



Type: Book Chapter

Unity Through the Power of Charity

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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*

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

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,
1995

Page(s): 263-275

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Alvin C. Rencher

One of the highlights of 4 Nephi is a description of the unity that the people enjoyed following Christ's visit. Reaching that state seems beyond the power of mortals, as does obtaining the spiritual gifts and guidance they received. My thesis is that all of this spiritual support is available to us today and that entire groups as well as individuals can reach a level of worthiness so as to be blessed with feelings of unity with all people.

Mormon describes the unity the Nephites and Lamanites enjoyed following Christ's visit as follows:

And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them. . . . And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. (4 Nephi 1:2-3)

By qualifying to be partakers of the heavenly gift, they received forgiveness of sins and the attendant blessings of the atonement. In this joyous state, they lived without contention:

And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land; but there were mighty miracles wrought among the disciples of Jesus. And it came to pass that the seventy and first year passed away. . . . yea, even an hundred years had passed away. . . . And it came to pass that *there was no contention in the land*. . . . And how blessed were they! For the Lord did bless them in all their doings; yea, even they were blessed and prospered until an hundred and ten years had passed away; and the first generation from Christ

had passed away, and there was no contention in all the land. (4 Nephi 1:13–15, 18; emphasis added)

This unity, characterized by lack of contention and the sharing of all things, lasted until about AD 200, long after the generation who stood in Christ's presence had all died. How did Christ's personal ministry have such a remarkable impact on those people? Can we tap that same power?

Many sources contributed to this unity. The people who stood in Christ's presence touched him and he taught them and ministered unto them. But the key, unifying factor that Mormon emphasizes in 4 Nephi is love: they had no contention in their lives "because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people" (4 Nephi 1:15).

The love the Nephites felt in Christ's presence continued not only with them, but also with their descendants. The degree of unity they reached comes only to those possessed of this pure love of Christ or charity. A major purpose of the Book of Mormon is to instill in its readers this same feeling of love for Christ and for one another. Before discussing how we might obtain this level of charity, let us review what Christ taught the Nephites about unity.

Christ's Teachings on Unity to the Nephites

Early in his visit to the Nephites, Christ declared his doctrine, the first principle of which was the elimination of contention and anger:

And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been. . . . For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. . . . Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (3 Nephi 11:28–30)

Jesus then identified four additional principles of his gospel: repentance, faith, baptism, and remission of sins through fire and the Holy Ghost (vv 31–35). These principles relate to the Atonement and allow the people to be at one or in unity with the Lord and with each other. Immediately after stating these principles, Jesus delivered the Nephite counterpart of the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon in 3 Nephi is clearly intended for those who have complied with the first principles

and received a remission of their sins. The first two verses of the sermon clarify this:

Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve. . . . After that ye are baptized with water, behold, I will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost. . . . 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)

The 3 Nephi beatitudes encourage unity through following church leaders, receiving the Holy Ghost, and sharing the gospel with others that they might come into the fold of Christ.

After his instructions on the first day, Jesus announces he is going to the Father, but the multitude implore him with their tears to “tarry a little longer with them” (3 Nephi 17:5). Moved by this silent plea, he stays with them, heals their sick, weeps with a fulness of joy over their faith, and calls down angels to minister to their children. Then, under these very special circumstances, he asks for bread and wine and institutes the sacrament. How fitting that in their apogee of feelings of oneness with the resurrected Jesus, he shows them how they can celebrate those feelings and re-create them with the sacrament: “And this shall ye always do to those who repent and are baptized in my name. . . . And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you” (18:11).

When Jesus finally does leave at the end of that unforgettable first day of his visit, he pronounces a concluding “blessed,” in which he emphasizes that all of his instructions have pointed to unity: “And I give you these commandments because of the disputations which have been among you. And blessed are ye if ye have no disputations among you” (3 Nephi 18:34).

