That Ye Might Feel and See: Touch in the First Day of Christ's Ministry

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The culminating event of the Book of Mormon, the fulfillment of six hundred years of Nephite prophecy, was Christ’s post-resurrection physical ministry. Comprising chapters 11–18 of 3 Nephi, the first day of that ministry is described in great detail, incorporating a number of teachings and events reflecting the supernal nature of the day. Much has been written concerning the discourses and experiences of that first day, yet perhaps the most intriguing are those events associated with touch with Christ’s ministry beginning with and initial touching event described in 3 Nephi 11:14–15 and the day’s ministry ending with an allusion to the earlier event in 3 Nephi 18:25: “And ye see that I have commanded that none of you should go away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me, that ye might feel and see.”

This continuity suggests that touch was not just peripheral to his ministry but central to it. In fact, touch appears to have been used by Christ as a form of teaching, with Christ himself declaring that touching him would result in knowing that he was “the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14). Yet touching Christ
may have done more than what Christ explicitly said it would do, for the act of touching itself can be understood as a form of communication with physiological effects such as engendering social cohesiveness that communicate meaning even if the ones touching are not aware of it. This paper will explore the role of touch in Christ’s first day ministry, beginning with the manner by which touching Christ taught what he said it would, thus possibly confirming uncertainty in Nephite prophecy, and then addressing the ways touch may have affected other aspects of his first day ministry, concluding with new insight into Christ’s invitation to “come unto me” (3 Nephi 18:25) at the conclusion of that ministry.

“That You May Know”

According to Mormon, following Christ’s condescension from heaven, the multitude “fell to the earth,” thus associating their behavior with their recognition of the fulfillment of prophecy: “The whole multitude fell to the earth; for they remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven” (3 Nephi 11:12). At this point, Christ exhorted those assembled, “Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14). Mormon then recounts that everyone did so, “going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and 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, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come” (3 Nephi 11:15).

As these verses suggest, a primary purpose to this initial touching event was to acquire knowledge, specifically the knowledge that Christ was the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth, and that he had been slain for the sins of the world. Though verse 12 implies that the gathered recognized Christ upon his arrival, a closer reading may indicate that they do not do so immediately. Only after Christ introduced himself using the language he had spoken
during the three days of darkness (see 3 Nephi 9:14–18) did Mormon place their remembrance of earlier prophecy; a prophecy, interestingly, not mentioned anywhere else in the Book of Mormon. Their initial uncertainty and Christ’s emphasis that touching him would give them knowledge that he was “the God of Israel, and the God the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” may indicate ignorance of (1) Christ’s death by crucifixion, (2) that he would visit those in the New World, and (3) that Christ was, in fact, God, thus necessitating the acquisition of this knowledge by those gathered in Bountiful via touching the Savior.

**Uncertainty Concerning Death by Crucifixion**

Understanding that Christ died by crucifixion would appear at first glance to be obvious, the physical puncture marks associated with crucifixion clearly and tangibly present on Christ’s body and attesting to the act of crucifixion. Yet it is possible that Christ’s crucifixion, and crucifixion in general, was not widely understood by the survivors of the cataclysmic events described in 3 Nephi 8–10. The understanding that Christ was going to die to redeem the world can be found as late as the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite, who noted that Christ “surely must die that salvation may come . . . , that thereby men may be brought into the presence of the Lord” (Helaman 14:15). Yet explicit references to crucifixion are found primarily in the prophecies associated with the small plates. The first explicit reference to the crucifixion is in Nephi’s paraphrase of certain prophecies found on the brass plates: “The God of our fathers, . . . yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself . . . as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum” (1 Nephi 19:10). A few verses later, Nephi, again referenced crucifixion, this time suggesting that the prophet Zenos also prophesied of Christ’s crucifixion. Jacob referenced the crucifixion in his discourse recorded in 2 Nephi 6–10. In 2 Nephi 6:9, Jacob proclaimed, “The Lord has shown unto me . . . that the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, should manifest himself unto them in the flesh; and after he should manifest himself they should scourge him and crucify
him, according to the words of the angel who spake it unto me.” Jacob repeated
the prophecy in 2 Nephi 10:3, again highlighting the prophecy’s angelic ori-
gin: “And they shall crucify him—for thus it behooveth our God, and there is
none other nation on earth that would crucify their God.” Nephi 1 gave one last
prophecy concerning Christ’s crucifixion following his Isaiah citations, declar-
ing that the Jews would “crucify him; and after he is laid in a sepulchre for the
space of three days he shall rise from the dead” (2 Nephi 25:13). After these
references, there is no explicit mention of crucifixion until the Nephite migra-
tion to Zarahemla.

The next set of prophecies are found in King Benjamin’s discourse, also
delivered angelically: “The things which I shall tell you are made known unto
me by an angel from God. And he said . . . they shall consider him a man, and say
that he hath a devil, and they shall scourge him, and shall crucify him” (Mosiah
3:2, 9). The final explicit reference is in the words of Abinadi, who noted that
Christ would be “crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto
death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah
15:7). This is the last explicit reference to the crucifixion until Christ’s appear-
ance, and it may suggest that the few generations preceding Christ’s appear-
ance were unaware of the act and it being a means by which one could identify
Christ. In fact, the nature of the act itself may have been unknown outside of
vision or direct angelic speech as there is no indication that Roman-style cru-
cifixion was practiced in the New World; the only individual who appears to
have seen the crucifixion was Nephi 1, who stated that he saw Christ lifted up
(1 Nephi 11:33). Others were told that he would be lifted up, but there is no
corresponding vision provided; therefore, it is unclear if the people understood
what crucifixion was at the time of Christ’s arrival. 4

Uncertainty Concerning Christ’s Coming

It is also unclear how well-known were prophecies concerning Christ’s actual
appearance in the New World. Prophecies concerning the coming of Christ
as a mortal are found throughout the Book of Mormon; in fact, it is possible
that this is one of the most common prophecies in the Nephite record. First
noted in 1 Nephi 11:7, these prophecies continue until 3 Nephi 2:7 and range from simple observations that Christ would come to detailed prophecies concerning his birth and ministry. The designations associated with Christ’s mortality include his identification as the Messiah, the Son of God, Lamb of God, Redeemer, Christ, and, importantly for this paper, Lord and God. The latter are significant as they indicate the prophecy that “God” would take on a mortal form was understood among at least some of the righteous.

