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Jon McNaughton, *Gentle Savior*.

We must remember that the Savior became who he is in process of time, just as we must do by the grace of God.

## *The Authority of Example: Emulation as the Path to Theosis*

MATTHEW SCOTT STENSON

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Since at least Plato and the patristic fathers, those interested in the things of God have expounded the doctrine of *deification*, or *theosis*.<sup>1</sup> Although doctrines differ widely, each system admits to one degree or another what Wynand Vladimir de Beer has recently called “divine-human co-operation (*synergeia*).”<sup>2</sup> For Plato, the back-and-forth of Socratic dialectic was a way for the rational part of man to ascend to God, or the Good. Augustine couched his anthropology of the soul’s ascent in biblical terms. In his view, founded on Proverbs 1:7, one unites (or reunites) with God by means of meditation, purification, and charity, or love.<sup>3</sup> These familiar systems, on first impression, resemble aspects of Latter-day Saint theology and share a basis in truth and scripture; however, as de Beer makes plain, the philosophical/patristic systems or formulations of becoming (or ascending) never conflate the primary distinction between transcendent Creator and fallen creature.<sup>4</sup> Instead, in these systems, especially those common to the church fathers and mystics, “humans are called to become divine by grace, not by nature.”<sup>5</sup> This sort of “becoming” is achieved by means of intellectual/contemplative “participation” in the divine idea or energy.<sup>6</sup> LDS theology—more dependent on action than

meditation, where it is not blurred by theories of relativity and probability<sup>7</sup>—does not make an ontological distinction between Creator and creature.<sup>8</sup> It asserts that humans are actual descendants of God and not merely made by his hands. Nevertheless, this literal understanding of our family relationship to God conceals a theological paradox that is explored in this study on the doctrinal place and redemptive power of Jesus Christ's example.

Jesus Christ's example is not only a divine expression of his and our Father's law but is essential to accomplishing the purpose of the plan of salvation.<sup>9</sup> This redemptive project, consistent with the fullness of the scriptures, intimates a process and comprises a paradox—our Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, have *become, by developmental stages of change, unchanging* celestial beings, and so may we if we follow their examples and participate in the Atonement. We can exercise saving faith in them because they have become unchanging possessors of “an infinity of fulness” (D&C 109:77). A correct understanding of their completed (or perfected) characters inspires in us confidence and a desire to imitate them. Their goodness and grace are sufficient to enable us to become like them in character and in conduct. The platonic and patristic arguments referenced, although ancient and emblematic of the truth, do not adequately interact with and correspond to what is known through the Restoration about Jesus Christ's life and teachings. None of these known systems trace the anthropology of the soul as broadly and deeply as needed. At best, they suggest that Christ's example “points the way to virtue,” or that it aids us in finding a kind of unity with God but without going all the way.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of Christ's example is often reduced to an ethical one that hardly gets at the covenantal requirements and stages of the immortal spirit and body, requirements that those who desire to enter into God's celestial kingdom must pass through. This study, in contrast, attempts to “gather together in one all things in Christ” by underscoring the “authority of [Christ's] example”<sup>11</sup> as it furthers the plan of God and our own eternal progression (Ephesians 1:10). *Christ's divine nature and actions have been, are, and will be principles of salvation and exaltation to us. Centering on the authority of Christ's full example will inspire us to achieve our foreordained purpose to leaven society and become like him and our Father in Heaven.*

The third article of faith reads, “We believe that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel” (Pearl of Great Price, 60). This study does not detract from what is inherent in that very succinct tenet. Rather, unlike Michael

Slusser, who subordinates the “exemplar theme” to that of atonement, this study makes explicit that doctrine from which the basic tenet is apparently deployed—Christ's character as manifest by his eternal example.<sup>12</sup> In light of the totality of Joseph Smith's teachings and the scriptures, the article of faith might just as correctly read, “We believe that through *the character, example, and Atonement of Jesus Christ* all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances.”<sup>13</sup> This expanded rendering of the beloved article of faith is not far removed from Elder Bednar's approach to the subject wherein he, following other prophets and apostles, couples Christ's divine character with the purposes of the Atonement.<sup>14</sup> Why does adding the above language in italics even matter? For our purposes, Christ's personal character and living pattern enable the process of his Atonement, by which we mean the events immediately surrounding his suffering, death, and Resurrection (see 1 Nephi 19:8–10; Alma 33:22). His divine character “underwrote His remarkable atonement,”<sup>15</sup> and his life qualified him to make the infinite offering. The added language matters because without Christ's divine character, his example of perfect obedience as he developed, and his infinite sacrifice, we could not be exalted. His life and good works demonstrate to us what to become and how to become like him and his father; whereas his precious blood enables us to do so.