On the second day of his visit, Jesus utters three prayers unto the Father in the presence of the multitude. We are not given the words of the third prayer, but a petition for unity appears in both of the first two prayers. In his second prayer, for instance, Christ asks for the same oneness among his disciples that he asked for in his intercessory prayer at Gethsemane: “Father, I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me out of the world, because of their faith, that they may be purified in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one” (3 Nephi 19:29). The oneness, the unity

of the Father and the Son is held out repeatedly in the scriptures as the supreme example we must emulate. In a sense, this fundamental doctrine embraces the whole of the gospel (see John 17:11, 23). In 3 Nephi 28, Jesus notes that this kind of unity will characterize relationships in the kingdom of God: "And for this cause ye shall have fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one" (3 Nephi 28:10; see also D&C 29:13).

Unity in Our Day

The unity Jesus spoke of is not reserved just for the Nephites in their golden age or for the future dwellers in the celestial kingdom. It is extended as a goal for the Saints in any age. In Mosiah 18, Alma taught his people the importance of unity and love, which he associated with repentance and faith: "And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another" (v 21).

In our own time, Jesus has also expressed an expectation of unity for his followers: "I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world, even as many as will believe on my name, that they may become the sons of God, even one in me as I am one in the Father, as the Father is one in me, that we may be one" (D&C 35:2). The present day instruction to become one is more than a recommendation. The Lord has said, "Be one, even as I have commanded you" (51:9) and, in even stronger language, "If ye are not one ye are not mine" (38:27).

Being one and working together does more than just bless us spiritually; unity also brings us temporal blessings. A horse-pulling contest in Canada illustrates the effect of synergism especially well. The people put weights on a flat bed wagon, and a single horse pulled it a measured distance. They added 1,000 pounds at a time, until the horse could no longer pull it. The winner pulled 9,000 lbs., and the runner-up pulled 8,000 lbs. Out of curiosity, someone suggested putting those two horses together. When they hitched both horses to the wagon, they pulled 31,000 lbs. Working together the horses pulled more than three times the weight the best of them could pull alone.

And so it is with humans. When we work together, we can accomplish much more than we can separately.

Another interesting illustration of the power of unity is found in the exodus from Kirtland in 1838.

As violence against the Saints and their leaders escalated, it was finally no longer safe for them to remain in Kirtland. The Prophet, whose life was in gravest danger, was “warned by the Spirit” and decided to move immediately to Missouri. . . . (Anderson 235)

After Joseph left for Missouri, persecution of those close to him in Kirtland increased. . . . Most families with sufficient means and equipment escaped the threatening mobs. . . . (236–37)

One effort to see that the Saints traveled to Missouri in safety was the organization of “Kirtland Camp,” which was initiated by the seventies. . . . Zerah Pulsipher testified of divine direction to the brethren: “One evening, while we were in the attic story of the Lord’s House, and while Joseph Young, I think, was at prayer, *I saw a Heavenly messenger*, who appeared to be a very tall man dressed in a white robe from head to foot. He cast his eyes on me and on the rest of the Council and said, ‘*Be one, and you shall have enough.*’ Soon after the way was opened before us, so that we received money and means for clothing for the poor and to prepare for our removal. James Foster and Jonathan Dunham also saw the angel at the same time I did.” (239)

Benjamin Johnson described the company . . . as the “Kirtland Poor Camp.” . . . (239)

The Kirtland Camp left on July 5, 1838, with 515 members. . . . With the help of the Lord and the combined faith and strength of each other, the members of Kirtland Camp traveled 870 miles in about three months, arriving in Far West on October 2, 1838. (241)

The unity necessary for the Kirtland Camp to journey such a long distance could not have been possible had they not first had love for the Lord and for one another.

Necessity of Charity

We noted earlier that in 4 Nephi 1:15, the love of God, or charity, was identified as the foundation of Nephite unity. Only by being filled with the love of God could the people in 4 Nephi avoid all contention. Like them, we are charged to love and respect every person we associate with. These feelings must be real, not feigned or forced. Only with true charity can we enjoy the kind of friendship with others we should.

