

Learning the Gospel from Brian Carpenter

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I had set a date of November 15, 2005 to find someone for the missionaries to teach. For several months I had tried to open the door to conversations about the gospel every time I spoke with someone, but it just seemed that nobody was interested. As my date approached I became desperate, and invited a couple of people who I suspected had no interest in the church, but who might be polite enough to accept an invitation for a preliminary discussion. They turned me down. I am busier than I've been at any point in my life, and thought of letting things slip just this once – but then realized that I'd be finished if I succumbed to that logic because next time will be worse. So having exhausted all of the alternatives I thought of for finding someone, I intensified my praying and fasting that God would put someone in my path. I pledged to the Lord that I would invite the person when I encountered him or her.

On about November 8 I got an email from an acquaintance on a board of directors I serve on, Brian Carpenter, who got his Harvard MBA in 1978. Although Brian was only a casual acquaintance of mine, he had known through his board service several LDS people whose lives he had come to admire deeply – especially the CEO, a long-time friend who had been a Harvard classmate of Brian's. Brian said he had come upon my website, claytonchristensen.com, where there is a link to an essay I wrote, "Why I Belong, and Why I Believe." In his email Brian said the essay had made him curious to know about our church. I responded by inviting him to our home to meet with our missionaries. I proposed that we wouldn't try to teach him what we thought he should know, but rather just let him ask questions. He accepted.

At our meeting, over dinner, Brian passed out copies to the missionaries and to Christine, Spencer and Katie and me a list of 17 questions, and explained why these were on his mind. His father had passed away a few years earlier, and it caused Brian to realize, "I'm on deck. I'm next. I decided I need to be doing what I need to have done before my life is finished." It turned out that he had listed the questions roughly in the order that are addressed in the missionary lessons, so I asked if he'd like to have the elders take us through the first lesson that night, and then return for the subsequent lessons. He accepted, and we commenced the first discussion right then.

When the elders introduced the Book of Mormon, Brian said that he had gotten a copy but hadn't been able to get past the second chapter in the first book of "Nehfee," as he pronounced it. It was just too confusing. Brian's first questions dealt with infant baptism, the forgiveness of sins, and the notion that Christ suffered for our sins – and I felt impressed that I should give him a more tangible reading assignment to make it easier to read and understand the book. I had done this once before. I wrote it longhand on a sheet of paper, as follows:

Homework Assignment

Read:

Mosiah 18:1-16 (pp. 180-182)
Moroni 8: all (pp. 525-527)

Write: a 2-paragraph answer to each of these 3 questions:

- a. Why does it make God so angry when people baptize little children?
- b. What does baptism mean and why are we baptized?
- c. What is the process by which we come to be forgiven of our sins?

Bring these to our next meeting, where we'll discuss what you've written.

Process for doing this:

1. Pray, on your knees, aloud, telling God that you got this homework assignment and that you will need his inspiration to answer these questions. Ask him to help you understand the chapters.
2. Read the chapters.
3. Write your answers, in draft form, to the 3 questions.
4. Kneel again in verbal prayer. Summarize your answers to God. Tell him you're going to read the chapters one more time, and ask him, as you read, please to help you understand even more deeply the answers to these questions.
5. Read the chapters again.
6. Revise your answers, based upon your deeper understanding. This is what you need to turn in at our next meeting.
7. Kneel again and pray a third time. Ask God if the things that you have read, and the things that you have written, are true. Follow the process that is outlined in Moroni 10:3-5.

We turned to Moroni 10 so that I could explain a couple of important details. I read the beginning of verse 3, and asked Brian, "Why does God want you to take a few minutes before praying to think about how richly he has blessed you?" After a moment's thought he responded, "I guess it will help me realize how much God loves me, and how much I should love him."

