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A Word to Our Anti-Mormon Friends

D. L. Barksdale

Mormons seem to have an inordinate number of "friends" who seem to want to "love" us straight into intensive care. We want them to know that we appreciate the time they took to write this message to us. We only wish that they had signed their names, so that we could properly direct our gratitude. We, as Mormons, accept the message in the spirit of "love" in which it was offered and would like to respond to this message in that same spirit. I've been asked to respond on behalf of some of us "Mormons."

"Christian" Love

My Dear Anti-Mormon "Friends,"

You begin your message to us by explaining that you are writing "a loving word from our hearts to our Mormon friends." You then lovingly tell us of the "bad news about our sin," claiming that we, as Mormons, are "drowning" and must be "hurt before [we] can heal." We certainly appreciate the warning. Without such, we could easily have taken your harsh words, misstatements, and misrepresentations of our beliefs to be vicious, petty, and deceptive. Now, however, we have the comfort of realizing that you are simply trying to "love" us.

Review of "A Word to Our Mormon Friends." In *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism,* 233–39. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1998. $10.99.

We must certainly commend you for your thoroughness in this regard. In recent memory, we do not remember being "loved" as unpleasantly as we have been in this book. In the spirit of meekness and mutual understanding, therefore, we offer the words of the Lord regarding this kind of "love": "But those who cry transgression do it because they are the servants of sin, and are the children of disobedience themselves" (D&C 121:17).

You advance the notion that "Mormons and Evangelicals" recognize that perfection is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. You then take some liberties with our beliefs—unwittingly, we're sure—in claiming that Mormons must be perfectly obedient in this life to be worthy of exaltation. As evidence of this, you point to a "chapter loved by Mormons," citing the verse that reads, "'For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all' (James 2:10)" (pp. 233–34).

I'm sure that, in your love, you might have overlooked some rather glaring problems with this assertion, so please allow me to take a moment to correct your claim. The truth of the matter is that this verse is referred to only six times in all of the works produced thus far by LDS General Authorities. Period. Only six. And the context in which it appears completely contradicts your assertion.

Since you choose this verse as the foundation of your message to us, these six references should serve to establish the credibility of your arguments throughout the rest of the chapter. Since I know that you want only to present the truth. I'm confident that you will agree.

The first two references appear in Bruce R. McConkie's *The Mortal Messiah* and James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ.*[1] I grouped these together because both of them refer to this verse in quoting from *a non-LDS source,* which employs it as follows:

> Some thought the omission of ablutions as bad as homicide; some that the precepts of the Mishna were all "heavy";

1. See Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 3:383, and James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 565.

> those of the Law were some "heavy" and some "light." Others considered the *third* to be the greatest commandment. None of them had realized the great principle, that the wilful violation of one commandment is the transgression of all (James 2:10), because the object of the entire Law is the spirit of *obedience to God.* On the question proposed by the lawyer the Shammaites and Hillelites were in disaccord and, as usual, both schools were wrong: the Shammaites, in thinking that mere trivial external observances were valuable, apart from the spirit in which they were performed, and the principle which they exemplified; the Hillelites, in thinking that *any* positive command could in itself be unimportant, and in not seeing that great principles are essential to the due performance of even the slightest duties.[2]

Far from being a call to perfection, this passage actually explains the true context of the biblical verse, which you seem to have completely ignored. It does not support your point.

The next three references to this passage are found in Joseph Fielding Smith's *Answers to Gospel Questions.* President Smith incorporates this passage in the following discussion:

> After giving this counsel and teaching the members to be faithful in all things, he said, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." James did not mean that a man who stole was guilty of murder, or that one who lied was guilty of unchastity. He was endeavoring to impress upon the minds of the members that the kingdom of God is *one.* Its laws are perfect. No unclean person can enter there. Since it is a perfect kingdom, its laws must be obeyed. There can be no disunity, no opposition in that kingdom. . . . Therefore the words of James are true. Unless a man can abide strictly in complete accord, he cannot enter there, and in the words of James, he is guilty of all.

2. Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (1874; reprint, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 529–30.

