would be better not to have known him (2 Ne. 31:14).

Faith. Nephi treats faith in Jesus Christ as a fundamental principle which underlies all the others and links them together. This same sense was present in Joseph Smith’s original Wentworth Letter which used the singular “first *principle* and ordinances of the Gospel,” which is rendered *principles* in the Articles of Faith (A of F 4).

Nephi delays introducing faith until near the end of his presentation, for faith is the link between what one does to enter the gate and what one must do thereafter. One cannot have gotten into the gate “save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Ne. 31:19). And after getting onto this path, one cannot attain

salvation except by “press[ing] forward with a steadfastness in Christ” (2 Ne. 31:20).

Endurance to the End. The gift of the Holy Ghost in its revelatory function seems particularly designed to aid converts with the final requirement that they endure to the end (2 Ne. 31:15), for unless men and women endure to the end in following Christ’s example, they cannot be saved (2 Ne. 31:16). But, as Nephi explains later when he expounds on his presentation, for all those who have entered in by the way and received the Holy Ghost, “it will show unto [them] all things what [they] should do” (2 Ne. 32:5). Having reduced the message to its essentials, he emphasizes one last time that “this is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given until after he shall manifest himself unto you” (2 Ne. 32:6).

Enduring to the end implies pressing forward in faith, hope, and charity. This trio of concepts occurs repeatedly in Book of Mormon sermons in connection with this point of the doctrine of Christ (see Moro. 8:26; 10:20–21; Ether 12:32–34). The three are clearly indicated in Nephi’s closing summary where he instructs people to “endure to the end” and

- “press forward with a steadfastness [*faith*] in Christ,”
- “having a perfect brightness of *hope*,” and
- “*a love of God and of all men.*” (2 Ne. 31:20; italics added)

Eternal Life. The reward promised to those who endure to the end is that they “shall be saved” (2 Ne. 31:15). Nephi supplements the words of the Father by insisting that unless individuals follow Christ in repenting, being baptized, and enduring to the end, they cannot be saved (2 Ne. 31:16). Quoting the Father a second time on this point, Nephi says that all who do these things “shall have eternal life” (2 Ne. 31:20) or “be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Ne. 31:21). Their assurance that this salvation will indeed come to pass is the gift of the Holy Ghost which they receive and enjoy in the present. It is both a living witness that this future promise will be fulfilled and the means by which they can endure to the end and qualify for eternal life.

CHRIST AMONG THE NEPHITES

The report of the events of the coming of Christ among the Nephites is also constructed around multiple repetitions of this doctrine of Christ. Whereas Nephi asks men and women to follow Christ’s example, the Savior himself invites the people to “come unto me” (3 Ne. 12:20).

The Structure of Christ's Teachings

Interestingly, although the account of Christ's visit to the Nephites gives a more scattered and complex treatment of the doctrine of Christ, this record also presents the doctrine five times, each time with instructive variations and internal repetitions.

Variation 1. The first and clearest presentation is given by the voice of Christ as it speaks out of the heaven to all the land (3 Ne. 9:1–16). Four of the six points of the doctrine of Christ as outlined by Nephi are specifically advanced in this passage.

The voice of Christ emphasizes the blessings to those who will receive him, stating first that unto such he has “given to become the sons of God” (3 Ne. 9:17). This point is echoed in the closing injunction to all to repent, come unto him as a little child, and be saved (3 Ne. 9:22). To receive him or to come unto him is explained as believing on his name (faith) and offering for a sacrifice unto him “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (repentance). The immediate promise to those who do this is that he will baptize them “with fire and with the Holy Ghost.” The Lamanites received this baptism because of their faith (3 Ne. 9:20).

Variation 2. Baptism of water is the focus of the second and most complete declaration of his doctrine (3 Ne. 11:23–39). Detailed instructions on baptism are given explicitly to settle some earlier (and unreported) disputations (3 Ne. 11:28). All people are to believe in Christ and be baptized, if they will be saved (3 Ne. 11:33). Two repetitions of this point emphasize that men and women must repent, become as little children, and be baptized in his name. Several times Christ emphasizes that he is presenting his doctrine, which the Father has given him (3 Ne. 11:28, 30–32, 39).