We paused again toward the end of verse 4, where I asked, “What does it mean to pray with real intent?” In response to his answer that he needed to be serious about it, I continued, “It’s more than just being sincere or serious about it – that’s covered in the prior phrase. To pray with real intent means that you need to tell God what you intend to do if he answers your prayer.” We then explained how to recognize answers that God gives to our questions through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Brian committed to do this assignment. At our next meeting, he handed a copy of his homework assignment to each of us. He read each paragraph aloud, and paused at the end of each to describe in more detail why he had reached these conclusions. He did this for the first 35 minutes of the 60-minute discussion. As he spoke, a marvelous spirit came into the room. I have copied below what Brian wrote:

Brian Carpenter’s answers to “Homework Assignment” from Clayton Christensen

November 29, 2005

Question A: Why does it make God so angry when people baptize little children?

There appear to me to be three principal reasons for God to be justly angry when people baptize little children.

First, baptizing little children trivializes the atonement. God sent his son Jesus Christ into the world to shed his blood, suffer and die on the cross to atone for the sins of those fallen by Adam’s transgression. That God’s forgiveness of original sin through Christ’s suffering could be later rendered inconsequential to a child dying before baptism by man lacks logic and faith in one of God’s purposes for sending Jesus Christ into the world. Secondly, the notion that little children who die without baptism would suffer in hell or be denied salvation assumes that God is without mercy, charity, impartiality and constancy. This would certainly deserve God’s anger by implying that God, who creates and loves innocent children, could somehow hold them capable or accountable for sin. Finally, baptizing little children misses the sacred meaning that God intends for the baptism of his faithful. Little children can’t repent for sins they are incapable of committing, nor can they then choose of their own free will to enter into a baptismal covenant with God to obey his laws and seek remission from sin and redemption. Therefore, baptizing little children makes a mockery of baptism’s true purpose.

Question B: What does baptism mean and why are we baptized?

Baptism to me signifies and affirms that one has truly repented and firmly resolved to seek remission of and forgiveness for their sins through faith in God, obeying his laws as revealed to us, and becoming a fully participative member of his following and church.

I believe we are baptized as a visible symbol and testimony that we have entered into a covenant with God to serve, worship and obey him all of our mortal life, that we seek to be filled with his Holy Spirit to help us do so and that we can then be blessed with eternal life in heaven.

Question C: What is the process by which we come to be forgiven of our sins?

I believe that the process is that, with a sincere and open heart and mind, we gain faith in God through prayer, contemplation, reading the scriptures, discussion with others and worship, seeking to communicate with God and receive his blessing and guidance. We come to feel a growing sorrow for our sins, while growing in our belief that God still loves us and wants to forgive us. We repent and make a covenant with God to worship, serve and obey him.

As we live up to our end of the covenant and we forgive and serve others, our faith grows and we receive remission from sin. We then realize even more fully how sorry we are for our sins to the point where we are visited by God's spirit, surrender to his power and live out our lives in prayer, worship and obedience, earning our forgiveness and salvation.

This was the most extraordinary experience I have ever had in a missionary lesson. For 35 minutes of the discussion, the investigator taught the lesson through the power of the spirit. Brian concluded by saying, "I believe that this is true. I almost feel guilty for saying this, but one reason I like this so much is that it makes sense in my mind. Is it wrong to believe something because it makes logical sense? But beyond the logic, I prayed about it like you told me to do. I really feel like this is true."

Several times during the course of his comments, Brian thanked me for giving him this homework assignment. "It forced me to think about what I read," he said. "And needing to write my answers was great, too – because it forced me to understand it clearly."

The elders then taught quickly the second lesson they had prepared, about the plan of salvation.

When the allotted hour had passed, I asked Brian if he was willing to be baptized. "I thought about this," he responded. "I am. I want to be baptized."

He then proceeded to teach us the lesson about baptism. "At first I thought that I'd better not do it until all of my questions get answered. But then I realized that as soon as one of my questions is answered, I'll have another question, and then another, and another. But that's not what baptism is about. See, it says right here. Baptism is a commitment that you're going to do your best to follow Christ and help other people. I need to be baptized, and then keep working on the questions."