> In other words if there is one divine law that he does not keep he is barred from participating in the kingdom, and figuratively guilty of all, since he is denied all.[3]

At first glance, this statement appears to completely justify your argument. But does it? What *else* did Joseph Fielding Smith have to say about this very verse? I imagine that in your haste you overlooked the fourth volume of his series, in which President Smith expands upon his comments in the third volume:

> The Savior's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," evidently have been by many misapplied or limited in their application. *The Savior knew that mortal man could not reach the great goal of perfection like his Heavenly Father,* but here in mortality is the place where that foundation *should be laid.* Then we should continue on from grace to grace, not only in *this life* but also in the *eternities to come,* and it is within the possibility of any faithful soul *eventually* to attain to that perfection.[4]

Joseph Fielding Smith's own words acknowledge the fact that we cannot attain perfection in this life but, rather, can eventually do so by gradual progression throughout the eternities. As I said, I'm sure you were unaware of that quotation, so I provide it here to assist in your quest for accuracy on Latter-day Saint beliefs. The final reference is found in *Church History and Modern Revelation,*[5] which quotes a statement by President Joseph F. Smith in his book *Gospel Doctrine:*

> For if a man keep all the law save [in] one point, and he offend in that, he is a transgressor of the law, and he is not en-

3. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 3:26.

4. Ibid., 4:72, emphasis added.

5. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 3:122.

> titled to the fulness of the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ [James 2:10]. But when a man keeps all the laws that are revealed, *according to his strength, his substance, and his ability, though what he does may be little, it is just as acceptable in the sight of God as if he were able to do a thousand times more.*[6]

This passage does not seem to support your allegation at all!

As we can see, only one passage comes even remotely close to supporting your assertion, and even that author further clarifies and refines his statement later on to the point of nullifying your assertion completely. I trust that this clarification will be received gladly.

The Mormon Necessity of Good Works

To further bolster your case, you then refer to a priesthood manual, *To Make Thee a Minister and a Witness*. Certain "standards of perfection" contained in the manual are listed, and you remark:

> According to Mormon teaching, without doing these faithfully and continually one cannot enter into the top level of the celestial kingdom and live with his or her Heavenly Father. Failure in a single point means that one has not reached absolute perfection and therefore cannot reach exaltation. (p. 234)

From this presentation, one comes away (that is, if one doesn't bother to check LDS references to James 2:10) with the notion that Mormons believe that we must be perfect in every way to be "righteous" or "worthy." We have already seen that the references by LDS General Authorities to James 2:10, few as they are, do not support your conclusions; in fact, it seems that you have somehow managed to ignore a massive amount of LDS teaching on this very subject.

My dear friends, if you wish to use priesthood study guides as a reliable source of LDS doctrine, why did you fail to consult the

6. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 225, emphasis added.

priesthood study guide published in 1997? If you had, you would have found a wonderful lesson called "Living the Gospel." In it, President Brigham Young completely refutes your assertion—with quotation after quotation.

> We . . . take all the laws, rules, ordinances and regulations contained in the Scriptures and practice them *as far as possible,* and then keep learning and improving until we can live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.
>
> In conversation not long since with a visitor who was returning to the Eastern States, said he, "You, as a people consider that you are perfect?" "Oh, no;" said I, "not by any means. . . . The doctrine that we have embraced is perfect; but when we come to the people, we have just as many imperfections as you can ask for. We are not perfect; but the Gospel that we preach is calculated to perfect the people so that they can obtain a glorious resurrection and enter into the presence of the Father and the Son.
>
> The people [cannot receive the laws] in their perfect fulness; but they can receive a little here and a little there, a little today and a little tomorrow, a little more next week, and a little more in advance of that next year, if they make a wise improvement upon every little they receive; if they do not, they are left in the shade, and the light which the Lord reveals will appear darkness to them, and the kingdom of heaven will travel on and leave them groping. Hence, if we wish to act upon the fulness of the knowledge that the Lord designs to reveal, little by little, to the inhabitants of the earth, we must improve upon every little as it is revealed.
>
> I . . . feel to urge upon the Latter-day Saints the necessity of a close application of the principles of the Gospel in our lives, conduct and words and all that we do; and it requires the whole man, the whole life to be devoted to improvement in order to come to knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus

> Christ. Herein is the fulness of perfection. It was couched in the character of our Savior; although but a scanty portion of it was made manifest to the people, in consequence of their not being able to receive it. All they were prepared to receive he gave them. All we are prepared to receive the Lord gives us; all that the nations of the earth are prepared to receive he imparts unto them.
>
> It is written of the Savior in the Bible that he descended below all things that he might ascend above all. Is it not so with every man? Certainly it is. It is fit, then, that we should descend below all things and come up gradually, and learn a little now and again, receive "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little." [see Isaiah 28:9–10; D&C 98:12][7]

I have to wonder how you missed these statements. Could it possibly be that they do not advance your agenda as you would like or that they do not sufficiently display the proper amount of "love" toward us? Please consider the following statements:

> Don't expect perfection from your children *or from yourself* all at once. Strive with your children to improve your lives little by little, step by step, line upon line each day.[8]
>
> The discerning realize that it is not realistic to expect perfection in others when none of us is perfect.[9]
>
> It occurs to me that many do not understand what worthiness is. Worthiness is a process, while perfection is an eternal trek. We can be worthy to enjoy certain privileges without being perfect.[10]

7. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 21–22, emphasis added, quoted from *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 3, 7, 4, 11–12, and 60.

8. *Family Home Evening: Resource Book* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983), v, emphasis added.

9. Marvin J. Ashton, *Be of Good Cheer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 10.

10. Marvin J. Ashton, *Measure of Our Hearts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 9.

Literally thousands of other references to the same effect from the works of LDS General Authorities contradict your premise. I am sincerely left to wonder why at least some of them were not included, especially when they appear in such abundance.

The Mormon Necessity of Repentance

The next main point in your presentation is the "Mormon Necessity of Repentance." Your message claims that "LDS teaching demands complete and permanent repentance of sin in order to live with the Heavenly Father" (p. 234).

All the versions of the Bible that I am familiar with make this requirement rather clear. The Savior's injunction to his disciples was not to "go forth and teach salvation by Faith alone." His teachings are always prefaced by the command to "*repent,* and be baptized." Was the Savior serious in requiring that we actually *turn* from our sins through repentance? And was that "turning" to be permanent, or was it just a "temporary" repentance? The Savior and the apostles were quite clear on this requirement:

> For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 5:5)

The Savior also taught that "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). This raises a most interesting question. Why, after having exercised faith in Christ, did those whom the Master was addressing need to repent? Is not professing Christ with one's mouth enough? And if they truly did have "saving faith," then wouldn't their works have naturally followed without consciously and actively having to *turn* from their sinful ways? Why do we find the apostles of Christ teaching the necessity of personal repentance, obedience, and righteousness *after* expressing faith in Christ? Why do we find the author of Hebrews going so far as to declare that Christ is the "author of eternal salvation unto *all them that obey him*" (Hebrews 5:9, emphasis added)?

In your message, dear concerned friends, you then claim that, from the Latter-day Saint point of view,

> Genuine repentance necessary for exaltation means that one will never repeat the offense. If he does, then he loses the forgiveness he got as a result of his repentance. For the Mormon manual, *Gospel Principles* states emphatically that "those who receive forgiveness and then repeat the sin are held accountable for their former sins." (p. 235)

One has to wonder if you truly understand the words of Peter:

> For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world . . . they are again entangled therein, . . . it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment . . . [as the] dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire. (2 Peter 2:20–22)

It seems that your purpose in including this section on repentance may be to mock the LDS belief that repentance is necessary to return to our Heavenly Father. And yet, how do you explain the myriad of New Testament teachings that demand this very thing? In claiming a belief in *sola scriptura,* how can you rationalize ignoring some of the clearest, plainest teachings of the Savior and his apostles on the subject of the necessity of repentance? Since your objective was to present the "truth in love" to us, why did you choose to ignore that particular truth?

