

Are Christians Mormon?

Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial

David L. Paulsen

Harold Bloom, the self-proclaimed “unbelieving Jew”¹ and distinguished scholar, recently characterized Joseph Smith as “a religious genius,” stating that the religion Smith founded “is truly a biblical religion.”² More recently, Carl Mosser has written concerning the doctrine of that religion: “Mormonism’s heresies are legion; they are also very interesting and often unique in the history of heresy.”³ Biblical or heretical? Of these two reactions, the charge of heresy has been far more common, especially among conservative Christian critics, who consistently draw a circle that leaves Joseph’s Mormonism out.

No wonder, then, the interest in 1974 when Truman Madsen published an article in *BYU Studies* with the half-jesting title “Are Christians Mormon?”⁴ The title was an obvious play on the often repeated and too familiar question “Are Mormons Christian?”⁵ It was only a *half*-jest because, as Madsen puts it, “In our time there are renowned and influential spokesmen

1. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 30.

2. Bloom, *American Religion*, 80–82, 96.

3. Carl Mosser, “And the Saints Go Marching On,” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 85.

4. Truman G. Madsen, “Are Christians Mormon?” *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (1974): 73–94.

5. For a careful survey and critique of contemporary attempts to demonstrate that Latter-day Saints are not Christian, see Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991).

David L. Paulsen

BYU Studies: What made you passionate enough about this subject to pursue all the research and writing required to produce this article?

Paulsen: My paper “Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World” delivered at the Library of Congress focused principally on Joseph’s divergence from and, hence, on his challenges to traditional Christian theology. However, my research for this paper uncovered considerable contemporary convergence in some Christian quarters toward Joseph’s once radical theological ideas. Last June, while preparing the Library of Congress paper for publication, the idea for a second paper stressing this convergence struck me with the force of what seemed to be inspiration. Here was another way to honor Joseph on the occasion of his bicentennial—to point out that highly influential Christian thinkers were now appropriating insights once uniquely owned, or nearly so, by the uneducated “ploughboy of Palmyra.” My love for Joseph Smith, my personal testimony of his prophetic calling, and my desire to honor him in his bicentennial drove this project. With the devoted and competent work of an able corps of student assistants who shared these passions with me, this idea became a hundred-plus-page manuscript in forty-five days.



BYU Studies: What impact do you hope your article will make?

Paulsen: I hope it will motivate others, especially Christian theologians, to take Joseph’s ideas more seriously and generate more interfaith discussion of Joseph’s theological insights.

BYU Studies: Where do you see Christian theology going next?

Paulsen: I don’t know. But I won’t be surprised if convergence in Joseph’s direction continues. For instance, Joseph taught a social model of the Godhead; at a conference I attended recently, an informed Christian scholar estimated that over half of Christian thinkers currently publishing on the topic of the trinity now hold social models of the same.

BYU Studies: What impact do you hope your article will make?

Paulsen: I hope it will motivate others, especially Christian theologians, to take Joseph’s ideas more seriously and generate more interfaith discussion of Joseph’s theological insights.

BYU Studies: Where do you see Christian theology going next?

Paulsen: I don’t know. But I won’t be surprised if convergence in Joseph’s direction continues. For instance, Joseph taught a social model of the Godhead; at a conference I attended recently, an informed Christian scholar estimated that over half of Christian thinkers currently publishing on the topic of the trinity now hold social models of the same.

—David Paulsen has also published in journals such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Analysis*, and the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.

and writers in all the major wings of Christendom—and they are not on the periphery but at the center—who are defending and teaching what, a century ago, Joseph Smith almost alone taught.”⁶

Now that Latter-day Saints and others⁷ have commemorated the two-hundredth birthday of Joseph Smith (1805–1844), founding prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is time to reassess how far Christian thinkers have come in appropriating theological insights once owned uniquely, or nearly so, by Smith and his followers.

In undertaking this task thirty-one years ago, Madsen prefaced his findings with four cautions, which I repeat and endorse here:

First, tracing trends and movements and shifts is always a selective affair. Just as powerful as the movements I am going to chronicle are counter movements equally influential that could lead one to the conclusion that Christianity today has never been farther away from its original moorings. . . .

Second, terminology is deceptive. Men may speak similarly but *mean* and *feel* differently. And, as you know, the theological vocabulary is notoriously vague.

Third, the focus on belief is misleading because religion is much more than belief—it involves values, commitments, kinds of loyalty, and cultures.

Finally, there is . . . a tremendous chasm between what professional writers may say theologically, philosophically, and what actually penetrates to the grass roots. Between the theoretician and the layman there is an ocean.⁸

One more very important reminder: when it comes to Christian fundamentals—the divinity and lordship of Jesus Christ, his redemptive atonement, his resurrection, and our victory through him over sin and death—there is little to distinguish Joseph's understandings from those of “orthodox” Christians. This point has often been made, most recently

6. Madsen, “Are Christians Mormon?” 73.

7. For instance, most notably, the Library of Congress hosted a commemorative conference, “The Worlds of Joseph Smith,” May 6–7, 2005, published in *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005). A similar conference (“The Worlds of Joseph Smith”) was held May 20–21, 2005, in the New South Wales Parliament House and State Library, Sydney, Australia, where conference cosponsors were the University of Richmond, Griffith University, Monash University, and the LDS Church. The Claremont School of Religion hosted a third academic bicentennial observance, “Joseph Smith and the Prophetic Tradition” on October 20–22, 2005. Other conference locations included Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana, October 25–27, 2005, and conferences in Atlanta and Taipei.

8. Madsen, “Are Christians Mormon?” 73–74.

by Robert Millet in *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*.⁹ And a final important reminder: Latter-day Saint views on many points of doctrine still differ, sometimes radically, from more traditional Christian views. This is true for even those doctrines toward which, as shown in this paper, there has been significant Christian convergence.

With these reminders noted, I examine here seven distinctive theological ideas attributed to Joseph Smith and generally accepted by Latter-day Saints, all of which have engendered the heresy charge: (1) the resumption of New Testament charismata and the reopening of the canon; (2) God as a personal and passible being; (3) a social model of the trinity; (4) deification; (5) the divine feminine; (6) God as eternally self-surpassing; and (7) postmortem evangelization. My threefold aim is to set out Joseph's views on each of these topics, summarize divergent Christian views and criticisms of Joseph's views, and spell out developments or trends in contemporary Christian theology that significantly converge in Joseph's direction. My purpose is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of each of these seven developments, but simply to set them forth in sufficient detail to sustain my thesis that, on the occasion of the two-hundredth birthday of the uneducated "ploughboy of Palmyra,"¹⁰ his viewpoints on these once-theological-distinctives are winning increasing acceptance by influential non-LDS Christian thinkers. In light of this, I half-humorously repeat the question, "Are Christians Mormon?"

I. RESUMPTION OF NEW TESTAMENT CHARISMATA AND REOPENING OF THE CANON

A. Joseph's Views

Of all Joseph's challenges to traditional Christian theology, none is more fundamental than his claim to direct revelation from God. This claim serves to ground all of Joseph's additional claims. No natural or cultural explanations can adequately account for the range, depth, and unique synthesis of Joseph's teachings. Even the most determined cultural

9. Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005). See also Roger R. Keller and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005); Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997); and Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?*

10. An early description of Joseph by critics intent on disparaging the credibility of his ideas.

reductionist must still, in the end, deal with Joseph's claims to authority by divine revelation.¹¹ Revelation is the rock of Latter-day Saint belief.¹² The authoritativeness of the Bible for Christians generally hinges on a similar claim to its being God's revealed word. As Richard Bushman explains:

Joseph aimed a question at the heart of the culture: Did Christians truly believe in revelation? If believers in the Bible dismissed revelation in the present, could they defend revelation in the past? . . . [And] if revelation in the present was so far out of the question that Joseph's claims could be discounted without serious consideration, *why believe revelation in the past?*¹³

Joseph's claim of new revelation is a challenge based on the Bible itself, a fact of which the Prophet was fully aware. When asked concerning the differences between Mormons and Christians, he responded, "We *believe* the Bible, and they do not."¹⁴ His was a church alive with angelic messengers, the restoration of the priesthood, new revelation, and new scripture, all of which Joseph viewed as the essence of a true biblical religion. If the biblical canon is closed, Joseph argued, then "there is a great defect in the book, or else it would have said so."¹⁵ Elsewhere he argued, "To say that God never said anything more to man than is there recorded [in the Bible], *would be saying at once that we have at last received a revelation*: for it must require one to advance thus far, because it is nowhere said in that volume by the mouth of God."¹⁶

To those who deny the possibility of extrabiblical revelation, Joseph's challenge is not based on argument but on testimony of his revelatory experiences. In setting out Joseph's experiences, my focus is not on whether Joseph's claims are true, but simply to make clear how those claims were understood by Joseph and his followers.

11. See my article "The Search for Cultural Origins of Mormon Doctrines," in *Excavating Mormon Pasts: A New Historiography of the Last Half Century*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2004), 27–52.

12. Chauncey C. Riddle, "Revelation," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:225–29.

13. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 272–73; emphasis added.

14. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:155; emphasis added.

15. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 73.

16. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, 73; emphasis added.

Joseph's heavenly instruction began on a spring morning in 1820 when he retired to a grove of trees and, kneeling in prayer, he sought divine guidance in choosing a church. Joseph testified that he saw and heard and was instructed by the living God and Jesus Christ.¹⁷ The First Vision was a transcendent, tradition-shattering experience, yielding many profound insights. Later, Joseph was to write: "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."¹⁸ Joseph was privileged to have many such gazes. As a result, Latter-day Saints have greatly enlarged the Christian canon, adding 872 pages of inspired writ, wherein dramatic "thus saith the Lord" directives appear ninety-nine times.

Writers in the Book of Mormon such as Nephi (circa 550 BC) and Moroni (circa AD 400) explicitly reject the claim that God's revelations would ever permanently cease.¹⁹ Joseph viewed the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as a divine harbinger that promised further revelations and greater spiritual gifts. In 1835, Joseph spoke of the Book of Mormon and its attendant fruits in language drawn from Christ's parables:

Let us take the book of Mormon, which a man took and hid in his field, securing it by his faith, to spring up in the last days, or in due time; let us behold it coming forth out of the ground, which is indeed accounted the least of all seeds, but behold it branching forth, yea, even towering, with lofty branches, and God-like majesty, until it, like the mustard seed, becomes the greatest of all herbs; And it is truth, and it has sprouted and come forth out of the earth, and righteousness begins to look down from heaven; and God is sending down His powers, gifts and angels, to lodge in the branches thereof.²⁰

17. All extant accounts of the vision (1832, 1835, 1838, 1842, 1840, 1869, 1871, 1874, 1842, 1843, and 1844) corroborate Joseph's claim of both seeing and hearing Jesus Christ. While mutually corroborative on this point, the accounts vary in other ways. See Milton V. Backman Jr., "Joseph Smith's Recitals of the First Vision," *Ensign* 15 (January 1985): 8. For a more recent and comprehensive study of all available accounts of Joseph's vision, see also Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," and James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 1-34 and 35-76.

18. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, 319.

19. 2 Ne. 29:9; Morm. 9:7-9.

20. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:268.

Indeed, the Book of Mormon paved the way for future events of the Restoration to occur during Joseph's own lifetime, including the organization of the Church itself, the restoration of the priesthood by angelic administration, the coming forth of the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, the building and dedication of temples, and the coming of additional angelic visitors.

The gifts of the Spirit were emphasized by Joseph very early on as an important part of the Restoration of the gospel. Though "all things which pertain to our religion are only appendages" to the mission and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Joseph saw spiritual gifts indelibly "in connection with these" principles.²¹ Furthermore, the restoration and enjoyment of these spiritual gifts were seen to be equal in measure to the outpourings of the Spirit in the days of the Apostles:

We believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost being enjoyed now, as much as it was in the Apostles' days; . . . we also believe in prophecy, in tongues, in visions, and in revelations, in gifts, and in healings; and that these things cannot be enjoyed without the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . We believe in it in all its fullness, and power, and greatness, and glory; but whilst we do this, we believe in it rationally, consistently, and scripturally, and not according to the wild vagaries, foolish notions and traditions of men.²²

In 1831, Joseph received by revelation instruction to the early members of the Church concerning the gifts of the spirit. These gifts were a direct resumption of New Testament charismata: the faith to heal and be healed, the gift to speak in tongues, the working of miracles, the gift of prophecy, visions, and the discerning of spirits (D&C 46:17–26). Later, Joseph included the resumption of New Testament charismata as the one of the Church's thirteen basic Articles of Faith (A of F 7). Latter-day Saints believe that these gifts have been restored in their fullness, and as they were a blessing to the lives of the primitive Saints, so are they now.

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

Joseph Smith's claim to have translated a new book of scripture on par with the Bible caused an uproar in the Christian world from day one. To most of his opponents, Joseph's "Golden Bible" was an instant sign of inexcusable sacrilege. Francis W. Kirkham related that one of the first recorded reactions to the Book of Mormon was a headline in the *Rochester Daily*

21. *History of the Church*, 3:30.

22. *History of the Church*, 5:27.

Advertiser: “Blasphemy—Book of Mormon, Alias the Golden Bible.”²³ The very notion of new scripture went directly against the long-standing conviction that the “deposit of faith” had been entrusted into the hands of the church in its completeness. When Warren Isham, a Presbyterian editor, received a copy of the Book of Mormon, he described it as “a volume of silly imposture” and denied that it could be “a New Revelation” since, in his words, “A new revelation was not needed. Everything essential to our salvation was already revealed.” Furthermore, “A new Revelation was not expected. . . . The Christian world had settled down into the belief that no further revelation would ever be made to mankind.” To these remarks Walter Norton concluded, “The strong rejection of Mormonism was directly linked to the unalterable orthodox doctrine that revelation had ceased in the apostolic era and that any professing new revelation must come with power to prove their divine mission.”²⁴ In the meantime, then, the canon was deemed closed, and no new scripture was expected from the heavens.

In addition to affirming a closed canon, the Christian world had also by and large held to the belief that the New Testament charismata had ceased, that such gifts and miracles were unique to the days of the Apostles, and with their death so passed away the gifts of the Spirit. Adding further fuel to the fire, then, was Joseph’s pronouncement that the gifts of the Spirit had again been restored on the earth, in a way no less miraculous than on the day of Pentecost among the early apostles. This, too, was unwelcome news and grounds to deal dismissively with the Mormon problem. Around 1839 the Mormon William Seichrist was

excluded from the fellowship of this [the first regular Baptist] church [of the city of Alleghany, Alleghany county Pennsylvania] for embracing and maintaining a heresy,—to wit, doctrines peculiar to a late sect called Mormons or Latter-day Saints, that miracles can be wrought through the instrumentality of faith; that special revelations from God are now given to men; and that godly men are now endowed with the gift of prophecy.²⁵

23. Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon* (Independence, Mo.: Press of Zion’s Printing and Publishing, 1951), 40.

24. Quoted in Walter A. Norton, “Comparative Images: Mormonism and Contemporary Religions as Seen by Village Newspapermen in Western New York and Northeastern Ohio, 1820–1833” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1991), 315–16.

25. *History of the Church*, 5:166, brackets in original. In addition, see the references to other excommunications of Mormons during the period 1835 to 1844 in Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 126–30.

News against the Mormons spread quickly. The 1835 guidebook for Ohio immigrants warns the English against the “wildest fanaticism” called Mormonism, which espouses belief in miracles, new revelation, gifts of healing and of prophecy.²⁶ The Christian world at that time wanted little to do with Smith’s fanciful notions of new scripture and heavenly revelations. And until recently, most Christian thinkers have held fast to this position.

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Recognition of Pentecostal and other charismatic movements in main-line denominations over the past century has given rise to new waves of thought in relation to the once dogmatic cessation of the charismata. It is currently a hot topic. Not only do many branches of thought consider, they insist on the need for spiritual gifts. This change has occurred remarkably fast. According to Jon Ruthven,

Perhaps no theological issue among evangelicals provokes more controversy than the role of ‘miraculous’ spiritual gifts in the contemporary church. A recent *Christianity Today* poll reported that according to their readers two of the ten most important theological issues today concern the cessation and operation of certain gifts of the Holy Spirit. Traditions from within the Reformation and the Scofield *Reference Bible* had produced a broad consensus among evangelicals and fundamentalists (outside of charismatic and Pentecostal believers) that so-called ‘extraordinary’ or miraculous gifts, such as prophecy, direct divine revelation, healings, miracles and the like, had ceased with the apostles or their writings (this view may be labeled cessationism).

Within the last two decades, however, that consensus has been rapidly eroding. A growing capability in biblical interpretation has weaned these groups from uncritical dependence upon the classic Reformation and Scofieldian traditions. Further, the amazing world-wide growth of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement and the increasing sophistication of its apologists have also prompted a widespread re-evaluation of cessationism.²⁷

Within traditional Christianity, Pentecostalism has paved the way in this area. It is no surprise then that Pentecostals, like Mormons, have suffered persecution from other Christians along the way, though they continue to grow in numbers. The following observation of Ruthven could well describe Mormonism: “This growth did not occur without opposition.

26. D. Griffiths Jr., *Two Years in the New Settlements of Ohio* (London, 1835; reprint, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1966), 132–40.

27. Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 7.

Historically, Pentecostalism has provoked controversy at almost every stage of its development. This has been true not merely because of its tradition-breaking forms of worship and practice,” but also “because the emergence of Pentecostalism was a tangible challenge to a theological position maintained in the church for centuries: that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit had ceased.”²⁸ Today, many Christian thinkers, such as Krister Stendahl, regret how Christianity has treated Pentecostals and feel that the consequences have been grave. “We in the mainline Protestant traditions,” Stendahl explains, “froze out our Pentecostal brethren in the nineteenth century. . . . As a result, the growth of the spirit, the soul, the church—the growth of everything—is stymied.”²⁹

For Stendahl, the renewal of the New Testament charismata is indispensable in triggering a much needed, invigorating vitality into Christianity. Says Stendahl, “I believe that the charismatic movement represents ‘high-voltage’ religious experience—and heaven knows we need it in the churches. . . . And the tragedy of tragedies would be if the mainline churches threw out the charismatic stirrings now going on.”³⁰

Yet many theologians are still hesitant in acknowledging and encouraging spiritual gifts because of their highly subjective nature and the danger of allowing such charismata to overshadow or distort God’s inclusive parcel of revelation in the Bible. W. D. Davies points out the danger, of which Protestants and Catholics alike are quite aware: “Progressive and continuous revelation is certainly an attractive notion, but equally certainly it is not without the grave danger of so altering or enlarging upon the original revelation as to distort, annul, and even falsify it.”³¹ Wayne Grudem presents similar cautions in relating the role of spiritual gifts in the church. He encourages “charismatics [to] go on using the gift of prophecy,” but cautions that its use should never be confused with or considered equal to the biblical witness. To add balance, he invites those holding to cessationism to “think again about those arguments for the cessation of certain gifts” to allow for a healthy use of the gift of prophecy in the church.³²

28. Ruthven, *Cessation of the Charismata*, 14.

29. Krister Stendahl, “The Charismatic Movement and the New Testament,” in *What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches*, ed. Theodore Runyan (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975), 26. To be precise, Pentecostalism did not formally begin until 1906, though its roots go back to the Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century.

30. Stendahl, “Charismatic Movement,” 25.

31. W. D. Davies, “Reflections on the Mormon ‘Canon,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 79, nos. 1–3 (1986): 64.

32. Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 18.

The emergence and embrace of spiritual gifts on the grassroots level of Christianity reflects a thirsting for a closer, two-way relationship with God and the confirmation that he, through his Holy Spirit, will respond to humankind through the generous outpouring of his gifts. As much as some Christians fear the dangers inherent in spiritual gifts, others fear more how the church would manage to survive without them. According to Stendahl, “High-voltage ecstatic enthusiasm is an important part of total Christian community in any time in any place. Of course, such enthusiasm has risks—everything has.” If nothing else, Stendahl sees a highly pragmatic need for the charismata in today’s churches: “Our flashlight battery voltage isn’t strong enough to fight drugs [and other challenges] the way the high-voltage, charismatic experience does.”³³

As we have seen, inherent in the fears of the resumption of New Testament charismata is the adverse way in which such a resumption might affect the scriptural canon. The notions of canon and continuing revelation are no doubt inextricably linked. And recently canon studies has become a very dynamic field. James Sanders writes of the barrier, which is increasingly being breached, to the idea of an open canon:

The quest for closure spawned a corresponding quest for lists, or what could be construed as lists, in ancient Jewish literature outside the Tanak: Sirach, Second Maccabees, Jubilees, Philo, Josephus, and Luke. Similarly, work on the New Testament canonization process looked to “lists” in Tertullian, Eusebius, the Muratorian Fragment, Athanasius’s Easter Letter, etc.³⁴ Such lists were taken to indicate closure for all of Judaism, or all of Christianity, instead of reflecting the distinctive purposes of a particular school or faction at a specific time. Ancient lists, or perceived lists, that contradicted or failed to support eventual official canons could be ignored as uninformed or irrelevant to the quest. Even after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents, the Judaeon Desert Scrolls, and many New Testament Greek papyri, the consensus tended to hold on despite questions raised by the new discoveries.³⁵

33. Stendahl, “Charismatic Movement,” 25.

34. See the critical discussion of them in Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. and enl. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), esp. 268–76.

35. James A. Sanders, “The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 252–53. See Peter W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), for an excellent discussion of the new evidence; see also the review of Flint in *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6, no. 1 (1999): 84–89, as well as the review of Shemaryahu Talmon in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 3 (1999): 545–47.

Yet, “in the last forty years,” say Lee M. McDonald and James Sanders, “interest has been growing not only in the origins of the biblical canon but also in its development, continuing viability, and future as a fixed collection of sacred writings.”³⁶

Certainly much of the impetus of this movement has been caused by the ancient document explosion of the last half of the twentieth century. These new discoveries include about eight hundred manuscripts³⁷ recovered from the vicinity of Qumran alone. While greatly increasing our knowledge of the ancient world, the Qumran texts, as Sanders notes, have proven to make the question of canonicity more complex. Indeed one scholar proposes, “The biblical scrolls are of central importance for the way we think about the Bible, and that they require us to update our way of thinking about it both historically and theologically.”³⁸ Furthermore, “The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a strong renewal of interest in and research on the so-called New Testament Apocrypha.”³⁹

The significance of the Qumran texts in regards to canon is twofold. The first is ably stated by James VanderKam:

The thesis I would like to defend regarding the second temple period is that while there were authoritative writings, and these were at times gathered into recognizable groupings (e.g., Law, Prophets, Others), the category of revealed literature was not considered a closed and fixed one, at least not for the type of Judaism for which we now have the most evidence—the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Essenes according to most scholars). This is in line with their documented belief that revelation was not confined to the distant past but continued in their time and fellowship. About the Teacher of Righteousness it is said that to him “God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets” (1QpHab VII, 4–5). Regardless whether that gift extended to others, the text is clear that revelation continued at least in the Teacher’s time. Whether others who did not belong to the Qumran community’s persuasion would have agreed that divine disclosures occurred in the

36. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, “Introduction,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 1.

37. Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), xxiv.

38. Eugene Ulrich, “The Scrolls and the Study of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls at Fifty: Proceedings of the 1997 Society of Biblical Literature Qumran Section Meetings*, ed. Robert A. Kugler and Eileen M. Schuller (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1999), 31.