Variation 3. Jesus then turns to the multitude and gives a briefer version of the same instructions as an introduction to the sermon at the temple (3 Ne. 12:1–2). The message is repeated three times with some variations:

- Those who heed the words of the Twelve and are baptized with water will be baptized by the Lord with fire and the Holy Ghost (3 Ne. 12:1a).
- The people will be blessed if they will believe in Jesus and be baptized (3 Ne. 12:1b).
- All who (1) believe the words of those people who have seen and followed Christ, (2) humble themselves, and (3) are baptized will likewise be visited with fire and the Holy Ghost and will receive a remission of their sins (3 Ne. 12:2).

Variation 4. The sermon at the temple also invokes the language of these instructions at several points. Enduring to the end is finally introduced and then emphasized: Jesus says, “I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life” (3 Ne. 15:9).

Variation 5. Following these presentations, the reporter describes in detail the baptism of the Nephites and, in so doing, brings out again the points of this doctrine (3 Ne. 19:7–28). The people pray for the Holy Ghost (3 Ne. 19:7–10). Then they are baptized, the Holy Ghost falls upon them, and they are “filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (3 Ne. 19:11–14). Praying in thanksgiving to the Father, Jesus indicates they have been purified because of their faith (3 Ne. 19:28).

The Content of Christ’s Teachings

These passages in 3 Nephi report the doctrine of Christ in the most authoritative setting, as it is the voice of Christ himself that delivers it publicly to all the people. All six of the points of this doctrine as introduced by Nephi are here, though there are several significant variations of phraseology that enrich and enlarge the meaning even further.

Faith. Belief on Christ’s name often comes first and is usually included in every statement about his doctrine, whereas Nephi incorporated faith only once as a unifying link at the end of his sermon (3 Ne. 9:17, 20; 11:32–33; 12:1–2, 19; 19:20, 28). Jesus commands the people to believe in him (3 Ne. 12:1, 19). He says that he chooses his people because of their faith or belief in him (3 Ne. 19:20, 28).

Repentance. Repentance is emphasized, occurring again in almost every restatement or repetition of the points of doctrine. It is here phrased in Isaiah’s terminology of a new sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (3 Ne. 9:20; 12:19). It is a commandment that all people repent. As did Nephi, Christ links repentance with the depths of humility (3 Ne. 12:2) but more often with becoming “as a little child” (3 Ne. 9:22; 11:37, 38).

Baptism. Baptism is described by the Savior in terms that are virtually indistinguishable from Nephi’s. The Savior provides the entire baptismal prayer, which indicates that one is baptized by a person holding the authority from Christ to perform this ordinance, such as the twelve disciples who received these instructions.³ The prayer also explicitly states that immersion is required (3 Ne. 11:23–26).

Holy Ghost. The baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost described by Christ in the first 3 Nephi account is also the same as that presented earlier by Nephi. Jesus indicates that it comes “because of . . . faith.” He also says that the converted Lamanites experienced this confirmation without knowing it had happened (3 Ne. 9:20). As in Nephi’s account, this baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost is the means by which the Father bears record of the Son to believers (3 Ne. 11:35); the Holy Ghost bears record of both the Father and the Son. In addressing the multitude, Jesus, like Nephi, links this spiritual baptism, which follows repentance and baptism in water, with the gift of a remission of sins (3 Ne. 12:2). The most important extension of the reader’s understanding of this point of doctrine is provided by the report of the actual event in which the Nephites, taught by Christ, are themselves baptized. After all had been baptized, “the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” The people actually saw, as a group, the fire as it came down from heaven and encircled them; the sight dramatized the divine origins of this gift and its purifying effect (3 Ne. 19:13–14).