This study of theosis examines three related scriptural themes in succession: (1) As Christ treads in the tracks of his father, so we all are invited to tread in his and his servants' tracks; (2) As we tread in Christ's tracks, so we as believers may become the salt, light, and leaven of the earth; and (3) As Christ kept celestial law and ordinances while assuming and overcoming a universal Godly measure of mortality, so we must learn through our Exemplar to keep the same laws while assuming our particular mortal measures. Ultimately, according to Joseph Smith, we will need to learn through Christ and his atoning power to “yield obedience” to *all* of the laws of the celestial kingdom that have been revealed *before* we enter that kingdom (see D&C 88:22).<sup>16</sup> As the Apostle Paul understood, spiritual children do not enter that kingdom, but men and women of Christ. Learning to keep celestial law through the amazing grace of Christ enables us to receive the fulness of the Father with him. This is the original doctrine of apotheosis, divinization, or deification and does the opposite of tarnish the transcendence of God—it glorifies him.

### Christ's Example to All

Like our Heavenly Father, Christ has ethos (the authority of influence) and saving power in large part because of *who he is* or *has become* through faith in his Father. Before the world, presumably through his Father's enabling grace, Christ, in process of time, became a God or "like unto God" due to his faithful obedience to law (Abraham 3:24). On earth he advanced in a similar way. "He received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for grace," advancing "from grace to grace, until he received a fulness" (D&C 93:12–13; see also Luke 2:52). As a result of following his Father, he has become the great "prototype or standard of salvation."<sup>17</sup> We are to learn about ourselves from observing him as he learned about himself through observing his Father. He learned to become what he is from his Father in Heaven, who, according to Joseph Smith, once worked out his own salvation with "fear and trembling" well before this world came rolling into existence.<sup>18</sup> This ancient doctrine of becoming a saved being through imitation is taught in the Gospel of John.<sup>19</sup>

In the following account, Christ describes his relationship with his Father in Heaven to his enemies who have accused him of breaking the law of the Sabbath:

But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.

Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye [the unbelieving] may marvel (5:17–20).

From this passage of scripture, we learn on what basis Christ justifies his Sabbath actions. He sees himself as only doing those good works that his father has done: "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth his Father do." He follows the example of his Father in keeping the law. Apart from his priesthood (given him from the Father also), Christ's right to do what he does is bound up in the character and example of his Father. His Father is the object of his faith and his guiding inspiration. In this particular case, Christ's warranting authority to do a healing work on the Sabbath day (not merely to heal) is based on historical, cosmic precedent instead of a passage of scripture or even priesthood authority. Furthermore, Christ

prophesies on this occasion that other revelations are forthcoming by which he expects to learn more about the example of his Father. Then he might emulate him in doing greater works and thereby model for us those actions that we might also aspire to the same.

In this exchange, however, Christ has shown his enemies and us far more than how to observe the Sabbath; he has taught us the eternal doctrine of emulation; he has taught us how to worship and find full salvation by becoming gods. Unless we learn to become like Christ and his Father in all things, we cannot be saved with them. Christ's saving example extends much further than proper Sabbath observance. It has a relationship to all things in time and in eternity, including life and death and priesthood ordinances. We followed him premortally; we follow him here; and we will follow him as "wider fields expand to view" after death.<sup>20</sup> His obedient emulation of his Father, who is also our Father, encompasses the plan of salvation and inspires, orients, and enables our own eternal progression. As he was gifted to do, Joseph Smith helps us glimpse what is involved in the passage from John during his unsurpassed King Follett discourse:

What did Jesus say? . . . The scriptures inform us that Jesus said, As the Father hath power in Himself, even so hath the Son power—to do what? Why, what the Father did. The answer is obvious—in a manner to lay down His body and take it up again. Jesus, what are you going to do? To lay down my life as my Father did, and take it again. . . .

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves . . . the same as all other Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation.<sup>21</sup>

As Joseph's sermon makes clear, Christ follows his Father not only in doing good deeds but in "lay[ing] down His body" and in "tak[ing] it up again." Unlike us, he had power in himself to do just that; however, we are also to follow him in death and in life. According to the "merciful plan of the great Creator," all will die and be raised again in immortality (2 Nephi 9:6). These are essential steps in laying hold of salvation or theosis.<sup>22</sup> Christ raises us from death to life, but he also has shown us the way to exaltation; he has walked in it. If we are to be exalted, we must not follow him only in death and in the Resurrection; we must learn from him by precept and example how to become, through his blood, actually like him. His personal character and pattern of actions are fundamental to our inheriting eternal life, since we must develop a character like his and follow that pattern and paradigm. Without

his pioneering example, we would not know the way or have hope of ever becoming as he is. However, since he is the Firstborn and our Elder Brother in the spirit, his life assures us that “it is in the power of man [potentially] to keep the law and remain also without sin,” a reality which augments our faith and hope.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding our many weaknesses, we may tread in his tracks as he treads in his Father’s.