39. Harry Y. Gamble, “The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 273.

present we do not know—with the exception, of course, of the group of Jews who followed Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁰

Thus, “at the beginning of the Common Era we cannot speak of a ‘canon’ in the sense of a well-defined number of holy writings—at least not for Judaism as a whole.”⁴¹ Secondly, according to Adam S. van der Woude,

Instead of assuming a gradual development from pluriformity to uniformity in the textual tradition of the Old Testament, as has been postulated by Albrektson, E. Ulrich and others, we should consider another possibility: that a far-reaching uniformity of textual tradition existed in the religious circles around the Temple of Jerusalem well before 70 CE *alongside* a pluriform tradition elsewhere in Palestine, with both traditions being exemplified by the Qumran biblical texts.⁴² This explains in simple fashion why the textual tradition supported by the Pharisees, who survived the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, could almost abruptly gain the field after 70 CE. The Pharisaic conviction that the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Israel since the days of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi excluded appeal to any later divine inspiration, thereby entailing a shift from authority outside Scripture to Scripture alone. This development gradually led to the canonization of Holy (Hebrew) Scripture as God's literally inspired word, and did not admit of various diverging textual recensions. But the situation at Qumran was different: since the community knew its own divinely-inspired authorities, pre-eminently the Teacher of Righteousness, the need to replace textual pluriformity by uniformity was not urgent.⁴³

In regards to the “strong renewal of interest in and research on the so-called New Testament Apocrypha,”⁴⁴ at least one scholar has proposed completing work on *The Complete New Testament* containing the entire library of early Christian texts.⁴⁵

40. James C. VanderKam, “Questions of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 92.

41. Adam S. van der Woude, “Fifty Years of Qumran Research,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment*, ed. Peter W. Flint and James C. Vanderkam, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1:40.

42. See more on this topic in Adam S. van der Woude, “Pluriformity and Uniformity: Reflections on the Transmission of the Text of the Old Testament,” in *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism*, ed. J. N. Bremmer and F. Garcia Martinez (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 151–69.

43. Van der Woude, “Fifty Years of Qumran Research,” 1:42–43.

44. Gamble, “The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 273.

45. Robert W. Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 557.

Many scholars today are reexamining whether closing the canon was, in fact, the proper thing to do. As noted above, Joseph Smith thought it strange that the canon had been regarded closed since the Bible itself never mentions this closure. Reasoning along similar lines, James Barr remarks that the notion of a finite, strictly defined biblical canon is itself an extra-biblical conclusion: “For *evidence* about what was within the canon, one had to go outside the canon itself” since there was “no *scriptural* evidence to decide what were the exact limits of the canon.”⁴⁶ Similarly, John Barton refers us to “the curse of the canon”—the oft-repeated saying British scholar Christopher Evans used in describing the downsides of having a closed canon. According to Evans, says Barton, “It was a fateful day when the Church decided to rule a line under the last book to gain entry to the Bible, and to declare the canon of Scripture closed.”⁴⁷ Both Barr and Barton agree that the modern notion of a cemented-closed canon does not cohere with how the earliest Christians viewed their own collection of scripture.

Perhaps the most candid discussion of how the changing face of canon studies affects the role of canon today is the final chapter of Lee M. McDonald’s *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Here in his “Final Remarks,” McDonald poses honest, open-ended questions concerning the long-held notion of a closed canon:

The first question, and the most important one, is whether the church was right in perceiving the need for a closed canon of scriptures.⁴⁸ If the term “Christian” is defined by the examples and beliefs passed on by earliest followers of Jesus, then we must at least ponder the question of whether the notion of a biblical canon is necessarily “Christian.” They

46. James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 24, 25; emphases in original.

47. John Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1993), 24.

48. Here, McDonald’s historical study demonstrates that the scripture available and used by the earliest Christians was much more expansive than the present closed canon. According to McDonald, “Even in regard to the OT canon, it has been shown that the early church’s collections of scriptures were considerably broader in scope than those presently found in either the Catholic or Protestant canons and that they demonstrated much more flexibility than our present collections allow.” McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 254. McDonald recognizes a disturbing inconsistency between the content and understanding of scripture in the days of Christ and the earliest Christians and the content and understood “closed-ness” of today’s scriptures.

did not have such canons as the church possesses today, nor did they indicate that their successors should draw them up.⁴⁹

Second, one must ask whether in fact the present biblical canon has not legitimized practices that the churches today uniformly reject, namely, the practice of slavery or the inferiority and subjugation of . . . [women]. . . .⁵⁰

Third, did such a move toward a closed canon of scriptures ultimately (and unconsciously) limit the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church? . . . Does God act in the church today and by the same Spirit? On what biblical or historical grounds has the inspiration of God been limited to the written documents that the Church now calls its Bible?⁵¹

Fourth, in regard to the OT, should the church be limited to an OT canon to which Jesus and his first disciples were clearly not limited?⁵²

49. McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 254. McDonald identifies several ancient writings which purport to tell us about Christ but were left out of the current canon of the church. He mentions specifically the Apocryphal writings and Pseudepigrapha as well as the *agrapha* (literally, unwritten or “isolated sayings of Jesus that have been found in the early church fathers, in ancient manuscripts, and in some apocryphal sources”). He suggests that inasmuch as these sources can be proven authentic and useful, they ought to inform our modern understanding of Christ. But he also firmly states, “I for one am not in favor of rejecting the present biblical canon in order to create a new closed canon of scriptures.” And concerning the currently known collection of non-canonical literature, he concludes “that there are no other ancient documents which are on the whole more reliable in informing the church’s faith than our present biblical canon, even though we have suggested that some noncanonical sources are as reliable in their portrayal of the teaching and preaching of early Christianity.” McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 257; emphasis in original. It would seem, then, that he would leave the canon open for early documents which would add to our understanding of Christ.

50. McDonald quotes Krister Stendahl, who explains that “there never has been an evil cause in the world that has not become more evil if it has been possible to argue it on biblical grounds.” McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 254. Stendahl’s main emphasis is on slavery, which he argues would have disappeared more quickly in our Western world were it not for the Bible’s perceived condoning of the practice. Clearly, McDonald is concerned with the way in which a closed canon needlessly perpetuates outdated practices.

51. These are apparently very sobering questions for McDonald even though he provides no direct answer or further commentary.

52. In light of such information, McDonald pointedly asks, “What obligations does the church have today to limit itself to a canon of OT scriptures that was not the precise canon of the earliest Christians?” McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 255. Again, McDonald emphasizes the disparity between the ancient canon and the modern closed canon and questions the canonization process of the church that established such.

Fifth, if apostolicity is still a legitimate criterion for the canonicity of the NT literature, . . . should the church today continue to recognize the authority of . . . [the] nonapostolic literature of the NT? If the Spirit's activity was not considered to be limited to apostolic documents, . . . can we and should we make arguments for the inclusion of other literature in the biblical canon?⁵³

Sixth, one must surely ask about the appropriateness of tying the church of the twentieth century to a canon that emerged out of the historical circumstances in the second to the fifth centuries CE. How are we supposed to make the experience of that church absolute for all time? . . .⁵⁴

Finally, if the Spirit inspired only the written documents of the first century, does that mean that the same Spirit does not speak today in the church about matters that are of significant concern, for example, the use of contraceptives, abortion, liberation, ecological irresponsibility, equal rights, euthanasia, nuclear proliferation, global genocide, economic and social justice, and so on?⁵⁵

McDonald and other scholars continue to work through these types of pointed questions, endeavoring to consider carefully the issue. On one hand, says McDonald, "all contemporary churches have essentially closed their biblical canons claiming that God has spoken through prophets of old and they wrote down what was communicated to them." On the other hand, however, "there is no way to argue biblically or theologically that the biblical canon is closed if there is still the activity of God among us. If this is still the age of the Spirit, there is little argument theologically to say that God has stopped speaking."⁵⁶

53. McDonald uses as an example the epistle to the Hebrews: "Although there was considerable doubt about the authorship of Hebrews among the church fathers, the book nevertheless was included into the biblical canon because its message was both relevant and important to the Christian communities that adopted and preserved it as scripture." McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 255. Perhaps McDonald reveals his own opinion in his concluding question on the issue: "Is it not the intrinsic worth of the writing to the church in establishing its identity and facilitating its ministry that is the ultimate criterion for canonicity?" McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 255.

54. As McDonald shows, the Bible as closed canon is not accepted on the authority of the Biblical writings themselves, but on the decisions of a collection of Church leaders hundreds of years removed from the time of Christ. Thus, the legitimacy of a closed canon rests heavily on one's answer to his question: "Was the church in the Nicene and post-Nicene eras infallible in its decisions or not?" McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 256.

55. McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 254–56.

56. Lee M. McDonald, email correspondence with the author, July 21, 2005. McDonald's email continues:

D. Conclusion

The cautious, forward movements of Christian theology and scholarship toward an expanded view of the workings of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and a reworked understanding of canonical dynamics certainly lean (however warily) in the direction of Joseph Smith's admittedly radical throwing open of the heavens. Few Christian scholars are so brazen as to go so far. However one chooses to view Joseph Smith's claim to have received new revelation and scripture, one thing is clear: Joseph never felt the need to

All Christians add unconsciously to the biblical canons—that is, their respective authorities—of their respective communities even though they would not put it in such terms. Most of us have heard Christians say such things as “Billy Graham says . . .” or citing some other well known figure who resonates well with the Christian community. The real question is, if canons are open, what are they open to? On what basis do we determine whether something is sacred and authoritative for the Christian community? I think the answer lies in the coherence of the new writings with what the believing community believed was sacred and from God in their sacred scriptures. Historically, it had more to do with coherence to the “apostolic deposit” that was passed on in the churches long before there was a biblical canon. If it does not cohere, or reflect that which has already been received as true and faithful, then it cannot be canon. I think that this is a part of the matter that divides some Christians from accepting the writings of Joseph Smith and others, namely they are not able to see the seamless connection with the sacred tradition already received in the church.

In the *Canon Debate*, the last two articles are by two very significant opposites in biblical scholarship, namely, Robert Funk of the Jesus Seminar who wants to have no canon in some cases and a very restrictive canon in others, and still a more inclusive canon in others. James D. G. Dunn's article is more about a “canon within the canon” which is the practice of many Christians. Without theological support, they simply gravitate toward the Gospels and Paul and largely ignore vast segments of the OT and also the NT. Karen King at Harvard would like to have the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* included because it includes something from a woman. The agenda of each group that wants a different canon varies and Dunn's is the most commonly practiced, namely ignore what does not fit well into our current mode of thinking.

I think that it is too early to say that we will have a new biblical canon that will gain wide acceptance. Any changes in the current biblical canon are likely to take years to gain wide acceptance and will cause considerable division in the existing churches and the various communities of faith. In this sense, the biblical [canon] is complete and not likely to change. On the other hand, it is difficult biblically and theologically to argue that what we have is all there should be.

apologize for adding new scripture to the canon. To Mormons, the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price (each containing ancient records) make clear that ancient documents outside of the Bible do exist that have substantial truths to share in shedding greater light upon God's dealing among men for their salvation through the mediation of Jesus Christ. The basic premise of the Book of Mormon—that a small group of Israel who had their own scripture and prophets existed apart from the Jews at Jerusalem—is not as anomalous today as it was two centuries ago when Joseph first brought forth the Book of Mormon. The revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, those received by Joseph Smith in these days, demonstrate a profound belief that God has meaningful things to say to humankind in our present age. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a church founded upon revelation—past, present, and future.

Joseph's work anticipated the discoveries of ancient documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the renewed interest in New Testament charismata, and yet anticipates that God has many more such divine disclosures to bring forth for our knowledge—both “a voice of mercy from heaven [as in continuing divine revelation]; and a voice of truth out of the earth [as in ancient divinely inspired documents such as the Book of Mormon]” (D&C 128:19). No longer must Mormons entertain such hopes in total isolation from the rest of the Christian world.

II. GOD AS PERSONAL AND PASSIBLE

A. Joseph's Views

As Joseph Smith walked out of the grove of trees following his first supernal encounter with God the Father and God the Son, he announced an unqualified testimony that God is a person. Since that time, Mormonism has been distinguished by its belief in a Godhead of three separate persons.⁵⁷ Conventional Christianity used the word “person”—and still does—in describing God, “but only in a most attenuated form, ascribing to Deity a consciousness, will, some kind of individuality, but denying the full-bodied characteristics of personality that we associate with the word.”⁵⁸ John Sanders, in explaining the discrepancy between merely using the word and allowing the word its full expression has commented,

57. Paul E. Dahl, “Godhead,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:552–53.

58. Truman G. Madsen, “Are Christians Mormon?” *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (1974): 74.

“A person is not primarily an isolated *cogito* but an agent who acts, wills, plans, loves, creates, and values in relation to other persons.”⁵⁹

Without the full characteristics associated with the word “person,” many question whether the God of traditional Christianity is capable of such agentive functions, particularly love. Charles Hartshorne articulated the problem in this manner:

What it comes to is that in retreating from popular anthropomorphism classical theology fell backward into an opposite error. Intent on not exaggerating the likeness of the divine and the human, they did away with it altogether, if one takes their statements literally. Using the word “love,” they emptied it of its most essential kernel, the element of sympathy, of the feeling of others’ feelings. It became mere beneficence, totally unmoved (to use their own word) by the sufferings or joys of the creatures. Who wants a friend who loves only in that sense?⁶⁰

This theological axiom is known as impassibility, which means that God is “not capable of being affected or acted upon,” explained Van A. Harvey. “The presupposition of this attribution is the Greek idea that passibility involves potentiality, and potentiality, change.”⁶¹ T. E. Pollard articulated Hartshorne’s point, stating that ascribing to God the characteristics of immutability and impassibility “ends inevitably in the use of terms which are not supra-personal but sub-personal.”⁶² Thus, an impassible God is a sub-personal God.

Joseph’s First Vision revealed a God that is radically different from the impassible, unmoved mover of traditional Christianity. God is not only seable, but also an approachable and extremely passible person.⁶³ One of the great lessons of the First Vision is the simple fact that God *responded*. Joseph learned that God is cognizant of and closely engaged in the human

59. John E. Sanders, “God as Personal,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 174.

60. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 29.

61. Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 129. See (the Very Reverend) James Malloch, *A Practical Church Dictionary*, ed. Kay Smallrized (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1964), 244: “This view seems to conflict with God’s love for man, Christ’s passion, and other doctrines of mercy and sympathy.”

62. T. E. Pollard, “The Impassibility of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955): 361.

63. For especially helpful treatments of the nature of personhood, see John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969); *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966); and Peter A. Bertocci, *The Person God Is* (New York: Humanities, 1970).

predicament.⁶⁴ The Prophet's witness speaks powerfully for a God who is affected by human petition. Of his experience, Joseph concludes, "I had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided" (JS-H 1:26, alluding to James 1:5).

Joseph taught that believing in God's passibility has profound influence on Christian living. The *Lectures on Faith*, compiled under Joseph's direction, list *mercy* among the six attributes that man must believe God to possess in order to exercise faith in Him unreservedly. "For," the *Lectures* teach, "without the idea of the existence of this attribute in the Deity, the spirits of the saints would faint" amid their tribulations. But when the existence of this attribute "is once established in the mind it gives life and energy to the spirits of the saints, believing that the mercy of God will be poured out upon them in the midst of their afflictions, and that he will compassionate them in their sufferings."⁶⁵ Joseph further viewed God's acute passibility as the pattern that the Saints should emulate in their own lives. In personal correspondence, Joseph wrote, "Inasmuch as long-suffering, patience, and mercy have ever characterized the dealings of our heavenly Father towards the humble and the penitent, I feel disposed to copy the example, [and] cherish the same principles."⁶⁶

Joseph Smith viewed God above all else as a heavenly *Father*. Accordingly, God exhibits those same instinctive cultivating impulses of any loving father, feeling both the joy and pain of his children as he witnesses both their triumphs and failures; sadly, all too often God looks in genuine sadness upon the lamentable condition of our world. Yet Joseph taught that still God's love remains constant:

64. After all, how can a timelessly immutable Being plan, anticipate, remember, respond, punish, warn, or forgive, since all such acts involve temporality and mutability? Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 14. A timelessly immutable God cannot "answer" prayer, as this would imply that God "responds" to our prayer. The absolutistic God only seems, from a human perspective to answer prayer. At this point many try to escape to "mystery" or "paradox" to avoid admitting a contradiction. Concerning the invalidity of this tactic, see Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, 16, 78, 140–45; and Sanders, "God as Personal," 172–73 and note 27.

65. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 4:15. Current scholarship suggests that Joseph Smith may not have been the only or primary author of the *Lectures*; however, he was assuredly familiar with them and even aided in their publication. See Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1990), 10.

66. *History of the Church*, 4:163.

But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."⁶⁷

The scriptures that Joseph Smith brought forth are replete with testimony of God's personal passibility. Enoch became an eyewitness of the Father's loving vulnerability and of his sensitive and responsive nature, when he saw the God of heaven weep over the wickedness and suffering of his children (Moses 7:28–29, 32–33, 37).

LDS scripture also alludes to the passibility of God in the agony of Jesus' atonement, consistent with a theopaschite view (that God suffers). The Book of Mormon speaks of the "condescension of God" wherein God himself "should be oppressed and afflicted," ultimately to die for the sins of the world.⁶⁸ In a prophetic foretelling of his mortal ministry, Alma (circa 120 BC) foretold that Christ would "go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind," he would "take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people," and he would "take upon him death" and infirmity, all so that "his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:11–12).

The passibility of God created a dynamic interplay of overture and response when the resurrected Lord appeared to a gathering of ancient Americans. When his visit was drawing to a close, he advised the multitude that he was leaving. But seeing the multitude in tears, the Lord instead tarried longer and consoled them with compassion and miraculous healings. Only when he saw that the multitude's joy was full did he respond, "And now behold, *my* joy is full. And when he had said these words, he wept" (3 Ne. 17:1–25; emphasis added).

Throughout the Book of Mormon narrative, we see portrayed the tender and profound passibility of God the Son, who is in the express image of His Father's person (Heb. 1:3). As Joseph taught, to see how the Son walks and acts among men is to see how the Father walks and acts.⁶⁹

67. *History of the Church*, 4:595.

68. 1 Ne. 11:16, 26; Mosiah 13:28, 34–35; compare 15:1; 17:8; Alma 42:15.

69. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 230 (compare John 14:9). See also Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Grandeur of God," *Ensign* 33 (November 2003): 70–73.

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

As with most doctrines espoused by traditional Christianity, belief in an impassible God developed through centuries of thought. That the doctrine is foreign to the Hebrew prophets is attested by Abraham Heschel, who noted, “Quite obviously in the biblical view, man’s deeds may move [God], affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defined the prophetic consciousness of God.”⁷⁰

However, for the influential Jewish philosopher Philo, the passible God of the prophets is far too human. For Philo, the scriptural denial of the likeness of God to any other being implies a complete lack of emotion. Why, then, does Moses speak “of His jealousy, His wrath, His moods of anger, and the other emotions similar to them, which he describes in terms of human nature?” To this Philo replied, “He hoped to be able to eradicate the evil, namely by representing the Supreme Cause as dealing in threats and oftentimes showing indignation and implacable anger. . . . For this is the only way in which the fool can be admonished.”⁷¹ Thus, scripture describes the divine Being in human terms in order to educate man. Philo’s interpretation of biblical anthropopathy would become standard in Jewish and Christian literature.

After the close of the apostolic era, the idea of an impassible God surfaces again in the writings of the early Church Fathers. However, for the Fathers, impassibility was compatible with emotional states such as love, mercy, and compassion. Their primary purpose in describing God as impassible was to “distance God the creator from the gods of mythology.”⁷² For the Fathers, the God of Christians is impassible in that he is free from passions exhibited by the pagan gods. For them, God is obviously not full of debauchery and corruption as are Dionysius, Apollo, Persephone, Aphrodite, and Zeus. Nevertheless, by the early twelfth century divergence from passibility was widespread; St. Anselm stated what for centuries to come would be axiomatic of God, namely that he is “not afflicted with any feeling of compassion for sorrow.”⁷³

70. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: Part II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 4.

71. Philo, *Quod Deus Immutabilis Est*, section 8, lines 60, 68.

72. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48.

73. Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1995), 104.

In proclaiming God to be personal and passible to the extent that he did, Joseph contradicted centuries of Christian thought. Indeed, Christianity had thought of God as an impassible, immutable, omnipotent will for so long that, as John Sanders comments, “We now take this way of thinking for granted.”⁷⁴ Thus, when Joseph declared God to be a passible person, commentators described the new Church and its doctrine to be “monstrous and absurd.”⁷⁵ As one writer jeered, “Mormonism tells you that a man is our God.”⁷⁶ The attack on Joseph’s “anthropomorphic” God continued throughout the nineteenth century. For example, a magazine article published in 1850 called the idea that God does “possess passions” as not only “retrogressive” but profane.⁷⁷ The article concluded that “[God] possesses the body and passions of a man, so his relations to his creatures are purely human.” Thus, a doctrine “stated as an absurdity in the fourth century, the Mormons embrace as an axiom in the nineteenth.”⁷⁸

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Since the writing of the above 1850 article, the Christian world has experienced a theological shift unparalleled in its history. This shift began in England in the 1890s as a steady stream of English theologians began to advocate a doctrine of divine suffering.⁷⁹ These theologians included Andrew Fairbairn who wrote, “Theology has no falser idea than that of the impassibility of God.”⁸⁰ In fact, in 1924 the Archbishops’ Doctrine Commission directed a study into the English theological interest in the

74. Sanders, “God as Personal,” 169.

75. LaRoy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1838), preface. Sunderland’s text first appeared in articles published by his *Zion’s Watchman* in 1837–38, and was written partly in response to Parley P. Pratt’s 1837 *A Voice of Warning*. Pratt countered Sunderland with his own *Mormonism Unveiled* in 1838 and Sunderland came out with an entirely new edition of *Mormonism Exposed* in 1842.

76. Robert B. Neal, “Smithianity; . . . OR . . . Mormonism Refuted by Mormons” (Cincinnati, Ohio: Christian Leader Print, 1898), 24; emphasis in original.

77. E. Littell, “Mormonism, part 2,” in *The Living Age*, no. 531 (July 22, 1854): 147–62.

78. Littell, “Mormonism, part 2,” 149.

79. It should be noted that the work of American theologian Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1866), had a good deal of influence on the English tradition. For more on Bushnell, see F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 243–46.

80. A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 483.

suffering of God.⁸¹ In 1986, Ronald Goetz described this shift as the “rise of a new orthodoxy.”⁸²

Listing every thinker or theologian since Joseph’s day to ascribe to God the full-bodied characteristics of personhood, most especially passibility, would not only be impractical, but impossible. The list crosses all denominational and national boundaries.⁸³ A brief listing of some of the most distinguished include Berdyaev, Tennant, Hartshorne, Brunner,⁸⁴ Aulén, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Cobb, Cone, Küng, Moltmann,⁸⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, Pannenberg, Ruether, Temple, Teilhard, and Unamuno.⁸⁶ Moltmann explains the downfall of classical Christianity thus:

Christian theology acquired Greek philosophy’s ways of thinking in the Hellenistic world; and since that time most theologians have simultaneously maintained the passion of Christ, God’s Son, and the deity’s essential incapacity for suffering—even though it was at the price of having to talk paradoxically about “the sufferings of the God who cannot suffer.”⁸⁷ But

81. The result of this commission was in chapter two of J. K. Mozley’s *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926). Mozley’s survey does not, however, include all important contributions within his period. For example, he misses Hastings R. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 450–54, and Arthur Michael Ramsey, *An Era in Anglican Theology: From Gore to Temple* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 58–59.

82. Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* 103, no. 13 (April 16, 1986): 385–89.

83. Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno developed a doctrine of the infinite sorrow of God in *Tragic Sense of Life* (London: Constable, 1954). Russian theologian Nicolas Berdyaev vigorously rejected impassibility in favor of a doctrine of tragedy within the divine life in *The Meaning of History* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939). Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori published a book embracing passibility in *Theology of the Pain of God* (London: SCM, 1966).

84. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 1:183; see entire chapter 15.

85. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 218.

86. As listed by Goetz, “Suffering God,” 385.

87. According to Irenaeus the *Deus impassibilis* has become *passibilis*. According to Melito, “The One who cannot suffer, suffers.” In his famous treatise Gregory Thaumaturgus describes “the Suffering of Him who cannot suffer.” Compare H. Crouzel, “La passion de l’impassible,” in *L’homme devant Dieu I* (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 269–79, and Von Luise Abramowski, “Die Schrift Gregors des Lehrers ‘Ad Theopompum’ und Philoxenus von Mabbug,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 89 (1978): 273–90. Out of the abundance of typical titles we may mention here G. Stanihurstius’s cumbersome *Historia von dem heiligen Leiden des unsterblichen Gottes im sterblichen Leibe* (Kempten, 1678). The last great treatment of the

in doing this they have simply added together Greek philosophy's "apathy" axiom and the central statements of the gospel. The contradiction remains—and remains unsatisfactory.⁸⁸

"Just as significant" as the list of contemporary proponents of divine passibility, according to Goetz, "is the fact that even those theologians who have not embraced modern theopaschism have failed to develop a creative restatement of the older dogma" (von Hilgel and Thomas Weinandy being, perhaps, the significant exceptions).⁸⁹ Yet, even in repudiating a possible God, Weinandy effectively states my thesis:

From the dawn of the Patristic period Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible—that is, He does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so cannot suffer. Toward the end of the nineteenth century a sea change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God is possible, that He does undergo emotional changes of states, and so can suffer.⁹⁰

In 1959 Daniel Day Williams described the growing belief that God suffers as a "structural shift in the Christian mind."⁹¹ In a similar vein, M. Sarot writes, "During the present century the idea that God is immutable and impassible has slowly but surely given way to the idea that God is sensitive, emotional and passionate. . . . By now the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has so much become a theological commonplace, that many theologians do not even feel the need to argue for it."⁹² Finally, Moltmann is so convinced of the rejection of divine impassibility that he writes, "The doctrine of the essential impassibility of the divine nature now seems finally to be disappearing from the Christian doctrine of God."⁹³

subject by B. R. Brasnett is also entitled *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1928).

88. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 22.

89. See Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Dr. Goetz, a Century Editor at large, holds the Niebuhr Distinguished Chair of Theology and Ethics at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois.

90. Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35.

91. Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 138.

92. Marcel Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?" *Theology* 95 (1992): 113.

93. Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God* (London: SCM, 1991), xvi. See also Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 1.

If twentieth-century theologians were not influenced by Joseph Smith's revelations, "What has brought about such a radical reconception of God? How, in only one hundred years, has the Christian theological tradition of almost two thousand years, so readily and so assuredly, seemingly been overturned?"⁹⁴ Goetz finds four primary reasons⁹⁵ for this fundamental shift in thinking:

1) *The decline of Christendom.* From Augustine's "theocratic hope that the church as the earthly City of God would gradually come to rule the world to the liberal dream that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth through the liberal's persuasive evangelism, Christians have been united in the conviction that God's eternal rule is confirmed by world events."⁹⁶ According to Goetz, this Christian triumphalism is becoming increasingly rare. While Christians continue to avow the reality of God, many are unable to recognize and affirm his sovereign lead in the events of history.

2) *The rise of democratic aspirations.* These democratic aspirations have contributed to the problem of belief in an impassible, immutable God. For if God is conceived of as an unmoved mover—the unaffected source of the world—he is irrelevant to what free men and women do in the world.

3) *The problem of suffering and evil.* As the traditional belief in a world that was created out of nothing about six thousand years ago with all species intact began to give way to an evolutionary view of creation, many twentieth-century theologians found belief in an impassible, immutable God to be inconceivable. It was indeed unacceptable to believe in a God who impassibly constructed a world through billions of years of slow and painful evolution driven by the principle of "the survival of the fittest." The brutalities of World War I gave further cause for rethinking the doctrine of God. It appeared that humanity could be more brutal than the beasts, that human moral progress was a charade, and that evil and suffering were a fundamental part of human existence. Talk about an impassible, immutable God was for many simply inconceivable. Warren McWilliams has suggested that "a recognition of divine suffering may be an intrinsic part of a comprehensive Christian response to the theodicy issue."⁹⁷

94. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 1.

95. Goetz, "Suffering God," 386–88.

96. Goetz, "Suffering God," 386.

97. Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), preface. For an example of a theodicy in light of a suffering God, see Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 47–52.

4) *The scholarly reappraisal of the Bible.*⁹⁸ Goetz asserts that “biblical interpretation is no longer bound by patristic and scholastic presuppositions about the divine aseity, nor is it bound by the deistic assumptions of liberal scholars. Some find the God of the Bible not to their taste, but today few scholars would disagree that the God of the Bible is a personal, passionate, jealous, concerned, and suffering God.”⁹⁹

This also applies to the biblical perception of God's possession of a human form. Many scholars now believe that the Genesis pronouncement of man being created in the “image of God” was first understood as a reference to the visible similitude of the human body to the form of God.¹⁰⁰ This corresponds to the early Hebrew view of an anthropomorphic God, but “as Judaism collided with the Hellenistic world many Jews became more consciously uncomfortable with the idea that God might possess a physical form and that a human was in some way similar to this form. Hence, the image of God was reinterpreted to mean other immaterial qualities which humanity shared in common with his creator.”¹⁰¹

D. Conclusion

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the worldwide acceptance of a passible God is that it came without the councils, name-calling, and bloodshed that have characterized significant doctrinal shifts of the past. This peaceful and almost imperceptible change is described by Goetz:

No one of whom I am aware has quite said that the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has become a theological commonplace. (Yet when one ventures to make this claim in the presence of theologians, one is invariably met with a slightly surprised expression, followed by an assenting, “Of course.”)¹⁰²

98. For an excellent presentation of the scriptural foundations of such a move, see Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 26–31, 56–60.

99. Goetz, “Suffering God,” 387–88.

100. D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 56–58; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. John Baker, vol. 2 of *The Old Testament Library*, ed. G. Ernest Wright, John Bright, and James Barr (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 122–24.

101. Eric R. Montgomery, “The Image of God as a Resurrected State in Pauline Thought,” http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2806 (accessed March 11, 2005).

102. Goetz, “Suffering God,” 385.

It is this anthropomorphic and anthropopathic God of the Bible that Joseph taught long before it was reaccepted by Christianity.¹⁰³ Thus, Harold Bloom writes,

I think transumptively of the Prophet Joseph's God when I read the text of the Yahwist, or J Writer, author of the earliest tales of the Pentateuch. The Yahweh who closes Noah's ark with his own hands, descends to make on-the-ground inspections of Babel and Sodom, and who picnics with two angels under Abram's terebinth trees at Mamre is very close, in personality and dynamic passion, to the God of Joseph Smith, far closer than to the Platonic-Aristotelian divinity of Saint Augustine and Moses Maimonides.¹⁰⁴

While Joseph did find this personal, dynamic, and passible God implicit in the Bible, his declarations rest on God's self-revelatory manifestations to him, person to person. Mormons rejoice in seeing other Christians moving more and more away from the "unblinking cosmic stare,"¹⁰⁵ that is the philosophers' god, toward the personal, passible God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

III. A SOCIAL MODEL OF THE GODHEAD

A. Joseph's Views

In 1842, as part of his response to a Chicago newspaperman's inquiry as to what Mormons believed, Joseph penned the Articles of Faith. Though not intended as such, they remain the closest Mormon analog to a creed. The first of these articles affirms Mormon belief in the New Testament Godhead: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Joseph's revelations repeatedly declare that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God" (see 2 Ne. 31:21; Mosiah 15:2-5; Alma 11:44; 3 Ne. 11:27, 36; Mor. 7:7). **But in his later noncanonized discourse, he explicitly stated that the Godhead consists of "three distinct**

103. "The age-old dogma that God is impassible and immutable, incapable of suffering, is for many no longer tenable. The ancient theopaschite heresy that God suffers has, in fact, become the new orthodoxy." Goetz, "Suffering God," 385.

104. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 101.

105. This is how Dallas Willard characterized the timeless, immutable, impassible God of conventional Christian theology. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 245.

personages and three Gods.”¹⁰⁶ Starting from the premise that three distinct personages make up the Godhead, Joseph understood their oneness or unity to consist of something other than metaphysical or psychical identity.¹⁰⁷ Rather, Joseph saw their oneness as a unity of heart, mind, purpose, and mutual indwellingness. Joseph’s Book of Mormon translation emphasized their oneness with words such as one “doctrine,” “judgment,” “baptism,” and “record” (2 Ne. 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Ne. 11:27; 3 Ne. 11:36).

Seeing the Godhead as three distinct personages in no way diminishes their collective unity of mind, glory, and power, as repeatedly declared in the *Lectures on Faith* and LDS-specific and biblical scripture.¹⁰⁸ Joseph taught, “everlasting covenant was made between three personages [Father, Son and Holy Ghost] before the organization of this earth.”¹⁰⁹ In short, the persons of the trinity are bound by genetics, by “everlasting covenant,” and by “the same fullness” or set of divine attributes. Moreover, there is a synergetic bond between the Father and his Only Begotten, which is altogether peculiar to them. This bond was forged not only out of their oneness of mind and genetic¹¹⁰ relationship but also out of their interdependent

106. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 370.

107. Compare Christopher Stead, who writes, “Theologians have been rightly convinced that the ultimate effect of Nicaea has been to assert, not merely the equality, but also the essential unity, of the three Persons; and they have attempted, I think incautiously, to represent this as the original and express intention of the Nicene fathers. In support of this view, it has been argued that *homoousios* was adopted at Nicaea to express the form of trinitarian theology prevailing in the West.” Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 251.

108. Dahl and Tate, *Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, 83–84.

109. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, 712.

110. In accordance with Joseph’s teachings, Church leaders in 1916 made the following statement which clearly and emphatically sets forth the doctrine that God is not only the Father of the spirits of all men, but that he is the Father of both the Spirit and the body of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Scriptures embodying the ordinary signification—literally that of Parent—are too numerous and specific to require citation. The purport of these scriptures is to the effect that God the Eternal Father, whom we designate by the exalted name-title “Elohim,” is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and of the spirits of the human race. Elohim is the Father in every sense in which Jesus Christ is so designated, and distinctively He is the Father of spirits. . . .

Jesus Christ is the Son of Elohim both as spiritual and bodily offspring; that is to say, Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed His mission in the flesh.

missions. As the Father needed the Son to accomplish his purposes, so did the Son need the Father for direction, power, and exaltation. By their acts of mutual service, each fulfilled, and was fulfilled, in the other. Hence, Jesus' prayer: "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee."¹¹¹ In addition to his testimony of direct experience, Joseph defends such a view biblically, "I want to read the text to you myself [John 17:21]—'I am agreed with the Father and the Father is agreed with me, and we are agreed as one.' The Greek shows that it should be agreed."¹¹² Thus, Joseph explicitly rejected the traditional belief that the Godhead, or trinity, was comprised of a single being.¹¹³

In his revelations, the word "God" has dual meaning; it designates the divine community as well as each individual divine person. In order to avoid misunderstanding, it is imperative to keep this dual use of the word "God" in mind. When Joseph declares there are "three Gods," he means that there are three distinct personages, each of whom is divine. When he affirms that there is "one God," he means that there is one perfectly united mutually indwelling divine community.¹¹⁴

Joseph held and his successors hold to a "one perfectly united, mutually indwelling divine community" model of the unity of Godhead rather

"The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 5:23–34 (June 30, 1916). Yet, even prior to Christ's being spiritually begotten by the Father, his eternal or uncreate nature is divine and partakes of the light and glory of the Father. A revelation states that Jesus was in the beginning with the Father as "Spirit, even the Spirit of truth" (D&C 93:23).

111. John 17:1; compare D&C 88:60. See Rodney Turner, "The Doctrine of the Firstborn and Only Begotten," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Center, 1989).

112. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 372. Modern translations of the Bible corroborate Joseph's rendering; see John 17:21 in *The Message* and *Worldwide English Bible*.

113. "Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God anyhow—three in one, and one in three! It is a curious organization. 'Father, I pray not for the world, but I pray for them which thou hast given me.' 'Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are.' All are to be crammed into one God, according to sectarianism. It would make the biggest God in all the world. He would be a wonderfully big God—he would be a giant or a monster." Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 372.

114. See my interview, "Are Mormons Trinitarian?" in *Modern Reformation* (November/December 2003): 40–43, wherein I answer common questions concerning the LDS understanding of the Godhead.

than a “one metaphysical substance” model.¹¹⁵ Thus, the Latter-day Saints do not see the doctrine of the trinity as a mystery in the sense of a doctrine that is incomprehensible, but in the sense of a spiritual truth that was once hidden but now re-revealed through Joseph Smith.

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

Except for the claim to continuous revelation and the reopening of the canon, perhaps no other Mormon doctrine has received as much criticism as the conception and formulation of the trinity by Joseph Smith and his successors.

Speaking of the Latter-day Saint model of the trinity, Evangelical Craig Blomberg has written:

If we are prepared to accept as inspired something that is so divergent from all other religions, what would ever disqualify an idea from being a true revelation from God? . . . Which is more likely—that everyone in the entire modern world was wrong and Joseph Smith got it right or that the tenets of monotheism shared by Jews, Christians, Muslims and other theists are right and Mormonism is wrong?¹¹⁶

Such criticism has been ongoing since Joseph Smith first declared that God the Father and Jesus Christ had appeared to him as two distinct personages in the spring of 1820 (JS-H 1:15–17). In 1849, T. W. P. Taylder, a noted British theologian, asserted that Mormon doctrine was tritheistic because it denies the “unity of the Godhead.”¹¹⁷ Recently, Stephen E. Parrish asserted in *The New Mormon Challenge* that the LDS trinity is a form of tritheism.¹¹⁸ In fact, both the United Methodist Church and Catholic

115. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 37.

116. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 121. Cyril Van der Donckt makes a similar assertion: “If God so emphatically declares, both in the Old and in the New Testament, that there is but one God, has anyone the right to contradict him and to say that there are several or many Gods? But Mr. Roberts insists that the Bible contradicts the Bible; in other words, that God, the author of the Bible, contradicts himself. To say such a thing is down-right blasphemy.” Cyril Van der Donckt, in B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Horizon, 1903), 60.

117. T. W. P. Taylder, *The Materialism of the Mormons, or Latter-day Saints Examined and Exposed* (Woolwich: E. Jones, 1849), 8, as cited in Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837–1860* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 124.

118. Stephen E. Parrish, “A Tale of Two Theisms,” in Beckwith, Mosser, and Owen, *New Mormon Challenge*, 203–4.

Church have recently declared that they will not accept Mormon baptisms as valid, citing in large part the Mormon doctrine of the trinity.¹¹⁹ One Christian polemical essay “seeks to expose the heresy that exists in Mormon Doctrine as it pertains to the Godhead,” stating, “Throughout history many movements have sought to diminish God and define him in rational, human terms. So it is in the Mormon Doctrine of the Godhead. Holding the God that is revealed in Scripture to ‘natural’ standards creates a god that is not worthy of our praise.”¹²⁰

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Despite such avid criticism, many Christian thinkers are showing a renewed interest in Joseph’s kind of trinitarian thought. The social analogy of the Trinity reasserts the religious teaching that the Godhead is composed of three substantively separate and distinct persons¹²¹ who are perfectly one in thought, word, intention, and action. Essentially, social trinitarianism begins with the construct of a “divine society” and then bases the oneness of the Persons in the harmony and union of activity of that society.¹²² Its methodology is explained by Moltmann: “We are

119. On July 17, 2001, *L’Osservatore Romano* reported that, according to the directive, Mormon baptisms did not involve a true invocation of the Trinity because Latter-day Saints perceive the Godhead as consisting of three separate divine beings rather than as one God existing within three persons of one substance. See “Why Mormon Baptism Is Invalid,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, July 17, 2001; Gustav Niebuhr, “Vatican Decides to Rebaptize Mormons Who Are Converting,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2001, A-17; Bob Mims, “Catholics Demote LDS Baptism,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 19, 2001, A-1. In their general conference (May 2–12, 2000), the United Methodist Church voted that following a period of catechesis (a time of intensive exploration and instruction in the Christian faith), such a convert (baptized LDS) should receive the sacrament of Christian baptism. Conference proceedings available online at <http://www.gc2000.org> (accessed February 13, 2006).

120. Richard C. Jackson, “Mormon Doctrine of the Godhead: A Biblical Critique,” Christian Information Ministries, <http://www.christianinformation.org/article.asp?artID=84> (accessed February 7, 2006).

121. For Pannenberg the divine persons are not three modes of being in the one divine subject. They are rather three separate and dynamic centers of action. They can be considered three separate centers of consciousness and thus can be distinctively described as persons on the basis of their unique self-relations that are mediated through their relationships with each other. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:384. See also William J. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003), 134.

122. Paul L. Owen, “Reflections on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” Mormons in Transition, <http://www.irr.org/mit/trinity1.html> (accessed February 15, 2006).

beginning with the trinity of the Persons and shall then go on to ask about the unity."¹²³ Clark Pinnock articulates social trinitarianism as a "transcendent society or community of three personal entities. Father, Son and Spirit are the members of a divine community, unified by common divinity and singleness of purpose. The Trinity portrays God as a community of love and mutuality."¹²⁴

In fact, John Hicks, a non-Mormon scholar, describes the "revival" of social trinitarianism as "one of the most significant developments in contemporary theology."¹²⁵ Hicks calls it a "revival" because most scholars of Christian beginnings acknowledge that the social model predated the creedal "one substance" view. Indeed, most attribute this understanding to New Testament writers and the earliest Church Fathers, particularly the fourth- and fifth-century Cappadocian fathers.¹²⁶ Yet this view is hardly

This article aims to "lay some groundwork which may help Latter-day Saints appreciate exactly what mainstream Christians mean when they speak of the Holy Trinity."

123. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 19.

124. Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 29. Those who affirm this doctrinal notion of deity base their perspective largely on the economic vision of the Trinity, which describes the acts of the triune God with respect to the creation, history, salvation, and daily lives of human beings. It refers to how the Trinity operates within redemptive history in regards to the roles or functions performed by each of the persons of the Trinity. The economic is contrasted by the ontological Trinity, which speaks of the essence, nature or attributes of the Trinity. Simply—the ontological Trinity focuses on who God is, while the economic Trinity focuses on what God does.

125. John Mark Hicks, "An Introduction to the Doctrine of God" (paper presented at Harding University Graduate School of Religion, "Theology in Service of the Church" seminar held in conjunction with the 1996 Christian Scholars Conference, Nashville, Tenn.), July 18, 1996.

126. "In the fourth and fifth centuries, when the doctrine of the Trinity was being fully developed, there were particular limits on orthodoxy and, accordingly, particular positions outside orthodoxy. As already suggested, virtually everybody who writes on the Trinity during this period identifies the monist heresy as some form of modalism (Sabellianism, for instance), and then specifies that modalism is unacceptable because it allows belief in only one person. I now want to add that the heresy on orthodoxy's pluralist side is specifiable as well. And it is surely not the view that God includes three distinct persons: that view lies at the heart of orthodoxy, agreed to by Cappadocians and Augustinians alike. . . . For the whole Augustinian age, and for centuries afterward, modalism and Arianism are the opposite trinitarian heresies and here again, social trinitarianism affirms the standard trinitarian tradition." Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in Feenstra and Plantinga, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 34.

universal. For example, in treating the trinitarianism of the Cappadocians, Roger Olsen states:

Throughout centuries of theology many critics have found it simply too ambiguous to accept without further clarification. When examined closely, it seems either that the Cappadocians were affirming God's oneness to the exclusion of real threeness or else affirming God's threeness to the exclusion of real oneness. Their analogies tend to emphasize threeness. Thus they are often treated as the source of the modern "social analogy" of the Trinity. . . . But their abstract explanations tend to emphasize oneness.¹²⁷

Even more prevalent than appealing to the Church Fathers as support for embracing a social model of the trinity is an appeal to the Bible. Jürgen Moltmann argues, "It seems to make more sense theologically to start from the biblical history, and therefore to make the unity of the three divine Persons the problem, rather than to take the reverse method—to start from the philosophical postulate of absolute unity, in order then to find the problem in the biblical testimony." The biblical beginnings of the doctrine should take precedence over the philosophical argument, "for ultimately we must always see to it that the liberating force of the biblical witness is preserved and not obscured."¹²⁸

Others offer existential reasons for rethinking the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, in his critique of the social and political effects of monotheism, Leonardo Boff writes:

It is not surprising, then, that Immanuel Kant should have written: "The doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value, even if one claims to understand it; still less when one is convinced that it far surpasses our understanding. It costs the student nothing to accept that we adore three or ten persons in the divinity. One is the same as the other to him, since he has no concept of God in different persons (hypostases). Furthermore, this distinction offers absolutely no guidance for his conduct." This observation shows that the Trinity, for most people, has become a problem in logic and has ceased to be the mystery of our salvation. It has been reduced to a curiosity rather than being a reality that matters to us because it sheds light on our own existence and tells us the ultimate structure of the universe and of human life: communion and participation.¹²⁹

127. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 194.

128. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 149, 65.

129. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 19–20, quoting Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten* 8 (Berlin, 1917), 38–39. Jürgen Moltmann expresses similar thoughts, writing:

The distinguished contemporary proponents of a social model of the divine unity represent every major Christian theological tradition and include Cornelius Plantinga Jr.,¹³⁰ C. Stephen Layman,¹³¹ Richard Swinburne,¹³² David Brown,¹³³ Joseph A. Bracken,¹³⁴ Jürgen Moltmann,¹³⁵ Leonardo Boff,¹³⁶ Clark H. Pinnock,¹³⁷ Thomas V. Morris,¹³⁸

Many people view the theological doctrine of the Trinity as a speculation for theological specialists, which has nothing to do with real life. That is why modern Protestants like to content themselves with the young Melancthon's maxim: "We adore the mysteries of the Godhead. That is better than to investigate them." It is difficult enough to believe that there is a God at all and to live accordingly. Does belief in the Trinity not make the religious life even more difficult, and quite unnecessarily? Why are most Christians in the West, whether they be Catholics or Protestants, really only "monotheists" where the experience and practice of their faith is concerned?

Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 1, quoting P. Melancthon, *Loci Communes*, 1521, *Melancthon's Werke* 2, ed. R. Stupperich (Gütersloh, 1952), 7. Karl Rahner also complains about this in his "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" *Theological Investigations* 4 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 77–102.

130. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 21–47; Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (April 1998): 37–53.

131. C. Stephen Layman, "Tritheism and Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (July 1988): 291–98.

132. Richard Swinburne, "Could There Be More Than One God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (July 1988): 225–41; Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 170–92.

133. David Brown, "Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality," in Feenstra and Plantinga, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, 48–78; David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), 272–301.

134. Bracken represents process thought by arguing, "They [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] represent three different subjective foci or centers of activity within the field. Thus, they are three separate 'personalities,' exercising interrelated but still different functions within one and the same field of activity." Joseph A. Bracken, "Panentheism from a Process Perspective," in *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (New York: Continuum, 1997), 101.

135. Jürgen Moltmann was a professor of systematic theology at Tübingen for twenty-seven years and presently a professor emeritus. See Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.

136. Leonardo taught for many years at the Franciscan Institute in Petropolis. See Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 119.

137. Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 21–48.

138. Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 174–84.