Endurance to the End. Enduring to the end is also taught to the Nephites in these passages. But it is not elaborated or emphasized nearly as much here as it was by Nephi. The principle is stated clearly and strongly but in only one passage (3 Ne. 15:9) and without any elaborations referring explicitly to faith, hope, or charity.

Eternal Life. The final reward of those who come unto Christ by obeying these commandments is, as earlier in Nephi, that they will be saved; they will receive eternal life (3 Ne. 15:9). But this promise is expanded to include the idea that to them it will be “given to become the sons of God” (3 Ne. 9:17), and in the sermon at the temple, they are promised “the kingdom of heaven” (3 Ne. 12:3; 14:21).

CHRIST AMONG THE DISCIPLES

The Savior’s first teachings to the Nephites as described above were aimed at settling disputations about the points of his doctrine (3 Ne. 11:28). His later and undated visit to the disciples focuses similarly on a disputation among the people, this time regarding the name of the Church (3 Ne. 27:3). The Savior’s first response is to point to the gospel. The scriptures instruct people to take upon them the name of Christ, “for by this name shall ye be called at the last day.” The scriptures also promise that whoever does so and endures to the end “shall be saved at the last day.” Similarly, the Church will be Christ’s church if it is called in his name and “if it so be that they

are built upon my [Christ's] gospel." The necessity of being built upon his gospel is stated four times, after which he reminds his disciples that he has already given them his gospel (he is apparently referring to 3 Nephi 11 [3 Ne. 27:5–13]).

But the explanation of the gospel is not left to memory, as the Lord launches directly into another definition beginning with the announcement that "this is the gospel" (3 Ne. 27:13). This time the term used is "gospel" rather than "doctrine." But again, no difference seems to be implied. The one significant difference in this presentation is that it is prefaced with a statement which invokes the larger context of the plan of salvation. Although the full plan of salvation is not spelled out, the atonement of Christ is mentioned as the reason why all men and women will be brought to stand before Christ to be judged (3 Ne. 27:14–16).

Structure of Christ's Message to the Disciples

The brief presentation in 3 Nephi 27 is based on three repetitions. The first articulation discusses who will be saved. The answer is whoever repents, is baptized, and is filled (with the Holy Ghost [see 3 Ne. 12:6]), and if the person endures to the end, he or she will be held guiltless at the day of judgment. Those who do not endure to the end will be cast into the fire (3 Ne. 27:16–17; compare 3 Ne. 12:2, 6). In one brief sentence, the Lord articulates five of the six points of his gospel. Enduring to the end is emphasized by being mentioned twice while faith is left unstated.

The second articulation remedies the omission by emphasizing the role of faith: "Nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end" (3 Ne. 27:19). This version does not explicitly mention baptism of water or the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, but they are implied in the idea of washing one's garments in his blood.

The third articulation clarifies even this point: "Repent, . . . come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day" (3 Ne. 27:20). The context of the judgment is retained throughout.

Content of Christ's Message to the Disciples

This series of brief definitional statements is framed by verse 13 and the similar concluding reaffirmation in verse 21: "Verily, verily, . . . this is my gospel." As brief as these statements are, further insights on the individual points of doctrine emerge.

Faith. Faith leads to baptism of water and fire, by which people wash their garments in the blood of Christ. And faith is the key to endurance or “faithfulness unto the end” (3 Ne. 27:19).

Repentance. Repentance is mentioned three times, but elaborated only at one point where Christ indicates that washing one’s garments in his blood requires “repentance of all [one’s] sins” (3 Ne. 27:19).

Baptism. In this sermon, Christ mentions baptism two times with the only elaboration being its implicit inclusion in the concept of washing garments clean in his blood (3 Ne. 27:19).