The Mormon Necessity of Perfection

In your message to us, you observe that "it would seem that reaching the celestial kingdom is next to impossible" (p. 235). You fail to cite a single LDS source reflecting or supporting that belief. You also seem to ignore the fact that becoming perfect is, in the Mormon view, a process of progression in partnership with Christ. I am certain

that omission was innocent. As fellow Christians, I am sure you are as concerned as we are about accuracy and truth. Therefore, we as Mormons would ask that you revisit your thoughts on that issue.

You next claim that the Bible allows for only "two options" in relation to salvation—"eternal life" or "destruction"—adding that "every Mormon should ponder seriously what 'destruction' means and who merits it" (p. 235).

You then pose a rather interesting question: Given the "rules of the LDS Church," will any more "than a miniscule number ever make it" to the celestial kingdom (p. 235)? Surely this is intended as a rhetorical question, given the view of perfection that you have attributed to the Latter-day Saints. In your haste, you must have ignored the observation by President George Q. Cannon:

> There have been, no doubt, *millions* of people on the earth who have had this willingness [to endure to the end]. They will attain, we are told, unto the celestial glory.[11]

I notice that you fail to cite LDS scriptural sources that specifically note the requirements for entering the celestial kingdom, and I'm frankly puzzled at this deficiency. After all, our mutual quest is to find the truth of our beliefs. In the Doctrine and Covenants, we read of those who inherit the celestial kingdom:

> They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given . . . And who overcome by faith . . . (D&C 76:51, 53)

I notice with intense interest that "perfection" was not one of the requirements given here. I also recall a number of other statements by LDS leaders that contradict the notion that we must be absolutely perfect while here on earth to attain celestial glory. Consider, for instance, this one by George Q. Cannon:

11. George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:102, emphasis added.

> There are some laws that we are prevented from obeying that have been declared to be necessary to exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of our God. What will be the condition of those who do not obey these laws? God, knowing all our desires, if He should see a *spirit of willingness and obedience in our hearts,* will judge us accordingly. That which we cannot do we are not expected to do. *God does not ask impossible things from His children.* But He asks us to be obedient to Him and to carry out His laws in our lives*; and if for any reason we cannot do this but are willing to do it, He will accept the offering and the good desires that we entertain in our hearts.*[12]

Biblical Teachings on Perfection

Let us examine the word of God in relation to the principle of perfection. What did the Savior mean when he admonished us to "be . . . perfect, even as [our] Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)? C. S. Lewis said,

> The command *Be ye perfect* is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words.[13]

The Bible teaches that perfection is found in completely surrendering our will to the Lord and in walking in obedience to his commandments.

When the rich man came to Christ, what did Christ indicate was necessary for perfection?

> Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be *perfect,* go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. (Matthew 19:21, emphasis added)

12. Ibid., 1:97–98, emphasis added.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 174–75.

For this young man, being "perfect" did not mean walking in absolute perfection to every law and ordinance. It meant being *willing* to obey the commandments and to sacrifice that which his heart was truly set on, that is, to sell all that he had and give to the poor—something he was not *willing* to do.

Christ's plea in his great intercessory prayer was that his disciples would "be made *perfect* in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me" (John 17:23, emphasis added).

How were the disciples to "be made perfect"? The ancient American prophet Moroni expanded on that concept with amazing clarity in the Book of Mormon:

> Yea, come unto Christ, and *be perfected in him,* and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.
>
> And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moroni 10:32–33)

The Absolute Perfection of Jesus Christ

I must commend you, my friends, for this wonderful section on the perfection of Christ. It was most inspiring. More important, it reflects, more or less, the teachings of the Bible on the subject as well as the understanding and faith of Latter-day Saints on the matter of perfection. No knowledgeable Mormon on earth would claim that our works can ever make us perfect in this life or the next. It is through Christ that we reach perfection. It is through our *willingness* to obey, however, that Christ's perfection can be applied to our efforts.

