



Type: Book Chapter

The Twelve: A Light unto This People

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Source: *The Book of Mormon: 3 Nephi 9-30, This is My Gospel*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,
1993

Page(s): 149-158

Abstract: From those present at his appearance in Bountiful, Christ chose twelve disciples, who were also apostles, to lead his Church as he had done in the Holy Land. Some six hundred years before Christ come to earth, the Book of Mormon prophets saw in vision that he would call twelve men in both lands. These men would be responsible for proclaiming the gospel among their people and for judging all of Israel. Through twelve apostles in various dispensations, Christ has led and will continue to lead all Israel to a reunion with the Father. By following the light that Jesus has given to the Twelve, we, like the Nephites, can unify with the Twelve and prepare to become one with God.



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In the meridian of time, Christ was assigned to go only to the House of Israel (Matt 15:24). As he began his ministry in the Holy Land, he chose twelve from among his followers, ordained them apostles, taught them, and sent them out to find the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Matt 10:5–6). They became his special witnesses and the conduit through which he would send his light into the world. These men would lead the Church after the Savior had completed his mortal ministry.

In his visit to the American Continent following his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven from the Holy Land, Jesus showed himself to the Nephites, a branch of Israel, and invited them individually to “thrust their hands into his side” and “feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet,” and they “did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he”—Jesus Christ (3 Nephi 11:12–15).

From those present at his appearance in Bountiful, Christ chose twelve disciples, who were also apostles, to lead his Church as he had done in the Holy Land. Some six hundred years before Christ come to earth, the Book of Mormon prophets saw in vision that he would call twelve men in both lands. These men would be responsible for proclaiming the gospel among their people and for judging all of Israel (see 1 Nephi 12:10). The term “Israel” refers to those “who prevail with God”

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or to Church members (LDS Bible Dictionary 708). Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written:

The concept of a chosen and favored people, a concept scarcely known in the world and but little understood even by the saints of God, is one of the most marvelous systems ever devised for administering salvation to all men in all nations in all ages. . . . In large measure, the spirit children of the Father who acquired a talent for spirituality, who chose to heed the divine word then given, and who sought, above their fellows to do good and work righteousness—all these were foreordained to be born in the house of Israel. They were chosen before they were born. . . .

Israel are the seed of Abraham; they are the children of the prophets; and they associate with the Lord's seers. Israel are the friends of apostles and revelators. (*Millennial Messiah* 182–83)

Through twelve apostles in various dispensations, Christ has led and will continue to lead all Israel to a reunion with the Father. By following the light that Jesus has given to the Twelve, we, like the Nephites, can unify with the Twelve and prepare to become one with God.

The Twelve Are a Light to Israel

Both the Jerusalem apostles and the Nephite disciples were to be the channel of light through which Israel would receive Christ's true doctrinal word and the ordinances of his gospel. Lehi literally sees the light of the Twelve in his vision (1 Nephi 1:9–10); he experienced the light of the Twelve through his sense of sight. As Christ taught the Nephite Twelve, he expanded their physical light into a metaphor of a guiding light: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, I give unto you to be the light of this people" (3 Nephi 12:14). Again he "said unto those twelve whom he had chosen: Ye are my disciples; and ye are a light unto this people" (15:11–12). Thus Jesus extends the physical light of the Twelve that Lehi experienced into a directional light which the Nephite multitude would follow.

For today's technological world, the light of the Twelve might be thought of as something like a laser. The Light of

Christ through the Twelve emits a coherent beam of one color directed on a salvational path. This light is emitted so precisely that it marks a glowing course of safety for Israel. In the hierarchy of available lights of this life, that light from the Twelve stands supreme next to Christ's. Hence, his words: "Behold, I am the light" and "ye are a light unto this people" (3 Nephi 18:16; 15:12).

As a channel of Christ's light, the Twelve teach true doctrine and ordinances. Elder Boyd K. Packer notes the importance of true doctrine in our spiritual progression: "True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. Preoccupation with unworthy behavior can lead to unworthy behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel" (17). Similarly, ordinances are equally important in furthering our spiritual growth, for "in the ordinances thereof, the power of Godliness is manifest" (D&C 84:20). Ordinances are the means of transmitting the power of God, line upon line, to worthy men and women who have made covenants with Christ.

One of the first opportunities for us to make covenants with God, to follow the Light of Christ presented to us by the Twelve, is through baptism. Because this ordinance is primary to our salvation, Jesus Christ immediately gave the authority to baptize to his Nephite disciples with specific instruction and a precisely worded prayer. The person to be baptized is to be called by name saying: "Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." This is followed by a total and complete immersion of the person in water (3 Nephi 11:25–26); "For by the water ye keep the commandment" (Moses 6:60). By using *his* authority and *his* specific instruction in this first ordinance, the circle of the Twelve was drawn into oneness with Christ; his light became their light. There were to be no dispu-

tations on this sacred, powerful and potentially sin remitting ordinance as the disciples administered it to the people.