Holy Ghost. The baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost is mentioned or implied three times but in different terms. The promise that those who are baptized will be filled (3 Ne. 27:16) must, in light of 3 Nephi 12:6, refer to the Holy Ghost. One statement, that those who come unto Christ and are baptized will be “sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost,” elaborates on the cleansing power of the baptism of fire and its implicit inclusion in the washing of garments in the blood of Christ (3 Ne. 27:20).

Endurance to the End. Endurance to the end and failure to endure to the end are explicitly mentioned (3 Ne. 27:16). In the second articulation, this phrase becomes “faithfulness unto the end” (3 Ne. 27:19).

Eternal Life. With the focus on judgment in this chapter, it is not surprising that the rewards of the faithful are first stated in terms of being held “guiltless” at the judgment day (3 Ne. 27:16). But the Savior quickly returns to the traditional language of entering his kingdom or entering into his rest (3 Ne. 27:19). The judgment context reasserts itself in the final articulation as the faithful will be able to “stand spotless before [him] at the last day” (3 Ne. 27:20).

ABBREVIATED STATEMENTS OF THE GOSPEL (MERISMS)

To this point this paper has been concerned with an analysis of the three major statements in the Book of Mormon that provide complete definitions of the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Taken together, the three provide the reader with a clear concept of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the Nephites understood it, as well as a rich abundance of explanatory and metaphorical insights into the individual points of doctrine.

Although the three statements constitute the clearest and fullest definitions of the gospel, they are only a small portion of the total Book of Mormon statements on this subject. The same pattern appears in the teachings of all the Book of Mormon prophets in the form of injunctions to the people to believe in Christ, to repent, to

be baptized that they might be cleansed by reception of the Holy Ghost, and to endure to the end and be saved. As in the definitional chapters, these many statements of the gospel contain instructive variations on terminology. But individually these statements are often elliptical, leaving out one or more of the six points. However, for an audience familiar with the basic pattern in the three defining statements, the reference is perfectly clear.

These elliptical references by Book of Mormon prophets often take the form of merismus,⁴ a classical rhetorical device in which the division of an important topic or statement into component parts allowed for its full invocation by explicit listing of selected parts only.⁵ In the Hebrew Bible, merismus occurs as concise or condensed expressions which, by mentioning the first and last or more prominent elements of a series, implicitly invoke the larger entity: “Symbolically expressed, merismus is the brachylogous use of A+Y or A+B+Y or A+X+Y in place of the complete series A+B+C . . . +X+Y to represent the collective Z of which the individuals A to Y are members.”⁶

Understood as a formula composed of a list of ordered elements, the gospel lends itself well to this rhetorical device. By mentioning two or more elements, usually including the last element, a writer can invoke all components of the formula even though they are not each mentioned explicitly. A typical Book of Mormon example of a merism states that believing in Jesus and enduring to the end is life eternal (2 Ne. 33:4). A conservative count of gospel-related merisms in the Book of Mormon, including the multiple presentations summarized below, gives at least 130 fairly clear statements of the gospel or doctrine of Christ (see Appendix).

The pattern found in Nephi’s early definitional statement of the gospel shows up immediately in the teaching of Nephi’s brother, Jacob (unless Nephi actually derives it from Jacob) and throughout the teaching of later Book of Mormon prophets. Almost every doctrinal teacher and writer in the Book of Mormon witnesses to the same set of teachings, sometimes with distinctive terminology, but always with the same logical structure of ideas. The pattern is set by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob. Others who carry on the tradition include Amaleki, Benjamin, Alma, Mosiah, Alma the Younger, Amulek, Ammon, Aaron, Helaman and his sons, Nephi and Lehi, Samuel the Lamanite, Mormon, and Moroni. Ether is reported by Moroni to have taught the same gospel pattern to the Jaredites in their decline. The greatest emphasis of all occurs in the record of Christ’s teachings to the Nephites. There can be no doubt that this was a conceptual pattern of the first importance to the Nephites in their teachings about God and his children.