In addition to following Christ in temporal death and in resurrected life, we also follow him in undergoing the ordeals of this mortal probation and in receiving the ordinances of salvation and exaltation (see 2 Nephi 3 1:5; 3 Nephi 27:21). Similar to Christ, we are born into a “tabernacle of clay” with a veil covering our memory (Mosiah 3:5).<sup>24</sup> We begin our lives on the “same standing,” in a state of innocence before we experience as accountable agents the widely diverse vicissitudes of this second estate (Alma 1 3:5; see also D&C 93:38). As we “begin to become accountable” (D&C 29:47), unlike Christ, we “perish from that which is good” (2 Nephi 2:5; see also Moses 6:55). We also “suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue,” except Christ suffers “even more than [we] can suffer” lest we die (Mosiah 3:7). In his singular case, “blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people” (3:7). Although we do not make an atonement for our sins, except perhaps insofar as we suffer godly sorrow for our sins before and during the repentance process (see D&C 19:20),<sup>25</sup> we may be required to experience Gethsemanes and to “suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world” (see Genesis 22; Jacob 1:8; 2 Nephi 9:18).<sup>26</sup> Our Christ-like or Abrahamic sacrifices increase our faith and secure for us the blessings of salvation (see D&C 101:4).<sup>27</sup> Our Gethsemanes and Calvaries, however, in no way atone for sin and are infinitely smaller in scale than that of Christ’s cosmic cup and cross. Nevertheless, they are real and carefully patterned after his. Christ “descended below all things” yet kept the law and by so doing, demonstrated for us that we also can learn to do the same, eventually rising above all things (D&C 88:6). This is because his ordeals were proportional to his godhood while our ordeals are adapted to our lesser capacities. The measure and kind of his mortal experiences as God among us and as Mary’s son have prepared him to one day pass “righteous judgment . . . upon the children of men” (Mosiah 3:10).

In addition to undergoing the ordeals of this earthly crucible, Christ demonstrated that we are to receive ordinances. Ordinances enable us to overcome our ordeals and have those spiritual experiences for which we may

qualify. These ordinances and their precious associated promises allow us to partake fully of the “divine nature” and not merely reflect it (2 Peter 1:4). This is the doctrine of theosis. Through faith in his Father and by his Father’s grace, Christ received baptism and the Holy Ghost (Matthew 3:13–17; 2 Nephi 3 1:4–9). He also apparently received priesthood ordination, temple blessings, and God’s sure approval (see Hebrews 5:4–6, 10; 2 Peter 1:17–18).<sup>28</sup> He is truly our prototype in all we seek to lay hold of, whether in life or death. Without his character, teachings, and example, we would not know the way to exaltation or how to walk in it. That is why Christ can say that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Since he has ascended to his Father to sit down on his throne, so may we through him ascend and sit with them. Christ “ev’ry point defines.”<sup>29</sup> “There is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ” (Alma 3 8:9). But crucial to understanding who he is and “how [we] worship, and . . . what [we] worship,” we must remember that he became who he is in process of time, just as we must do by the grace of God (D&C 93:19).<sup>30</sup> This is the example that he set—he *became* what he is and always will be.

### The Example of the Believers

As the Saints seek to tread in the tracks of Christ and his apostolic servants,<sup>31</sup> they may become through faith, repentance, and obedience the salt, light, and leaven of the world (see Matthew 1 3:33; Luke 1 3:20–21).<sup>32</sup> According to the plan of salvation, this is part of their foreordained purpose as “representative agents.”<sup>33</sup> Others who themselves heed the light they possess may choose to tread in their tracks as they follow Christ and his ordained servants to even greater light. In a similar way, strong Saints can influence weaker ones for the kingdom’s sake (see D&C 84:106–8).<sup>34</sup> This doctrine of righteous influence is increasingly important given the gradually worsening condition of the world. The doctrine is found early in the writings of Moses where Abraham pleads with the Lord for those of Sodom. In the account, Abraham asks the Lord, “Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23). Because of his merciful and just character, the Lord agrees not to destroy the wicked city if even ten righteous people can be found in it. The account ends with two angels assisting Lot, his wife, and their two daughters to escape. The city is not destroyed until Lot and part of his family have safely arrived at Zoar. The city of Sodom is spared so long as there are righteous individuals among the wicked (see Genesis 18:22–19:29).

Generally, the Lord will not destroy the righteous along with the wicked, although they may suffer many things along with their neighbors and be called upon to assist them often (see 1 Nephi 22:17). This truth, that the most righteous are spared, is illustrated in the opening pages of the Book of Mormon with Lehi's family's exodus from Jerusalem before it is destroyed by Babylon. And later in the same record, the righteous are expelled from Ammonihah before its wicked inhabitants are destroyed for their abominations (see Alma 10:22–23). The claim that the Lord will spare society for a time because of the righteous and their prayers and loving efforts to lift and help and save does not mean that they will not suffer persecution or even death on occasion, but it does affirm that the pattern is that once the righteous are driven from a society (or effectively silenced) stern judgment follows (see Mosiah 29:26–27). The Saints, if they are charitable, however, may bless and preserve a community wherever they reside in the earth. They may even lead others who seek light to commune with God. They are the salt, light, and leaven as long as possible.<sup>35</sup> Societies are not destroyed (the long-suffering of the Lord is illustrative of his great love for all of his children) unless the wicked literally (or figuratively) first drive from them “the prophets . . . and the saints” (2 Nephi 26:3–8). The Saints' efforts to benefit the children of God in these ways is a kind of nod toward the doctrine of theosis.