John Richardson Illingworth,¹³⁹ Timothy R. Bartell,¹⁴⁰ William Hasker,¹⁴¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg,¹⁴² William Lane Craig,¹⁴³ and Stephen T. Davis.¹⁴⁴

In discussing the question of the trinity, Cornelius Plantinga writes: “The main problem or puzzlement here is that of threeness and oneness. Suppose the divine life includes both a three and one. What are the referents of these numbers? Three what? One what? And especially, how are these three and this one related?”¹⁴⁵ Social trinitarianism answers Plantinga’s questions by explaining that the “Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that, on this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as *persons* in some full sense of that term.”¹⁴⁶ Boff concludes, “To sum up, we can say that in God there are three *prosopa* or *personae*; that is, three specific individualities, which the New Testament calls Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹⁴⁷ In regards to the Greek New Testament text, Boff gives a persuasive explication that mirrors that of Joseph Smith:

139. Richard Hoskins, *The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Works of John Richardson Illingworth and William Temple, and the Implications for Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (London: Edwin Mellen, 2000).

140. Timothy R. Bartell, “The Plight of the Relative Trinitarian,” *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 129–55.

141. See William Haskers’s essay in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000).

142. Pannenberg is a leading systematic theologian at the international and ecumenical level. See also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004), 81.

143. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 575–96.

144. Davis is the Russel K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. See Stephen T. Davis, “Perichoretic Monotheism: A Defense of a Social Theory of the Trinity,” in *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*, ed. Melville Stewart (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 35–52.

145. Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 21.

146. Plantinga continues delineating the remaining conditions a theory must meet to be classified as “social”: “Any accompanying sub-theory of divine simplicity must be modest enough to be consistent with condition (1), that is, with the real distinctness of trinitarian persons. . . . (3) Father, Son, and Spirit must be regarded as tightly enough related to each other so as to render plausible the judgment that they constitute a particular social unit.” Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” 22.

147. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 59–60.

The basic reason for this choice is to be found in John 10:30: "The Father and I are one" (*hen*). Note that Jesus is not saying, "The Father and I are numerically one" (*heis*), but uses a term meaning "we are together" (Greek *hen*, as used again in v.38: "The Father is in me and I am in the Father"). The union of the Father and Son does not blot out the difference and individuality of each. Union rather supposes differentiation. Through love and through reciprocal communion they are one single thing, the one God-love.¹⁴⁸

Besides speaking of one God-love, Social Trinitarians answer the question, "One what?" in three specific ways. There is "only one font of divinity, only one Father, only one God in *that* sense of God," there is "a set of excellent properties severally necessary and jointly sufficient for their possessor to be divine," and there is "only one divine family or monarchy or community, namely, the Holy Trinity itself."¹⁴⁹ And especially, how are these three and this one related? Social Trinitarians answer, "The mysterious inness or oneness relation in the divine life is short of personal identity, but much closer than mere common membership in a class. For it includes a divine kinship relation as well."¹⁵⁰ While traditional Christianity (aided by modern translations of the Bible) has downplayed the familial relationship of the Son to the Father,¹⁵¹ Social Trinitarians cautiously assert doctrine

148. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 5.

149. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 31. In accordance with Plantinga, Moltmann writes:

We have to talk about the unity of the triune God in three respects.

In respect of the constitution of the Trinity the Father is the 'origin-without-origin' of the Godhead. According to the doctrine of the two processions, the Son and the Spirit take their divine hypostases from him. So in the constitution of the Godhead, *the Father* forms the 'monarchical' unity of the Trinity.

But in respect of the Trinity's inner life, the three Persons themselves form their unity, by virtue of their relation to one another and in the eternal perichoresis of their love. . . .

Finally, the mutual transfiguration and illumination of the Trinity into the eternal glory of the divine life is bound up with this. (Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 177–78)

150. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 28–29.

151. In the American Standard Version translation of John 1:14, 18 and John 3:16, 18 the "only begotten" Son is now the "only" while the New International Version translates "only begotten" as "one and only" Son.

parallel to Joseph's. Consider Plantinga on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus:

Such biblical language as Son 'of the Father' still suggests, however, both kinship and derivation. One might suppose, therefore, that these two persons are essentially related to each other not only generically but also in some quasi-genetic way. For the Son is not only equally divine with the Father; he is also the *Father's* Son. He is, so to speak, his Father all over again. We could say, then, that Father and Son are not just members of the class of divine persons, but also members of the same family.¹⁵²

Furthermore, Leonardo Boff writes, "The Gospels preserve the originality of Jesus' relationship to his God. This is something extremely intimate and unique; thus Jesus describes God with a word drawn from the language of family relationships, *Abba*, a childish expression of affection for a father."¹⁵³

In an unprecedented move, Plantinga and others propose getting rid of simplicity theory altogether as it "ends up complicating trinity doctrine quite needlessly."¹⁵⁴ (Simplicity theory holds that a perfect being must be absolutely simple or incomposite, inasmuch as anything composed of parts is susceptible of being decomposed or destroyed.) At the very least, Plantinga argues, any subtheory of divine simplicity must be modest enough to be consistent with there being distinct persons within the trinity.¹⁵⁵ Moltmann argues from a biblical standpoint:

If we search for a concept of unity corresponding to the biblical testimony of the triune God, the God who unites others with himself, then we must dispense with both the concept of the one substance and the concept of the identical subject. All that remains is: the unitedness, the at-oneness of the three Persons with one another, or: the unitedness, the at-oneness of the triune God.¹⁵⁶

152. Plantinga, "Social Trinity, and Tritheism," 28.

153. Boff continues, "We also know that the Son proceeds and comes from the Father (John 8:42) and that the Holy Spirit is sent by the Son from the Father. . . . There is an order in the three Persons: the Father first, the Son second and the Holy Spirit third. The witness of revelation of this mystery further testify that the Persons proceed one from another. 'Procession' (*processio* or *emanatio* in Latin, *ekporeusis* or *probolē* in Greek) designates the origin of one Person from another." Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 29, 90. For another Social Trinitarian view on the Fatherhood of God, see Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 162–66.

154. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 43.

155. Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 22.

156. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 150.

D. Conclusion

A comparison of the conception and explication of the trinity by Social Trinitarians and Joseph's revelations yields the conclusion that an increasing number of respected orthodox Christian scholars are now holding and defending what was, for a long time in the West, a uniquely Mormon doctrine.¹⁵⁷

IV. DEIFICATION

A. Joseph's Views

On February 16, 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received a revelation from God indicating that those who attained the highest level of glory in the heavens would receive God's "fulness, and of his glory," becoming "gods, even the sons of God" (D&C 76:56, 58). This event marked the beginning of the gradual unfolding of a significant doctrine taught by Joseph Smith: deification—the doctrine that man can become like God. This gradual unfolding became a mainstream doctrine of the Latter-day Saints.¹⁵⁸

To understand Joseph's doctrine of deification, it is necessary to set forth a few of the unique aspects of his theological anthropology. First, Joseph taught that the "mind" or "intelligence" of man is eternal. In the King Follett Discourse¹⁵⁹ delivered in the spring of 1844, Joseph Smith

157. For example, Paul Owen has written, "Again, the point being made here is that *both* the social model and the modal/psychological model are approaches which are taken by mainstream, orthodox Christians; all of whom would quickly affirm their commitment to the belief that God is essentially one, but personally differentiated. Therefore, discussions between traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints need to take into consideration the *spectrum* of possibilities within the framework of historic, orthodox Christianity. Mainstream Christians should not give the misleading impression that there is no theological 'breathing room' for different trinitarian perspectives underneath the umbrella of 'orthodoxy.'" Owen, *Reflections on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity*, part 2.

158. K. Codell Carter, "Godhood," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:553–55.

159. More than any other sermon, the "King Follett Discourse" more fully presented the parameters of the origin, nature, and eventual divinity of man. This discourse would come to be known as the Prophet Joseph Smith's greatest sermon. Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 179–92; Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 209–23. See also Jordan Vajda, "Partakers of the Divine Nature,"

taught, “The mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal [co-eternal] with, God himself. I know my testimony is true. . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle . . . and there is no creation about it.”¹⁶⁰ The assumption that man is uncreate and eternal provides a unique anthropological foundation for Joseph’s doctrine of deification.¹⁶¹ Madsen shows that a close reading of Joseph Smith’s teachings yields four insights into man’s spirit intelligence: Man inherently has individuality, autonomy, consciousness, and capacity of development.¹⁶²

Second, at some stage in man’s premortal existence, his spirit body is spiritually begotten by heavenly parents.¹⁶³ Spirit birth does not mark the

FARMS Occasional Papers 3 (2002): 27; and M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, “Doctrine: Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:396.

160. Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 203–4. Elsewhere, speaking of our conscious identity or spirit, Joseph taught: “Where did it come from? All learned men and doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning; but it is not so: the very idea lessens man in my estimation. . . . We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal with God himself.” Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings*, 340.

161. There are differences of opinion among students of the Prophet’s teachings as to whether humans always existed as individual intelligences or were part of a pool of intelligence or spirit matter that became intelligences as a result of spirit birth. The Church has taken no official position on this issue. As Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “Some of our writers have endeavored to explain what an intelligence is, but to do so is futile, for we have never been given any insight into this matter beyond what the Lord has fragmentarily revealed.” Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Progress of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1936), 11. In any case, the intelligence of man is as eternal as God and capable of enlargement until, like God, it attains a fullness of glory.

162. Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 25, quoting *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 353.

163. Spirit birth is not a doctrine explicitly found in Joseph Smith’s writings or recorded sermons. It is, however, easily extrapolated from his teachings and reflects the way most of his closest associates understood them. Joseph taught that God is an exalted man and that, in order to become like God, men and women must enter the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, which will enable them to “bear the souls of men” in the eternal world (D&C 132:63). Joseph also taught that one of the keys to understanding the spiritual realm is to look at the nature of things in the temporal world since “that which is spiritual [is] in the likeness of that which is temporal” (D&C 77:2).

beginning of man's consciousness, but rather it constitutes a transformation or enlargement of the uncreate "intelligence." Says Madsen:

In mortal birth, inherent physical and personality traits of the father and mother are transmitted to their son or daughter. . . . More, one's bodily inheritance and then his environment mold him and largely condition his destiny.

It is exactly so with man's spirit. Long before mortality, in a process of actual transmission, there were forged into man's spirit the embryonic traits, attributes, and powers of God Himself! And in the surroundings of that realm man was nurtured in the Divine image.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, Joseph boldly proclaimed that humans are of the same origin and species as God: "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!"¹⁶⁵ And thus the powerful corollary: humankind, as uncreate intelligences who become the literal, spiritual offspring of God, inherits the potential to become like God, able to attain his same knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence. But they cannot achieve this status on their own. God's fundamental purpose in creating the world was to bring about the "immortality and eternal [God-like] life" of his spirit children (Moses 1:39). On this point, Joseph taught:

God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with Himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits.¹⁶⁶

Third, according to Joseph's revelations, the fall of Adam and Eve and the freedom to choose between good and evil are both essential to the synergistic process of man's growth into God's likeness. Lehi informed us that "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25). But to attain this joy, Lehi explains that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness . . . neither good nor bad . . . [neither] happiness nor misery" (2 Ne. 2:11). Lehi continued:

And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, . . . it must needs be that there was an

164. Madsen, *Eternal Man*, 35.

165. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 345.

166. *History of the Church*, 6:312.

opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter. Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other (2 Ne. 2:15–16).

Even God, though omnipotent, cannot by divine fiat bring about joy without moral holiness, moral holiness without moral freedom, moral freedom without an opposition in all things (see 2 Ne. 2:25–26).

Given man's initial moral imperfection, together with moral freedom and opposition as essential variables in the divine equation for man, two consequences stand out saliently: (1) the inevitability and universality of human sin, and (2) our need for a Redeemer and ongoing sanctification. Accordingly, the fourth foundational principle for Joseph's doctrine of deification is centered in Christ's incarnation and atonement. These afford man redemption from sin, immortality, and the ability to grow in holiness through the sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost. Joseph recognized the untoward consequences of man's fallen status, yet did not attribute to man an essentially evil nature. He stated, "I believe that a man is a moral, responsible, free agent; that although it was foreordained he should fall, and be redeemed, yet after the redemption it was not foreordained that he should again sin."¹⁶⁷ Thus, through the sanctifying influence of the Holy Ghost, Christ's atonement makes it possible for man to transcend his fallen state and become a partaker of the divine nature. To refer again to Lehi: "And the way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free . . . Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth" (2 Ne. 2:4–6).

Finally, Joseph realized that an essential property of divinity is a relationship of sacred and intimate unity with the persons of the Godhead. As Joseph stated in an 1833 revelation:

[Christ] received a fulness of the glory of the Father; and he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, *for he dwelt in him*, and it shall come to pass that if you are faithful . . . you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified *in me as I am in the Father*; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace (D&C 93:16–17, 20; emphasis added).

The stunning reality, according to Joseph Smith, is that the very purpose of human life consists in the fact that humankind has been invited "into" this relationship through the atonement of Jesus. God wants to relate to us just

167. Joseph Smith Jr., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 33.

as the divine persons relate to one another; God wants us to be one in the Father and the Son as they are one in each other. God desires to be “at-one-ment” with persons. Deification, according to Joseph, is dependent upon our acceptance of and obedience to Jesus, thereby making his atonement personally and fully efficacious. As the *Lectures on Faith* explain:

And all those who keep his commandments shall grow up from grace to grace, and become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness, even the express image of Him who fills all in all; being filled with the fullness of his glory, and become one in him, even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one.¹⁶⁸

Although Joseph taught a very lofty view of man's eschatological potential in asserting that man has the potential to become a god and enter into close association with the Godhead, he also made clear that those who become gods will be forever subordinate to the Godhead. As we progress and attain God's present glory, God progresses also to reach a higher exaltation and remains our God. Said Joseph of eternal progression,

“When I [Jesus] get my kingdom, I will give it to the Father and it will *add to and exalt* His glory. *He will take a higher exaltation and I will take His place and am also exalted*, so that He obtains kingdom rolling upon kingdom.” So that Jesus treads in His tracks as He had gone before and then inherits what God did before. God is glorified in the salvation and exaltation of His creatures.¹⁶⁹

Joseph's doctrine of deification was boldly original and quite distinct from that of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions (this will be explored more fully below). For example, one difference between Orthodoxy's *theosis* and Joseph Smith's doctrine of deification regards what deified persons actually *do*. Orthodox doctrine sheds little light on this matter, whereas Joseph's recorded revelation of God's word reads that humankind “shall come forth in the first resurrection; . . . and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths.” The faithful will pass by the angels and receive exaltation and glory in all things, “which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end.” Because these gods have progeny, “they continue.” Then are they “above all” and have “all power, and the angels are subject unto them.”¹⁷⁰

168. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 5:2.

169. Larson, “King Follett Discourse,” 201.

170. D&C 132:19–20. Elsewhere Jordan Vajda summarizes: “[Deified persons] will do all those things that their own Heavenly Parents have done: they will organize matter into universes and worlds; they will produce spirit children; they will

In addition, Joseph's view of deification is both ontological and participatory while conventional Christianity's view is merely participatory.¹⁷¹ Conventional Christianity sees deification as a change in which the deified being takes on divine attributes but essentially is still of a different species than God.¹⁷² Vladimir Lossky writes of human beings, "We might say that by creation *ex nihilo* God 'makes room' for something which is wholly outside of Himself; that, indeed, He sets up the 'outside' or nothingness alongside of His plenitude. The result is a subject which is entirely 'other,' infinitely removed from Him, 'not by place but by nature.'"¹⁷³

Three analogies presented by Jordan Vajda, Rene Krywult, and Blake Ostler underscore the differences between Joseph's and the Orthodox view. The Orthodox view¹⁷⁴ of man's becoming God, said Vajda, is analogous to iron being forged in a fire.

provide a plan whereby their spirit children can attain divinization also." Vajda, "Partakers of the Divine Nature," 46.

171. It is helpful to realize that there are two strands to the classical patristic view of deification, one emphasizing the communication of divine attributes to Christians, the other concentrating on the Christian's participation in intradivine relationship. Williams notes that "these are not seen as contradictory by the Fathers, though we can learn a good deal about the general cast of a writer's thought by observing which strand predominates." Rowan Williams, "Deification," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (London: SCM, 1983), 106.

172. After the Orthodox acceptance of the views of Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) on the distinctions between divine energies and divine essence, the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of theosis became defined as a union (of energies) without confusion (of essence) in which the essential distinction between Creator and creature eternally remains. As Orthodox Bishop Kalistos Ware writes: "In the Age to come God is 'all in all,' (1 Cor. 15:28); yet Peter is Peter and Paul is Paul." Each retains his or her own nature and personal identity. Yet all are filled with God's Spirit and perfected as creature. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 125. Ware also emphasizes that deification implies neither a change in God's nature nor a loss in our status as creature: "'We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation.' Man does not become God *by nature*, but is merely a 'created god,' a god *by grace* or *by status*." Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 237.

173. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (England: James Clarke, 1968), 92–93.

174. See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 97. Also Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003).

Reflect on what occurs when iron is plunged into fire, as happens when a sword is being shaped. A definite change takes place. The fire penetrates the metal and communicates to it some of its own properties. The metal begins to glow. It becomes hot and burning. It becomes malleable. None of these things is a natural property of iron; . . . It is only when the iron participates in the nature of the fire that it becomes what it was not while still retaining its essential identity as iron.¹⁷⁵

Adding another analogy, Ostler saw the relational aspect of the process of deification as analogous to chemical reaction in the combination of atoms:

Consider the element hydrogen. If we heat the hydrogen, it becomes “hot,” but at a certain point the hydrogen atoms fuse and give off energy. A single atom of hydrogen does not have the ability to fuse and create thermonuclear power, but two hydrogen atoms together can become together what alone they cannot be—a source of power and light. The properties of divinity emerge from the relationship of divine unity and supervene on persons-in-relationship and not just on a person simpliciter.¹⁷⁶

By contrast, Krywult noted that many LDS Church leaders have likened Joseph's conception of man's becoming God to the development and growth of a human embryo.¹⁷⁷ As gods in embryo, we are dependent on God for our subsistence, just as an embryo is to his mother. Once born, an infant gradually becomes aware of his inherited attributes and capacities, which are refined and enlarged as he grows to full maturity. Similarly, we come alive to our divine potential as we are born through receipt of the spirit of God and rise in the resurrection with bodies “fashioned like unto his [Jesus'] glorious body” (Philip. 3:21). Thus growth from embryo to godhood is a lengthy process not to be achieved in this world. Joseph taught that “it will be a great work to learn our salvation *and exaltation even beyond the grave.*”¹⁷⁸

175. Vadja, “Partakers of the Divine Nature,” 24–25.

176. Blake Ostler, email correspondence to author, July 26, 2005.

177. Church leaders who have used this metaphor include Brigham Young, John Taylor, Orson Pratt, Erastus Snow, Orson F. Whitney, George F. Richards, to name a few. See numerous references in the *Journal of Discourses*.

178. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 348; emphasis in original. Vadja gives a slightly different spin to this analogy by comparing Joseph's conception of man's becoming God to the growth of an infant into an adult. He writes:

The infant and its parent look different, sound different, are amazingly unequal as to their abilities or actual capacities. Apart from some knowledge and experience, one could never guess that the infant has *already* the inborn capacity to grow and develop into the maturity and capacity of the adult parent. . . . In a similar way, the LDS doctrine of exaltation explains human salvation as being fundamentally about a process of human growth and progress. Being literal spirit children of

In summary, Joseph Smith taught a unique form of human deification which emphasizes the genetic principle that humans are essentially the same species as God. He would have agreed most with the “gods in embryo” analogy. He rejected the traditional creator/creature distinction and boldly affirmed man’s eschatological divine potential which becomes fully actualized only when man becomes “one” with the persons of the Godhead. Claiming authority from God, Joseph invites us to take Athanasius’ aphorism quite literally: “God was made man that we may be made gods.”

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

For traditional Christianity, the doctrine of theosis or deification¹⁷⁹ has a unique history. Biblically, Peter, John, and Paul all spoke of the idea that man can become God (2 Pet. 1:4; Rom. 8:16–17). In the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria, one can find references to the idea that “God became man, that man might become God.”¹⁸⁰ From the initial scholarly attention deification received in the first century to its integration in the Byzantine Church in the fourth century, the doctrine experienced numerous developments at the hands of many influential Church Fathers.¹⁸¹ Maximus the Confessor (580–682) was primarily responsible for the elucidation of deification that eventually led to its eventual level of acceptance in Eastern Orthodox religions.¹⁸² Gregory

divine parentage, all persons who come into this world possess *already* the capacity to grow up and become just like their Heavenly Parents—with all the same powers and abilities. (Vajda, “Partakers of the Divine Nature,” 40)

179. To follow suit with recent theologians, I will use the terms “deification” and “theosis” as synonyms in this paper. Carl Mosser points out, however, that traditionally the term *theosis* “has been uniquely associated with the classical tradition of Byzantine theology represented by such figures as Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus Confessor, and Gregory Palamas.” Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (April 2005): 31 n. 3.

180. See Norman Russell’s “‘Partakers of the Divine Nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) in the Byzantine Tradition,” in *Kathegetria: Essays Presented to Joan Hussey for Her 80th Birthday* (Camberley, UK: Porphyrogenitus Publications, 1998), 51–67, for arguably the best treatment of deification in the Patristic Fathers. See also *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3d ed., ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Deification.”

181. See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–16, for a brief overview of *theosis* among the Church Fathers.

182. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 262–63.

Palamas (1296–1359) elaborated the doctrine further for the East by stressing that mankind can be deified by the Holy Spirit; thus deified man can participate in God's divine attributes.¹⁸³ But, according to Palamas, the attributes of God that man participates in consist of God's *energies*, or knowable attributes, workings, activities, and so forth. Man cannot participate in God's *essence*, or unknowable attributes—such as omnipresence or timelessness—for these represent an ontological gap between the Creator (God) and the creature (man) that cannot be crossed.¹⁸⁴ After having made explicit the essence/energies distinction, Palamas provided an ontological framework through which the Eastern Orthodox Church could interpret the numerous references made to deification by the Patristic Fathers. Consequently, deification has been explicitly significant in the East; indeed, one influential Orthodox scholar, Vladimir Lossky referred to deification as the “very essence of Christianity.”¹⁸⁵

By contrast, however, deification in the Roman Catholic and Protestant West has received mixed reviews. It would be incorrect to say the doctrine has been altogether abandoned by western theologians. A number of Catholic scholars have recognized the centrality of deification, at least to the Patristic Fathers.¹⁸⁶ Also Protestants such as Jürgen Moltmann,¹⁸⁷

183. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Deification.”

184. Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Bedfordshire, UK: Faith, 1963), 132–33.

185. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 97. Also Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 121.

186. French Jesuit Henri Rondet wrote that “this doctrine is found henceforward in all the Fathers,” both the Alexandrians as well as the Antiochenes. Henri Rondet, *The Grace of Christ* (Paris, 1948; rpt. New York: Newman, 1967), 80. Michael Azkoul wrote that it was the “universal teaching of the Catholic Church and her Fathers.” Michael Azkoul, *St. Gregory of Nyssa and the Tradition of the Fathers* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 15 n. 6, where he cites, with references, the following fathers as having taught deification: Ignatius, Dionysius the Areopagite, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus (the Theologian), John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, Hippolytus, Cyprian of Carthage, Hilary of Poitiers, Pope Leo the Great, Ambrose of Milan, Peter Chrysologus, Ephraim the Syrian, Tertullian, and Augustine. Jesuit Jacques Dupuis has written that it was one of the “fundamental axioms for the early Church Fathers.” Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994): 77. Jesuit Frans Jozef van Beeck wrote that it was the “most central theological theme of the patristic tradition . . . a patristic commonplace.” Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, “Understanding the Christian Faith” (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 63, 87.

187. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992): 299. See also the comments by

Wolffhart Pannenberg,¹⁸⁸ and Reinhold Neibuhr¹⁸⁹ admit importance to the patristic version of deification. But the doctrine certainly has not been accepted in the West as in the East, and numerous scholars from both sides have inquired as to why deification has muted acceptance in the West.¹⁹⁰ Catholic writer Hans Küng suggests that as early as the Augustine-Pelagius controversy, deification in the Latin tradition was being replaced with milder doctrines of grace, focusing on how God saves rather than on what the condition of the saved will be.¹⁹¹ In response to some of Pelagius' claims, Augustine said regarding deification:

Moltmann, quoted favorably, and interpreted as referring to *theosis*, by Lutheran writer Kenneth L. Bakken, "Holy Spirit and *Theosis*: Toward a Lutheran Theology of Healing," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994): 411.

188. Wolffhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 39–40, 347 n. 45. The term he uses here is *theopoesis*, also frequently used by the early Fathers.

189. Reinhold Neibuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 1:173. Clement of Alexandria is quoted at 1:144, 2:58, and 2:131; Irenaeus at 1:173; Gregory of Nyssa at 2:77 n. 8, 2:132; Origen at 2:131 n. 6; Tertullian at 2:131.

190. Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, "The Mystery of *Theosis* or Divinization," in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of the Very Reverend Georges Vasilievich Florovsky*, ed. David Nieman and Margaret Schatkin (Roma: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1973), 335–36; Benjamin Drewery, "Deification," in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, ed. Peter Brooks (London: SCM, 1975), 37; Joseph Frary, "Deification and Human Freedom," *Sobornost*, series 7 (1975): 118–19; Frederick W. Norris, "Deification: Consensual and Cogent," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 411–12; A. D. Nock, review of *The Epistle to Diognetus*, by Henry G. Meecham, *Journal of Religion* 31 (1951): 214–16; James G. M. Purves, "The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*: Reviewing the Anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons," *Evangelical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (1996): 102; Christoph Schönborn, *From Death to Life: The Christian Journey*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 45–46; C. R. B. Shapland, trans., *The Letters of Saint Athanasius concerning the Holy Spirit* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 125; Carl A. Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church: Foundations for Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983), 76.

191. Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 215–16. According to A. N. Williams, Orthodox writer Paul Evdokimov took the same position, claiming that "after Augustine and Ambrose, Latin theology replaced the theology of theosis with the theology of filiation and grace,' an interpretation [Williams continues] that essentially faults the West for infidelity to the true theological tradition." A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6, citing Paul Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1959): 93 n. 214.

For my part I hold that, even when we shall have such great righteousness that absolutely no addition could be made to it, the creature will not be equal to the creator. But if some suppose that our progress will be so great that we will be changed into the divine substance and become exactly what he is, let them see how they may support their view. I confess that I myself am not convinced of it.¹⁹²

Adolf Von Harnack would later claim that due to the Pelagian affair Augustine successfully brought an end to the doctrine of deification in the West.¹⁹³ Also, mention of deification or theosis is totally absent in any of the early church's ecumenical councils and creeds. If the doctrine was admittedly so central in the Patristic Fathers' writings, why was it not explicated in a more official venue? Maximus the Confessor, "the last common Father" who straddled both Eastern and Western theologies,¹⁹⁴ wondered the same thing. Jaroslav Pelikan reported Maximus saying in regards to the Creeds, "If this dogma [of theosis] belongs to the mystery of the faith of the Church, it was not included with the other [dogmas] in the symbol expounding the utterly pure faith of Christians, composed by our holy and blessed fathers."¹⁹⁵ Catholic Christoph Schönborn responded that it is not the purpose of a Council to define the doctrines of the Church: "It is the role of a council to *profess* the Faith, not to explain it: this would be the task of theologians and doctors of the Church."¹⁹⁶ Thus the problem Maximus dealt with: the Fathers clearly taught the doctrine; the Councils and Creeds did not. Also, the Creeds (Apostolic or Nicene [AD 325], Constantinople [381], and Chalcedon [451]) were not intended to be full expressions of the Catholic faith. Jesuit Roger Haight writes, "The logic of salvation, a way of understanding how it unfolded, is absent in the creed. . . . The creed

192. Augustine, Nature and Grace 33.37 in *Answer to the Pelagians*, part 1, volume 23 of John E. Rotelle, ed. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1997), 244.

193. Adolf Von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. James Millar, 7 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1897), 3:165, as cited in Carl Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 38.

194. Bernard McGinn, "Introduction: Eriugena, East and West," in *Eriugena: East and West*, ed. Bernard McGinn and Willemien Otten (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 4.

195. Jaroslav Pelikan, "'Council or Father or Scripture': The Concept of Authority in the Theology of Maximus Confessor," in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of the Very Reverend Georges Vasilevich Florevsky*, ed. David Nieman and Margaret Schatkin (Roma: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1973), 287–88, quoting *Ambigua* 42.

196. Christoph Schönborn, *God's Human Face*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 8.

does not develop in any way what it means by salvation.” Further, Father Haight writes, “Nicaea did not attempt to say everything. Its intentionality was strictly and self-consciously limited to the narrowly defined goal of refuting Arian propositions. It left many questions unaddressed.”¹⁹⁷ Orthodox scholar D. B. Clendenin picked up on this seeming lack of attention paid to deification, and compared its treatment among theologians in the West with those in the East:

Western theologians in general and Protestants in particular have given only scant attention to the central importance of theosis in Orthodox thought. Nor do they address the doctrine as an important biblical category in its own right. New Testament theologies such as those by George Ladd (1974) and Leon Morris (1986), for example, do not even mention theosis. On the other hand, as early as Gregory Palamas’s fourteenth-century work *On Divine and Deifying Participation*, Orthodox thinkers have systematically analyzed the doctrine at length.¹⁹⁸

Finding an ontological understanding of deification incompatible with traditional understandings of Augustinian theology, some assert that, in years following the adoption of the Creeds, Western theologians preferred to emphasize Christ’s soteriological or salvific role in terms of juridical categories (for example, “satisfaction” or penal substitution), rather than Christ’s role as a divinizing Redeemer.¹⁹⁹ Keith J. Egan said:

Focused on sin and weakness in the human person, students of moral theology in the centuries after Trent [1545–1563] had too little exposure to the study of holiness and not much incentive to engage the holiness tradition from a theological perspective. The presumption at least in practice, if not in theory, was that holiness was the concern of the few, namely, religious and even more restrictively, cloistered religious [as in monks]. The theology of divinization that is so much part of Eastern Christianity would have been a corrective to this overemphasis in the

197. Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 283–84, 285. See also “Hades and Gehenna,” *Church Quarterly Review* (London) 21 (1886): 392, which says there is nothing in the creeds as to the Sacraments. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1:141., which says there is nothing in Nicene creed regarding how salvation was accomplished.

198. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 121. Also see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Deification.” Contemporary Western theologians agree that a marginal amount of attention has been paid to deification. See A. N. Williams, “Deification in the *Summa Theologiae*: A Structural Interpretation of the *Prima Pars*,” *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 219–55; Mosser, “Greatest Possible Blessing,” 36 n. 1–2; and Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (June 1997): 257.

199. See Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 122–23.

West on sin, guilt, and confession. But late medieval efforts at healing ties between East and West were futile and the cross-fertilization between Eastern and Western theology and spirituality had to wait for the renewed interest in that dialogue during this century.²⁰⁰

A. N. Williams attributed the very language used by Patristic Fathers to be another reason why the doctrine of deification may have been neglected. “Deification, even in its patristic form, has become virtually invisible to the eyes of modern Westerners because instead of defining deification, or providing a phenomenological description of the deified, the Fathers use a set of cognates for deification that forms a quasi-technical vocabulary.”²⁰¹ A different emphasis on vocabulary, said Clendenin, partly distinguishes East from West. For the East, “the great mysteries of the faith are matters of adoration rather than analysis.” For Clendenin, “The creeds describe rather than dissect the great truths of Christianity, such as the nature of the Trinity (three persons in one essence) and the relationship between the divine and human natures in Christ.”²⁰² Thus, the difference in emphasis on deification between East and West may have been methodological as well as doctrinal.

But tacit acceptance, neglect, or a shift of emphasis isn't the West's only reactions to the doctrine of deification. Indeed, some Protestants in the past 150 years—particularly those influenced by Adolf von Harnack—explicitly rejected the notion of deification. Schönborn suggested Harnack “and other Church historians of his school” may have rejected deification on purely religious grounds or because the concept is ambiguous or unbiblical.²⁰³ Carl Mosser attributed Harnack's views as an influential factor leading to a Protestant interpretation that deification is a remnant of “Greco-Roman philosophy, the mystery religions, or the Imperial cult,” the notion that humans could become gods “represents the climax of Hellenization of Christianity.”²⁰⁴ Protestant Benjamin Drewery believed that “deification is . . . the most serious aberration to be found not only in

200. Keith J. Egan, “The Divorce of Spirituality from Theology,” in *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 302.

201. Williams, “Deification in the *Summa Theologiae*,” 221.

202. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 53.

203. Schönborn, *From Death to Life*, 42. Schönborn, himself Catholic, feels such a rejection unwarranted. Elsewhere Schönborn expresses his own view that deification is “one of the most influential formulations of the Christian message in that [patristic] period.” Schönborn, *From Death to Life*, 41.

204. Mosser, “Earliest Patristic Interpretations,” 33.

Origen but in the whole tradition to which he contributed.”²⁰⁵ D. M. Baillie, Scottish Presbyterian professor of systematic theology at St. Andrews (1934–1954), said the belief that God became man in order that we might become God “must be suspect, because if taken strictly it would seem to imply either a pantheistic conception or the idea that there can be more gods than one.” He was particularly critical of the common interpretation of 2 Peter 1:4 (partakers of the divine nature); the testimony given there “seems alien to the New Testament writers.”²⁰⁶ Scottish Protestant David Cairns (1862–1946) believed that 2 Peter 1:4 was “open to misinterpretation, and has in fact been misinterpreted.”²⁰⁷ Eastern theologians, he felt, went “beyond the reserve of the Bible” when teaching theosis.²⁰⁸ German Protestant Dietrich Ritschl felt deification as taught by Hippolytus, third century disciple of Irenaeus, is “unbiblical” and “is actually in its origins a doctrine of participation in the (human) obedience of Christ.”²⁰⁹ But Protestants have not been alone in their criticism. Roman Catholic Cyril Van der Donckt offered this condemnation in 1901: “As to man becoming God, the idea is absurd. With far more reason might we contend that the gnat will develop into a lion, and the animalcules which we swallow in a sip of water will grow into gigantic giraffes and colossal elephants.”²¹⁰

As these examples show, the responses of traditional Christendom to the idea of deification have been anything but univocal. Most scholars

205. Benjamin Drewery, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace* (London: Epworth, 1960), 200.

206. D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 81–82, which continues:

But even to speak of a man becoming *divine* involves us in manifest errors. It is not an accident that the adjective ‘divine’ hardly occurs in the New Testament. . . . Indeed it seems alien to the New Testament writers, in all the varieties of their Christology, not only to say that Jesus *became* divine, but even to say that He was or is divine. . . . Does Christianity, then, teach that God changed into a Man? Is that the meaning of ‘and was made man’? That at a certain point of time God, or the Son of God, was transformed into a human being for a period of about thirty years? It is hardly necessary to say that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation means nothing like that. Such a conception bristles with errors.

207. David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM, 1953), 43.

208. Cairns, *Image of God in Man*, 57.

209. Dietrich Ritschl, “Hippolytus’ Conception of Deification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959): 399: “The unbiblical idea of deification can only be replaced by a sound doctrine of Union with Christ if the humanity of the risen Lord is taken seriously in all thinking about the Church and the world.”

210. C. Van Der Donckt, in Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 55.

throughout the years generally agree the idea was central to the Church Fathers. The Eastern Orthodox Church explicitly acknowledges the ontological developments in the doctrine made most notably by Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas. Hence, theosis continues to play a central part in the meaning of salvation for the East. The West, on the other hand, has been riddled with varying opinions. Some have affirmed deification's importance while others prefer to speak of salvation in juridical terms of grace and justification. Still others are hostile to the idea that man could become God—they even equate the notion with Satan's lie to Eve in the Garden of Eden.²¹¹

Irrespective of the acceptance or rejection of Orthodox versions of deification, however, Joseph Smith's doctrine of deification, including his unique corresponding theological anthropology, has prompted a hailstorm of criticism from the Western Christian world. The editors of *The New Mormon Challenge* wrote, "We believe that the doctrine of the literal eternality of human persons is inimical to Christian faith." They proceed to cite Joseph's doctrine as one of "the three issues" which "are absolutely fundamental and nonnegotiable." And they concluded by saying, "We do not feel that the status of Mormonism in relation to Christianity can ever change unless there is willingness within the structures of the LDS church to reconsider those issues."²¹² Similarly, George Arbaugh wrote concerning Joseph's doctrine of the literal parenthood of God the Father: "This evil assertion says too much . . . that man is in his own nature divine. This is blasphemous impudence and conceit."²¹³

Nevertheless, it is Joseph's understanding of the *potential* of humankind that has historically received the most ardent attacks. For instance, Jason J. Barker in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwest Region of the Evangelical Theological Society, opined, "Few doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appear to be more at odds with

211. See Van Der Donckt, in Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 58. One argument against deification is that it seems to imply that the serpent instilled the idea into the minds of humankind, making it a source of pride. Indeed, Gregory Nazianzen wrote that the serpent "cheated us with the hope of becoming gods." But the same Church Father also taught that Christ "still pleads even now as Man for my salvation; for he continues to wear the Body which He assumed, until He make me God by the power of His incarnation." *Oration* 39.13, and *Oration* 30.14 at <http://nazianzos.flter.ucl.ac.be/traductions.htm>.

212. Beckwith, Mosser, and Owen, "Final Conclusions," in *New Mormon Challenge*, 400.

213. George B. Arbaugh, *Gods, Sex, and Saints: The Mormon Story* (Rock Island, Ill: Augustana, 1957), 44.

those of mainstream Christianity . . . than the doctrine of exaltation.”²¹⁴ Ed Decker offered one of the most famous (and disingenuous)²¹⁵ attacks upon Joseph’s doctrine in his book *The God Makers*. Decker called Joseph’s doctrine of deification “a satanic seduction to rebellion against the only true God,” asserting, “no greater lie could be conceived than that humans could become Gods.”²¹⁶ Evangelical apologist Robert M. Bowman Jr. stated that the Mormon belief in the eternal progression of man is “heretical.”²¹⁷

Evangelicals are not alone in their criticism. The Catholic Van Der Donckt, mentioned above, is one more critic that labels Joseph’s doctrine as “a mere echo of Satan’s promise in Paradise; ‘You shall be as gods.’”²¹⁸ Arbaugh echoes this oft-repeated criticism when he ascribes to Mormons “the greatest sin of all, namely pretending to be God.”²¹⁹ In a similar vein, Ron Rhodes writes that when Latter-day Saints discuss salvation and eternal life, “They completely redefine these words to fit their cultic theology.”²²⁰ Jim Adams equates LDS beliefs to those of anti-biblical “pagan

214. Jason J. Barker, “Did the Early Church Teach Theosis or Exaltation? An Analysis of Latter-day Saint Patristic Studies,” paper presented April 7, 2000, in Fort Worth, Texas. Similarly, Paul Owen and Carl Mosser wrote, “Perhaps the doctrine that has generated the most controversy between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals is the notion of ‘deification’ or ‘theosis.’ Can human beings be exalted to such a state as to be properly termed *gods*?” Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, review of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (1999): 16.

215. The National Conference of Christians and Jews characterized the book as making “extensive use of ‘half-truth,’ faulty generalizations, erroneous interpretations, and sensationalism. It is not reflective of the genuine spirit of the Mormon faith.” A detailed report of the committee’s membership and report can be found online at <http://www.lightplanet.com/response/nccj.htm> (accessed January 5, 2006). For a critique of Decker’s book, see Gilbert W. Scharffs, *The Truth about “The God Makers”* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1986).

216. Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1984), 27–28, 29.

217. Bowman asserts that Joseph’s doctrine fails to uphold the four essential elements to an orthodox view of the relationship between God and man: monotheism, Trinitarianism, Incarnationalism, and evangelicalism. He concludes, “Mormonism . . . fails on all four counts.” Robert M. Bowman Jr., “‘Ye Are Gods?’ Orthodox and Heretical Views on the Deification of Man,” *Christian Research Journal* (Winter/Spring 1987): 22.

218. Van Der Donckt in Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 57–58.

219. Arbaugh, *Gods, Sex, and Saints*, 57.

220. Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Mormons* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 311.

religions”²²¹ and then charges Joseph’s doctrine that humans are gods in embryo as “going a step beyond pagan thought.”²²² While some characterize Joseph’s doctrine as rebellious, heretical, satanic, cultic, and pagan, some argue that it is philosophically unsound. Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish argue in *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* that the LDS view “seems to be fundamentally irrational.”²²³

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

But things are changing. While I am not attempting to show that the Christian world has become more receptive of Joseph’s specific version of deification, the past fifty years reflect a steadily increasing amount of general interest in the issue of Orthodox and Patristic deification from Catholics and Protestants alike.²²⁴ In the preface to his seminal work, *The*

221. Adams defines *pagan* as “shorthand for ancient non-Israelite cultures and their religious beliefs” yet, clearly condemns any such beliefs as nonbiblical and erroneous by later stating that these are views “the Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and psalmists intentionally rejected in light of the revelation they received from the one true and living God.” Jim W. Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?” in Beckwith, Mosser, and Owen, *New Mormon Challenge*, 155, 191.

222. Adams, “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?” 188.

223. Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 63. Beckwith and Parrish criticize the LDS understanding of God. Their purpose is to show “(1) that the Mormon concept of God differs radically from the classical concept of God, (2) that the Mormon concept of God contains many philosophical flaws, and (3) that the classical concept of God is more consistent with the Christian Scriptures than the Mormon view.” Beckwith and Parrish, *Mormon Concept of God*, 1. Their philosophical arguments against the LDS concept of God are directed mainly against Mormon eternalism. Their central criticism stems from an argument by William Lane Craig that it is impossible for an actual infinite number of things to exist in the real world.

For responses and rebuttals to Beckwith and Parrish’s arguments, see James E. Faulconer, review of *The Mormon Concept of God*, by Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *BYU Studies* 32, no. 1–2 (1992): 185–95; Blake Ostler, “Review of *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 8, no. 2 (1996): 99–146; David Paulsen and Blake Ostler, “F. J. Beckwith and S. E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35, no. 2 (1994): 118–20; and L. Shane Hopkins, “Assessing the Arguments in *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*” (honors thesis, Brigham Young University, 1999).

224. Explanations for this renewal of interest are varied. Some suggest that the rise of the Soviet Union may have engendered increased study of deification. As scholars came out of the Soviet Union to settle in Europe and other places, they

Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition, Norman Russell points out:

It is becoming less necessary in the English-speaking world to apologize for the doctrine of deification. At one time it was regarded as highly esoteric, if it was admitted to be Christian at all. . . . In recent years a succession of works on deification in individual Fathers from Irenaeus to Maximus the Confessor has confirmed the patristic basis of the doctrine. Since the 1950s several studies have shown how deification, in a more muted way, is also at home in the Western tradition.²²⁵

Some scholars are asserting that deification is not only compatible with Augustinian theology, it is central to it.²²⁶ References to deification have even been found in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.²²⁷ Russell suggests that renewed interest in the patristic writings and the translation into English of several Orthodox scholars have contributed to the increase

had access to Western publications in which they were able to contribute. As Russian scholars of Orthodox background, they were able to introduce the doctrine of deification to a wider audience. Yet others suggest that the *fall* of the Soviet Union contributed to greater awareness of deification. Carl Mosser, for instance, in a personal letter to the author, August 3, 2005, said:

I think the renewal of interest comes from a variety of places. A lot of credit has to be given to the resurgence in patristic scholarship among Protestants. Some must be given to ecumenical dialogue between the West and East. For example, the re-discovery of deification in Luther happened because of dialogue between Lutherans and Orthodox in Finland. Some credit goes to the fall of the Soviet Union. As Protestant missionaries began to work in former Soviet lands that have been historically Orthodox, they have been exposed to Orthodox theology, including theosis, and have researched the issue.

As to his own interest in the subject, Mosser credits his confrontation with LDS apologetics.

225. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, vii. Russell suggests the translation and publication of works by Vladimir Lossky, Mantzaridis, Nellas, and Yannaras, as well as the publication of studies by John Zizioulas and Dumitru Staniloae, have all brought "deification (or theosis) in Orthodox soteriology to the attention of a wide readership." Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, vii.

226. David L. Balas, "Divinization," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Everett Ferguson, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1997), 1:339; Gerald Bonner, "Augustine's Conception of Deification," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 37, no. 2 (1986): 369–86.

227. A. N. Williams, "Deification in the *Summa Theologiae*," 219–55, which states: "Where the conventional wisdom errs, however, is in locating the break in the Middle Ages, for the greatest of all medieval Western theologies, the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, contains a highly developed doctrine of deification."

in attention paid to deification.²²⁸ The result of this awakening has been a virtual explosion of research, dialogue, and publication regarding the doctrine of deification. A current bibliography of articles, books, chapters in books, and dissertations reveals 222 publications. Of these, 195 (or 88 percent) were published since 1950, 104 (nearly half of the total) were published since 1990, and at least twenty more have come off the press in the last four and a half years. Interest in deification remains high, indeed. And it crosses every denominational line.

In May of 2004, Drew University hosted a conference with the theme “Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification/Theosis in the Christian Traditions.” There scholars representing every major Christian theological tradition—Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Calvinist, and Evangelical—presented papers.²²⁹ While topics ranged from historic theories of deification—ancient, patristic, and medieval—to modern interpretations, one point was salient: the presenters were nearly all claiming ownership of some variant of the doctrine for their respective traditions.

An important instance of dialogue on the issue is the ongoing consultation between the Finnish Lutheran Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. To facilitate the incorporation of theosis into Lutheran doctrine, the Finns have discovered and emphasized explicit references to theosis in Luther's writings that had long been overlooked. Jonathan Linman suggests that reading some of Luther's sermons with a “new set of hermeneutic lenses” exposes Luther's understanding of theosis. For instance, in his Christmas sermon of 1514 Luther wrote:

Just as the word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God. Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful. The Logos puts on our form and pattern, our image and likeness, so that it may clothe us with its image, its pattern, and its likeness. Thus wisdom becomes foolish so that foolishness may become wisdom, and so it is in all other things that are in God and in us, to the extent that in all these things he takes what is ours to himself in order to impart what is his to us.²³⁰

228. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, vii.

229. Presenters included James Starr, Nathan Kerr, Paul Collins, Stephen Davis, Fr. Francis Caponi, Gosta Hallonsten, Andrew Louth, S. T. Kimbrough, Jonathan Linman, Sr. Nonna Verna Harrison, Todd Billings, and Robert Bird. A book containing conference addresses is forthcoming.

230. Jonathan Linman, “Christ for the World: Reflections on Faith and the Sacraments as Means to *Theosis* in the Writings of Martin Luther,” paper delivered May 21–22, 2004, at the Partakers of the Divine Nature Conference, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Copy in author's possession.