Yet as common as these prophecies are, they emphasized Christ’s birth and ministry in the Old World. Prophecies declaring Christ’s ministry in the New World are rare in the text as we have it. The most explicit prophecies are again found in the writings of Nephi 1. As part of the vision concerning his descendants and after the destruction associated with Christ’s death, he “saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself” to those who survived (1 Nephi 12:6). Nephi 1 revisits the prophecy in 2 Nephi 26:1, noting, “After Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren.” Reiterating the destruction that would take place at Christ’s death, Nephi 1 then promises, “The Son of Righteousness shall appear unto them [the righteous who survive]; and he shall heal them, and they shall have peace with him” (2 Nephi 26:9). In both instances, Nephi 1 appears to be addressing later generations of Lehi’s descendants who would experience Christ’s visit, but their placement on the small plates may suggest they were not well known by later generations.

Alma 2 also spoke of Christ’s coming. For instance, Alma 2 would tell his son Corianton that their ministry was “to declare these glad tidings [the coming of Christ] unto this people, to prepare their minds; or rather that salvation might come unto them, that they may prepare the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming” (Alma 39:16). A generation or two later, Helaman 2 would remind his sons, Nephi 2 and Lehi 2, of King Benjamin’s prophecy, paraphrasing: “Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world” (Helaman 5:9). Nephi 2 would later declare that the Nephite “fathers . . . even down to this time, yea, they have testified of the coming of Christ” (Helaman 8:22). Significantly though, these prophecies only
indicate an awareness that Christ was coming to earth to redeem it, not explicit prophecies concerning a visitation by him to those in the New World.

An explicit reference to Christ’s coming to the New World following Nephi’s is found in Alma 16:20. The verse is part of Mormon’s summary of events for the latter half of the twelfth year of the reign of judges. In response to the ministering of the church’s priests, “many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come.” The interest appears to be based on the church’s teachings, described a few verses earlier: “The Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land to prepare the minds of the children of men, or to prepare their hearts to receive the word which should be taught among them at the time of his coming” (Alma 16:16). As noted, the coming of Christ as a mortal was a common Book of Mormon prophecy; this continued as a part of the church’s teachings in the reign of the judges, possibly reflecting the emphasis on Abinadi’s teachings in the early church.7 Mormon continues in Alma 16:20, noting that the people “were taught that [Christ] would appear unto them after his resurrection; and this the people did hear with great joy and gladness,” thus suggesting that Christ’s future appearance was a known element of the church’s teachings.

Yet three years earlier in the ninth year of the reign of the judges, Alma2, speaking to the people of Gideon, admitted, “The time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people. Behold, I do not say that he will come among us at the time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle; for behold, the Spirit hath not said unto me that this should be the case. Now as to this thing I do not know; but this much I do know, that the Lord God hath power to do all things which are according to his word” (Alma 7:7–8). According to the admission, Alma2 acknowledges two things. The first is that he knows Christ will visit “his people” and the second is that Christ would not be in the New World during his “time of dwelling.” The assumption as to whom “his people” are appears to be the church in the Book of Mormon, but if this is the case, then Alma2 is acknowledging that he is unsure how exactly the prophecy would be fulfilled, his own uncertainty reflected in the admission.8

Perhaps most notable is the absence of this prophecy in the prophecies attributed to Samuel the Lamanite. As detailed as they were about the events that would take place in the New World at the birth and death of Christ,
Samuel’s prophecies contain no explicit reference, or even allusion, to Christ’s arrival in the New World. In light of the above, it is possible that those gathered, as described in 3 Nephi 11, were not fully aware that Christ was to come.

Uncertainty Concerning Christ as God

The final uncertainty mentioned above was the way Christ could also be identified as God. At issue was what the Nephites meant when they spoke of Christ as both “Son of God” and “God.” The identification for Christ as the Son of God is found fifty-one times in the Book of Mormon. The first mention is in 1 Nephi 10:17, where Lehi described Christ as the “Son of God.” The designation is found four times in Nephi’s vision (1 Nephi 11:6, 7, 18, 24), with the angel also identifying Christ as the Lamb of God, who he later acknowledges as “the Son of the everlasting God” (1 Nephi 11:32) and “Son of the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:12; 13:40). Later, in 2 Nephi 25, Nephi uses the designation twice (2 Nephi 25:16, 19) in conjunction with “the Only Begotten of the Father” (2 Nephi 25:12; see also Alma 5:48; 9:26; 13:9). The text of King Benjamin’s sermon contains the title three times (Mosiah 3:8; 4:2; 15:2), the first usage, as in 1 Nephi 11, used by an angel.