In both ancient and modern scriptures, we learn that the righteous are the salt of the earth because they are the covenant people of the Lord. In 1833, Christ revealed to Joseph Smith the following: “When men are called unto mine everlasting covenant, and covenant with an everlasting covenant, they are accounted as the salt of the earth and the savor of men; They are called to be the savor of men; therefore, if that salt of the earth lose its savor, behold, it is thenceforth good for nothing only to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men” (D&C 101:39–40). To become the covenant people of the Lord, we must worthily receive ordinances, but these are available to all. The “everlasting covenant” is a “light to the world, and . . . a standard . . . for the Gentiles to seek to it” (see D&C 45:9); we enter it upon being baptized and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. Those who are baptized and who receive the companionship of the Holy Ghost can become the savor of men. Elsewhere in scripture, we learn that to be the *savor of men* suggests becoming the *saviors of men*. In that sense, salt is a symbol of salvation and redemption or theosis. Those who follow Christ can become the saviors of men in more ways than one. The reverse is also true: “But inasmuch as they keep not my

commandments, and hearken not to observe all my words, the kingdoms of this world shall prevail against them. For they were to be a light unto the world, and to be the saviors of men; And inasmuch as they are not the saviors of men, they are as the salt that has lost its savor, and is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men” (D&C 103:8–10). The doctrine that indicates that the Saints, those who follow the example of Christ and his apostolic servants, are and can become an important influence in blessing, guiding, and persevering or saving society along with their honest, wise, and faithful neighbors has been illustrated repeatedly in sacred history.

In the Book of Mormon, this doctrine of Christ's people as saviors of men is illustrated and described on a macro scale. In 3 Nephi, for instance, we learn in dramatic fashion that many cities were destroyed at the coming of Christ to the Americas because they had cast out the prophets and Saints.<sup>36</sup> The implication is that if they had not done so, they would not have been burned by fire or sunk into the sea. This theme is a refrain in chapter 9. Apart from that lesson, and the other in Ammonihah referred to earlier, Christ also enters into this theme while among the Nephites, just as he once did in Galilee (see Matthew 5:13–16). After establishing his doctrine and saying, “I give unto you to be” the salt and light, Christ explains the larger implications of failing to live as such (3 Nephi 12:13–14). In chapter 16 of 3 Nephi, we learn that the righteous seed of Lehi would, after many years, be “cast out from among them [unbelieving Gentiles], and [be] trodden under feet by them” as salt that had lost its savor (16:8). Further, in the same chapter we learn that the believing Gentiles thereafter would receive the favored status for a season once the house of Israel had rejected the gospel. However, the Gentiles would similarly be in danger of losing their privileges if they did not assume their responsibilities. Christ warns the Gentiles: “But if they will not turn unto me, and hearken unto my voice I will suffer them, yea, I will suffer my people, O house of Israel, that they shall go through among them, and shall tread them down, and they shall be as salt that hath lost its savor, which is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of my people, O house of Israel” (16:15). This scripture teaches that if the Gentiles turn from the “fulness of [the] gospel” revealed in the meridian of time and from their favored role to be examples and a saving blessing to the world, then that opportunity will be restored in a latter day to Israel (16:10). Israel will become in a sense the means to theosis for the children of God.

The times of the Gentiles are now being fulfilled because of pride and wickedness, and Israel—particularly the rising generation—is becoming again, through the grace of Christ, the salt, savor, and even saviors of those who will respond in this final dispensation before the end of the world. This is according to the “election of grace” and requires learning how to boldly and articulately defend the truth and win souls (D&C 84:99; see also Deuteronomy 32:8–9; Acts 17:26–27). As the Saints (and their interfaith counterparts) seek to tread in Christ’s tracks and give strict heed to the counsel and instructions of the apostolic servants of the Lord, they will become a blessing and a preserving influence wherever they are found among the nations. Nephi saw this situation in seeric vision. He said that the Saints of God would be “few” in number but scattered in congregations throughout all nations. Nevertheless, because of restored temple ordinances, they would be “armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory” (1 Nephi 14:14). According to the covenant, God would “make bare his arm” (1 Nephi 22:7–12). The remnant of Israel, including the righteous branch of Lehi’s seed, would in that day leaven the whole lump as far and as long as possible. Meantime, individuals would be saved and “all the kindreds [families] of the earth [would] be blessed” with sacred priesthood ordinances and covenants in temples (1 Nephi 22:9; see also 7–12). In our day, Israel is a “light to the Gentiles” and sends salvation “unto the ends of the earth” (1 Nephi 21:6). Through the example and labors of the Saints, not only can humanity be preserved from a degree of unnecessary trouble and destruction but it can be led to commune with God in his house (symbolic theosis) or participate in ordinances which have power to purify and prepare us to enter as joint heirs into his eternal presence.

### Becoming like Our Exemplar

Since the Saints’ ability to tread in Christ’s tracks and to influence society for good depends on their faith in Christ and capacity to increase, this final section will examine the reciprocal relationship between atoning grace, law, and good works, including ordinances. The intersection of these themes is fundamental to understanding the doctrine of theosis from an LDS perspective. In this section, we turn our attention to the value and meaning of keeping the commandments, receiving the ordinances (baptism, confirmation, sacrament, etc.), and reconciling ourselves with Christ by learning to act obediently in doctrine and become like him as assisted by his enabling grace. Observing the

laws and ordinances of the gospel, or acting in doctrine, is essential for those who hope to become like Christ through his power. This is because the law of the gospel is necessary to any personal advancement. His law lifts us. Christ has not only given laws to his people, therefore, but has promised them power to keep them as he does (see Moroni 7:33). As society declines, his gospel law will increasingly be challenged, discarded, and mocked. However, among the Saints (and other believers), his laws must be strictly upheld, fulfilled, taken care of, preserved, cherished, guarded, or *kept* safe like precious jewels from the hands of thieves. One reason to do so is that the law is fundamental to any understanding of the Atonement, redemption, or progression and of deification or divinization.

