

Who Shall Declare His Generation?

Elder Bruce R. McConkie

I have prayed and pondered earnestly to learn what the Lord wants me to say on this occasion. In the early hours of the morning, as I tossed and turned in bed and kept my wife awake, I concluded upon a subject. I shall talk, if I am properly guided by the Spirit, about what I consider in some respects to be the third greatest miracle that has ever occurred in all eternity. This miracle is of such a nature and of such moment that its accomplishment was attended by a heavenly choir, who sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). It was attended by an angelic visitant who proclaimed to all of the earth's inhabitants that "unto [us] is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). It is clear that, if we are to consider this matter, we need a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I need it so that what is said may be expressed discreetly and wisely and in harmony with the mind and will of the Lord, and you need it so that the thoughts expressed will sink into your hearts and you will have a feeling of their eternal verity.

THE THREE GREATEST MIRACLES OF ETERNITY

As I analyze and view the matter, it seems to me that the greatest miracle that ever occurred was the miracle of creation: the fact that God, our Heavenly Father, brought us into being; the fact that we exist; that we were born as his spirit children; and that now we are privileged to abide in mortal tabernacles and partake of a probationary experience.

It seems to me that the second greatest miracle that has ever occurred, in this or any of God's creations, is the atoning sacrifice of his Son; the fact that he came into the world to ransom men from the temporal and spiritual death brought into this existence by the fall of Adam; the fact that he is reconciling us again to God and making

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immortality and eternal life available to us. This atoning sacrifice of Christ is the greatest thing that has ever happened since the creation.

You probably know that the Prophet was once asked, "What are the fundamental principles of your religion?" He responded:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.¹

The very heart and core and center of revealed religion is the atoning sacrifice of Christ. All things rest upon it, all things are operative because of it, and without it there would be nothing. Without it the purposes of creation would be void, they would vanish away, there would be neither immortality nor eternal life, and the ultimate destiny of all men would be to become as Lucifer and his followers are.

The underlying foundation upon which the atoning sacrifice of Christ rests is the doctrine of the divine sonship, by which we mean that the Lord Jesus, the firstborn spirit child of the Father, having been foreordained to his mission, was born into this world, on the one hand as the Son of God, inheriting thus from his Father the power of immortality; and that he was born, on the other hand, as the offspring of a mortal woman, inheriting from Mary, his mother, the power of mortality. Thus he became the only person who has ever lived who had the power within himself to either live or die as he chose—and therefore the power to work out the infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice upon which all things rest. It seems to me that it would be appropriate on this occasion—as we come into the Christmas period, when we gladly and joyously join with all Christendom in commemorating the traditional day of his birth—for us to talk about the doctrine of his coming into mortality. This is what I consider, in many respects, to be the third greatest miracle of eternity.

MESSIANIC TEXTS IN THE SCRIPTURES

There are several texts that we might take. One text is the great messianic utterance of Isaiah, which he couched in these simple words: "Who shall declare his generation?" (Isaiah 53:8). This means, "Who will give his genesis? Who will reveal his genealogy? Who will give the source from whence he sprang? Who will announce the divinity of the

¹Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), p. 121.

mortal Messiah?" We might also take another text, and this is one that Jesus himself spoke. He said, "Whose son is he?" This is the context: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand till I make thine enemies thy footstool?" (Matthew 22:42-44).

Whose son is he? Is he the son of a mortal father and a mortal mother? Is he the Son of God? Is he separate and apart from all mankind by virtue of the birth that was his? Who shall declare his generation? We have an account in the New Testament that begins, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ" (Matthew 1:1). Then Matthew proceeds to outline what appears to be the ancestry of the Lord, but we can't quite figure out how it fits in with other scriptural passages, at least in the form it has come to us. Luke gives another account that does not agree with that in the book of Matthew. We suppose it may be that one of them is a kingly, royal genealogy, intended to indicate his position and place as the one to sit upon the throne of his father David; the other is possibly a genealogy either of Mary or Joseph—we can't be sure. The commentaries of the world talk about the virgin birth as being "pious fiction." No one, they say, could have been born in that way; it was something which Matthew assumed, and so it became a tradition in the early Church. This matter of the genealogy, this matter of the birth of our Lord, is at the heart and core of Christendom. Thanks be to God that by the opening of the heavens and by revelation in our day we have gained an understanding of what is involved. As a result we can put the atoning sacrifice in its proper position and relationship to all things, and then we are in a position to work out our salvation and do the things that we must do if we are to inherit peace and happiness in this life and go on to eternal glory in the life to come.