Alma also uses the designation; in fact he uses the designation eighteen times, more than any other with its appearance in every major sermon he delivered. The designation is used once by Helaman when speaking to his sons, Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5:12), with Nephi using it three times in his sermon on the tower (Helaman 8:14, 15, 20). Samuel the Lamanite references Christ as “the Son of God” three times in Helaman 14 (verses 2, 8, 12). Of interest is the usage of the title by those who are critical of the church’s teachings in Helaman 16:18: “It is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ should come; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth.” Though antagonistic, its usage here suggests a general understanding among the population as to Christ as the Son of God. One final note before moving on is that this designation is often associated with Christ’s future mortal state. In fact, in at least two instances, Mosiah 15:3 and 3 Nephi 1:14, Christ’s designation as “Son” is explicitly tied to his future, physical form.
Further prophetic utterances demonstrate that they distinguished between Christ and a figure identified as “God” even when not using the explicit designation of “Son of God.” In 2 Nephi 25:23, Nephi, exhorts his people to believe in Christ and be reconciled unto God. In Nephi’s discourse concerning the eventual restoration of Israel, he notes, “The Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 30:2). Nephi’s brother, Jacob, also suggests that there are two distinct and different divine beings. In Jacob 4:5, Jacob records that he and his people “believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name.” Just a few verses later, Jacob would exhort his people to “be reconciled unto him [God] through the atonement of Christ, his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:11). As with the designation of Christ as “Son of God,” these references indicate a common understanding of Christ as a being separate from “God.”

Yet even as these descriptions suggest that Christ and God were understood as two distinct beings, other references imply a more complex, ambiguous understanding to the designation of the term God and its application to Christ. In 1 Nephi 19, Nephi indicates that the “God of our fathers, . . . the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” would be crucified, indicating that Christ was also “God” (1 Nephi 19:10). In 2 Nephi 10:3–4, Jacob explicitly designates Christ as God, who would be crucified and work miracles. A few chapters later, Nephi would entitle Christ as “the Eternal God” (2 Nephi 26:12). A few hundred years later, Abinadi emphasized that “God would come down,” this emphasis on divine condescension being one of the primary factors behind his martyrdom: “For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 17:8; also Mosiah 13:34; 15:1). In at least one instance, the divine voice, identifying himself as Christ, refers to himself as “God.” In Mosiah 26, which records the revelation setting out the church’s regulations concerning membership, the divine voice declares, “This is my church; . . . whomsoever ye receive shall believe in my name; and him will I freely forgive. For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world; . . . then shall they know that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer” (Mosiah 26:22–23, 26).

A duality between the usage of the term God as a general term for divinity and as a designation for a specific entity is expressed in Alma 11. Part of
the debate between Zeezrom and Amulek centers on this subject. In verse 25 Amulek referenced “the true and living God.” After confirming this title, Zeezrom then asked if there was more than one God, implying that he understood Amulek to be discussing the title as the designation for a type of divine being. Amulek’s answer is no, suggesting that his usage differed from what Zeezrom supposed. A few verses later, Zeezrom asks concerning the prophecy of Christ, “Who is he that should come? Is it the son of God?” (Alma 11:32). Amulek answers in the affirmative, to which Zeezrom then rejoins with, “He said there is but one God; yet he saith that the Son of God shall come” (Alma 11:35), which suggests that at some level “Son of God” was equated with the concept of “god” since Zeezrom is attempting to catch Amulek in a verbal error.

The subject is redressed again later in the confrontation, with Zeezrom asking if the Son of God was “the very Eternal Father” (Alma 11:38). Amulek responded again in the affirmative, noting that this individual would “come into the world to redeem his people” (Alma 11:40), an act that would allow for a judgment and resurrection by which all would “be brought and be arraigned before the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God” (Alma 11:44). In this verse, three usages of God are being used; God as entity is referenced in conjunction with the identification of the Father, while the entities of Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit are “one eternal God.” Thus, there appears to be three concurrent usages of God: (1) individual entity, often but not always associated with a supreme deity equated either with God the Father, especially when used to designate Christ as Son or with Christ, (2) ontological descriptor, in which no specific identity is necessarily referenced, but purposes and behaviors of deity may include recognizing the deity’s possible physical form, and (3) designation for organization of divine entities, or what we today would refer to as the Godhead.

Adding to the confusion, it appears that at some point the Nephite word God was not understood by the Lamanites. In Alma 18 the martial acts of Ammon are ascribed to supernatural power, which leads Lamoni, a Lamanite king, to assume that Ammon is “the Great Spirit” (Alma 18:11). Later, when Ammon demonstrates that he knows what Lamoni is thinking, Lamoni again equates him with the Great Spirit: “Who art thou? Art thou that Great Spirit, who knows all things” (verse 18). Still later, when Ammon asks if Lamoni
believes in "God," Lamoni’s answer is intriguing: “I do not know what that meaneth” (verse 25), suggesting that the terminology Ammon₂ uses, translated in the Book of Mormon as God, is not in the Lamanite lexicon or has a completely different meaning. Ammon₂ then asks if Lamoni believes there is “a Great Spirit.” When Lamoni responds in the affirmative, Ammon₂ declares, “This is God” (verse 28).

The same confusion appears later in Aaron’s interaction with Lamoni’s father. The exchange begins with Lamoni’s father wondering why it is that Ammon₂ is not present. Aaron’s response is that Ammon₂ had been called away to the land of Ishmael by “the Spirit of the Lord” (Alma 22:4). Lamoni’s father then asks, “What is this that ye have said concerning the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, this is the thing which doth trouble me” (verse 5). What exactly it is that troubles him is not clear, though based on the confusion between the Nephite term God and the Lamanite term Great Spirit, it is possible that Lamoni’s father is confused as to who is exactly interacting with Ammon₂. Aaron’s response to this begins in the same manner as Ammon₂ with Lamoni: “Believest thou that there is a God?” (verse 7). Unlike Lamoni, who responded that he didn’t know what that meant, Lamoni’s father answers that he is aware of God but only through Nephite dissenters to whom he had granted religious rights of assembly and building of edifices. This awareness leads Lamoni’s father to ask whether the Nephite God is equivalent to his Great Spirit, and, like his brother, Aaron responds in the affirmative (verses 9–10). What these narratives suggest is that Nephite terminology for deity is not the same as Lamanite terminology and that therefore the nature of God was not equally known among Lehi’s descendants.