Through Christ’s character, actions, and Atonement, we learn that even now we can make great strides in obeying law and becoming godly like him. According to the plan of salvation, we become deified or divine, like him, to the degree that we learn to truly honor his laws, ordinances, and commandments. The Atonement does not only cleanse us—it enables us. However, we must fully and continually participate in it for it to do so.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as the offspring of God, “the power is in [us]” to become like him (D&C 58:28).<sup>38</sup> Christ’s Atonement can call it forth and magnify it, but it is latent within us from before birth. In other words, despite the fall of our physical bodies through Adam’s transgression of law, we have a divinely conceived spirit; an eternal, intelligent center; and the Light of Christ from infancy to guide us upward. His light, itself a law, remains with us and increases within us in proportion to our obedience to it. If we as agents yield in faith to its continuous “enticings” instead of those equally continuous counter enticements from the devil and the flesh, we will find enabling grace to “put off the natural man” and “become[ . . . ] through the atonement of Christ the Lord” as a little child—“submissive, meek, humble, full of love” (Mosiah 3:19; see also Moroni 7:12–13). Without Christ, however, we would never develop these godly attributes; with him we may do so and become like him to a great degree even now. As evidence of this, many of the early Saints did so and were translated before the time of Abraham (see JST, Genesis 14:32–34).

Gospel law is fundamental to the doctrine of the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2:13; Alma 42:17–23). That is because the transgression of the law necessitates the Atonement; and the observing of law invites the blessings of the Atonement (see D&C 54:6). The Atonement itself is an act of obedience to law. Through the Atonement the laws of justice and mercy were and are

reconciled and satisfied (see Alma 42). Further, the Atonement represents the keeping of a premortal covenant between the Father and the Son<sup>39</sup> and is the fulfilling of a covenant of obedience made by Christ at baptism (see 2 Nephi 31:7). Christ did not need baptism for the remission of sin, but by it he covenanted with his Father and was enabled through it to “fulfil all righteousness” (2 Nephi 31:5). He presumably drew strength from the covenant of obedience he made throughout his ministry and life much as we do. Baptism obligates, inspires, and enables us to develop godliness long after it has been received. Properly understood, there is no remission of sin through Christ’s blood or otherwise until one learns to obey certain gospel laws and ordinances (see JST Romans 4:16). Obedience, whether in baptism or in sacrament, is the act that finally cleanses us because of the Atonement (see D&C 1:32; see also JST Mark 3:28). Baptism, or its subsequent corollary, sacrament, prepares the way for the sanctifying power and influence of the Holy Ghost. Sanctification is a kind of deification. His visitation cleanses and sanctifies our souls. Once he comes, we more perfectly begin to learn about the reality of the Father and the Son and about the mysteries of the kingdom (see 3 Nephi 11:35; Moses 6:66). Therefore, as repentance is the first fruits of faith in Christ (see Alma 34:15), so “the first fruits of repentance is baptism,” an act of obedience which leads to the “remission of sins” and to the “perfect[ing] and sanctif[ying]” of our souls (Moroni 8:25; see also D&C 88:21, 34).

Ordinances are Christ centering, enabling, and grace and gift releasing. They must be obeyed if we are, as theosis requires, to be acceptable and come to know God and his Son in the full sense (see D&C 52:15; John 17:3). Baptism, like all ordinances, is founded or centered on Christ and essential if we are to become like our Exemplar. As Paul explains, in baptism we symbolically enter death and life with Christ. The “old man [of sin] is crucified” and the new man of righteousness is born (Romans 6:6). The ordinance is simple and dignified but teaches us about the life and example of Christ. It prefigures that we will one day die and be raised in a resurrection (see Romans 6:3–8). It further suggests, as Alma understood, that we are willing to “stand as witnesses of God [and his laws] at all times and in all things, and in all places that [we] may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9). This also means standing with his servants (see D&C 1:38). This covenant and promise is the gate to membership in the Church and to celestial salvation. It is a public witness that one stands with Christ and his servants and will “stand as [a witness]” for him and for truth thereafter (18:9). Entering the water begins our walk

with Christ as members of his family. There, for the first time we take upon us his name and covenant to obey all of his commandments. As indicated, until one is baptized he or she cannot qualify for the greater blessings of the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Baptism opens the door to essential spiritual blessings. It opens the door to enabling power, saving grace, and spiritual gifts. Without baptism one can only progress so far. With baptism and confirmation, the sky is no limit. Baptism and the bestowal of the Holy Ghost open up the possibility of receiving, in due time, “all spiritual blessings,” including the “power of godliness” and the privilege of communing with deity (D&C 84:19–25). Both justification and sanctification are possible only after one enters the waters of baptism in similitude of Christ’s Atonement. It anticipates and is a prerequisite for “eternal life” (see Mosiah 18:9, 13), the greatest of all the gifts of God.