Most of these passages are quite clear and use the same basic language developed in the definitional chapters. For example, in his comments about the future Gentiles, the Savior commands the Nephites to record his words for the benefit of the Gentiles, for whoever “will hearken unto my words” (have faith) and repent and be baptized “shall be saved” (3 Ne. 23:5). It would be difficult to state a majority of the points of the doctrine of Christ in fewer words. In a similar appeal, Mormon invites the Gentiles to repent, come unto Christ, and be baptized in his name, that they may receive a remission of their sins, be filled with the Holy Ghost, and be numbered with his people (3 Ne. 30:2). Jacob is just as clear and economical in stating the whole formula negatively. In his great sermon on redemption he warns all people that “if they will not repent and believe in [Christ’s] name, and be baptized in his name, and endure to the end, they must be damned” (2 Ne. 9:24).

In some cases it seems we have what amounts to a merism within a merism. As has been indicated above, enduring to the end was explained by Nephi in terms of faith, hope, and charity (2 Ne. 31:20). Like his father, Moroni also emphasized these principles, perhaps using them singly to invoke the trio. (See for example, Ether 12:32 and 34, where hope and charity respectively seem to invoke enduring to the end.)

Other passages say the same things with a more complex vocabulary. Nephi ends his writings by appealing to the Gentiles, indicating that there is no hope for them except “they shall be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk the strait path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation” (2 Ne. 33:9). Moroni’s final farewell invites all people to come unto Christ and be perfected in him by denying themselves all ungodliness. Then they will be sanctified “through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of sins, that [they] become holy, without spot” (Moro. 10:32–33).

Many passages present fuller versions of the gospel, exhibiting unique emphases and phrasings. In his summary of the Jaredite record, Moroni inserts another appeal from the Lord to the future Gentiles, an appeal which is built on repeated urgings to believe and to come unto the Lord. The time will come when they will rend the veil of unbelief and call upon the Father in the name of Christ, with broken hearts and contrite spirits. All must repent and come unto Christ, believe in his gospel, and be baptized in his name. All who do this will be saved, if they are found faithful at the last day, and they will be lifted up to dwell in the kingdom Christ has prepared for them (Ether 4:10–19).

Because the gospel formula is so clearly established and understood among Book of Mormon peoples, it frequently provides the implicit interpretive or explanatory framework for reports of actual historical experiences. The description of the baptism of the Nephites by Christ's disciples has already been mentioned above (see 3 Ne. 19). But there are numerous other examples, including the description in Mosiah of the response of Benjamin's people to his great sermon (Mosiah 5), the account of Limhi's people and their hope of forming a church based on Alma's principles (Mosiah 21:30–35), the efforts of Alma to organize a church among the Nephites (Mosiah 25), Alma the Younger's account of his conversion (Mosiah 27), the confrontation of Nephi and Lehi with their captors in the prison (Hel. 5), Samuel's description of the conversion of the Lamanites (Hel. 15), and Mormon's description of the establishment of the church among the Nephites by the disciples of Christ (4 Ne. 1). In these reports, the details of what happened and what people did make sense only in terms of the doctrine of Christ and its basic elements. These experiences illustrate the process of sinful people coming to Christ and partaking of his saving power through his gospel. The assumed background teaching of the gospel informs the accounts and gives them meaning far beyond the actual descriptions in the text.

Book of Mormon discussions of ordinances are almost all stated in such a way as to invoke most of the elements of the doctrine of Christ. Salient examples include the baptismal instructions and prayer of Alma at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:7–13), of Christ among the Nephites (3 Ne. 11), and of Moroni (Moro. 6), as well as the introduction of the sacrament (3 Ne. 20) and the pattern for ordaining priests and teachers as reported by Moroni (Moro. 3). For example, this last reference records the actual prayer of ordination used by the Nephites. The ordainer speaks "in the name of Jesus Christ" and ordains the candidate to preach repentance and remission of sins through Jesus Christ by the "endurance of faith on his name to the end" (Moro. 3:3). Moroni further explains that they ordained men by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moro. 3:4). This discussion is soon followed by an account of the procedures for baptism (Moro. 6). Again, faith in Jesus Christ, the most obvious element, is omitted.