As to how they envisioned what a God was as a physical entity is never defined in the Book of Mormon. Christ is accorded a physical body, but only when he became mortal. For the Lamanites, deity, or at least a chief deity, was understood to be a Great Spirit, and though the terminology differed, all Nephite interactions with Christ in the Book of Mormon would have been with him in his premortal, precorporeal state, and thus a spirit as well, his designation as “Son” reflecting his future, corporeal state. The ontological nature of other individuals identified as God are either as spirit or not provided. Thus, not surprisingly, the Holy Ghost, or Spirit of God, is designated as a spirit. In
the case of God the Father and his ontological state, the text is silent. Again, as noted above, it seems clear that the Nephites know of the existence of the Father as an independent entity and recognize generally his work regarding salvation, but there is no explicit interaction with God the Father outside of 2 Nephi 31, which records speech from both God the Father and Christ to Nephi. Thus, it is unclear if anyone in the Book of Mormon fully understood the ontological nature of God outside of spirit states, with the Lamanites possibly not even understanding the very terminology.15

“They . . . Did Feel with Their Hands, and Did Know of a Surety”

These uncertainties—uncertainty as to the fulfillment of earlier Nephite prophecy, specifically prophecies concerning crucifixion and his actual appearance in the New World, as well as uncertainty concerning how Christ was God and if Gods had bodies—may have been answered in the touching experience. Unfortunately, Christ does not explain (nor Mormon for that matter), how exactly touching Christ was necessary for the acquisition of this knowledge. With that said, tactile manipulation is one of the primary avenues for early learning. Though rarely thought of in terms of the learning process—specifically abstract learning—tactile, or haptic, learning is formational at the beginning of the learning process. While haptic learning is crucial to spatial awareness, which includes such elements as temperature, air movement, object recognition, even balance, it also serves to make abstract thought concrete.

In little children and infants, some have suggested that approximately 60 percent of the early lexical development is simple nouns. This development begins with the child grasping and feeling the object. The act of touching creates rudimentary patterns of mental characteristics, which are the foundation of more complex mental representations. The “haptic schemas” (the patterns or characteristics associated with the object) then lead to “image schemas” in which the visual experience with the object harmonizes with the haptic memory; these then allow for the object to be associated with the more abstract identifying word.16 For example, a child may first learn the concept of “apple”
through the touch of one, which is reinforced by a picture of one, which is then assigned the abstract word *apple*. In the end, the child knows what an apple is and will associate the correct concept when presented with the word *apple*, but the process itself began with the tactile manipulation of one. In this manner Helen Keller was able to figure out how to communicate. It took her hands being placed under running water and then having her fingers manipulated into the signs for “water” that she grasped the concept of “water,” which was the communicative breakthrough she needed. It was the tactile experience, the sense of touch, the water running over her skin, that led to the mental recognition.\(^\text{17}\)

Based on the role of touch in learning, it is possible that the experience of touching Christ reinforced schema that already existed, such as the Nephite prophecies, while at the same time making concrete other schema, like the physical reality of a God. The experience itself would have entailed sensations such as pressure, temperature distribution, spatiality, and so forth—all of which would have revealed something of the nature of the object being touched. If, as Christ says, the object was his divinized body, then touch was being used to make aspects of a divine body concrete. This may seem elementary, but it has profound implications concerning the uncertainties mentioned above.

First, it would have confirmed the nature of crucifixion. As noted earlier, there is no evidence that Nephites earlier and the righteous present at Christ’s arrival understood exactly what crucifixion entailed. Running fingers over the ridges and indentations of Christ’s marks in his hands and in his feet would have initiated haptic learning, allowing for everyone present to grasp what crucifixion was which would have led to a greater understanding and appreciation of those prophecies; they would have truly understood what had been promised. Second, it would have confirmed the prophecies of Christ’s coming and of his presence. This may seem obvious, but by handling and feeling Christ’s body, those gathered would have no longer simply believed but known in a powerful, lasting way that Christ was real. That this is in fact what happened is realized in their response to the touching, recorded by Mormon: “And this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth . . . and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety . . . that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come” (3 Nephi 11:15).
Finally, the experience of touching Christ would have taught those gathered the physical reality of a divine body. Again, as obvious as it may sound, it would have revealed the spatial immediacy of Christ. A divine body took up space; it was present within a space not filled by anything else. It would have confirmed that deity had its own physical form independent of others. In this it would have contrasted with deity as spirit. The ontological implications of a spirit being were that they could be housed or embodied in anything, perhaps suggesting a fluidity to the concept of God. Feeling Christ’s own body would have established that at least at some level, God includes an independent form. This experience would have affected that understanding from that moment forward. It also would have confirmed that the body was living. While it is not clear exactly what a resurrected body is like (does it have a pulse, does it have a circulatory system, does one breathe, and so forth), it is certainly not a corpse. Thus, his body would have been enlivened, possibly reacting to the stimuli of being touched by twitching, shivering, and so on. All of this would have confirmed his living nature, that deity was alive and therefore relatable at some level. Those gathered would know via this haptic learning the nature and very existence of deity. As Christ himself would recognize: “Ye have seen me and [now] know that I am” (3 Nephi 12:1).