Next Jesus instructed these Twelve personally in his true doctrine. He taught them to believe in him, repent, be baptized, and be visited with fire and the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 11:32–34). Some may argue that these teachings, these doctrines, are merely the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel and then pass them off as only for the elementary student in the Church. But doing so denies the power of these principles and ordinances. True doctrines practiced in daily living bring personal—and private—spiritual experiences so people can “bear record” of the truth. They witness that God is our Father and that Jesus is the Christ. This witness comes as a recording fire from the Holy Ghost. Standing firm for and with these first principles and ordinances will document in the cleansed soul “the record of heaven” (Moses 6:61). Jesus stated: “This is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them” (3 Nephi 11:39). He also said that to declare more or less than this and establish it for doctrine was to build upon a sandy foundation and the gates of hell stand open to receive such when floods come and winds beat upon them. He then instructed the Twelve disciples to “go forth unto this people and declare the word which I have spoken” (vv 40–41). They were now prepared to teach the first principles of true doctrine and administer the first ordinance of the gospel; they were ready to be a light to their people.

The Twelve Lead Us to Unity with Christ

Thereafter, Jesus establishes the position of the Twelve among the people. He opens his discourse of “the things which I taught before I ascended to my Father” (3 Nephi 15:1), the Sermon on the Mount, by stretching forth his hand toward the multitude and saying not “Blessed are the poor in spirit” as recorded in the gospel of Matthew, but “Blessed are ye if ye

shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants; and unto them I have given power that they may baptize you with water; and after that ye are baptized with water, behold, I will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost.” Then to these same people Christ said: “Yea, blessed are they who shall believe in your words, and come down into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins” (3 Nephi 12:1–2). Clearly, our oneness with the Twelve is a factor in our salvation.

Paul taught the Ephesians that Christ gave apostles and prophets to the Church “for the perfecting of the saints, . . . till we all come in the unity of the faith . . . that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:11–14). The Twelve are a unifying channel of light as Jesus had proclaimed. Immaturity in the gospel and shallowness of soul can create a lack of unity with the Twelve. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “And Jesus dwells in the Father, because they are one; the Twelve dwell in Jesus, because they are one; and all the saints dwell in the Twelve, because the same perfect unity prevails in their hearts. ‘The Lord our God is one Lord’ (Deut 6:4), and his command to all his disciples is: ‘Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine’ (D&C 38:27)” (*Mortal Messiah* 4:115).

Later that first day, after the celestial fire encircled the Nephite multitude and angels ministered to them, Jesus instituted another unifying ordinance—the sacrament. He told the disciples to administer the broken bread and wine of the cup to the multitude, “in remembrance of [his] body” and “of [his] blood” (3 Nephi 18:7–11). This new ordinance of the gospel provided, “in the mouth of” (2 Cor 13:1) two separate lawful acts, a testimony and a witness to the Father that Israel would always remember Jesus. This renewing and rehabilitative remembrance of him generated companionship with the Holy Ghost, which unified Christ, the Twelve, and the multitude

(3 Nephi 19:9). And again, Jesus instructed them: “If ye do these things [ordinances] . . . ye are built upon my rock.” Doing more or less than these ordinances causes one to be built upon a sandy foundation. Storms easily blow and beat upon those members, and “the gates of hell are ready open to receive them” (3 Nephi 18:12–13).

So powerful and sacred were these renewing ordinances that Jesus commanded the disciples: “Ye shall not suffer any one knowingly to partake of my flesh and blood unworthily when ye shall minister it” (3 Nephi 18:28). The moral maintenance of Church membership is a command to the Twelve of any dispensation. A person’s unworthy participation in these ordinances brings damnation instead of renewal and rehabilitation to the soul; it ultimately disrupts the unity of the community. However, in an attempt to preserve that unity, Christ directed the Twelve, “ye shall not cast him [the unworthy] out of your . . . places of worship” but “continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them.” Condemnation was mentioned for not keeping this command (vv 30–33).

In the closing moments of that first day of his visit to the Nephites and before he reascended into heaven, Jesus gave these special Twelve Disciples a supernal and matchless power. It was a gift above gifts; it was the means by which they would maintain a unity of the Saints and invite more people to join the community. He touched with his hand the disciples “one by one . . . and spake unto them as he touched them. And the multitude heard not the words which he spake; the disciples bear record that he gave them power to give the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 18:36–37). We are indebted to Moroni for recording the exact words of Jesus’s instruction on the proper manner of bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost: “Ye shall call on the Father in my name, in mighty prayer; and after ye have done this ye shall have power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands,

ye shall give the Holy Ghost; and in my name shall ye give it, for thus do mine apostles” (Moroni 2:2).

And what the Twelve taught the people after they were empowered follows an exact doctrinal pattern of what we are taught. Specifically to “. . . kneel down upon the face of the earth, and . . . pray unto the Father in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:6). The Twelve ministered to the people, speaking the same words that Jesus had spoken. Through ministering to the multitude as Jesus had done, they lead the multitude toward unity with Him.