While differences remain between Lutheranism's rendering of the doctrine and that of Orthodox theologians,²³¹ the fact remains that "the Finnish dialogue with Lutherans . . . [has] therefore made the notion of deification a center of their discussions."²³²

Perhaps a telling sign of the extent to which deification has reentered Christian theology is the way in which it has reemerged in Catholic thought and rhetoric. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, revised in 1993, the fourth reason the Word was made flesh is described thus:

The Word became flesh to make us "partakers of the divine nature" [2 Pet. 1:4]: "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God" [Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1: PG 7/1, 939]. "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God" [Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3: PG 25, 192B]. "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods" [Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57, 1-4].²³³

231. Lutheran Ross Aden observes that Orthodox theologians, such as John Breck, use the expression "communion with God" to mean "ontological participation." In contrast to Lutheranism, "the Orthodox hope of salvation in its broadest sense is more than hope of a divine sentence of 'not guilty' or even of a beatific vision; it is 'human participation in the being of God . . . a total sharing in the Triune life.' . . . Created in the *image* of God, human beings are called to become *like* God by realizing the potential for ontological sharing in the life of God," yet never in such a way that theosis means sharing in God's essence (nature). "Lutherans and Orthodox would agree that the essence of God is utterly transcendent and therefore inaccessible to any created reality." Ross Aden, "Justification and Sanctification: A Conversation Between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1994): 96-98. See also John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, eds., *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992). "While theosis theologians do not espouse a fusion of deity with humanity in deified believers, they at times do speak of ontological change in them. Jaroslav Pelikan observes that in the Cappadocians there does seem to be some sort of a fundamental ontological change in the theosis experience. . . . Krivocheine states that in the thought of St. Symeon, deification refers to 'an ontological rather than to a purely spiritual transformation, although Symeon does not pretend that man abandons his created nature when he becomes a god through adoption.'" Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God," 261 and note.

232. Robert W. Jenson, "Theosis," *Dialog* 32, no. 2 (1993): 108.

233. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is available online via the archive of the official site of the Vatican: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p122a3p1.htm>.

Pope John Paul II has given further credence to the reemerging role of deification in Catholic doctrine:

This is the central truth of all Christian soteriology that finds an organic unity with the revealed reality of the God-Man. God became man that man could truly participate in the life of God—so that, indeed, in a certain sense, he could become God. The Fathers of the Church had a clear consciousness of this fact. It is sufficient to recall St. Irenaeus who, in his exhortations to imitate Christ, the only sure teacher, declared: “Through the immense love he bore, he became what we are, thereby affording us the opportunity of becoming what he is.”²³⁴

After noting that “reference to deification is virtually absent from the major Roman Catholic ascetical and mystical manuals of this century,” Catholic theologian Mark O’Keefe mourns its loss and the fact that it “could not regain a central place in Roman Catholic spiritual theology.”²³⁵ He speaks repeatedly of “retrieving” the idea of theosis and believes that this doctrine contains a powerful pragmatic punch, which should be vital in spurring believers to live a more moral and spiritual life. He explains:

To understand the Christian life as path of theosis is to suggest that the human person called not “merely” into relationship with God—as truly incredible as that is in itself—but that human persons are invited and called into a share in the divine life itself, into the very inner life of the triune God.

Because *theosis* is a present reality—though only partially realized—Christians strive to live a life in conformity to the awesome dignity to which they are called. . . .

To believe that one already shares in the divine life demands of the Christian an authentic response to the divine life and love, especially as this has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Christians strive to model in their lives those perspectives, dispositions, virtues, attitudes, intentions, and affections that seem authentically conformed to the deified life which they have already begun to live, although as yet incompletely and imperfectly. Believers strive to decide and to act in a way consistent with their new life and with the character which flows from it. Christian ethics—both of doing and of being—must be profoundly rooted in the reality of *theosis*.²³⁶

It is indeed stunning that the notion of deification could go from being largely ignored in past Catholicism to being labeled by Pope John Paul II

234. John Paul II, *Jesus, Son and Savior* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), 215.

235. Mark O’Keefe, “Theosis and the Christian Life: Toward Integrating Roman Catholic Ethics and Spirituality,” *Eglise et Théologie* 25 (1994): 56.

236. O’Keefe, “Theosis and the Christian Life,” 61.

as “the central truth of all Christian soteriology” in addition to being recognized as a powerful doctrine with which to shape one’s ethics and fuel one’s spirituality.

Enthusiasm for deification is widespread. Robert Rakestraw, an Evangelical professor of theology at Bethel Theological Seminary, spoke of theosis as, above all, “the restoration and reintegration of the ‘image’ or, as some prefer, ‘likeness’ of God, seriously distorted by the fall, in the children of God. In this life Christians grow more and more into the very likeness and character of God as God was revealed in the man Jesus Christ.”²³⁷ Rakestraw considers the “strengths” of theosis theology to be that it is biblically supported, it offers “hope to some Christians who despair of finding the truly abundant life here on earth,” and that it defines theology itself.²³⁸

Carl Mosser has attempted to show that the doctrine of theosis was both understood and taught by John Calvin.²³⁹ Mosser points out that for Calvin “partaking of the divine nature” is that “which nothing more outstanding can be imagined.”²⁴⁰ In conclusion Mosser states of Calvin: “It must be remembered that deification is a part of the catholic tradition that Calvin and the other Reformers inherited, affirmed and defended. One should never be surprised to find elements of this tradition in the writings of the Reformers.”²⁴¹

Methodists have also joined the search for a place for deification in Western theology. Charles Wesley’s hymns, asserts Rakestraw, “contain a strong element of the life of God in our souls now.”²⁴² One such hymn reads:

Made Flesh for our Sake,
That we might partake
The Nature Divine,
And again in his Image, his Holiness shine.²⁴³

237. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God,” 261.

238. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God,” 267–69.

239. Mosser, “Greatest Possible Blessing,” 36–57.

240. Mosser, “Greatest Possible Blessing,” 40.

241. Mosser, “Greatest Possible Blessing,” 55–56.

242. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God,” 265.

243. “Away with Our Fears.” This hymn is taken from a list of Wesleyan hymns relating to theosis compiled by S. T. Kimbrough Jr. of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. The hymn can be found in *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1762), 2:12, hymn 8, stanza 5.

Charles Ashanin suggests that 2 Peter 1:4 played a significant part in John Wesley's conversion and no doubt influenced his theology. Ashanin explains, "This Biblical statement, incidentally, led John Wesley to the advocacy of the doctrine of Sanctification. This doctrine is probably Wesley's adaptation of the Patristic doctrine of *Theosis*."²⁴⁴

The Anglican tradition also claims insight to the doctrine of deification. A. M. Allchin has written that "unless we affirm with Athanasius that God became man in order that man might become God, the language of incarnation is likely to lose its true significance, as unfortunately it too often has done."²⁴⁵ Philip Edgecumbe Hughes clarified Athanasius' couplet mentioned above by defining theosis as "the reintegration of the divine image of man's creation through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit conforming the redeemed into the likeness of Christ, and also of the believer's transition from mortality to immortality so that he is enabled to participate in the eternal bliss and glory of the kingdom of God."²⁴⁶ Anglican theologian Kenneth Leech expounds on Maximus the Confessor's idea of deification in that "deification is the work of divine grace by which human nature is so transformed that it 'shines forth with a supernatural light and is transported above its own limits by a superabundance of glory.'"²⁴⁷ Finally, the words of popular Anglican writer C. S. Lewis reflect how an acceptance of deification influences our view of human dignity: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."²⁴⁸

D. Conclusion

The Mormon doctrine of deification as revealed to and taught by Joseph Smith has been met throughout the years with labels of heresy, pantheism, and philosophical unsoundness. But these denigrations are not original; older and less robust Orthodox versions of the doctrine have

244. Charles Ashanin, *Essays on Orthodox Christianity and Church History* (Indianapolis: Broad Ripple Laser Type, 1990), 90.

245. A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988), 69.

246. P. E. Hughes, *The True Image* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 281, quoted in Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God," 261.

247. Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 258, quoted in Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God," 260.

248. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1976), 45.

also suffered the same criticisms at the hands of scholars and theologians throughout the years. It seems that as contemporary scholarship continues to take a broader interest in deification, as old teachings continue to be interpreted through a “new hermeneutical lens,” and as interfaith dialogue and inquiry continue to reap a rich harvest of understanding, deification will continue to enjoy greater attention in the Christian community. Likewise, perhaps in the future, Joseph’s more robust version of the doctrine will follow suit and eventually gain greater attention and acceptance from Christian thinkers.

V. THE DIVINE FEMININE

A. Joseph’s Views

The idea of a Mother in Heaven is deeply enshrined in Mormon thought and even hymnody. Indeed, the idea found its clearest and most moving expression in a poem written by Eliza R. Snow,²⁴⁹ first published November 15, 1845, in the *Times and Seasons*. It was subsequently set to music and included in an LDS hymnal first published in 1851 in Liverpool,²⁵⁰ and today is one of the most beloved LDS hymns:

In the heav’ns are parents single?
 No, the thought makes reason stare!
 Truth is reason; truth eternal
 Tells me I’ve a mother there.
 When I leave this frail existence,
 When I lay this mortal by,
 Father, Mother, may I meet you
 In your royal courts on high?²⁵¹

The belief that we have a Mother in Heaven was officially accorded doctrinal status in 1909 when the Church’s First Presidency, in a statement called the “Origin of Man,” declared: “All men and women are in

249. For an overview of Eliza R. Snow’s life, see Jill Mulvay Derr, “Eliza R. Snow,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon, Arnold K. Garr, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1148–50.

250. Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 36.

251. “O My Father,” in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292. For a classical parallel to Eliza’s poem, see John W. Welch and James V. Garrison, “The ‘Hymn of the Pearl’: An Ancient Counterpart to ‘O My Father,’” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 127–38.

the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity.”²⁵² The doctrinal status of a Heavenly Mother was again officially reaffirmed in the “Proclamation on the Family” issued in 1995 by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”²⁵³

However, since the doctrine is explicitly stated neither in any LDS scripture that came to or through Joseph Smith nor in any of his writings or sermons, at least one scholar has questioned whether the doctrine can be credibly ascribed to him.²⁵⁴ Others find convincing the total evidence—circumstantial, testimonial, and otherwise—that Joseph taught the doctrine.²⁵⁵ Still others, including myself, simply argue that

252. “The Origin of Man,” in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:203 (November 1909). In 1925, the First Presidency in another official declaration reaffirmed the Mother in Heaven doctrine using the exact language of the 1909 statement. See “‘Mormon’ view of evolution,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:244 (September 1925).

253. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign* 25 (November 1995): 102.

254. Blake Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Spring 1982): 59–78, 76 n. 28. In a footnote to his study Ostler raises the issue of the development of the doctrine of premortal existence. He says, “Although Joseph Smith may have secretly taught the doctrine of Mother in heaven, he did not bifurcate the pre-existent state of man into a period of existence as intelligences and existence as spirits after spiritual birth through a heavenly mother. All sources attributing the idea of a heavenly mother to Joseph Smith are late and probably unreliable.”

255. Among the scholars who attribute this idea to Joseph Smith are Jill Mulvay Derr and Linda P. Wilcox. Derr argues that Eliza R. Snow could not have been the originator of the idea, pointing out, among other data, that W. W. Phelps, before Snow wrote “O My Father,” wrote a poem referencing our Mother in Heaven and presented it at the dedication of the seventies hall. She concludes that Joseph Smith was the source for the Mormon belief of a Mother in Heaven. See Derr, “Significance of ‘O My Father,’” 85–126. Linda Wilcox provides a comprehensive study of the subject of a Mother in Heaven in Mormon history, doctrine, and theology. She sets out the testimonies of those who were close to Joseph Smith, who affirmed that he taught the Mother in Heaven doctrine. These witnesses include Susa Young Gates, who was told by Zina Diantha Huntington of a time when she was consoled by Joseph on the death of her mother in 1839. Zina had asked whether she would know her mother again on the other side, Joseph said, “More than that, you will meet and become acquainted with your eternal

the doctrine was implicit in Joseph's revelations regardless whether he explicitly drew it out.²⁵⁶

Indisputably, the idea of a Mother in Heaven was openly expressed and published within months of Joseph's death. W. W. Phelps referred to the idea in a poem that he composed and read at the dedication of the Nauvoo Seventies Hall on December 26, 1844. The poem was published in the Church newspaper the following month.²⁵⁷ It seems especially

Mother." David McKay (father of President David O. McKay) recorded that during a buggy ride on which he accompanied Eliza Snow, he asked if the Lord had revealed the doctrine to her. She replied, "I got my inspiration from the Prophets teachings; all that I was required to do was to use my Poetical gift and give that Eternal principal in Poetry." In his journal, Abraham H. Cannon gives a third-hand account of a vision Zebedee Coltrin had with Joseph Smith in which they saw "the Father seated upon a throne; they prayed again and on looking saw the Mother also; after praying and looking the fourth time they saw the Savior added to the group." Linda B. Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 5–6.

256. Linda Wilcox states, "The Mother in Heaven concept was a logical and natural extension of a theology which posited both an anthropomorphic god, who had once been a man, and the possibility of eternal procreation of spirit children." Wilcox further explains that the idea of a Mother in Heaven was considered by the leaders of the Church in the nineteenth century to be "commonsensical." Wilcox quotes Brigham Young as saying that God "created man, as we create our children, for there is no other process of creation." She quotes the apostle Erastus Snow as saying, "Now, it is not said in so many words in the Scriptures that we have a Mother in heaven as well as a Father. It is left for us to infer from what we see and know of all living things in the earth, including man. . . . To our minds the idea of a Father suggests that of a Mother." Wilcox, "Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," 4, 6. Charles Harrell addresses the issue in the context of tracing the development of the doctrine of the premortal existence in Mormon theology. He argues that since "spirit birth" was known and taught by close associates of Joseph like Orson Pratt, who had a book published at the printers with the doctrine contained therein as early as June 22, 1844, and since "spirit birth" presupposes a mother, the doctrine could have been known and taught by the prophet prior to his death. He notes that at the very least, Joseph must be credited with having provided the impetus that led to the formulation of the doctrine of spirit birth. Charles R. Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of the Preexistence, 1830–1844," *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 75–96.

257. Part of the W. W. Phelps poem reads:

Come to me; here's the myst'ry that man hath not seen:
 Here's our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen,
 Here are worlds that have been, and the worlds yet to be:
 Here's eternity,—endless; amen: Come to me.

W. W. Phelps, "A Voice from the Prophet. 'Come to Me,'" *Times and Seasons* 6 (January 15, 1845): 783.

significant that this first known publication of the idea had presented the doctrine matter-of-factly, as if commonplace, not novel. Several months later, in October 1845, Eliza R. Snow composed "O My Father." But I will not rehearse here fully the evidence and arguments pertaining to the provenance of the doctrine. Readers interested in this question can peruse the studies referenced in the relevant footnotes. For purposes of this article, I presume that the idea was known to Joseph and was integral to his understanding of deity.

Joseph's successors in the prophetic office have provided some elaboration into the nature of our Heavenly Mother.²⁵⁸ For example, Spencer W. Kimball said, "When we sing that doctrinal hymn and anthem of affection, 'O My Father,' we get a sense of the ultimate in maternal modesty, of the restrained, queenly elegance of our Heavenly Mother, and knowing how profoundly our mortal mothers have shaped us here, do we suppose her influence on us as individuals to be less if we live so as to return there?"²⁵⁹

258. Wilcox, a firm believer and advocate for believing in a Mother in Heaven, wrote the following concerning the reason for the lack of information regarding a Heavenly Mother: "One reason why little theology was developed about a Heavenly Mother is that the scriptural basis for the doctrine was very slim. But Joseph Fielding Smith noted that 'the fact that there is no reference to a mother in heaven either in the Bible, Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants, is not sufficient proof that no such thing as a mother did exist there.'" One LDS scholar provides an insightful answer to the question "So how do we handle the absence of information about our Heavenly Mother, the divine being who could embody the spiritual identity of women?" She answers:

Perhaps it is easier to understand this absence when we realize that we lack a detailed description of our Heavenly Father as well. The Savior spoke of the Father at every turn, but when Philip asked to be shown the Father, Jesus replied that the Father was made manifest through the Son. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" (John 14:9.) When we ask about the Mother, might not the Lord give us a similar reply? "He that hath seen me hath seen the Mother." We think of the Godhead as united in purpose and similar in character. If we as Mormons are going to assert the existence of a female Deity, shouldn't we assume that her Son mirrors her perfection as well as that of the Father? (Kathryn H. Shirts, "Women in the Image of the Son: Being Female and Being Like Christ," in *Women Steadfast in Christ: Talks Selected from the 1991 Women's Conference*, ed. Dawn Hall Anderson and Marie Cornwall [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992], 96)

259. Spencer W. Kimball, "The True Way of Life and Salvation," *Ensign* 8 (May 1978): 6.

Much has been said also by way of the existential meaning of Joseph's doctrine; that a heavenly mother has a direct bearing on the very existence and nature of mankind, particularly women. In speaking to the women of the Church, Kimball said, "God made man in his own image and certainly he made woman in the image of his wife-partner. . . . You [women] are daughters of God. You are precious. You are made in the image of our heavenly Mother."²⁶⁰ Harold B. Lee observed:

Sometimes we think the whole job is up to us, forgetful that there are loved ones beyond our sight who are thinking about us and our children. We forget that we have a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother who are even more concerned, probably, than our earthly father and mother, and that influences from beyond are constantly working to try to help us when we do all we can.²⁶¹

Another Church leader, Vaughn J. Featherstone, strongly linked mortal women to the divine feminine:

Women are endowed with special traits and attributes that come trailing down through eternity from a divine mother. Young women have special God-given feelings about charity, love, and obedience. Coarseness and vulgarity are contrary to their natures Theirs is a sacred, God-given role, and the traits they received from heavenly mother are equally as important as those given to the young men.²⁶²

This existential meaning is deeply significant to Latter-day Saints.²⁶³

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

The unique Mormon version of the divine feminine has long been opposed by both Protestant and Roman Catholic critics. In March 2004, before a meeting of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, Clark Pinnock summarized the traditional Christian view concerning

260. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 25.

261. Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 70.

262. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "A Champion of Youth," *Ensign* 17 (November 1987): 28.

263. Carol Lynn Pearson, "Healing the Motherless Home" in Hanks, *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, 231–245; "Emerging Discourse of the Divine Feminine," in Hanks, *Women and Authority*, 257–96; Cheryl B. Preston, "Feminism and Faith: Reflections on the Mormon Heavenly Mother," *Texas Journal of Women and Law* 2 (1992): 337–86; Margaret Merrill Toscano, "Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?" *Sunstone* no. 133 (July 2004), 14–22.

God and gender. Answering his self-imposed question, "What (if any) sexual characteristics apply to God?" he said: "[We] assume that none literally do, except in sociological ways." He continued: "That is, we have taken the term 'Father' to be indicating, not a sexual being²⁶⁴ so much as a patriarch, which points to qualities in God of leadership, headship, and transcendence. We have not and do not think of God as having a consort."²⁶⁵ While Pinnock was conciliatory and courteous in approaching this delicate subject, others in the Christian world have not greeted the Mormon belief in a Mother in Heaven with as much tolerance. Some have even considered the belief as a basis for the exclusion of Latter-day Saints from the class of Christians. For instance, in 1907 in Salt Lake City the Protestant *Ministerial Review* published a statement in the Salt Lake Tribune in which the editors charged Mormons with believing and teaching controversial doctrines, including belief in a Mother in Heaven, a doctrine not shared with the world abroad. The *Review* concluded, "When the full doctrine of the Deity, as taught in Mormon congregations, is known, it will at once be seen that no Christian can accept it."²⁶⁶

More recently, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said the church could not accept Mormon belief that "God the father had a wife, the Celestial Mother, with whom he procreated Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit." On the basis of these doctrinal suppositions and other considerations, the body decided that Mormon baptism "is not the baptism that Christ instituted."²⁶⁷

264. For example, the apologist Aristides of Athens, opened his *Apology* with a description of God stating, "He has no form, no limits, no sex." J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 84.

265. Clark Pinnock, "Open and Relational Theologies among Evangelicals and Other Christians," given March 19, 2004, at the first annual meeting of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, Utah Valley State College, Orem, Utah.

266. *Ministerial Review*, quoted in B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 2:267–68.

267. For a detailed discussion on the Vatican's decision, see Fr. Luis Ladaria, "The Question of the Validity of Baptism Conferred in the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*," available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/MORMBAP1.HTM> (accessed February 24, 2006). According to Ladaria, "The similarities with the formula used by the Catholic Church are at first sight obvious, but in reality they are only apparent." He then cites differences in the conception of the Trinity as the ultimate reason for the decision, with the LDS doctrine of a Heavenly Mother contributing to those differences. Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* said Tuesday (July 17) that Pope John Paul II personally approved the ruling, dated June 5, at an audience with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the congregation. English translation available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/MORMBAP1.HTM>

Other criticisms are aimed at the idea of a divine feminine in general rather than the LDS concept of a Mother in Heaven. Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, in their book titled *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words*, address the issue of the new translations of the Bible which are changing the general pronouns of the Bible, such as *he*, when used hypothetically, into gender neutral pronouns such as *they*: “There are a few radical-feminist versions that even undertake to call God the Father ‘Father and Mother’ or to eliminate ‘Father’ language altogether. But these versions clearly reject the authority of the Bible and its claim to be the Word of God.” The authors thankfully note that “most modern versions” of the Bible “have attempted to preserve the language about God, including masculine pronouns referring to God.”²⁶⁸

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Despite such declarations, some scholars agree with Paul Tillich in lamenting the “intolerable male character” of Protestant symbolism. Too often, God is thought of only as “he.” Somehow, maintains Tillich, “she” and “they” ought to become more common—that is, a representation of Deity both male and female.²⁶⁹ “At a ‘Women’s Liberation Day’ rally in New York City in 1970, Betty Friedan proposed that the question for the new decade was ‘Is God He?’”²⁷⁰ With the rise of feminine theology,²⁷¹ the Christian world has struggled to find a place for the feminine in God. Since traditional theology assigns no literal sexual characteristics to God, the most common route has been to change how one *speaks* about God. As the evangelical scholar Donald G. Bloesch wrote in 1985, “Two decades ago the principal issues in the church were whether the Bible should be demythologized (Bultmann) or deliteralized (Tillich). Now the

vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010605_battesimo_mormoni_en.html (accessed February 26, 2006).

268. Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 5.

269. Tillich speaks of this “in his lectures on religious symbolism at Harvard.” Truman G. Madsen, “Are Christians Mormon?” *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (1974): 90 n. 70.

270. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 225.

271. For the distinction between European/North American, African, Latin American and Asian feminine theologies, see Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 225–27, 261–63, 296.

main issue is whether the Bible should be resymbolized.”²⁷² Rosemary Radford Ruether²⁷³ argues that monotheistic religions tend to influence societies to be “monarchical” and when we ascribe a masculine gender to the one God, it places men in a position to rule absolutely.²⁷⁴

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen notes that “Elizabeth A. Johnson’s book *She Who Is*, a massive study in Scripture, Christian tradition, and other traditions, suggests that there are basically three ways to deal with sexist language if one wants to stay within the Christian theological tradition,” the first way being to “add feminine traits to God such as nurture and care.” This approach may be limited, as it “still implies that God is Father,” though he may possess many gentler attributes. “The second way is to seek a more ontological footing for the existence of the feminine in God; here the main route has been to speak of the Spirit in feminine terms (the Hebrew *ruach* is feminine). The Spirit is often linked with events and features typical of women such as protecting and bringing forth life.” This approach is also limited “because it maintains the duality of male-female in the divinity. A third approach, favored by Johnson, is to seek equivalent images of God as male and female.” Quoting Johnson directly, “The mystery of God is properly understood as neither male nor female but transcends both in an unimaginable way.”²⁷⁵

Johnson attributes an example of the first model to Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine, arguing that these theologians were writing about the feminine side of God. They all espoused an inclusive model of God including both genders, referring to

272. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Vine Books, 1985), 1.

273. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a highly distinguished Catholic theologian and prolific author explores the influence that our “God-talk” has on our society and gender relations in her book *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983). Other related books by Ruether are *Sexism and God-talk*; *Woman-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985); and *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

274. Mary Daly opposes the image of the Father God because it makes “the ‘mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting’; the father image, in her opinion, has legitimized male domination in society. Even more critically, ‘If God is male, then male is God.’” As quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 229.

275. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 47–57, as quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 229.