“My Bowels Are Filled with Compassion towards You”

Though the tactile experience described in 3 Nephi 11 had an explicit purpose to teach those gathered about Christ, both in terms of prophecies uttered about him and his very ontological nature as God, the experience would have had other unspoken effects as well by virtue of the physiological aspect of the event. Perhaps the most significant would have been the hormonal changes enacted by this active form of touching, specifically the release of oxytocin. This physiological effect of touch has long been recognized and has been noted to be an essential feature of social interaction. First noted as an effect of childbirth and labor, breastfeeding, and physical intimacy, oxytocin has since been found to be released in even casual touch such as handshakes, pats on the back, and so forth. While there is much that is still
not known, one of the primary effects of oxytocin appears to reduce amygdala activity, an area of the brain that regulates fear and aggression and the release of hormones such as cortisol associated with stress and anxiety. At the same time, it helps facilitate the release of other hormones such as dopamine and serotonin, which have calming influences and are associated with prosocial behavior, such as creation and maintenance of long-term bonds, parental care, and other social affiliations.¹⁹

One of the intriguing outcomes of touch is that it appears the release of oxytocin associated with touch increases compliancy in those being touched. In one study, it was demonstrated that a waiter or waitress who touched a restaurant patron even in the most casual manner was more likely to receive a bigger tip.²⁰ Other studies have demonstrated that oxytocin makes one more socially aware, with one study noting that the presence of oxytocin led to greater visual concentration of another’s eyes and facial expressions.²¹ In light of the prosocial behavior that results from oxytocin, some have begun noting that oxytocin may play a role in one’s spirituality and religiosity.²²

Perhaps because touch has such a powerful physiological impact, touch experiences are highly regulated socially. No matter the culture, bodily contact is often limited to only certain situations and the type of touch is associated with one’s spatiality.²³ One’s understanding of self includes the physical separateness one has from objects and others, with the senses delineating the type of contact one has with another. Unlike the other senses though, touch possesses an immediacy in terms of response.²⁴ Unlike the other senses, touch includes an immediate awareness of being touched. One cannot be unaware of touch the same way one can be unaware of others looking at us or speaking to us.²⁵ It collapses personal space and is not an event that one is unaware of. As such, touch is one of the primary means of communication.

The space that separates us from others, and thus regulates the type of touching that can take place, demarcates the closeness of the individual with us. The more distant, the less attached we are to the individual. The closer they are to our body, the more likely we have attachment feelings to the individual. Moreover, the closer they are, the more they are allowed to touch and have access to more places to touch. Thus, not surprisingly, touch plays a role in determining social status. In a number of studies, initiation of touch seems
to indicate one is of a higher social status, with the act elevating the individual in the lower status, since the act suggests access to higher social levels, as if some of the status rubbed off and is retained by the individual of lower status. Other studies have demonstrated that because touch indicates status, the type of touch differs in those of higher and lower social status. Those in lower status positions are more likely to initiate touching and engage in more formal, polite touches such as handshakes that recognize and maintain spatial distance. Those of higher status are more likely to engage in more informal, friendly acts of touch such as hand-to-shoulder and hand-to-arm touch.

Because the type of touch is significant as much as the act of touching itself, it is worth noting the terminology used to describe the touch type. In 3 Nephi 11 we are told that the individual was to “thrust” their hands (plural) into the side of Christ and “feel” the prints of the nails in his hands and feet. These suggest a tactile experience, which would have included feeling the ridges, the puckering of skin, pressure in or on the body, perhaps feeling the depressions or absence of flesh in the wounds themselves, sensing the warmth of the flesh. In the case of the spear mark, one would have also felt flesh surrounding the fingers inserted into the wound. If the above description of the tactile experience is somewhat uncomfortable, part of the reaction reflects the intimacy of the act itself. This was not simply a reaching out of a fingertip, but fully active form of touching of areas of the body normally off limits, particularly the lower torso. The social boundaries are not in effect and therefore result in our potentially reflexive discomfort.

In this sense, then, we can think of Christ’s invitation as provocative. It certainly would have had social ramifications. In terms of status, Christ’s invitation indicates his position of higher status, yet the type of touch is not one of social distance but of intimacy and closeness in which those gathered entered Christ’s personal space and engaged in more than incidental, polite contact. They were invited not only to actively feel the contours and depressions of the marks but actually to place their hands inside the body of Christ in an area, either the torso or lower torso, that is restricted territory. Moreover, there is no record that Christ actively touched back. Instead, Christ stood there as twenty-five hundred people ran their hands over portions of his body, inserting them into his side. The invitation to enter his personal, intimate space suggests
a reversal of status. Christ voluntarily placed himself into the lower status position regarding this touching event, elevating all those who actively touched him, in effect erasing the status as a marker. The closeness and the type and placement of the touching indicated that Christ did not view those touching as strangers but close, intimate friends or colleagues.

The effects, both in terms of the physiological effects and the resulting prosocial behavior, may provide insight into Christ’s emphasis concerning social cohesion. Christ’s instructions to the disciples concerning the proper manner of baptism immediately following the touching event include instruction that there be no “disputations” among the congregation (3 Nephi 11:22, 28). In verses 29–30, Christ teaches that there should be no contention and anger against one another in any situation, with Christ suggesting such antisocial behavior is the antithesis of his doctrine: “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.” This is immediately followed by Christ’s emphasis on the oneness that exists between him and other members of the Godhead (verses 32–36, see also verse 27).