Having the gift of charity is also essential for us to progress along the strait and narrow path described by Nephi:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. . . . Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. (2 Nephi 31:19–20)

Missionaries, bishops, and many other church workers know that they cannot serve effectively without love. The Spirit does not operate in the absence of love: “Behold, I speak unto you . . . who have desires to bring forth and establish this work; And no one can assist in this work except he shall be humble and full of love, having faith, hope, and charity” (D&C 12:7–8).

Charity Covers and Prevents Sins

Joseph Smith made some incisive comments about the unifying power of charity:

It is a time-honored adage that love begets love. Let us pour forth love—show forth our kindness unto all mankind and the Lord will reward us with everlasting increase; cast our bread upon the waters and we shall receive it after many days, increased to a hundredfold. Friendship is like Brother Turley in his blacksmith shop welding iron to iron; it unites the human family with its happy influence.

I do not dwell upon your faults, and you shall not upon mine. Charity, which is love, covereth a multitude of sins, and I have often covered up all the faults among you. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 315–16; hereafter *TPJS*)

When he noted that “charity, which is love, covereth a multitude of sins,” the Prophet may have been referring to one of the following two scriptures: “Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins” (Prov 10:12) or “above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

The Joseph Smith Translation of 1 Peter 4:8 reads “charity *preventeth* a multitude of sins.” On another occasion, the Prophet clarified how charity both prevents and covers sins.

Suppose that Jesus Christ and holy angels should object to us on frivolous things, what would become of us? We must be merciful to one another and overlook small things. . . . Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand, and watch over them with tenderness.

When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what power it has over my mind, while the opposite course has a tendency to harrow up all the harsh feelings and depress the human mind. (TPJS 240)

Thus charity enables us to cover each other's sins, that is, to forgive them and be unified in spite of each other's weaknesses and foibles. Charity also prevents sins in that it leads us to forsake sin.

Overcoming Anger and Contention

As noted earlier, Nephite unity was characterized by the absence of contention, and also, Jesus listed the elimination of anger and contention as a basic principle of his gospel. He further underscored this precept in the Nephite version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, and it is also written before you, that thou shalt not kill, and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment of God; But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of his judgment. And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (3 Nephi 12:21–22)

The Book of Mormon does not say “angry . . . without a cause,” as in the Matthew version of the sermon; there is no qualification here. Anger and criticism are characterized as grievous sins. A quotation from Elder Neal A. Maxwell provides an interesting insight: “Letting off steam always produces more heat than light” (84).

Let me give a personal illustration of how using scriptural insights helped me overcome anger. I was praying to know what to do about someone close to me whose frequent outbursts left me depressed and suffering stomach pains for days at a time. As I prayed for understanding, the words “A soft answer turneth away wrath” (Prov 15:1) came into my mind. I immediately asked, “Whose wrath?” And the answer was, “Yours!” Then the flood of insight came. My problem had not been caused by the other person's anger but by my own anger that arose because of my answering back in kind, either defensively or in counterattack. Thus the soft answer would prevent my anger from arising. The other person's anger by itself could not cause me any discomfort. The result was a great miracle in my life. When I answered the person's outbursts with neutral or even loving words, my anger did not arise, and I felt no residual resentment. I later found that using soft words alone was not sufficient to control my

feelings, but I had to get all bad thoughts out of my mind. I could not even think any resentful or critical thoughts.

The effectiveness of a group can be shattered by contention and anger or expanded by love and unity. This applies to all groups such as families, businesses, units of the Church, or even athletic teams. The following example illustrates the power of love in achieving unity in an organized group.