When Christ returned to minister to them the next day, he offered three separate prayers to his Father, two of which are recorded. His words explain the value of the words of the Twelve:

Father, I thank thee that thou hast given the Holy Ghost unto these whom I have chosen; . . . Father, I pray thee that thou wilt give the Holy Ghost unto all them that shall believe *in their words* . . . And now Father, I pray unto thee for them, and also for all those who shall believe *on their words*, that they may believe in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one. (3 Nephi 19:20–21, 23; emphasis added)

A factor in receiving the Holy Ghost is believing in the words of the Twelve. Believing “in the words” of the Twelve leads us to becoming one with the Father and with Christ.

In his second prayer among the Nephites, Jesus’ words verify that the doctrine of purification, becoming clean from the sins of this world, is also dependent upon our “faith on the words” of the Twelve. He prayed: “Father, I thank thee that thou hast purified those whom I have chosen, because of their faith, and I pray for them, and also for them who shall *believe on their words*, that they may be purified in me, through *faith on their words*, even as they are purified in me” (3 Nephi 19:28; emphasis added). True doctrine, correct baptism, the renewing sacrament, the gift of the Holy Ghost, a remission of sin, purification—these doctrines and ordinances of the gospel were made available to Nephite Israel through the Twelve Disciples

Jesus called from among them, and they were integral in creating and maintaining the unified Nephite Zion.

The Latter-day Twelve Light and Unify the Church

If we are to liken these scriptures unto ourselves, it seems appropriate to ask: In what light do we see the Twelve whom Jesus has called today? Like the Nephites in Bountiful, do we see them as the channel of light through which modern Israel receives true doctrine, ordinances of the gospel, and the hope of eternal rest? Is there any rebellion on our part to cut off or diminish this light from our lives? At the October 1992 General Conference, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Remember how, with Pharaoh's angry army in hot pursuit, ancient Israel aligned themselves with the Lord's instructions? Moses stretched forth his hand and the Red Sea parted. With towering walls of water on each side, Israel walked through the narrow passage obediently, and no doubt quickly! There were no warnings about conforming on that day! There are passages ahead which will require similar obedience, as prophets lead the 'men [and women] of Christ' in a straight and narrow course. (67)

By following the course set by the Lord's apostles, we too can become one with each other and with him.

In accordance with Christ's admonition that the chief among us become the servant of all (Matt 20:27), despite the benefits of being called as an apostle of Jesus Christ, our modern-day apostles focus on serving and leading those in the Church rather than on their own self-aggrandizement. At the October 1992 General Conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

I wish now to say a few words about the men who are members of the Quorum of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. . . . I am confident that no one of them ever aspired to office. No one campaigned for it. I think none ever thought himself worthy of it. This is a singular and remarkable thing. . . . I say for each and all that we have no personal agenda. We have only the

Lord's agenda. There are those who criticize when we issue a statement of counsel or warning. Please know that our pleadings are not motivated by any selfish desire. Please know that our warnings are not without substance and reason. Please know that the decisions to speak out on various matters are not reached without deliberation, discussion, and prayer. Please know that our only ambition is to help each of you with your problems, your struggles, your families, your lives. . . . I know that there is no desire to teach anything other than what the Lord would have taught. (54, 59)

Our Latter-day Twelve are constantly aware of their responsibility to be a light to the members of the Church. They desire to lead us to unity with God.

Conclusion

At the close of 3 Nephi, Mormon gives a solemn warning to Israel in particular and to all people in general:

And wo be unto him that will not hearken unto the words of Jesus, and also to them whom he hath chosen and sent among them; for whoso receiveth not the words of Jesus and the words of those whom he hath sent receiveth not him; and therefore he will not receive them at the last day; and it would be better for them if they had not been born. For do ye suppose that ye can get rid of the justice of an offended God, who hath been trampled under feet of men? (28:34–35)

It is an offense to God when we refuse to receive the words of the Twelve he has called to lead us. We are thankful to John the Revelator for his teaching the truth about “. . . the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; . . . for the accuser of our brethren [Satan] is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev 12:9–11). Despite Satan's attempts to darken our perception of the light of the Twelve, we must watch and follow that light.

A central message from Christ in 3 Nephi is clear: our Heavenly Father gave his glorious gospel plan to his Son. Jesus

gave that same gospel plan, with its true doctrine and ordinances to the twelve disciples; and the twelve disciples, in turn, made the same eternal fulness available to all the Nephite Saints. Through the Twelve all of Israel (Church members) may become one with the God of heaven. This unity and oneness of the Saints is an evidence of the truth of the Lord's work.

Finally, no greater truth or source of happiness has been revealed than that given to Nephite Israel. It is a supernal truth. The oneness of the Father and the Son and the Twelve provides the light channel through which men and women of Israel may access Christ's true doctrinal word and his ordinances of the gospel including rest in mortal life and in eternal life. It comes only through oneness with the Twelve. While there are thousands of bishops and even thousands of stake presidents today, there are still only Twelve Apostles of the Lamb who, with power, serve as did the Nephite Twelve as the "light unto this people." May we keep our eyes on the safe salvational path they light and thereby achieve unity with God.

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