Similar instruction is given to the multitude. While many have recognized themes in Christ’s sermon at the temple, noting its similarities with Christ’s Old World teachings, social cohesion plays a role in these as well. Third Nephi 12:11–12 speaks to the importance of not responding in kind to negative social behaviors, as do verses 38–44, emphasizing the role of loving even your enemy, praying for those that despise and persecute you. Earlier, in verses 21–25, Christ again emphasized the role of reconciliation in proper worship, exhorting those gathered, “Go thy way unto thy brother, and first be reconciled” (verse 24) if they desired to come unto Christ. Christ’s instruction concerning marriage in verses 27–32 may also be seen as an emphasis to greater cohesion, this time within the bonds of the marriage relationship.

Later in the day, oneness is again a theme. Beginning in chapter 15, Christ relates that there are “other sheep . . . which are not of this fold”; these too would receive Christ’s ministrations so that there would be “one fold, and one shepherd” (verse 17). This is emphasized in verse 21, where Christ indicates that the righteous in the New World were those of whom he was speaking, again emphasizing the importance of one fold and one shepherd. Chapter 16
continues the theme, this time noting that there were still others that Christ would minister to, again because there was to be one fold and one shepherd (verse 3). Within this context of greater social cohesion established by the touching event, we place Christ’s teachings on the gathering. Immediately following his emphasis on one fold and one shepherd, itself following on the heels of his teachings that had implied oneness among the gathered in Bountiful, Christ speaks concerning the manner by which he and the Father would gather all, both Israelite and Gentile (verses 4–5), placing the pivotal Isaianic prophecy concerning redemption and comfort within the context of the touching event and social cohesion of his earlier words (verses 17–20).29

“Even So Shall Ye Do”

The event described in 3 Nephi 11 was not the only tactile event of that day. Following his spoken discourses, Christ brought to him all who were “afflicted in any manner” (3 Nephi 17:7), who were then healed. We don’t know precisely how the healing took place, but Christ suggested that he would do so in the same manner as he did in the Old World: “I perceive that ye desire that I should show unto you what I have done unto your brethren at Jerusalem” (verse 8). If he did heal in the same manner, this would have included touching the afflicted as this is the overwhelmingly predominant way he healed in the New Testament. A few verses later, we find that Christ invited all the little children in the gathering to come to him, where, following a prayer concerning all who had gathered, Christ “took their little children, one by one, and blessed them” (verse 21). Again, though it doesn’t say explicitly that he touched them, the implication of his taking them one by one suggests that he would have held them, perhaps encircling them with his arms while blessing them, while at the same time reflecting the earlier experience. Just as they had come one by one to touch him, so he too touched them one by one. These later events would have had the same physiological results, and thus would have emphasized and reinforced the effects of the earlier event resulting in even greater social cohesion, the reciprocal acts of touch—those gathered touching Christ and then
Christ touching them—strengthening and adding layer upon layer to those relationships.

The initial touching event also played a role in Christ’s introduction of the sacrament and the instruction concerning his church recorded in 3 Nephi 18. After establishing the way the bread of the sacrament would be dispersed and eaten, Christ noted that it should be done “in remembrance of my body, which I have shown unto you” (verse 7). Thus, one element of the new ordinance experience was to remember the experience they had with Christ’s body. For those gathered, the sacrament would remind not only of Christ’s sacrifice but also his resurrected, tangible body. It would be a reminder that he was there. Therefore, one aspect of the event was to be a specific memory to be used in later spiritual growth.

This aspect of the event, the memory of it, is explicit in Christ’s later instruction. Beginning in 3 Nephi 18:22, after noting that the righteous should “meet together oft,” Christ teaches that no one should be forbidden from meeting with the congregation: “Ye shall not forbid any man from coming unto you when ye shall meet together; . . . ye shall pray for them, and shall not cast them out” (verses 22–23). Why would one do so? Because Christ himself had set the example: “Ye see that I have commanded that none of you should go away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me” (verse 25). This is then followed by a direct reference to the event and an exhortation to do likewise: “That ye should come unto me, that ye might feel and see; even so shall ye do unto the world” (verse 25; emphasis added).

The last clause, “even so shall ye do unto the world,” is beautifully ambiguous. What is it exactly that those gathered were to do? On one level, it appears they were to bring people to Christ much as he had brought those gathered to him. In other words, they, having experienced Christ, would now go and invite others to come unto him. Doing so may be reflected in something as simple as a handshake or a pat on the back, a physical act that demonstrates to the one touched that they are being thought of and known, that they belong and are valued. Yet it is equally possible that Christ’s request is not alluding to the act of physical touch but instead to an individual making themselves as available, as open, as he had, demonstrating the same willingness to be vulnerable and receptive to others as Christ himself had been.30 Or perhaps it is both—both a
request that invites others to the supernal knowledge that we ourselves know concerning Christ and the willingness to make ourselves as open and vulnerable as Christ himself was.

**Conclusion**

However we are to understand this commandment, it arises from the powerful experience of touch. It was through touching and being touched that those gathered that day in Bountiful truly knew that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of centuries of prophecy, that he was the God who died and was resurrected, not just for those present but for all humanity. It was through touch that physiological effects could take place, reinforcing Christ’s teachings concerning unity and oneness. It was through the experience of touch that the new ordinance of the sacrament was introduced. It was the memory of touch that led to Christ’s supernal, and open-ended, invitation to “do unto the world.” Even as we recognize the significance of Christ’s spoken teachings, perhaps it is through the unspoken acts of touch that Christ’s most significant teaching took place. Certainly its power resonates with us today, his invitation as real now as it was on that day in Bountiful.

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**Notes**

1. Though he does not use the term “crucifixion,” Nephi, does appear to be aware of the act in his own prophecies. In 1 Nephi 11:33, Nephi relates that he saw Christ “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world.” This suggests that Nephi, saw in vision the crucifixion of Christ, though he did not say he saw that, only that he saw Christ lifted on the cross, not the manner of how Christ was attached to the cross.