But what is the relationship between the “laws and ordinances of the gospel” referred to in the third article of faith and saving grace? Saving grace is born of the Atonement (see Alma 34:15) and, as it relates to eternal life and theosis, is a fruit of our willing and valiant obedience. When baptized, we are “baptized unto [until or into] repentance” (Mosiah 26:22). Repentance and forgiveness are principles of progress and increase our capacity to obey celestial law and become celestial beings. “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6); however, that does not mean that through Christ we cannot learn to obey the very laws we once transgressed. That is the good news of the gospel of repentance and grace—where we are weak we can, if humble and full of faith, become strong (see Ether 12:27). Repentance is the process by which our own moral agency expressed in baptism and sacrament combines with Christ’s justice and mercy.<sup>40</sup> As our natures become newly created by the combination of these interactive realities, we become, in our hearts, more holy (see footnote 26). Even the weakest, most wretched, and most wicked among us can become, if consistent and patient, “pure in heart” and prepared to see and dwell with God (3 Nephi 12:8). “Behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors . . . , to prepare for eternity . . . , [and to] improve [their] time” and themselves (Alma 34:32–33). Saving grace does not leave us as unprofitable and fallen children unable to abide by the inspiring laws of our celestial parent but rather enables us to become immortal, independent, and glorified joint-heirs with Christ and his Father; in addition to becoming holy, through this process and in due time we can become omniscient, omnipotent, and, presumably, omnipresent as our God is. In short, grace nurses our faith

in and obedience to Christ until we can become men and women of Christ, inheritors of the Father's fulness, abounding in those divine works wrought in every generation of gods.

### Conclusion

If we are to learn to fill the “measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” which would be achieving theosis, we must not leave the basic principles and ordinances of the gospel plan behind as we add to our faith, virtue, and to our virtue, knowledge and the other characteristics residing in our divinely begotten natures (Ephesians 4:13). Each of these already residual, embryonic attributes are gifts more fully available to us through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. It has power to help us stir up the gifts within us. They can become fully perfected in us if we choose to walk in the light of the laws and ordinances of the gospel as did Christ, who is our pattern in all things. Following his Father through faith and obedience to celestial law, he laid hold of every good thing, obtaining even the fulness of the Father. However, as indicated, even Christ “receiv[ed] not of the fulness at first” (D&C 93:12). He learned obedience by those ordeals he experienced (see Hebrews 5:7–8). He is our example in suffering and in obedience (see 1 Peter 2:21).<sup>41</sup> He trod in the tracks of his father as we tread in his. This is according to the scriptures and the promises: “For if you keep my commandments,” he explains, “you shall receive of his fullness [the Father's], and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace. . . . And no man receiveth a fulness unless he keepeth his commandments. He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things” (D&C 93:20, 27–28). This becoming full of truth and light, or knowledge, “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel” “through [the authority of the character, the example, and] the Atonement of Christ” is the neglected and misunderstood doctrine of deification, or theosis (Articles of Faith 1:3; see also Matthew 13:43; Alma 41:25; John 17:3). The revelations and teachings of the prophets resolve to a large degree how the previously stated paradox applies to the children of God the Father.

The scriptures and apostolic servants of Christ confirm this incremental process of becoming like “the Eternal God” in character through emulation and atonement (Book of Mormon title page).<sup>42</sup> We too may lay hold upon every “good thing” if we will but exercise faith, patience, and obedience. If we

will touch not the “evil gift” and “deny ourselves of all unrighteousness,” we may become perfect in and through Christ and his blood (Moroni 7:20–48; and 10:32–33). Justification and sanctification can finally become glorification. The promise of Christ's grace is sure: “Whatsoever thing ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is good, in faith believing that ye shall receive, behold, it shall be done unto you. . . . And Christ hath said: If ye will have faith in me *ye shall have power to do* whatsoever thing is expedient in me” (Moroni 7:26, 33; emphasis added). He especially speaks here of our quest to become like him and his Father. This process of becoming “true followers of . . . Jesus Christ” culminates in our becoming “the sons [and daughters] of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (7:48).<sup>43</sup> Seeing him as he is (or becoming like him) is a special kind of knowing (see 2 Peter 1:8). The hope of securing in process of time such a blessing—becoming in character like God and thereby obtaining Eternal Life—inspires us to purify our lives and live in such a way that others, seeing our good works, may choose also to “glorify God” before “the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12). To glorify God, however, is not merely to praise his name or to prophesy by the power of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 31:13; 32:1–3), but, much more significantly, it is to learn to live in such a way so as to add one's kingdom (when inherited) to his Father's infinite number of other mansions or kingdoms, thus exalting God the Father higher and higher, worlds without end.<sup>44</sup> But none of this can happen in an instant and will never happen unless we fasten our eyes now and forever on the heels of Christ. ■