About ten years ago, while serving as chairman of the Department of Statistics at BYU, I was momentarily startled one day to look up from my desk into the eyes of the biggest blond giant I had ever seen. He announced that he had come in to change his major from physical education to statistics. I asked "Can you do the math? We require several courses beyond calculus." He said "I can do the math." His name was Larry Hamilton, and he was a starting defensive lineman on the football team. His warm congenial personality soon made him a great favorite with our faculty and students. He and his wife had joined the Church after coming to Brigham Young University. The next year, in the middle of the football season, I asked Larry to come and speak at a fireside for my BYU ward. He gave a great talk, but the thing I will always remember was his statement: "Do you know why we win all our games? It's not because we have the best quarterback or the best receivers or the best linemen, etc. It's because we love each other." They went on to win all their games. That was 1984, the year BYU went undefeated and was named National Champions.

Achieving Charity through Repentance

Charity is a gift; we seek this gift by complying with the requirements for its bestowal. In Moroni 7:48, Mormon states that charity is "bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ." He further explains that perfect love comes after forgiveness of sins, which follows repentance:

And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect

love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. (Moroni 8:25–26)

Alma pleaded with his people not to procrastinate the day of their repentance, so that they might “be led by the Holy Spirit . . . having the love of God always in your hearts” (Alma 13:27–29). On another occasion, he characterized the feelings that come after forgiveness as a song of redeeming love: “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?” (5:26).

After we repent, as the Nephites did at the time of Christ’s visit, we too can sing the song of redeeming love. Having felt the power of Christ’s atonement in our lives, we love him and feel his love to a degree that we could not otherwise imagine. The Atonement is the pivotal turning point in the history of the universe. It lies at the core of human existence. We can expect to be possessed of wondrous feelings after we experience the effects of the Atonement.

Dissolution of Nephite Unity

Just as repentance leads to receiving the gift of charity, failing to repent leads to loss of divine love, and contention follows immediately. In the last part of 4 Nephi, we have a model of how to lose unity through sin and the lack of repentance, as the Nephites allowed pride and materialism to creep in unchecked: “And now, in this two hundred and first year there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world. And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more in common among them. And they began to be divided into classes” (4 Nephi 1:24–26).

Because they did not turn from their pride and materialism when the temptation arose, they soon began to lose their unity. “And again, there was another church which denied the Christ; and they did persecute the true church of Christ, because of their humility and their belief in Christ; and they did despise them because of the many miracles which were wrought among them” (4 Nephi 1:29).

What should these people have done when they witnessed the miracles? They should have done the same thing their ancestors did in reaction to the miracle of Jesus' visit, the same thing we should do in response to a miracle—repent. But these people did not repent; instead, they despised the righteous because of the miracles that were wrought among them. The record states that “the people did harden their hearts, for they were led by many priests and false prophets to build up many churches, and to do all manner of iniquity” (4 Nephi 1:34). Mormon emphasized, “they did not dwindle in unbelief, but they did willfully rebel against the gospel of Christ” (v 38). He further states that even “the people who were called the people of Nephi began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain like unto their brethren, the Lamanites” (v 43). Thus we can trace the sad consequences of failure to repent and to stay close to the Lord. The Nephites lost the Spirit that had provided them with unity and glorious feelings of charity.

Achieving Unity

How then do we achieve unity? What we must work on is *repentance*, which removes all barriers between us and Christ. Before coming down to visit with the Nephites, Jesus had instructed them from heaven: “O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and *repent of your sins*, and be converted, that I may heal you?” (3 Nephi 9:13; emphasis added). They obviously obeyed this counsel, because they were prepared to stand in his presence and feel his love in full measure.

In his second prayer in 3 Nephi chapter 19, Jesus asked that the people might be purified so that they might be one with Christ. Hence, purification through repentance and forgiveness is the key to unity with him. This feeling of unity then extends to our families, our associates, and all who surround us. Seeking first to achieve unity with Christ is a better plan than to start by working on unity with others and hope for eventual unity with Him. Only after attaining unity with Jesus are we given power to truly achieve unity with others.