2. “And as for those who are at Jerusalem, saith the prophet, they shall be scourged by all the people, because they crucify the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 19:13). The immediate precedent for “the prophet” is Zenos, suggesting it is Zenos’s prophecies to which Nephi is alluding.

The crucifixion is stated explicitly in 1 Nephi 19:13, 2 Nephi 6:9, 10:3, 25:13, sources that predate Abinadi and to which he must have had some access. Since it is unlikely that Abinadi had access to the small plates, we may suppose that this information also appeared on the large plates which would have served as Abinadi’s source.” See also Gardner, Second Witness, 1:210–13, in which he notes the possibility of cross imagery in Mesoamerica but not Roman-style crucifixion.

4. Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness, 2:185: “I tend to see the inclusion of the specific word ‘crucifixion’ as a modern artifact rather than an accurate rendition of plate text. Even assuming that Jacob understood exactly what crucifixion was, the chance that his audience would be familiar with that form of execution is extremely remote. Those who came from the Old World might possibly know it, but the New World portions of the Nephite population . . . would not.”

5. Gardner notes the absence of this prophecy in later Nephite tradition, see Gardner, Second Witness, 1:224: “These verses prophesy the events recorded in 3 Nephi. Oddly enough, despite its explicitness, this particular prophecy is never referenced close to that time. While the people recognize that the Messiah’s death and arrival among them is approaching, it is the predictions of Samuel the Lamanite, not Nephi, that they recall (3 Nephi 8:3). What this silence confirms is that Nephi’s personal record on the small plates is essentially lost to the greater tradition. Mormon tells us that he found the small plates only as he searched among the records (Words of Mormon 1:3). He was not only in charge of the records but was also researching the information which to create his own summary text. If Mormon, at the end of the Nephite civilization, was unaware of these small plates, we may assume that earlier keepers of the records were similarly unaware of them.” There does appear to be some evidence that at least some of the small plates are known by earlier writers in Alma and Helaman. In Alma 63:12 we learn that Helaman1 initiated a program in which the existing texts were made more available, presumably via making copies: “All those engravings which were in the possession of Helaman were written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land.” According to Words of Mormon 1:10, Amaleki delivered all the plates he had, which would have been the small plates of Nephi, to Benjamin, who “put them with the other plates,” presumably describing the storage facility for all records, until all the records were received by Mormon. This transfer would have occurred just a few generations before Helaman’s work. Thus, it is possible that at least until Helaman1 the material on the small plates was known. Thanks to my colleague John Hilton III for pointing out this connection. With that said, Gardner’s point concerning the specificity of this prophecy and its apparent ignorance by those gathered in Bountiful at the time of Christ’s appearance is intriguing.

6. See notes 2–3 and the possibility of ignorance to prophetic statements found exclusively on the small plates. With this said, it is possible that there are other texts that Mormon used. The prophecy alluded to by Mormon in 3 Nephi 11:12, “they remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven,” is not found anywhere else in the Book of Mormon.
7. The role of Abinadi’s teachings in the church’s doctrine may be seen in Mosiah 18:1–2 and 19–20 where the church’s understanding of the gospel principle of redemption appears to be based on Abinadi’s understanding of redemption, provided in Mosiah 14–15. Abinadi’s teachings concerning redemption are again mentioned in the Mosiah 26, which provides the regulations of Christ’s church, via revelation (see verses 15, 25–27, the latter of which associates redemption with the eschatological judgment like Abinadi’s association in Mosiah 15:19–27).

8. Gardner, Second Witness, 4:8: “Alma understands that Jesus will live his life in the Old World but does not know if Jesus will come to the New World as a mortal.”

9. Heather Hardy, “‘Saving Christianity’: The Nephite Fulfillment of Jesus’s Eschatological Prophecies,” in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 23, no. 1 (2014): 22–55: “Although six hundred years prior to the devastation, Book of Mormon prophet Nephi had clearly taught that the resurrected Lord would visit Lehi’s posterity, . . . the fact that Samuel the Lamanite, just a generation before, had not mentioned a post resurrection visit may have led the Nephites to forget the earlier prophecy or to interpret it other than literally” (40). Samuel’s prophecies, and the narrative of their presentation, is not so clear-cut either. For more on the history and compilation of Samuel’s prophecies, see Daniel L. Belnap, “‘There was One Samuel: Possible Multiple Sources for the Samuel Narrative,’ in Samuel the Lamanite: That Ye May Believe, ed. Charles Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 251–92.

10. Hardy, “‘Saving Christianity,’” 39–40: “Despite the Father’s explicit introduction, the Nephites are genuinely puzzled when the resurrected Lord descends from the skies. . . . It appears that the Nephite survivors are not expecting a divine manifestation beyond Jesus’ voice from heaven.” This is perhaps even more probable if one considers the survivors to be predominantly Lamanite (see 3 Nephi 6:14).

11. See Gardner, Second Witness, 1:214–22, for an excellent introduction to this challenge and his approach to the problem (specifying that “Son of God” has reference to Christ as the son of El Elyon [Most High God], with references to Christ as Father in reference to Christ’s role as Father to humankind). While this may resolve some issues, as we’ll see, there are several references that simply discuss Christ as “God” or do not identify the title or designation with any specific individual.