Whose son is he? He is the firstborn spirit child of God, our Heavenly Father. There is no possible way to conceive of the genealogy, the genesis, the generation of Christ, without knowing that God our Father is a personal being in whose image we are created; that he has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; that he is literally—in the most real and personal sense of the word—the father of the spirits of all men. The Lord Jesus, the great Jehovah, the creator of all things under the Father, is the firstborn of all that spirit host.

In that premortal life our Father ordained and established a plan of salvation named the gospel of God, which plan was to enable his spirit children, Christ included, to advance and progress and become

like him. In that day he issued a great cry, a great proclamation went forth through the councils of eternity, with reference to the Father's plan. He said, "Whom shall I send to be my Son, to work out the infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice? Whom shall I send to be born into mortality, inheriting from me the power of immortality? Whom shall I send to lay down his life for the sins of men and to reconcile fallen man to me?" When that great cry went forth, as you know, there were two volunteers. One stepped forward, the firstborn of the Father, the Lord Jesus, and said, "Here am I. Send me. I will be thy son. And, Father, the honor and the glory be thine in all things. I will do thy will. I will follow thy plan, do all things in harmony with that which thou hast ordained." There was another volunteer, and he said, "Here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, . . . and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor" (Moses 4:1)—that is, "Let me replace you and be the exalted and most noble of all the persons who live and are." Well, the decree was issued: "I will send the first" (Abraham 3:27), and that was the day when there was war in heaven, as you know.

The first volunteer was the Lord Jesus; he then became the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the one appointed to come down and do all things needed to put in operation his Father's plan. Now from that day, from the day of creation on, the prophets foretold his coming and ministry. We call these prophetic utterances messianic prophecies, as for instance, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Or, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

How many sermons were preached in ancient Israel on these messianic texts we can only imagine. The most perfect prophecies and the greatest sermons are found in the Book of Mormon. Here is a sermon-prophecy that an angel spoke to a Nephite prophet:

For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the

sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases.

And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men.

And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.

And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary. (Mosiah 3:5-8)

ACCOUNTS OF THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH

In due course, at the appointed time, in the fulness of the Lord's own time, the Savior was born into the world. Who shall declare his generation? We have attempts made by prophetic writers of old. Matthew says, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 1:18). And then he recites what happened and quotes the prophetic utterance of Isaiah about the virgin birth. Let me read you the kindred passage in the book of Luke, this one spoken by Gabriel to Mary:

The angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:30-35)

Now I take those two statements—one written by Matthew, the other by Luke—not perhaps perfectly transcribed and recorded for us in their present form, and I add these words spoken by Alma as the Holy Ghost moved upon him. Alma, as we shall see, will tie together what Matthew and Luke have written and give us the accurate and perfect perspective as to the generation of the Lord Jesus. He said:

Repent ye, and prepare the way of the Lord, and walk in his paths, which are straight; for behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and the Son of God cometh upon the face of the earth.

And behold, he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem, which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God. (Alma 7:9-10)

Now I shall call your attention to one other passage, and then we shall see if we know the answer to our query, "Who shall declare his generation?" This passage is from that wondrous, marvelous vision that Nephi had. He said:

I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? [If the angel had asked that of you, what would your answer have been? Nephi was a little hesitant. He knew in part, but not in full.]