We set a baptismal date of December 17.

Brian then asked for another homework assignment. I again wrote it down:

Read 2 Nephi 2, 25 and 31, and write a 2-paragraph answer to each of these questions:

- A. Why did God send us to this world, and why is there sadness and suffering here?
- B. The Catholic Church emphasizes experiencing the seven sacraments as the means for receiving salvation. Some protestant churches teach that if you accept Jesus you can be saved. What are the roles of our actions and Christ's atonement in our salvation?

I wrote again on the bottom of the paper the process I wanted him to follow. Brian thanked me for this assignment, and committed to do it. The next discussion was similarly extraordinary.

Upon reflection, in most missionary discussions we've participated in, the missionaries do the heavy lifting. They prepare carefully to teach the doctrine, and strive to teach clearly, logically, and by the power of the spirit. As I've sat in those lessons, I've always had a prayer in my heart and mind that the Lord would magnify those young missionaries to be able to teach even more clearly and powerfully, and that our friends would be able to feel the spirit as they listened. What was remarkable about this experience with Brian is that it was the Book of Mormon and the Holy Ghost that did the heavy lifting. It did not depend upon the abilities of the missionaries or us, his friends.

I am writing this on the morning after the third lesson. Again, it was an astounding experience. The commitments the elders asked Brian to make were to study and pray daily – which of course, he already has been doing. When Elder Haslam asked if he'd do these things, Brian responded, "Of course I will – every day."

"Let me tell you one of the things I've concluded as I've done my homework," Brian continued. "Satan is real – and he's always there, trying to work his way into your life. I've noticed that when I study the Book of Mormon and pray in the morning, and when I think of Christ all day long, I have a great day. Things just go right. If I decide I'm too busy and skip it, Satan moves right in, and things don't go right that day. It's like there just can't be a vacuum in your mind and your heart. Either the Spirit of God is in there, or Satan is. That's why it's so important to study the Book of Mormon and pray every day."

Brian picked up his copy of the Book of Mormon as he said these things. I was struck by the reverence with which he held it, having only read a few chapters.

Brian continued, as he held the book, "I realized something else the other day. If you were a physician and you wanted to study how to be a good physician, you wouldn't read some medical textbook that was printed in the 1600s. You'd get the latest information that had been published in your field. If you want to be the best manager you can be, you don't go read a marketing textbook that was written in 1900. You get the latest copy of the Harvard Business Review because that's where the world's experts talk about how to handle today's problems. Isn't it crazy that people think that a God who supposedly loves us all would just stop talking to us, or just talk to the people who lived in Palestine? Don't you think that people who want to do God's will would want to read the most recent things that God has said about the problems we face today?"

He held up the book again, and said, “That’s what this is. I know this is a true book. I understand it in my head, and I feel it in my heart.” He then asked for a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants.

There was just a magnificent spirit in our home as he spoke. The elders and we just sat there with our mouths open. Again, the Book of Mormon and the Spirit of God had done the heavy lifting. We had nothing to add.

Brian then asked for another homework assignment. Fortunately I had prepared it, in response to the portion of the elders’ lesson that focused on the priesthood:

1. Read Mosiah 2 and Alma 1, and write a 2-paragraph response to this question: “What different impact is there on the members of a church that employs professional clergymen to run it, vs. the effect on the members of a church where all men are ordained to the priesthood, and all members accept full responsibility to teach and care for each other?”
2. Read 3 Nephi 11 and 3 Nephi 17, and write a 2-paragraph answer to this question: “Why has the Savior held up little children as the standard towards which adults should aspire? What are the tendencies Jesus wants us as adults to overcome?”

Brian said, “You don’t need to copy the method again. I have it down pat. Feel gratitude. Pray, read, write; pray, read, write; and pray. Eight steps.”

We’ll meet again on Saturday.

Update: Brian was baptized on December 17, 2005. His name has been disguised.