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Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World

David Paulsen

In his illuminating book *The Story of Christian Theology*, Roger Olson states:

Christian theology does not begin at the beginning. That is, Christian theology began well after Jesus Christ walked the earth with his disciples and even after the last disciple and apostle died. . . . The apostles [had] tremendous prestige and authority. . . . While they were alive, there was no need for theology in the same sense as afterward. Theology was born as the heirs of the apostles began to reflect on Jesus' and the apostles' teachings to . . . settle controversies about Christian belief and conduct.¹

These words invite consideration of a fundamental question: Why was theology unnecessary before the death of the apostles? Pertinent to this inquiry is John 15:16, where Jesus declares to his apostles, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and *ordained* you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit” (emphasis added). Clearly, this apostolic authority is not something that can be chosen—it was a divine calling issued by the Lord himself, the fruits of which are evidence of the call's divine origin.²

Perhaps the most important fruit of that divine call and ordination was revelation, which enabled the apostles to direct the church's affairs under God's direction. It was by revelation that

Peter received the commandment to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and it was by revelation that the apostles decided that gentile converts to the faith would not be bound by the law of circumcision.³ It should come as no surprise, then, that the loss of apostolic authority and its attendant revelation was seen as problematic by early Christians, and Olson explains, “The last disciple . . . to die was John ‘the Beloved’ . . . who . . . is a pivotal figure in the story of Christian theology because his death marked an important turning point. . . . No longer would it be possible to settle doctrinal or other disputes by turning to an apostle.”⁴

Lacking apostolic authority and revelation, Christian theologians have been unable to settle controversies about Christian belief, as Olson’s section titles disclose:

“The Opening Act: Conflicting Christian Visions in the Second Century”

“The Plot Thickens: Third-Century Tensions and Transformations”

“A Great Crisis Rocks the Church: The Controversy about the Trinity”

“Another Crisis Shakes the Church: The Conflict over the Person of Christ”

“A Tale of Two Churches: The Great Tradition Divides between East and West”

“A New Twist in the Narrative: The Western Church Reforms and Divides”

“The Center of the Story Falls Apart: Protestants Follow Diverse Paths”

“The Overall Plot Divides: Liberals and Conservatives Respond to Modernity.”

As we enter the new millennium, Olson says, unsettled conflicts in Christendom have not subsided; they have increased, with no end in sight.⁵

To this diverse and ambivalent world that we call Christian theology, doctrines taught by Joseph Smith pose several challenges. To be

sure, he poses *different* challenges to the varieties of generally orthodox Christian thought (which will be my focus here) than he does to the many variants of liberal Christian theologies. Unfortunately, there is not room to compare Joseph with each individual theologian. Instead, I will discuss, usually in his own words, several of Joseph Smith's revelations and invite everyone to examine his or her own theological world in light of these. It is not my intent to argue for their truth but rather to make clear their content and their challenging implications for Christian theology.

Six of Joseph's most fundamental challenges are his teachings (1) of God's resumption of direct revelation in our day; (2) of God's restoration of divine authority to man to speak and act in his name, and as a corollary, of a greatly enlarged (and still open) canon. Within this enlarged canon is found the basis for many more challenges, including (3) a clear and very high Christology that affirms that Jesus is both God and the Savior; (4) a reaffirmation of the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as opposed to the God of the philosophers and theologians; (5) an ennobling, theomorphic understanding of human potential; and (6) a comprehensive and consistent soteriology that, among other things, solves the puzzle of the fate of the unevangelized. I will explain and illustrate each of these challenges.

1. Revelation and Canon

Of all Joseph's challenges to the theological world, none is more fundamental than his claim to direct revelation from God. This claim challenges every variety of Christian thought and, at the same time, grounds all of Joseph's additional claims. However biblically consistent, rationally plausible, or existentially appealing Joseph's theological insights may be, the force of their challenge hinges most critically on his claim they were directly revealed by God.⁶ The authoritative-ness of the Bible for Christians hinges on a similar claim to its being God's revealed word. As Richard Bushman explains:

The reason for embracing the Bible was that its words had come from heaven. Christianity had smothered this self-evident fact by relegating revelation to a bygone age, making the Bible an archive

rather than a living reality. . . . [Hence,] 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?*⁷ (emphasis added)