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! (1 Nephi 11:13-21)

Who shall declare his generation? Whose son is he? Well, now it is perfectly clear. On the one hand he is the son of God, the God who said in messianic vein, "Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee" (Psalms 2:7). On the other hand, he is the son of David and the son of Mary. He inherited from his Father the power of immortality and from his mortal ancestors the power of mortality. How do we know this? How can it be established? We are dealing with spiritual things. Matthew says his book is the book of the generation of Jesus Christ, and he records the facts. He says there was a virgin birth; but the whole world—Christians, so-called—contends and is uncertain and has

difficult feelings about this passage. Some say, "Yes, he was born of a virgin," and others say, "It was a pious tradition." Then we read the Book of Mormon account, and we discover what the perfect rendition of the doctrine is. Whose son is he and how do you know it? Paul said a very impressive thing: "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Prophet improved this by saying: "No man can know that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

TESTIMONY OF THE SAVIOR'S GENEALOGY

Who shall declare his generation? Whose son is he? We have been called out of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ. We have been called to the place where the heavens are opened, where the gifts of the Holy Ghost are poured out bounteously, abundantly, upon all the members of the Church who seek the Lord in integrity and uprightness of heart. We have the gifts of the Spirit, we have the gift of revelation, and we know what is involved in these things. Every member of the Church has had the hands of a legal administrator placed upon his head, and the decree issued: "Receive the Holy Ghost." This means that we receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the right to the constant companionship of that member of the Godhead, based on faithfulness.

Who shall declare his generation? His generation can be declared only by living witnesses who have had the revelation of the Holy Ghost which certifies to their souls that Jesus is the Lord. There is no possible way to know that he is Christ above all, that all power is resident in him, that he is God's son, except by the process and means of revelation—and I speak of personal revelation. Peter received a personal revelation as he stood in the presence of the Lord, and it came by the power of the Holy Ghost. He certified, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), and received a blessing from the Lord for the witness that he had borne.

Now, if we want to know who is going to declare his generation, the answer is that it is the Latter-day Saints; it is the elders of Israel; it is the prophets and apostles who minister among us; and it is all of those among us who have lived in such a manner that we know by the whisperings of the Holy Spirit within us that here is eternal verity, that these things are true. You can be one, as well as I can be one, who declares the generation of Jesus Christ, who gives his genealogy, who comes to know in his heart by a power that is beyond intellectuality, by a power that comes from revelation and revelation only, that he is the

Lord, that God is his Father; and this is the beginning of a course of personal righteousness. Unless and until we know that Jesus is the Lord and that God is his Father, we do not have testimonies of the truth and divinity of the work. In our day a testimony is to know, number one, that Jesus is the Lord, which is the doctrine of the divine sonship. It is to know, number two, that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God and a revealer of the knowledge of Christ and of salvation for us in our day. And it is, number three, to know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.

Now, I am just one among you. There are thousands of us here congregated in the spirit of worship. I have been speaking, and you listening, and the Spirit of the Lord has been present. I have given utterance to truths that are eternal, that will endure to all ages, that are the great foundation upon which the cause of truth and righteousness rests. Those truths have sunk into the hearts of all of you who have been endowed with the same Spirit, and you know as I know that they are true.

Now, in conclusion, I, acting as voice, as mouth as it were for you, declare the generation of the Lord Jesus, his genesis, the source from which he sprang: He is God's son. He was born into this world after the manner of the flesh, with God as his father and Mary as his mother, inheriting the powers of mortality and immortality thereby. He was thus able to work out the infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice. He was thus able to bow in that garden outside Jerusalem's walls, that garden called Gethsemane, and take upon himself the sins of all men on conditions of repentance. That act is the greatest miracle of all time since the miracle of creation, and underlying it is the event which we celebrate with the world this coming season, the birth of our Lord into mortality. Is it any wonder that angelic choir sang, "Glory to God on high, and peace to men"? That is the message we proclaim at this season, and we do it with a sure knowledge whereof we speak, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.