God as both father and mother, and using such descriptions as “mother wisdom under whose wings we flee for protection.”²⁷⁶

Joan Chamberlain Engelsman models the second approach by writing, “It might be possible to describe one member of the trinity as feminine. Because the Holy Spirit is the least sexually defined member of the trinity, and because it is often symbolized by feminine images—by fire and the dove—I imagine that the Spirit would be chosen.”²⁷⁷ In a more radical example of the second route, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote late in the nineteenth century concerning the first chapter of Genesis, “Instead of three male personages, as generally represented, a Heavenly Father, Mother, and Son would seem more rational.” Her reasoning for this is that Genesis says that we are created in God’s image, both *male* and *female*. “If language has any meaning,” she said, “we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father!”²⁷⁸ Engelsman also posits an ontological footing for the divine feminine writing: “[A] final choice, and the most radical, would be the addition of a feminine image of God and the creation of a quaternity.”²⁷⁹

Ruether, in espousing the third option, does not think that we should ascribe a male or female gender to God, but that we should include both. She says, “God is both male and female and neither male nor female.”²⁸⁰

While there is certainly no consensus concerning which approach to take, Engelsman is confident the Christian world will one day embrace the idea of the divine feminine. “I do foresee, nevertheless, that some approach will be found which will assist us in lifting the repression of the feminine, and permit the development of a feminine image of God. The center of that storm will probably be the doctrine of the trinity and the definition of monotheism just as it was in the early centuries of the Christian era.”²⁸¹

Perhaps more surprising than present Christian theological interest in a divine feminine is the emerging body of scholarship which indicates that the idea of a Heavenly Mother is no modern innovation but has biblical

276. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” *Theological Studies* 45, no. 3 (1984): 451.

277. Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine: A Study of Sophia and Feminine Images in Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 152.

278. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1999), 14.

279. Engelsman, *Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 153.

280. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 67.

281. Engelsman, *Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 153.

support.²⁸² The least that can be said is that a great many Bible scholars believe that ancient Israel believed in a goddess named Asherah. Mark S. Smith goes further than this, suggesting that perhaps the majority of experts in this field agree that ancient Israel believed in this goddess.

Does the biblical and extrabiblical evidence support the view that Asherah was a goddess in ancient Israel and that she was the consort of Yahweh? Or, alternatively, does the data point to the asherah as a symbol within the cult of Yahweh without signifying a goddess? The first position perhaps constitutes a majority view, represented by the older works of H. Ringgren, G. Fohrer, and G. W. Ahlström, and the more recent studies of W. G. Dever, D. N. Freedman, R. Hestrin, A. Lemaire, and S. Olyan.²⁸³

In W. G. Dever's recent book *Did God Have a Wife?* extensive archaeological evidence is presented to demonstrate that ancient Israelite belief in a divine goddess was far more extensive than previously believed. He suggests that too many biblical scholars have been slow to accept the findings of archaeology because of its uncomfortable theological implications. But the growing evidence is becoming harder to ignore.²⁸⁴

Margaret Barker has explored the issue in depth, concluding that the evidence strongly supports what Smith refers to as the "majority" report. She outlines the methodology of her inquiry:

It is an interesting exercise to try to recover the Lost Lady using the same methods as are used to reconstruct the male aspect of the God of Israel:

1. By giving priority to the evidence of the Hebrew texts, including inscriptions. There is no exact parallel to the phrasing of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions, which shows that biblical traditions are not representative of everything about Hebrew language and religion.
2. By allowing for singular and plural forms, and for a variety of names for one figure, and for the undoubted practice of using a singular verb with a plural form for divinity.
3. By admitting that if conceptions of the male aspect of deity moved away from anthropomorphism, then the female must have had the

282. LDS scholar Daniel Peterson explores this issue in conjunction with the Book of Mormon passage 1 Ne. 1:8–23. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Ne. 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243.

283. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 88–89. Smith himself holds to a minority position held by B. Lang, P. D. Miller, J. Tigay, and U. Winter, who maintain that on the paucity of evidence that Asherah neither referred to a goddess nor symbolized the goddess of Israel.

284. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

same fate. There are unlikely to have been simultaneous movements away from anthropomorphism for the male but towards personification for the female.²⁸⁵

Barker's research reveals many ancient sources that speak of a divine feminine. In addition to Ugaritic tablets, Hebrew graffiti that associates Yahweh and Asherah, and the hundreds of pillar figurines from Jerusalem that date to the time of Josiah, Barker enumerates many biblical texts that allude to a feminine deity, including many from the Targums. Barker presents important evidence from the Book of Enoch describing the forsaking of Wisdom at the end of the first temple period, corresponding accounts in 2 Kings 23:6 of the destruction of the Asherah (the tree of life that had been in the Holy of Holies during the first temple period), passages in Proverbs which speak of forsaken Wisdom, and the Qumran Isaiah scroll, "which differs from the Masoretic Hebrew by one letter, and reads: 'Ask a sign from the *Mother of the LORD your God*.'"²⁸⁶ In addition, Barker also discovers the divine feminine in the New Testament. For instance, in her commentary on Revelation 12:1–2, Barker draws on a wide range of evidences to discuss the significance and the identity of the woman clothed with the sun who appears at the exact center of Revelation. As she reads the passage, "The Woman clothed with the sun is not the Ugaritic goddess, but the Hebrew goddess who was worshipped in Jerusalem until the temple purges in the seventh century BCE."²⁸⁷ She also finds further illumination in passages from Philo, the Gnostic texts about Sophia, many early Christian writings, and even Orthodox and Catholic icons.

Barker was a featured speaker at the Joseph Smith Conference hosted May 5–6, 2005, by the Library of Congress. There she commented directly on how the portrait of the Heavenly Mother which she found in her explorations compared with passages in the Book of Mormon.

Imagine my surprise when I read the account of Lehi's vision of the tree whose *white fruit* made one happy, and the interpretation, that the Virgin in Nazareth was the mother of the Son of God after the manner of the flesh.²⁸⁸ This is the Heavenly Mother, represented by the tree of life, and then Mary and her Son on earth. This revelation to Joseph Smith

285. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 233.

286. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 80.

287. Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2000), 201–2.

288. Discussed by Daniel C. Peterson in "Nephi and His Asherah," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25.

was the ancient Wisdom symbolism, intact, and almost certainly as it was known in 600 BCE.²⁸⁹

D. Conclusion

Of all these contemporary Bible scholars and theologians, few approach the radical level to which Joseph's understanding of Deity points us. His revelations disclose an embodied Heavenly Father who is gendered and masculine as well as directing us towards an embodied Heavenly Mother who is gendered and feminine. Yet in insisting on a divine feminine, a growing number of both Christian theologians and Bible scholars are leaning significantly in Joseph's direction in a way few dared lean 160 years ago.

VI. GOD AS ETERNALLY SELF-SURPASSING

A. Joseph's Views

Joseph Smith and the scriptures he brought forth teach that God is perfect. *The Lectures on Faith* declare: "We here observe that God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell."²⁹⁰ But what does it mean to be perfect? For the ancient Greeks, perfection meant static "completeness." As Plato argued in the *Republic*, a perfect being must be immutable—incapable of any kind of change.²⁹¹ Plato's notion of perfection was appropriated by early Christian thinkers and has been integral to the traditional Christian understanding of God. To Joseph Smith, however, God consistently revealed himself as a concrete person: dynamic, passible, relational, and, in some respects, as

289. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and the Preexilic Israelite Religion," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 76.

290. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 291. The Book of Mormon for example teaches that God is perfect: "And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a *perfect*, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:15); emphasis added. See also 3 Ne. 12:48.

291. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates argues, "If he [God] change at all he can only change for the worse, for we cannot suppose him to be deficient either in virtue or beauty." To which Plato replies, "Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every god remains absolutely and for ever in his own form." Plato, *The Republic* 2.3.

continuously self-surpassing; or, as the idea is more commonly expressed in LDS discourse, as “eternally progressing.”

But in what respects did Joseph view God endlessly progressing? First of all, in his creations. In the Pearl of Great Price, God declared to Moses: “The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine. And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come, and there is no end to my works, neither to my words.”²⁹² In his King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith indicated additional ways in which God is self-surpassing. He asked: “What did Jesus do?” And he had Jesus answer:

Why; I do the things I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence. My Father worked out his kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to my Father, so that he may obtain kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt him in glory. He will then take a higher exaltation, and I will take his place, and thereby become exalted myself.²⁹³

Thus, God is eternally self-surpassing in kingdoms, glory, and degree of exaltation. Joseph continued, “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to *advance like himself*.”²⁹⁴

Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff apparently understood Joseph’s affirmation of divine advancement in a way that included the principles of power and knowledge. Young once commented that “according to [Orson

292. Moses 1:37–38. Also in the Book of Moses is written, “And, behold, thou art my son; wherefore look, and I will show thee the workmanship of mine hands; but not all, for my works are without end, and also my words, for they never cease” (Moses 1:4).

293. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 347–48.

294. *History of the Church*, 6:312; emphasis added. Stan Larson amalgamated the original texts of the King Follett Discourse, and in his reconstruction this passage reads as follows: “Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to *advance like Himself and be exalted with Him*, so that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge, power, and glory. So he took in hand to save the world of spirits.” The original notes that were taken during the discourse speak in this same language; Wilford Woodruff’s notes read, “God has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences that they may *be exalted with himself*.” William Clayton’s notes read, “That God himself-find himself in the midst of spirit and glory because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to *advance like himself*.” Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith’s King Follet Discourse: A Six-Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamations* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 50–51; emphasis added.

Pratt's] theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful."²⁹⁵ Young also taught:

If we continue to learn all that we can, pertaining to the salvation which is purchased and presented to us through the Son of God, is there a time when a person will cease to learn? Yes, when he has sinned against God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost—God's minister; when he has denied the Lord, defied Him and committed the sin that in the Bible is termed the unpardonable sin—the sin against the Holy Ghost. That is the time when a person will cease to learn, and from that time forth, will descend in ignorance, forgetting that which they formerly knew. . . . They will cease to increase, but must decrease. . . . These are the only characters who will ever cease to learn, both in time and eternity.²⁹⁶

And similarly, Woodruff observed, "If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent and reflecting mind. God himself is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end."²⁹⁷ Other Church leaders have passionately denied that God can surpass himself in knowledge, but the idea that God progresses eternally in other aspects such as exaltation and dominion has near-universal acceptance among Latter-day Saints.²⁹⁸

Joseph, then, rejected the Greek and conventional Christian notion of perfection as total static completeness. For him, a perfect being was dynamic—indeed, in some respects, eternally progressing.

295. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:286, January 13, 1867.

296. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:203, February 17, 1856.

297. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:120, December 6, 1857.

298. President Joseph Fielding Smith asserted, "Do we believe that God has all 'wisdom'? If so, in that, he is absolute. If there is something he does not know, then he is not absolute in 'wisdom,' and to think such a thing is absurd." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., compiled by Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:6. Elder Bruce R. McConkie expressed a similar sentiment: "There are those who say that God is progressing in knowledge. . . . This is false—utterly, totally, and completely. There is not one sliver of truth in it. . . . God progresses in the sense that his kingdoms increase and his dominions multiply. . . . God is not a student. . . . He has indeed graduated to that state of exaltation that consists of knowing all things." Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," *Devotional Speeches of the Year 1980* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 75. See also Lisa Ramsey Adams, "Eternal Progression," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:465–66.

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

Conventional Christian theology has long been opposed to the idea that God is a dynamic being. According to a great many Christian theologians, God is static and immutable. Philo, a Jewish Neo-Platonist, though a non-Christian, influenced a great many Christian theologians after him. Philo clearly believed God to be a being who transcended temporal succession. He said, “The great Cause of all things does not exist in time, nor at all in place, but he is superior to both time and place. . . . God is the creator of time also . . . so that there is nothing future to God, who has the very boundaries of time subject to him; . . . and in eternity nothing is past and nothing is future, but everything is present only.”²⁹⁹ St. Augustine, in one of the most brilliant treatises on the nature of time, addressed the question “What was God doing before the creation of the world?” For Augustine, the question becomes absurd when one realizes that for God there is no “before” creation. For God created time, and there can be no before and after without temporal succession.³⁰⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas reasoned, “The idea of eternity follows immutability, as the idea of time follows movement. . . . Hence, as God is supremely immutable, it supremely belongs to Him to be eternal.”³⁰¹ John Calvin reiterated this concept: “When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have ever been, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge nothing is future or past, but all things are present.”³⁰²

Joseph’s teaching that even God eternally progresses starkly contradicts the conventional notion of divine perfection. It is no surprise, then, that it has come under sustained attack by conservative Christian critics. James White sets out clearly what he sees as the theoretical superiority of the more orthodox view:

We can believe in His promises because He has eternally been what He is today. Can you say this about the LDS concept of God . . . ? Has God eternally been what He is today? . . . If you believe that God has ever been in a state of “progression” how can you be *sure* that He will not change again tomorrow? I have confidence in my salvation because it is based upon the words of an unchanging, eternal God. How about you?

299. Philo Judaeus, *Works of Philo Judaeus*, trans. C. D. Yonge, 4 vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 1:289, 1:139.

300. *Confessions of St. Augustine*, 11.10.

301. Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1916), 1, q. 10, a. 1.

302. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 2:175.

White concludes, "As we have noted already, God did not 'acquire' this knowledge over time through some process of learning or progressing as Joseph Smith taught, and as modern Mormons affirm."³⁰³

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Joseph's dynamic view of divine perfection may have been unpopular among the religious thinkers of his day,³⁰⁴ and, as White's critique makes clear, with some today. But it did not take long for others to begin to entertain the idea. Among the first was the German philosopher and psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887).³⁰⁵ Fechner explained that "the perfection of God . . . is not in reaching a definite or limited maximum but in seeking an unlimited progress. Such a progress, however, that God in each time is the maximum not only of all the present, but also of all the past; he alone can surpass himself, and does it continually."³⁰⁶

William James (1842–1910), the American pragmatist, further developed Fechner's vision of God as dynamic and in process. On pragmatic grounds, he explicitly rejected the classical conception that God is timelessly eternal and thereby immutable and impassible. As such, James argued, God could not enter into an authentic social relation with us, or be moved by the feelings of our infirmities, or be involved in the sweat and dirt of our daily human trials. He could not be a co-laborer with us in the vast task of building a moral universe, for he would have neither history nor future.³⁰⁷ But James notes that "all the categories of my sympathy

303. James R. White, *Letters to a Mormon Elder* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1993), 182, 189.

304. Some who were present at the King Follett sermon later expressed their feelings. "Granville Hedrick once declared it to be 'one of the most infamous sermons of blasphemy ever preached from the pulpit,' and on another occasion stated, 'A more high handed and degrading infamous attempt in blasphemy never was uttered by mortal tongue.' William Cadman even claimed a revelation concerning it, 'That Joseph Smith (in that case) taught a worse doctrine than the Devil did in the Garden of Eden. The Devil only taught that men should be as Gods. But Joseph taught that men should be Gods.' The doctrines of the sermon were declared 'false and damnable' in a resolution by another group of dissenters." Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 211–12.

305. For more on Gustav Theodor Fechner, see "Gustav Theodor Fechner," in *The 1911 Edition Encyclopædia Britannica*, available at http://67.1911encyclopedia.org/F/FE/FECHNER_GUSTAV_THEODOR.htm (accessed March 6, 2006).

306. Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (London: SCM, 1970), xi.

307. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 27.

are knit up . . . with things that have a history. . . . I have neither eyes nor ears nor heart nor mind for anything of an opposite description, and the stagnant felicity of the absolute's own perfection moves me as little as I move it."³⁰⁸

In his classic defense of free will, "The Dilemma of Determinism," William James argued that given human freedom, the future is in some respects open and indeterminate. Hence, he concluded, God's knowledge of the future is, like ours, knowledge of both what will be (actualities) and what may be (possibilities). God's knowledge increases as agents freely make choices.³⁰⁹

These ideas of process and progress—even for God—became dominant in two contemporary movements in Christian thought: process theology, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century; and openness theology, which made its appearance as the century came to a close. These two movements—since both have much in common with Joseph's revelations of God's nature—deserve closer scrutiny.

308. James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 27, as quoted in David W. Paulsen, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and (William) James," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1999): 123.

309. Contrary to Craig L. Blomberg's argument, James proceeded to show that God's ever-increasing knowledge is fully compatible with divine providence. He argued:

The belief in free-will is not in the least incompatible with the belief in Providence, provided you do not restrict the Providence to fulminating nothing but *fatal* degrees. If you allow him to provide possibilities as well as actualities to the universe, and to carry on his own thinking in those two categories just as we do ours, chances may be there, uncontrolled even by him, and the course of the universe be really ambiguous; and yet the end of all things may be just what he intended it to be from all eternity. . . . The creator's plan of the universe would thus be left blank as to many of its actual details, but all possibilities would be marked down. The realization of some of these would be left absolutely to chance; that is, would only be determined when the moment of realization came. Other possibilities would be *contingently* determined; that is, their decision would have to wait till it was seen how the matters of absolute chance fell out. But the rest of the plan, including its final upshot, would be rigorously determined once for all. So the creator himself would not need to know *all* the details of actuality until they came; and at any time his own view of the world would be a view partly of facts and partly of possibilities, exactly as ours is now. (William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," *William James, Writings 1878-1899* [New York: Library of America, 1992], 592-94)

Process theologians reject many of the fundamental assumptions of conventional Christian theology—most notably that God is timeless and, hence, metaphysically immutable and impassible—while acknowledging that God is constant in his loving concern for the welfare of human agents. Process theism is, more specifically, “a product of theorizing that takes the categories of becoming, change, and time as foundational for metaphysics.”³¹⁰

The metaphysical framework for process thought was established by the great mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). Within that framework, Whitehead introduced a radically unorthodox way of understanding God's nature. He rejected the absolute, static God of traditional theology, calling this type of God *monopolar*, or consisting of one nature entirely. To the contrary, he asserted that God's nature is *dipolar*; he has both a primordial nature (the nature that traditional theology espouses) and a consequent nature. His primordial nature includes all possibilities, or what could be, and his consequent nature is dependent on the decisions of nondivine actual entities, what Whitehead calls “actual occasions.”³¹¹ Whitehead's model of God gave theologians a new perspective and a new way of answering the questions and contradictions that plagued theology.

Whitehead's creative vision of God influenced a great many theologians after him, especially Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), who systematized and popularized Whitehead's process thought. In accord therewith, Hartshorne redefined divine perfection in order to avoid the contradictions inherent in the Greek conception:

If perfection is defined as that which in no respect could conceivably be greater, and hence is incapable of increase, then we face paradox on either hand. But suppose we define the perfect, or supremely excellent or good, as that individual being (in what sense “individual” will appear later) than which no *other individual* being could *conceivably* be greater, but which itself, in another “state,” could become greater (perhaps by the creation within *itself* of new constituents). Otherwise expressed, let us define perfection as an excellence such that rivalry or superiority on the part of other individuals is impossible, but self-superiority is not

310. Donald Viney, “Process Theism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2004 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/process-theism> (accessed February 21, 2006).

311. Viney, “Process Theism.” Two of Whitehead's most significant contributions to process theology are: Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds. (New York: Free Press, 1978); and Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making: Lowell Lectures, 1926* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

impossible. Or again, let us say that the perfect is the “self-surpassing surpasser of all.”³¹²

To the question “Is there a strictly immutable yet living being?” Hartshorne answers, “No, life in any sense, no matter how exalted, implies some form of real change or becoming—indeed some form of real growth.” To Hartshorne, “the history of natural theology from Aristotle, Philo, and Augustine to Hume and Kant” has brought out a theism of paradox that “has no rational content.” The error “is one of the penalties we have had to pay for putting too much trust in the first form of rational metaphysical thought, the Greek.”³¹³ Hartshorne concluded that God must be self-surpassing in knowledge:

Consider the traditional transcendent property of omniscience or cognitive infallibility. Whatever exists, the infallible (analogically speaking) knows this existence; yet not even the infallible can know the possible but non-existent as existent, for this would be error, not knowledge. The infallible must, of course, be *capable* of knowing and certain to know the actuality of the possible should it be actual. To be infallible, then, is to be actually in cognitive relation to what actually exists, and potentially in relation to what could exist. The duality of actual and possible, or of concrete and abstract, cannot be suspended even with reference to the omniscient.³¹⁴

Other process thinkers concur. For example, Tyron Inbody interprets Job’s encounter with God using the language of process theology: “In this encounter with Job, God learned to recognize, to acknowledge, and to accept the antinomies that so far have been hidden in God’s own unconsciousness. In this moment of self-reflection God discovers that if Job gains knowledge of God, God must also learn to know Godself.”³¹⁵

In a co-authored book, two of the most influential process thinkers, John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, defined omniscience in the following way:

To say that God is omniscient means that in every moment of the divine life God knows everything which is knowable at that time. The concrete actuality is temporal, relative, dependent, and constantly changing. In each moment of God’s life there are new, unforeseen happenings in the

312. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 19–20.

313. Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, 38.

314. Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*, 234; emphasis in original.

315. Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 101.

world which only then have become knowable. Hence, God's concrete knowledge is dependent upon the decisions made by the world actualities. God's knowledge is always relativized by, in the sense of internally related to, the world.³¹⁶

In addition, Shubert Ogden argues that God is both perfect and in process, and that the one implies the other:

The point is not that God is growing and therefore is "a God who is not or who is not yet completely perfect," but that "growing" is itself a wholly positive conception, of which, as of *all* positive conceptions, God is the eminent or perfect exemplification. In other words, the new theism asserts that God is "completely perfect" in *whatever sense these words have any coherent meaning* and then questions whether the old use of the words is not, in part, meaningless.³¹⁷

The philosophers who have put forth these arguments would be considered by most conservative Christians to be far too liberal in their views. But a much more conservative movement within evangelical Christianity known as "open theism" has begun to develop within the last two decades, and it has much in common with process theology, though it nonetheless claims to be biblically based.³¹⁸ Indeed, the basic primer of this movement, *The Openness of God*, has as its subtitle *A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*.³¹⁹ Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, David Basinger, Richard Rice, Gregory A. Boyd, Terence Fretheim, and William Hasker are among the most influential thinkers in this movement. John Sanders argues:

According to openness theology, the *triune* God of love has, in *almighty* power, created all that is and is *sovereign* over all. In *freedom* God decided to create beings capable of experiencing his love. God loves us and desires for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with God as well as our fellow creatures. In creating us the divine intention was that we would come to experience the triune love and respond to it with love

316. John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 47–48.

317. Shubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 59–60 n. 97; emphasis in original.

318. For careful comparisons between process and openness thought, see J. B. Cobb and C. H. Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000); and Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 140–51.

319. Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).

of our own and freely come to collaborate with God towards the achievement of his goals.³²⁰

Central to open theism is the self-limiting God (as opposed to the ontologically limited God of process theology). According to openness theists, God limits his knowledge of the future in order that we may be truly free agents that can enter into a reciprocally loving relationship with God.

In speaking of the reasons why openness theologians have decided to take the route they have taken, Clark Pinnock says: “Love and not freedom was our central concern because it was God’s desire for loving relationships which required freedom. In a controversial move, we also envisaged God making a world, the future of which was not yet completely settled, again to make room for the input of significant creatures.”³²¹ And again, “According to openness theism, for example, the future is partly settled and partly unsettled, partly determined and partly undetermined and, therefore, partly unknown even to God and it holds that God himself has a temporal aspect.”³²² John Sanders defines God’s omniscience in the following way:

The *omniscient* God knows all that can be known or all that he wants to know. . . . In the openness debate the focus is on the nature of the future: is it fully knowable, fully unknowable or partially knowable and partially unknowable? Even if the future is fully knowable does God choose not to know it? According to open theism God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). God’s knowledge of the future contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally (that which is definite or settled), knowledge of possibilities (that which is indefinite) and those events that are determined to occur (e.g. an asteroid hitting a planet). Hence, the future is partly open or indefinite and partly closed or definite. It is not the case that just anything may happen, for God has acted in history to bring about events in order to achieve his unchanging purpose. Graciously, however, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being.³²³

D. Conclusion

While many Christian thinkers still hold to the static notion of God which emerged out of the biblical/classical synthesis, significant

320. John Sanders, “Heffalumps and Heresies,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1; emphasis in original.

321. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 202–3.

322. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 13.

323. Sanders, “Heffalumps and Heresies,” 3.

movements in contemporary Christian theology, most notably process and openness thought, espouse process in God in ways closely aligned with Joseph Smith's thought.³²⁴ But new theological winds are blowing still more widely over the landscape of Christian thought. Many of them are the outgrowth of the demise of divine impassibility. With such a central doctrine being put to rest, a cluster of logically related ideas may also end up in the theological graveyard. As Clark Pinnock explains, "The conventional package of attributes is tightly woven. You cannot deny one, such as impassibility, without casting doubt on others, like immutability. It's like pulling on a thread and unraveling a sweater. A little boldness is required; tentative changes will not do."³²⁵ Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff:

Once you pull on the thread of impassibility, a lot of other threads come along with it. Aseity, for example—that is, unconditionedness. The biblical witness seems to me clearly to be that God allows himself to be affected by the doings of the creatures God created. What led the traditional theologians to affirm aseity was their philosophical argument that the world is such that it can only be explained if we postulate a being which is the condition of everything but itself, itself being conditioned by nothing. To give up aseity then is to give up an argument for God's existence—an argument which is questionable in any case. One also has to give up on immutability and eternity [timelessness]. If God really responds, God is not metaphysically immutable and, if not metaphysically immutable, not eternal [timeless].³²⁶

One hundred and sixty years ago, Joseph saw God as living, acting, responding, and even as continually self-surpassing. Once foreign to conventional Christian theology, this vision of God is becoming commonplace.

324. Openness thinkers have even been publicly charged with having Mormon leanings. For instance, in a review in *Christianity Today*, Pinnock's model is taken to task for suggesting that God may be an embodied person in time. According to one reviewer, "We are only a few steps away, it seems, from the assertion that God possesses a body of sorts, spiritual though it may be." Christopher A. Hall, "Openness Season," review of *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, by Clark Pinnock, *Christianity Today* 47, no. 2 (2003): 92. Jeff Riddle, an evangelical pastor, writes on his Web site: "If the nascent ideas on divine corporeality in *Most Moved Mover* are any indication, it seems that the 'mature' vision of God in open theology will be more like that of Mormonism than orthodoxy." See www.jpbc.org/writings/br-most_moved_mover.html (accessed February 22, 2006).

325. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 77.

326. N. P. Wolterstorff, "Does God Suffer?" *Modern Reformation* 8.5 (1999): 47, as quoted in Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 77–78.

VII. THE FATE OF THE UNEVANGELIZED

A. Joseph's Views

One of the puzzles challenging thoughtful Christians is the scriptural assertion that there is “none other name under heaven [save Jesus Christ] given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Faithful Christians have no reservations in recognizing Christ as their sole source of salvation, yet how are they to make sense of the fate of the myriad souls who have lived and died on this earth never hearing the name of Christ nor having adequate opportunity to accept his salvific gift? Do they suffer eternally? Are they forever excluded from the joy of eternal life with God? In his book *The Logic of God Incarnate*, Thomas Morris, professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, explains that a “scandal” arises when considering “a simple set of questions” asked of theologians who assert that only through Jesus Christ can all be saved: How can any be held accountable for something of which they have no knowledge? What of those from cultures with religious traditions wholly disconnected from Christianity? If God is just, why did he give conditions for salvation that are unavailable to most people? “Is not the love of God better understood as universal,” concludes Morris, rather than “limited to a mediation through the one particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth?”³²⁷ Consideration of this challenging issue has produced a wide array of answers from Christian theologians, ranging from restrictivism (all who never hear of or accept Christ in this life are forever damned) to universalism (all will ultimately through Christ be reconciled to God and receive eternal life).

Joseph Smith’s revelations from God provide a divine method of justly resolving the fate of the unevangelized without compromising Christ’s unique role as Savior and Redeemer. Joseph fully grasped the despair-filled quandary of the fate of the unevangelized, but could not fathom a God who would allow such arrant injustice to exist unmitigated. As an example Joseph gave the case of two brothers, who are “equally intelligent, learned, virtuous and lovely, walking in uprightness and in all good conscience.” One brother dies without hearing the gospel, and the other hears and accepts the message of salvation. Joseph asked, “Shall the one become the partaker of glory and the other be consigned to hopeless perdition? Is there no chance for his escape?” Noting that sectarianism does not give this chance for escape, Joseph concluded, “Such an idea is worse than atheism.”

327. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 174–75. Morris is not sure how to resolve the “scandal,” although he offers several solutions, including universalism (176) and inclusivism (177).

Instead, Joseph taught that “there is never a time when the spirit is too old to approach God. . . . There is a way to release the spirits of the dead; that is by the power and authority of the Priesthood—by binding and loosing on earth.” The doctrine of redemption for the dead “exhibits the greatness of divine compassion” in God.³²⁸

Joseph's teachings emphasized postmortem evangelization of all those who did not hear the gospel message in this life.³²⁹ Directly linked with postmortem evangelization is the performing of vicarious baptisms for those who have died without this essential ordinance, thus preserving Christ's injunction, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Hence, Latter-day Saints today consider redeeming the dead one of the three primary missions of the Church.³³⁰ Joseph's doctrine of the redemption of the dead allows God to be both merciful and just to all men uniformly, places all mankind within equal grasp of eternal salvation through Christ, and demands and provides universal means for the selfsame ordinances required of every person regardless of the geography or chronology of that person's earthly sojourn.³³¹ In short, all human beings in all areas and ages of the world will

328. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:425–26.

329. Commenting on the ministry of Christ to the disembodied spirits following his crucifixion, Joseph states:

Peter, also, in speaking concerning our Savior, says, that “He went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometimes were disobedient, when once the long suffering of God waited in the days of Noah,” (1 Peter 3:19, 20). Here then we have an account of our Savior preaching to the spirits in prison, to spirits that had been imprisoned from the days of Noah; and what did He preach to them? That they were to stay there? Certainly not! Let His own declaration testify. “He hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.” (Luke iv: 18. Isaiah has it—“To bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness from the prison house.” (Isaiah xlii: 7. It is very evident from this that He went not only to preach to them, but also to deliver, or bring them out of the prison house. (*History of the Church*, 4:596–97)

330. Elma Fugal, “Salvation of the Dead,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1257–59.

331. Joseph strongly expresses that all people will have “the same privilege” regardless of where and when they live on earth:

When speaking about the blessings pertaining to the Gospel, and the consequences connected with disobedience to the requirements, we

ultimately hear Christ's good news and have equal opportunity to accept or reject this message of salvation. Thus Joseph confirmed:

[God] holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, "according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil," or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have," those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will by judged by that law. We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right.³³²

Joseph's view, then, does not minimize the importance of this life for those who do not hear of Christ while alive. On the contrary, he affirms that all men will be judged according to how they responded in the flesh to whatever law they had access. This will then play a significant factor in their judgment. What Joseph's position makes clear is that all men will hear the gospel and have access to its saving ordinances; thus, as Peter says, they will be able to be "judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" (1 Pet. 4:6).

Although Joseph saw his teachings as being in substantial concordance and harmony with the Bible,³³³ he did not consider his views on the issue to be just one more human interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. No human interpretation, no matter how sincerely and carefully crafted, is ultimately compelling. Rather, his view came out of

are frequently asked the question, what has become of our fathers? Will they all be damned for not obeying the Gospel, when they never heard it? Certainly not. But they will possess the same privilege that we here enjoy, through the medium of the everlasting priesthood, which not only administers on earth, but also in heaven. (*History of the Church*, 4:598)

332. *History of the Church*, 4:595–96.

333. Scriptures in which Joseph saw biblical support for this doctrine include Isaiah 42:7; Luke 4:18; 1 Cor. 15:29; 1 Pet. 3:18–21, 4:6. See *History of the Church*, 4:595–99.

direct revelation from the risen Lord.³³⁴ Thus, divine disclosure from the Word, not a scholarly exegesis of the word, stands as the uncompromising foundation of Joseph's position.

Joseph's revelation on the fate of the unevangelized brings comforting clarity and a deeper appreciation for the equity and charity of God to an issue which otherwise challenges one's belief in the universality of God's love towards his children of all dispensations and locations. God anticipated the predicament of his many children he knew would never hear the glad tidings of the gospel while in mortality, and he prepared a way "before the world was" of equitably solving the problem in perfect love and justice.³³⁵ This doctrine has inspired one of the most exulting passages of Latter-day Saint scripture. In language that is saturated with joy, Joseph exclaimed the exciting prospects of the unfolding work for the dead:

Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy. . . . Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free. (D&C 128:19, 22)

Truly, then, "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34) as all have equal access to his salvific gift through his plan of perfect foresight. Joseph concludes, "A view of these things reconciles the Scriptures of truth, justifies the ways of God to man, places the human family upon an equal footing, and harmonizes with every principle of righteousness, justice and truth."³³⁶

334. Canonized sections of LDS scripture revealed to Joseph Smith addressing this topic include: D&C 45:54; 76; 88:99; 124:29–44; 127:5–12; 128; 137.

335. Joseph's teachings explain that God from the beginning was aware of and accounted for the station of all nations and peoples in relation to their receiving the gospel, whether in this life or the next:

The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever "the morning stars sang together" for joy; . . . He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the council of His own will; He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come. (*History of the Church*, 4:597)

336. *History of the Church*, 4:599.

B. Christian Divergence and Criticisms

It is widely believed today that the church in ancient times held to some notion of postmortem evangelization. This theme is scattered throughout various early Christian sources and seems to suggest that the early church was in agreement that Christ “descended into hell,” per the Apostles’ Creed. According to Jeffrey A. Trumbower,

Numerous conceptions of posthumous rescue found their way into the earliest Christian speculations: an implicit universal salvation (Rom. 11:32), vicarious baptism “on behalf of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:29), talk of proclaiming the gospel among the dead (1 Pet. 4:6), the dead apostles’ baptizing the righteous dead (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *Sim.* 9.16.2–7), and even God’s granting the righteous the privilege of saving some of the damned at the final judgment (*Apocalypse of Peter* 14:1–4; *Sibylline Oracles* 2:330–38).³³⁷

All of this, suggests Trumbower, fits into the practices of the larger cultures of the time, namely the Greek, Roman, and Jewish concern and pious acts for their dead.³³⁸

Postmortem evangelization continued in the writings of early Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. A general concern for the dead and belief in Christ’s visit and release of dead souls from hell was a very popular early Christian conviction. “That the doctrine was taken for granted by A.D. 150,” says John Sanders,

is evident from the fact that the heretics Marcion and the Valentinians, who were criticized on most of their beliefs by the early Church Fathers, were not challenged at all on this point. Both the early Fathers and the heretics agreed that Christ descended into hell. Even the cautious Tertullian accepted the doctrine without squabble. In the Arian controversy again, both sides agreed on the descent into hell. It can be concluded from this that the doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell and the release of souls therefrom was well established by the end of the first century. The only question through this time involved *who* was released.³³⁹

Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian posited that the salvation proffered to the “dead” included only Old Testament patriarchs and prophets; on the other hand, the heretic Marcion, who had a strong distaste of the Old Testament, suggested the very opposite: Christ, in fact, damned all Old Testament believers and released all the Gentiles. Yet despite their differing

337. Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33–34.

338. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 10–32, 34.

339. John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 183–84; emphasis in original.

opinions, “both groups agreed that the purpose of the descent was to give salvation to the dead.”³⁴⁰

In later centuries, ideas concerning postmortem evangelization shifted. Augustine, writing in the early fifth century, marks the turning point away from postmortem evangelization. As Trumbower notes, “By the time he wrote the *City of God*, Book 21, in the mid-420s, [Augustine] had formulated what would become the clear position in the West rejecting all forms of posthumous salvation.”³⁴¹ In Roman Catholic circles, his ideas remain highly influential—a solid doctrine formed in Roman Catholicism that upon a person’s death, an immediate, unalterable decree was made concerning that person’s salvation.³⁴² Until the second half of the nineteenth century, when certain Protestants³⁴³ considered the idea, little debate for postmortem evangelization took place. In the 1830s, then, when his doctrines concerning the redemption of the dead emerged, Joseph Smith found himself treading on doctrinal ground that had been practically untouched for more than a thousand years.

C. Contemporary Christian Convergence

Postmortem evangelization (variously called “eschatological evangelization,” “future probation,” “probation after death,” or “divine perseverance”) has made a strong resurgence onto the current Christian theological scene. But this development has not occurred all at once. Despite the Apostles’ Creed mentioning that Christ “descended into hell,” Christian theologians have been unable to come to a consensus on what the creed exactly refers to. Such reticence in affirming Christ’s descent is illustrated in the following anecdote shared by Millard Erickson:

In the late 1960s the chaplain of Wheaton College decided that a series of chapel messages on the Apostles Creed would be desirable. Members of the Bible department were asked to preach, each on a different phrase of the creed. No one, however, was willing to preach on “descended into

340. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 184.

341. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 126.

342. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 178. This idea, Sanders points out, is not “contradicted by the concept of purgatory. Roman Catholic theology dictates that purgatory is a place where those who have already been saved are purified prior to their attainment of heaven.” Sanders, *No Other Name*, 178. Such a place, then, requires no evangelization.

343. Sanders in his nineteenth-century bibliography singles out John Lange, I. A. Dorner, Herbert Luckock, Frederic Huidekoper, and Egbert Smyth, among others, as those exploring this idea. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 212–13.

Hades,” because no one believed in it. Therefore that phrase was omitted from the series.³⁴⁴

Many Christian thinkers today, however, are advancing various post-mortem evangelization theories based on Christ’s descent into hades. “The twentieth century,” says John Sanders, “has witnessed a tremendous proliferation of belief in eschatological evangelization among theologians and biblical commentators from diverse traditions.”³⁴⁵ Indeed, Erickson considers the wider issue of the fate of the unevangelized “one of the burning issues of the present day,”³⁴⁶ and “only recently have orthodox or evangelical Christians expressed interest in [postmortem evangelization],” which “for much of its earlier history . . . has existed virtually on the fringes of Christianity.”³⁴⁷

Among the leading theologians helping to bring postmortem evangelization from off of the fringes, Sanders lists Joseph Leckie, Gabriel Fackre, and George Lindbeck.³⁴⁸ Donald Bloesch, John Macquarrie, Stephen T. Davis, and others could be added to the list.³⁴⁹ Perhaps what appeals most to advocates of postmortem evangelization is the way in which it preserves Christ’s role as sole author of salvation (exclusivism) while yet allowing all humankind opportunity to hear of Christ. Many see no other way to solve the puzzle while maintaining these two tenets. Indeed, as Sanders points out, “If one holds (1) that salvation is universally accessible, (2) that explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation, and (3) that the only reason anyone is condemned to hell is for rejection of Jesus Christ, then it is not unreasonable to conclude that the unevangelized must receive some kind of opportunity after death to respond to Christ.”³⁵⁰ Further,

It is argued that postmortem evangelism provides the best answer as to *how* God makes salvation universally accessible. It has tremendous “theological fit” when accompanied by the control beliefs of God’s universal salvific will, the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation, the necessity that one hears about Christ in order to have faith, and the fact that God is loving, just, and fair. Furthermore, it makes use of the long-standing belief

344. Millard J. Erickson, “Is There Opportunity for Salvation after Death?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April–June 1995): 140–41.

345. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 213.

346. Millard J. Erickson, “The Fate of Those Who Never Hear,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January–March 1995): 3.

347. Erickson, “Is There Opportunity for Salvation after Death?” 131.

348. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 195–205.

349. See Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 90 and n. 16.

350. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 180.

in Christ's descent into hell and the release of certain souls there. It provides a means to hold up Jesus Christ as the universal Savior without succumbing to universalism.³⁵¹

Conversely, what causes the most trepidation concerning postmortem evangelization is its lack of explicit biblical warrant. The prime biblical passages used in support of postmortem evangelization are 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 4:6. The problem is that the meaning of these passages is highly debated, and, much like the “He descended into hell” phrase of the Apostles’ Creed, no consensus has emerged on what these verses refer to. In order to claim that the passage affirms postmortem evangelization, Millard Erickson says that

it is necessary to demonstrate that 1 Peter 3:18–20 does indeed teach that Christ preached the gospel to individuals in hades between the first Good Friday and Easter, and that this was a genuine offer of salvation on the basis of belief. Second, one must demonstrate that the offer made to those Old Testament persons is also available to all persons who live and die after that time.³⁵²

This has, traditionally at least, been shaky ground.

But within the last century, more and more biblical commentators are affirming at least the first half of the equation—that Christ did indeed preach the gospel to disembodied spirits who had the choice of accepting his message.³⁵³ Many are also willing to consider the second half as well, suggesting its implicitness in 1 Peter in addition to being a natural outgrowth of God’s mighty mercy. For instance, Gabriel Fackre finds the second half implicit not only in 1 Peter, but in the whole of the Bible itself:

God’s desire to save—with our freedom to resist—is the “story line” of Scripture, clear at every turn of the tale, from creation to Fall, to the covenants with Noah and Israel, to the person and work of Jesus Christ, to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church, in the redeemed, and on the world, and finally to the consummation of all things in the resurrection of the dead, the return of Christ, the final judgment and everlasting life in the reign of God.

The sweep of this story shows us that God’s pursuit of the divine purpose is indefatigable. . . . The last and least, in time and eternity, will not be overlooked or denied access to the saving Word of Jesus Christ.³⁵⁴

351. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 192–93; emphasis in original.

352. Erickson, “Is There Opportunity for Salvation after Death?” 135.

353. Sanders identifies Charles Bigg, F. W. Farrar, J. L. König, Beyschlag, E. Huther, and Ernest Best as those holding such a view and lists an impressive bibliography of twentieth-century writing on the topic. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 213.

354. Fackre, Nash, and Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard*, 86; emphasis in original.

Of those advancing postmortem evangelization, there are few, if any, who go further and additionally claim baptism as both required of all and available to all. In terms of explicit biblical support, 1 Corinthians 15:29 is the prime witness, though this passage, not unlike 1 Peter 3:18–20, is one of the most puzzling and divergently interpreted verses in the Bible. In Paul’s great defense of a physical resurrection, he mentions almost in passing those “which are baptized for the dead” as further proof of his argument. Many and varied have been the interpretations of what Paul could possibly have meant. Jeffrey Trumbower is one of many who, like Joseph Smith, sees a description of some actual early Christian practice:

Enormous vats of ink have been emptied in both pre-critical and critical scholarship speculating on precisely what those Corinthian Christians were doing, why they were doing it, and Paul’s attitude toward it. . . . I agree with [Mathis] Rissi and Hans Conzelmann (and, for that matter, with Mormon prophet Joseph Smith), that the grammar and logic of the passage point to a practice of vicarious baptism of a living person for the benefit of a dead person.³⁵⁵

This passage of scripture remains a topic of current debate. A number of scholars suggest that the Corinthians referred to were in fact practicing some form of vicarious baptism, yet scholars are unsure what to do with this puzzling occurrence. “Those who put this forward,” says R. Alistair Campbell, “do so with the air of someone making the best of a bad job. . . . [O]ne detects little actual enthusiasm for this solution even among those who propose it, and in fact many scholars remain unsatisfied with it.”³⁵⁶ This dissatisfaction is caused not by grammatical difficulties inherent in the Greek, but by the theological complications inherent in the passage’s implications. Thus, in his biblical commentary Gordon Fee notes, “The normal reading of the text is that some Corinthians are being baptized,

355. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 35. Although Trumbower agrees with Joseph Smith as to what the ancient Saints might have been doing, he does not consider likely that the ancient practice was ever as widespread as the current LDS practice. He states, “Were the Corinthians baptizing by proxy dozens or hundreds of dead Gentiles and Jews, like the Latter-day Saints began to do 1800 years later? That is certainly a possibility, but it is so alien to Paul’s theoretical statements about the effects of baptism and individuals’ acceptance of the gospel that I consider it highly unlikely. Perhaps the practice was more limited.” Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 35–36.

356. R. Alistair Campbell, “Baptism and Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:29),” *Australian Biblical Review* 47 (1999): 43. Campbell’s own view rejects an actual vicarious baptism for the dead. He explains that an attraction of his view is that it “eliminate[s] the need to hypothesize an otherwise unknown group with a bizarre baptismal practice.” Campbell, “Baptism and Resurrection,” 47.

apparently vicariously, in behalf of some people who have already died. It would be fair to add that this reading is such a plain understanding of the Greek text that no one would ever have imagined the various alternatives were it not for the difficulties involved.”³⁵⁷

D. Conclusion

The number of theologians who are advancing or considering the idea of postmortem evangelization grew rapidly in the twentieth century and continues to the present. Most are drawn by its powerful “theological fit” which makes both Christ’s message and mercy ultimately available to all. Although biblical support of this view has not been part of the traditional interpretive consensus, much current scholarship has shown support for postmortem evangelization in 1 Peter 3:18–20 and other biblical passages.³⁵⁸ Despite these current developments, Joseph Smith’s doctrine remains unique in Christian thought. As mentioned above, his coupling of postmortem evangelization with vicarious baptisms for the dead reflects a position distinct among current Christian theologies. Joseph not only maintained that hearing of and accepting Christ would be a live option for all humankind, but also that the ordinance of baptism is required of and available to all who would enter Christ’s kingdom; thus the LDS emphasis on worldwide missionary efforts and vicarious baptisms for the dead. Although Joseph recognized biblical support for his doctrines, their ultimate source was the revelations he received from God.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON JOSEPH SMITH

I began this piece asking how far contemporary theologians have come in appropriating theological insights once unique to Joseph Smith. At the conclusion, two points need to be made explicit that were implicit in this study. (1) None of these spokesmen from contemporary Christianity has pulled all of these doctrines together in any comprehensive way, though pieces and fragments of the doctrines are everywhere. Joseph, however, *did* pull them together, and addressed each of these theological conundrums in revolutionary and brilliant ways. (2) The methods employed by Joseph Smith compared to the methods of contemporary spokesmen vary

357. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 763–64.

358. For a detailed listing of Bible passages generally used in support of this view, see Sanders, *No Other Name*, 178–88.

greatly. While these notable theologians have come to their conclusions through reason, experience, biblical exegesis, and reconsideration of tradition, Joseph bypassed any such hermeneutical exercise, instead claiming divine revelation and authority. Harold Bloom concludes his study of Joseph Smith with these words: “If one decides that Joseph Smith was no prophet . . . then one’s dominant emotion towards him must be wonder. There is no other figure remotely like him in our entire national history, and it is unlikely that anyone like him ever can come again.”³⁵⁹

Charlatan or prophet? Heresy or truth? While the reactions to Joseph’s doctrines remain clearly mixed, one thing is certain: the doctrines he proclaimed are not as “unique” as they used to be.

359. Bloom, *American Religion*, 126–27.

David L. Paulsen (david_paulsen@byu.edu) is Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University and a former member of the BYU Studies Academy. He received his JD at the University of Chicago Law School and his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Michigan. Student assistants Craig Atkinson, Adam Bentley, Robb Duffin, and Brett McDonald have each made major contributions to the research for and preparation of this paper. Kevin Christensen, Carl Cranney, Edward T. Jones, Carl Mosser, Blake Ostler, Tom Russon, Paul Wilson, and, especially, Charles Harrell have also made valuable contributions. Funding for this project has been generously provided by the Department of Philosophy, the College of Humanities, and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship—all at Brigham Young University.