One of the main contexts in which Book of Mormon prophets invoked the gospel of Jesus Christ explicitly and implicitly was in their sermons on redemption, rebirth, priesthood, Israel, and other subjects. The language and logic of many such sermons would be unintelligible without implicit awareness of the various elements of the gospel. Examples include Jacob's sermon on redemption

(2 Ne. 9); Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5); Benjamin's valedictory sermon (Mosiah 2–5); Alma's discourse on priesthood (Alma 13); Moroni's discourse on faith, hope, and charity (Moro. 7); and Mormon's discussion of the baptism of children (Moro. 8).

The other LDS scriptures contain similar formulations of the gospel of Jesus Christ, many of which also include merisms. (See D&C 10:63–70; 11:9–24; 19:29–32; 20:37; 33:10–13; 39:6; 68:25; Moses 5:14–15, 58; 6:50–53.) Drawing on this perspective, Latter-day Saints can see the same concept behind more succinct New Testament passages (Matt. 3:11; 24:13–14; Acts 2:38; 19:4–6; Rom. 1:16). For example, Paul's statement to the Ephesians that "by grace are ye saved through faith" can be read as a merism, implicitly invoking all elements of the gospel even though only faith and salvation, the first and last, are mentioned (Eph. 2:8).

CONCLUSION

Three Book of Mormon passages provide extended definitions of the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ. In each case the definition is a six-point formula that is repeated in varied ways. Numerous additional passages and merisms assume these definitions in a way that indicates the definitions were both normative and paradigmatic for all Book of Mormon writers. Their gospel message can be understood only in terms of a larger context, that of the plan of salvation, which includes accounts of the creation, the fall, the atonement of Jesus Christ, and a future judgment. Given that context, the gospel taught by Nephi and the Savior tells us that anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ, repents, is baptized, receives the Holy Ghost, and endures to the end will be saved in the kingdom of heaven.

APPENDIX

Gospel Merisms in the Book of Mormon

Key:

- 1: Faith or belief in Christ.
- 2: Repentance.
- 3: Baptism and obedience to the commandments.
- 4: Receiving the Holy Ghost.
- 5: Enduring to the end, sometimes indicated meristically by mention of only one distinctive element, hope or charity.
- 6: Gaining salvation or eternal life.

1 Nephi

6:4 (6)
 8:15–30 (5, 6)
 10:18 (2)
 13:37 (4, 5, 6)
 14:5 (2, 6)
 15:14 (6)
 22:31 (3, 5, 6)

2 Nephi

2:9 (1, 6)
 6:12 (2, 6)
 9:23 (1, 2, 3, 6)
 9:24 (1, 2, 3, 5, 6)
 30:2 (1, 2)
 30:7 (1)
 31:7–15 (2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
 31:16 (5, 6)
 31:17 (2, 3, 4)
 31:20 (5, 6)
 32:5 (1, 2, 3, 4)
 33:4 (1, 5, 6)
 33:9 (1, 6)

Jacob

6:4 (1, 6)
 6:11 (2, 3, 5, 6)

Omni

1:26 (5, 6)

Mosiah

2:41 (3, 5, 6)
 3:21 (1, 2)
 4:30 (3, 5, 6)
 5:15 (5, 6)
 12:33 (3, 6)
 15:11 (1, 6)
 15:22 (1, 3, 6)
 16:13 (2, 6)
 18:7 (1, 2, 6)
 18:9 (5, 6)
 18:13 (3, 4, 5, 6)
 18:20 (1, 2)
 21:31 (3)
 23:22 (1, 6)
 26:22 (1, 2, 3)
 26:23 (1, 6)
 26:32 (2, 6)