You claim in your message that Christ "gives us the perfection we cannot attain as a free gift." In this we agree, if by that statement you mean that he has provided this gift conditionally, after we have done as much as we are able. If Christ really did offer perfection as a free gift with *no effort* on our parts, I have to wonder how you interpret the following passages, which teach a very different principle:

Paul teaches the Corinthian Saints in 2 Corinthians 13:11 to "*Be perfect*, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." Why, if these Saints were already given perfection as a free gift, would Paul admonish them to "be perfect"?

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul taught the Saints there of the offices and duties in the church, such as apostles and prophets, which should continue "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *unto a perfect man*, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, emphasis added). What does Paul identify with "a perfect man"? Being "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." This was addressed to those who had already, by your understanding, been given perfection as a free gift. Why would Paul do that? By your standards, he seems to be rather "confused" on this topic.

Paul further muddies the waters, so to speak, in his epistle to the Philippians, wherein he writes,

> Not as though I had already attained, *either were already perfect:* but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12–14, emphasis added)

Paul was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely he had "saving faith," according to your understanding. If that be so, why had Paul not already become "perfect" in Christ? Why did he still feel the need, and *teach* the necessity of, pressing "toward the mark" to attain perfection?

For that matter, what is one of the primary reasons that God gives us scripture in the first place?

> All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: *That the man of God may be perfect*, throughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16–17, emphasis added)

Even in this passage, being perfect is not mentioned as a free gift but is associated with our willingness to do good works, to be corrected, to be obedient, to be righteous. This passage does not present a vague perception of "perfection" as something that is bestowed on followers of Christ immediately on simple expression of belief.

You quote the apostle John as saying that "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life" (John 6:47). This is an excellent passage, my friends, and one with which no Mormon would disagree. For how did John define *belief?* Was it mere lip service, or did he attach more to the word than a bare profession of faith?

> And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. (1 John 2:3–5)

Allow me to pose several questions. Was John conditional here? Did he allow for obeying *some* of the commandments only? Are there any commandments that John excused? No. Does this not mean then, that John implied *perfection in obedience* for one who really knows God? And who was John's audience? Were they all heathens and the "unchurched"? No. They were those who had *already* accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. How can this be, if we understand your position properly?

You make the point that John's statement, "hath everlasting life," amounted to nothing more nor less than a "once-saved, always saved" promise of salvation. I must point out, however, that such is not compatible with John's teachings. In his magnificent revelation,

John warned the churches to whom he wrote that they were in danger of being "removed out of their place," or, in other words, of losing their very salvation, because of their sin.

> Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. (Revelation 2:5)

How could this be so if they had at one time been "saved"? How could they, having once obtained "perfection" as a "free gift," *lose* it to the point of being in danger of losing their very salvation?

By the way, your quotation from Paul regarding the law was taken woefully out of context. I'm sure this was an oversight on your part. I'm sure you're aware that Paul's statements against the "law of sin and death" referred to the Law of Moses *specifically* and were directed to the Judaizers who maintained that the requirements of the law remained necessary for salvation, thus negating the effect of the Savior's atoning sacrifice.

Your next statement about the apostle James was most intriguing. You quote James 2:24, which is very clear: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." You then correctly profess that "nothing is considered good works in God's eyes apart from faith," and we wholeheartedly agree. But I must admit that I found your next statement to be somewhat of a stretch: "James is distinguishing *true* faith from *false* faith" (p. 237). I was very perplexed by this declaration. Try as I might, as many times as I read that passage I could not, and *can* not, see that message anywhere within the text. I even examined my Greek version very carefully. To me, it is very clear. "By *works* a man is justified, and not by *faith only*" (emphasis added). I honestly found no distinction in the text of that verse between *true* faith and *false* faith. Perhaps you could point out where the text makes that distinction.

You then observe that James uses the word *faith* more than he uses *works*. I must say that I was surprised by this argument. Does the frequency of a word in the scriptures determine the truthfulness of the principle represented by that word? I don't seem to be able to

find any indications for such a notion. Perhaps if you would steer me to where that is found, I might better understand your point. In the meantime, I would settle for a sound explanation of why Paul's statement that "by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" should not be taken at face value.