After king Benjamin delivered the words the angel gave him to his people in his celebrated sermon, they repented and were born again (Mosiah 3:2–4; 5:7). He then gave them further instructions about how they could remain close to the Lord:

As ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God . . . and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, . . . I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, . . . and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel. (Mosiah 4:11)

Benjamin followed this counsel with the promise, “If ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins” (v 12). If we can meet the conditions and retain a remission of our sins, we, too, will be filled with the love of God and preserve a feeling of unity for others. Otherwise, we will lack the power to do it.

The building of unity is associated with enduring to the end. Enduring to the end is more than hanging on to a minimal level of performance and avoiding major transgression. It is a time of significant progress and preparation for the celestial kingdom. It is a time during which we become the kind of people who can dwell in the presence of God, the kind of people who can live in total unity with each other. To do this, we must eliminate the last vestige of pride, criticism, anger, etc. We can accomplish this refining process with the aid of the Holy Ghost.

Role of the Spirit in Maintaining Charity and Unity

Let us consider the role of the Spirit in helping us develop charity and unity. In his first prayer in 3 Nephi chapter 19, Jesus asked for the Holy Ghost to be given to the people, “that they may believe in me, . . . *that we may be one*” (3 Nephi 19:23; emphasis added). A remarkable sermon by Mormon on the role of the Spirit in perfecting ourselves and achieving a oneness with Christ is found in Moroni chapter 7. In that sermon, Mormon is speaking to those who are already well established on the path to eternal life, “the peaceable followers of Christ,” who have “obtained a sufficient hope by which [they] can enter into the rest of the Lord, from this time henceforth until [they] shall rest with him in heaven” (v 3). Thus Mormon’s sermon is not an elementary approach describing first steps, but an advanced course on enduring to the end and attaining a unity with Christ and with those who will dwell with him.

In Moroni 7:16–19, Mormon describes the role of the Spirit of Christ in aiding us to “know good from evil.” Through this medium we are given an eternal view, and each moment prepares us for eternity. When we do wrong, we are blessed with instant godly sorrow, with loss of the Spirit. Thus even in periodic repentance, to maintain a remission of sins, we need help. We cannot do it by ourselves.

Let me illustrate how this process has worked for me. When I do something wrong or say something I should not, the Spirit turns off. Sometimes I feel it go, draining out of me like pulling the plug. By this means, he is teaching me what is truly good and comes from him and what is not.

In my case, three things that the Spirit is especially sensitive to are complaining, criticizing, and the least tinge of pride or boasting. I always lose the Spirit when I engage in those activities. I must not only not say such things aloud, I must not even think them. This is not always easy. There are times when I despair of ever learning this lesson permanently. Whenever I stumble, I immediately fall into a period of godly sorrow and repentance. I feel my hope in Christ slipping away. In its place comes the hopelessness that leads to repentance. After a time, my eternal hope comes back.

A Celestial Society

I have often wondered about the kinds of relationships we will have in the celestial kingdom. The Doctrine and Covenants tells us that the “same sociality that exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (130:2). Consequently, shouldn’t we have the same feelings now that we expect to have then? Those we associate with have as much value now as they will have in the eternities to come. This life is the time for us to learn to love others, to overcome envy, to eliminate all resentments, to stop making unfavorable comparisons. This is the time for us to rise above materialism as the Nephites did for many years after the visit of Christ.

I assume that the Nephites were ordinary people, who received only the powers they earned. They obeyed precepts and made choices that are also available to all of us. They were blessed by the Spirit to change their natures: to love as Christ loves, to have the gift of a

grateful heart, to experience unity, to gain an eternal perspective, to look beyond the materialistic components of this world.

As followers of Christ, we seek for a time and place where everyone loves and is loved by everyone else, where no one becomes angry or harms anyone. In short, we seek a society filled with charity, as in the “golden age” of the Nephites. We probably will not see such a time in which everyone on the earth acts that way until after this life. But, individually, we can experience feelings of unity with Christ, with our families, and in all of our associations. Each of us can have the feelings that powered the Nephite unity: “And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:15).

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