Alma

5:11–13 (1, 5, 6)
 5:21 (2, 6)
 5:51 (2, 6)
 5:62 (2, 3, 6)
 7:14 (1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
 7:15–16 (2, 3, 5, 6)
 9:12 (2, 6)
 9:27 (1, 2, 3, 6)
 11:40 (1, 6)
 12:15 (1, 2, 6)
 12:33 (2, 6)

12:34 (2, 6)
12:35 (2, 6)
12:37 (2, 6)
13:13 (2, 6)
13:28–29 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
19:36 (1, 2, 6)
22:6 (2, 6)
29:2 (2)
32:13 (2, 5, 6)
32:15 (2, 5)
32:41–42 (1, 6)
33:23 (1, 6)
34:31 (2, 6)
36:24 (2, 4)
38:2 (5)
41:6 (2, 5, 6)
42:31 (2, 6)

Helaman

3:28 (1, 6)
5:11 (2, 6)
5:41 (1, 2)
5:47 (1)
7:28 (2, 6)
9:22 (2, 6)
10:14 (2, 6)
13:6 (1, 2, 6)
13:11 (1, 2)
13:13 (2, 6)
14:13 (1, 2)
14:29 (1, 6)
15:7 (1, 2)

3 Nephi

7:16 (1, 2)
7:25 (2, 3)
9:14 (6)
9:17 (1, 6)
9:22 (2, 6)
11:31–33 (1, 2, 3, 6)
11:37 (2, 3, 6)
11:38 (2, 3, 6)
12:2 (1, 2, 3, 4)
12:20 (3, 6)

14:21 (3, 6)
15:1 (3, 6)
15:9 (1, 5, 6)
16:13 (2, 6)
18:32 (2, 6)
19:28 (1, 4)
23:5 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
26:17 (3, 4)
27:6 (1, 5, 6)
27:16 (2, 3, 4, 6)
27:17 (5, 6)
27:19 (1, 2, 6)
27:20 (2, 3, 4, 6)
30:2 (2, 3, 4, 6)

Mormon

3:2 (2, 3, 6)
7:3 (2, 6)
7:7–9 (1, 2, 3, 6)
7:10 (1, 3, 4, 6)
9:6 (1, 6)
9:23 (1, 3, 6)
9:29 (3, 5, 6)

Ether

3:14 (1, 6)
4:18 (1, 2, 3, 6)
5:5 (2, 6)
12:4 (1, 6)
12:9 (1, 6)
12:32 (5, 6)
12:34 (5, 6)

Moroni

3:3 (2, 4, 5)
6:1–4 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
7:26 (1, 6)
7:34 (1, 2, 3, 6)
7:38 (1, 6)
7:44 (6)
8:3 (5)
8:25–26 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
10:21 (5, 6)
10:32–33 (1, 2, 4)

NOTES

¹Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young: Second President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, arr. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 1.

²Some readers might wonder if the formula reported here as the “gospel” is not overly restricted. It does not mention missionary work, temple marriage, genealogy, or home teaching. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the term as used in the Book of Mormon only. No attention is given to the much broader meanings one encounters in contemporary Latter-day Saint discourse.

³One might ask why it is that a baptizer needs authority if, following Nephi, baptism is only the outward evidence one gives of an internal covenant. Why is not baptism simply an act initiated by the convert? Nephi’s brother Jacob teaches that there is a keeper that minds the gate by which a person enters into the straight and narrow way (2 Ne. 9:41). Minimally, the authorized baptizer represents the Holy One of Israel, bringing the repentant applicant through the true gate. Other gates may lead to other places. Furthermore, in submitting to baptism by particularly authorized agents, individuals indicate publicly and to the Lord that it is the gospel taught by those agents that they wish to obey.

⁴I am indebted to Paul Y. Hoskisson for calling my attention to this phenomenon and its possible significance for this study. Professor Hoskisson is conducting a comprehensive study of merismus in the Book of Mormon, which, when published, will provide a valuable perspective for the present analysis.

⁵See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, sub “meris” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

⁶A. M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of Biblical Hebrew* 71 (1952): 14.