### Notes

1. *Theosis* is a term that describes the ability of humans to become like God. The doctrine was especially embraced in Eastern Orthodox theology.
2. Wynand Vladimir de Beer, “Being Human, Becoming Like God: Patristic Perspectives on Humankind,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148 (March 2014): 65–82.
3. St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 38–40.
4. According to Robert V. Rakestraw, “The Greek fathers taught that, in the fall, humanity lost the likeness but retained the image [of God]. To regain the likeness through the image, therefore, is, by one account, one aim of redemption.” Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40, no. 2 (June 1997): 258.
5. de Beer, “Being Human, Becoming Like God,” 81.
6. Becoming has been defined very differently. Definitions range from the mystical sense of ineffable oneness between God and humans to what Karl Barth, according to Rakestraw, has explained as a “practical fellowship of Christians with God . . . , the conformity of their

acts with the divine nature” (“Becoming Like God,” 258). Latter-day Saints, unlike most Christians, describe becoming like God in bold, literal strokes. For them, becoming is not a mere approximation of godhood, a going “a long way towards God.” Michael Slusser, “Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes,” *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 566.

7. Eugene England, “Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 3 (1989): 31–47.

8. Tad R. Callister, *The Inevitable Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 146–60. Brother Callister cites the early theologian Origen as explaining that theosis does not diminish God because among the gods there is hierarchy. The complementary doctrines of plurality of gods and hierarchy among those gods allows for humans made in the image of God to become like him without requiring him (God the Father) to step down from his singularly transcendent place in order to lift them up to the status of godhood (151–52). Further, and by way of prophetic confirmation, Callister quotes President Hinckley as teaching, “This lofty concept [deification] in no way diminishes God the Eternal Father. He is the Almighty. He is the Creator and Governor of the universe. *He is the greatest of all and will always be so*” (151–52; emphasis added).

9. “Michael Slusser explains that deep in our being there is an ikon of God” that “naturally leads us to perceive Jesus himself as the great example of God at work” (“Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes,” 565). The equivalent of the “ikon” in Latter-day Saint theology is the Light of Christ which is in all of us.

10. Many writers cite the analogy from Maximus the Confessor when defining likeness with God. “The Seventh Century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor described this reality of transformation into God’s likeness with the image of placing an iron sword in a fire, such that it remains an iron sword but also takes on certain properties of the fire—light and heat—by ‘participating’ in it” (see below for reference). LDS teachers might describe this half measure toward divinity as transfiguration or translation, not deification or ultimate theosis. Transfiguration (and translation) is to partake of the divine power or nature without putting off fully mortality. It is a temporary condition enabling one to abide in the presence of God. Latter-day Saints believe in progress, redemption, and grades of transformation but not in divine alchemy—once gold always gold, or to use the above analogy, once fire always fire. So Latter-day Saints believe in becoming like God in more than “discrete ways.” Michael J. Gorman, “Birth, Death, and Becoming Like God: Reflections on a New Testament Theme,” *The Living Pulpit*, 1 November 2014, 10–11.

In addition to ethical emulation, many early Christians also understood their obligation to imitate Christ as their responsibility to die with him. Michael Slusser writes, “The disdain for death which the martyrs displayed was founded directly on the imitation of Jesus” (“Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes,” 566). The same concept is conveyed in Romans 6:3–5 and Mosiah 18:9. Baptism in water signifies a Christian’s willingness not only to lay down the natural man of sin but to suffer and die with Christ that he or she might be raised with him in the resurrection of the just. This is explored in depth in D. Edmond Hiebert, “Following Christ’s Example: An Exposition of 1 Peter 2:21–25,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January–March 1982, 32–45.

11. Neal A. Maxwell, “Called and Prepared from the Foundation of the World,” *Ensign*, July 1986.

12. Michael Slusser, “Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes,” 566.

13. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 151–52.

14. David A. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 4–26.

15. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine*, 7.

16. *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Richard C. Galbraith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 65. “Letter to the Church, circa February 1834,” 135, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-february-1834/1>.

17. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 63. This text is based on the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants prepared by Joseph Smith.

18. Richard C. Galbraith, *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 392. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” 614, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>.

19. This Johannine doctrine is not equivalent to the Arian doctrine of “re-direct[ing] the will,” because this understanding of theosis requires a “radical renewal of the entire ontological condition of man” (273). LDS teachers would call this mighty change being born again. However, this New Testament theosis goes further than Saint Athanasios would allow in his concept of divine “communion” (274). Gregory Telepneff and James Thornton, “Arian Transcendence and the Notion of Theosis in Saint Athanasios,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32, no. 3 (1987).

20. John Nicolson, “Come, Follow Me,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 116.

21. Galbraith, *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 391. Joseph Smith Papers equivalent: “what did Jesus say? . . . Jesus said, as the Father hath power in himself, even so hath the Son power; to do what? why what the Father did, that answer is obvious; in a manner to lay down his body and take it up again. Jesus what are you going to do? To lay down my life, as my Father did, and take it up again. . . . Here then is eternal life, to know the only wise and true God. You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves; to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done; by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation.” “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” 614, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>. This language gives a sense of the original sermon as it was recorded by at least one contemporary paper. In the Joseph Smith Papers Project online accounts of the same sermon are also recorded by the following individuals: Willard Richards, William Clayton, and Thomas Bullock. A version of the sermon also appeared in the *Times and Seasons* on 7 April 1844.