13. Though the following may seem to be referencing the ongoing discussion concerning the depiction of God in the Book of Mormon as a modalist or a trinitarian model, this argument is actually addressing what those in the Book of Mormon may have understood God to be ontologically, or what they thought about God in physical form. For more on the modalist or trinitarian discussion, see Hull and Smoot in this volume. See also David L. Paulsen and Ari D. Bruening, “The Social Model of the Trinity in 3 Nephi,” in Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 191–234.
14. Gardner, Second Witness, 4:292, notes the incompatibility and suggests it is a “cultural/religious difference.”

15. It is possible that the Jaredite record may contain an interaction with a physical body. In Ether 3:8–13, the brother of Jared interacts with the Lord in such a manner that may have included seeing a body. According to verse 7, when questioned as to why the brother of Jared had fallen to the ground, he states, “I saw the finger of the Lord... I knew not that the Lord had flesh and blood.” The Lord’s response is that because of his faith, the brother of Jared saw that the Lord would “take upon me flesh and blood” (verse 9). What exactly the brother of Jared saw is unclear. Moroni appears to believe that he saw Christ’s spirit form, but which was “after the manner and in the likeness of the same body even as he showed himself unto the Nephites” (verse 17). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland entertained the possibility that in some revelatory manner the brother of Jared actually saw the body of Christ. See Jeffrey R. Holland, Christ and the New Covenant (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 22: “Another interpretation of this passage is that the faith of the brother of Jared was so great he saw not only the spirit finger and body of the premortal Jesus... but also some distinctly more revealing aspect of Christ’s body of flesh, blood, and bone.” With that said, Elder Holland’s opinion falls on the following interpretation: “A final explanation—and in terms of the brother of Jared’s faith the most persuasive one—is that Christ was saying to the brother of Jared, “Never have I showed myself unto man in this manner, without my volition, driven solely by the faith of the beholder.” As a rule, prophets are invited into the presence of the Lord, are bidden to enter his presence by him and only with his sanction. The brother of Jared, on the other hand, seems to have thrust himself through the veil, not as an unwelcomed guest but perhaps technically as an uninvited one” (23).

16. Christiane Kiese-Himmel, “Haptic Perception in Infancy and First Acquisition of Object Words: Developmental and Clinical Approach,” in Human Haptic Perception: Basics and Applications, ed. Martin Grunwald (Birkhäuser Basel, 2008), 321–34: “Altogether, the development starts in sensory modality, i.e, haptic schemas (references are percepts), followed by image-schemas in the second half of the first year (references are mental images), culminating in arbitrary symbols (words) (328).


18. The literature on this is voluminous. For a general overview, see Tiffany Field, Touch (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001).


23. Bryan Lawson, The Language of Space (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2001): “Humans normally only allow bodily contact in a number of limited contexts: first, and most obviously, this is between sexual partners whether of the opposite or same gender; secondly, between close relatives, particularly parents and their young children; thirdly, between the very young before the social taboo of contact has been acquired; fourth, in greetings, when momentary contact is allowed as in handshakes, kisses or even nose rubs, depending on your culture; fifth, for the comforting of individuals in exceptional circumstances of distress; and finally, of course, in the highly specialized settings of professional treatment by doctors, dentists and so on. However, for the vast majority of the time in nearly all our relationships we feel uncomfortable if bodily contact is made and usually apologize if we accidently bump into each other” (102).

24. Lawson, Language of Space, 110: “Distance is not abstract, since it quite strongly relates to the way we are aware of our fellow human beings. Under normal circumstances, the senses work in the series of nested spatial bubbles rather like ‘Russian dolls’. We can see, hear, smell and touch people in that order.”

25. Matthias M. Müller and Claire-Marie Giabbiconi, “Attention in Sense of Touch,” in Human Haptic Perception, 199–26: “Contrary to vision for instance, while visual and auditory stimuli might be miles away from our body, somatosensory stimuli are not. They have an immediate impact on our body surface, which makes somatosensory stimuli very different from auditory or visual ones” (199). See also Stephen Thayer, “Social Touching,” in Tactual Perception: A Sourcebook, ed. William Schiff and Emerson Foulke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 263–304: “Touch, like all nonverbal behaviors, rarely has a unitary, unequivocal meaning. Whether it is a tap, a shove, or a caress, the meaning or message can vary profoundly depending upon a host of other factors. Because touching another’s body generates an immediate demand for response, as well as a special intimacy or threat unique among communicative behaviors, touch is probably the most carefully guarded and monitored of all social behaviors” (266). Also Lawson, Language of Space, 115: “Inside the distance of a half a metre or so, we can touch another person. We may feel body heat and smell body odour, and we may smell breath and perfume. If facing one another, we can see the face in sufficient detail to appreciate emotion accurately unless very skillfully concealed. This then is a distance of trust and intimate activity. It is a distance that we enter normally only with permission. It is socially difficult to ignore someone with this distance, and some form of acknowledgement at the very least is expected. Indeed it may even be hard to ignore some else’s presence simply because of the wealth of ways they can be sensed at this distance. Public display of the affection associated with such a distance is
disapproved of in some cultures and many situations. Communication at this distance can be by whispering, and thus can remain private from all other people in the same space."


27. For the specific studies, see Hall, "Gender and Status Patterns in Social Touch," 343: "The lower-status person was significantly more likely to initiate handshake, whereas the higher-status person was non-significantly more likely to engage in affectionate and hand-to-shoulder and hand-to-arm touch."

28. For more on those similarities, see John W. Welch, Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).


30. One intriguing implication is that the invitation connects the event to Christ’s teachings concerning becoming like a little child, found in 3 Nephi 11:37–38; 12:9, 45. One cohort of the population that would allow for the touching of their belly as open and trusting and innocently as Christ did would be little children. Thus, it is possible that the event and the nature of Christ’s trust were reflected in his call for those gathered to become as a little child, expressing similar characteristics.