The True Gospel

I found this last part of your message to us extremely interesting, particularly your quotation of Hebrews 10:12–14:

> But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

I was especially intrigued by verse 14: "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." I thought about that, and the question arose in my mind, "But how are we sanctified, if that is a prerequisite for perfection and not a product *of* it?" This question was followed closely by another: "If we are saved once when we profess faith in Christ, why is sanctification necessary at all *afterwards?*" So, I searched the Bible and found some wonderful information that I would like to share with you in our quest for truth.

> For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8)

I found that sanctification, upon which our perfection is based, comes through God's truth (see John 17:17), through Christ (see 1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 10:10; 13:12), by the Spirit of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:11), through the influence of others (see 1 Corinthians 7:14), *by obedience to the ordinances of the gospel,* notably baptism (see Ephesians 5:25–26), and by the word of God and prayer (see 1 Timothy 4:5). From these passages, I learned that in order to be "perfected," we must be "sanctified" by a combination of our efforts and the grace of Christ. I learned that this is the true gospel.

I trust that you are genuine seekers of truth and not merely defenders of dogma and that you will carefully consider your own injunction as you closed your message to us: "This is the true gospel. Any other gospel is a false gospel—even if it comes from an angel!" (p. 238).

In Summary

My dear anti-Mormon friends, I hope that you receive this response to your message in the spirit in which it was offered. We know that your hearts are sincere and that you are concerned about us. We know that we have differences that divide us. But one thing is certain. We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. He is our Redeemer. It is only in him and through him that we can be saved. We know to whom we look for salvation, and we know that his righteousness is sufficient to save us. But we thank you all the same for reminding us of this truth.

Stephen E. Robinson summed up what we really believe regarding perfection and salvation in the following words:

> First, it is impossible to *earn* or *deserve* any of the blessings of God in any sense that leaves the individual unindebted to God's grace. . . . Even in those contexts, such as the law of tithing, where there is a *quid pro quo*—a covenant agreement that if I will do A, God will grant B—the very fact that such a covenant has been offered to me and that I am able to receive such overwhelming blessings in return for such paltry efforts is in itself a prior act of grace, . . . an expression

of the pure love of God, a gift. Salvation itself is the result of such a covenant of grace—"the new testament [covenant] in my blood" (Luke 22:20). The very existence of this covenant is a gift, a grace offered by a volunteer Savior. Yet like all covenants, there are terms binding upon both parties. Our best efforts to live the laws of God are required, but not because they *earn* the promised rewards—our efforts are infinitely disproportionate to the actual costs. Rather, our best efforts are a token of our good faith and of our acceptance of the offered covenant. Thus we participate in our own salvation as we attempt to keep the commandments of God, but we can never earn it ourselves or bring it to pass on our own merits, no matter how well we may think we are doing.

Second, redemption can never come as the result of an individual's own efforts, but only through the atonement of Jesus Christ. . . . There is no doctrine, ritual, principle, ordinance, law, performance, church, belief, program, angel, or prophet that can save us in the absence of the personal intervention in our lives of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is the teaching of the Book of Mormon as well as the Bible.

Third, the individual must be born again through the atonement of Jesus Christ and become Christ's spiritual offspring. . . . Even membership in the Church of Christ is insufficient for salvation without the personal experience of the Savior and of his atonement, which begets us spiritually. . . .

Fourth, we are saved by grace and condemned without it, no matter what else we might have or do. Grace is *sine qua non,* an essential condition, for salvation. . . . Moreover, if a person is willing to come to Christ and endure to the end, the Savior's grace is sufficient for that person's salvation, despite his or her mortal weaknesses. . . . In other words, our comparative righteousness is secondary in importance to humbling ourselves, admitting our weaknesses, striving to live the gospel, and having faith in our Savior.[14]

14. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 105–7

We are deeply grateful for your message of love and concern for us. We too love the Jesus of the Bible, the Only Begotten Son of Almighty God. We too attempt to follow him and exercise "saving faith," showing our faith by our attempts to do what he showed us and to obey his commandments and to deny ourselves of "all ungodliness." Our prayer is that all of us will grow in the "measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," that we may be perfected in him through his grace, as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling before his throne. Our hope is that this response has clarified our belief regarding perfection.