22. In at least one respect, LDS theology is perhaps closer to the Athanasian concept of theosis than the Arian concept of theosis: “Whereas for Saint Athanasios and the Greek patristic tradition salvation as *theosis* signifies a mystical, albeit real, participation (*metoche*) in the Divine, for Arios divine grace [through the Divine Son of God] does not effect such participation in, or real communion with, God the radically transcendent Father.” Telepneff and Thornton, “Arian Transcendence and the Notion of Theosis in Saint Athanasios,” 272. In LDS theosis theology, Jesus Christ is necessary to achieve full theosis or participation (what is termed eternal life or exaltation) with the Father, even though he, the divine Son of God, is subject to his Father in authority and was his firstborn spirit child.

23. *Lectures on Faith*, 48.

24. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:33.

25. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement*, 184.

26. Clifford A. Barbarick, “‘You Shall Be Holy, For I Am Holy’: Theosis in 1 Peter,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9, no. 2 (2015): 287–97. The author, among other ideas, suggests that theosis as holiness (one of the attributes/characteristics of God that may be acquired) is likely derived from the Old Testament holiness code and that Peter deals directly with theosis via suffering. For Peter, Barbarick asserts, pouring out one’s soul after Christ’s pattern is how one becomes like God in holiness. Borrowing a phrase, he agrees that “cruciformity is really theoformity” and that this “understanding of theosis occupies an important place in the theology of 1 Peter.” Barbarick posits that Peter encourages his audience to “imitat[e] the kenotic pattern of Christ” as a way to achieve a theosis defined by divine holiness (291).

27. See John A. Widtsoe, comp., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 57–60.

28. Galbraith, comp., *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345. (June 11th, 1843.) DHC 5:423–27.

29. Eliza R. Snow, “How Great the Wisdom and the Love,” *Hymns*, no. 195.

30. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Gift of Grace,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 107.

31. Widtsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 92.

32. It is true that LDS doctrine teaches that light from Christ is in all people to one degree or another from infancy, and what is stated here about those in covenant with Christ (those who have access to the gift of the Holy Ghost and are commonly called Saints) may also have application to all good will efforts. Believers of all sorts to one degree or another hold up Christ’s light and to that degree represent him. Indeed, interfaith efforts have become and will yet become increasingly important as we move closer to the Second Coming. In this section of this study, we refer to the “righteous” and the “wicked” in somewhat stark terms because this is the language of the scriptures, particularly those scriptures that speak apocalyptically of our day. It should be understood, however, that there are many among the children of God who are not in the Church who are full of goodness and even greatness. There are many exemplary leaders and believers outside of the Church. Each child of God, according to the prophets and apostles, is loved and valued and will be rewarded according to his or her works.

33. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine*, 50.

34. Both LDS leaders and scholars have recently addressed at length this issue—sanctification, and ultimately glorification, or theosis, comes in and through a community of Saints and believers. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “Why the Church,” *Ensign*, October 2015; Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015), 8. This truth about community was also taught by Paul and Peter (see 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; Luke 22:32).

35. Like all symbols, their meaning depends on context. Leaven can be sometimes used negatively in scripture. For instance, Jesus directs his disciples to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees, meaning their doctrine (Matthew 16:6).

36. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), 172.

37. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, “Fear Not, I Am With Thee: Christ’s Atonement and Our Personal Growth,” *Brigham Young University Women’s Conference*, 1 May 2014 (Provo, UT, publisher, 2014). This participation is not the same the theologians speak of when they define theosis. Using the Atonement daily is not the same thing as partaking of the divine nature, although the one leads to the other. What they are speaking about when

they deploy the word participation is the soul’s ability to enjoy the divine life as far as that is possible after death.

38. This is not merely that divine endowment of “reason” spoken of by the Cambridge Platonists and others (151). But it may have a strong relationship to what one of them described as the “seeds of light . . . scatter’d in the Soul of Man” (153), and another defined as an “inborn striving for transcendence” (152). Such premortal traces of divinity in our spirits (not to be confused with the Light of Christ) must be fundamental to the LDS understanding of how theosis is to be achieved. And, as Terryl L. Givens points out, “the possibility of theosis (deiformity or deification) is rendered less blasphemous and less inconceivable [to others] alike if styled as a return rather than an unprecedented elevation.” *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 152.

39. James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 81.

40. D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 18.

41. Thomas S. Monson, “Ponder the Path of Thy Feet,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 86–88.

42. David A. Bednar, “Preface,” in *Power to Become* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 2014), xiii.

43. Bednar, *Power to Become*, 98.

44. *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Galbraith, 392. According to Joseph Smith, this is what Jesus would say if he were among us as our teacher: “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.” Then Joseph Smith concludes this part of his teaching by applying the doctrine to all of us: “So that Jesus treads in the tracks of his Father, and inherits what God did before; and God is thus glorified and exalted in the salvation and exaltation of all of his children.” Each child of God will glorify him to the degree he or she is saved or exalted. Here is how the first passage reads in the *Times and Seasons*: “What did Jesus do? why I do the things I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence. I saw my Father work 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 obtains kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt his glory, so that Jesus treads in his tracks to inherit what God did before; it is plain beyond disputation,” “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” 614, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>.