Joseph's claim of new revelation is, as Bushman suggests, a challenge based on the Bible itself, a fact of which the Prophet was fully aware. In response to a minister inquiring "wherein we [the Mormons] differ from other christian denominations," the Prophet replied, "We believe the Bible, and they do not."⁸

Extrabiblical Revelation: Representative Christian Views. Is prophetic and apostolic revelation an archive rather than a living reality? In his book *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, Evangelical Bible scholar Lee M. McDonald points out that the passing of the apostles and the formation of the canon led to a significant change in attitude regarding the possibility of continuing revelation: the biblical canon came to be viewed as containing all the truths necessary for human life and salvation.⁹ The Westminster Confession gives creedal status to this view:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.¹⁰

And in a slightly expanded version of the same view, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains:

While the Church recognizes that God has spoken to His servants in every age, and still continues thus to favour chosen souls, she is careful to distinguish these revelations from the Revelation which has been committed to her charge . . . *That Revelation was given in its entirety to Our Lord and His Apostles.* After the death of the last of the twelve it could receive no increment. It was, as the Church calls it, a deposit—"the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude, 2)—*for which the Church was to "contend" but to which she could*

add nothing. . . The gift of Divine assistance, . . . sometimes confounded with Revelation by the less instructed of anti-Catholic writers, merely preserves the supreme pontiff from error in defining the faith; it does not enable him to add jot or tittle to it.¹¹ (emphasis added)

Not all Christian thinkers hold as dogma the finality of God's revelation in biblical times. Indeed, the status of the biblical canon, whether open or closed, has become a hotly debated issue among current biblical scholars. In the "Final Reflections" of his book on the formation of the canon, McDonald raises several very thoughtful questions challenging Christian belief in a closed canon; I list the most relevant ones:

The first question, and the most important one, is whether the church was right in perceiving the need for a closed canon of scriptures.¹² 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 whether the notion of a biblical canon is necessarily "Christian." They did not have such canons as the church possesses today, nor did they indicate that their successors should draw them up. . . .¹³

. . . Did such a move toward a closed canon . . . 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?

. . . If apostolicity is still a legitimate criterion for the canonicity of the NT literature . . . should the church today continue to recognize the authority of . . . 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? . . .¹⁴

. . . 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? . . .¹⁵

If the Spirit inspired specific, authoritative instruction on the issues contemporary to the biblical writers, is there no voice today to give such needed guidance in our increasingly complex world?

God's Word and Joseph Smith. Almost two centuries ago, Joseph challenged the theological world with answers to McDonald's questions, always with a witness of revelatory events. For example, consider Joseph's response to the question: On what biblical ground has the inspiration of God been limited to the written documents that the church now calls its Bible? None! reasoned Joseph: "If [the canon is closed] there is a great defect in the book, or else it would have said so."¹⁶ Elsewhere, he argued:

To say that God never said anything more to man than is 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, that He would not, after giving what is there contained, speak again; and if any man has found out for a fact that the Bible contains all that God ever revealed to man he has ascertained it by an immediate revelation, other than has been previously written by the prophets and apostles.¹⁷ (emphasis added)

Joseph's argument seems persuasive. Given the silence of the Bible as a whole on this issue, the only way one could know for certain that there can be no extrabiblical revelation would be by means of an extrabiblical revelation. But this is obviously incoherent.

Joseph's most fundamental challenge, however, to those who deny the possibility of extrabiblical revelation is not based on argument; it is grounded in his testimony of receiving direct revelations from God. Joseph's experience with these matters began in his fifteenth year as he struggled to decide which Christian church to join:

It was impossible for a person young as I was, . . . to come to any certain conclusion [as to] who was right and who was wrong . . . for the teachers of religion . . . understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. (Joseph Smith—History 1:8–12)

In 1820, he prayed for divine guidance in choosing a church. In his canonized account of the experience, Joseph reports, "I saw two

Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” (Joseph Smith–History 1:17).

In this revelation, Joseph conversed with God and Jesus Christ face to face as one man converses with another.¹⁸ In this transcendent, tradition-shattering experience, Joseph received personal assurance of forgiveness of his sins, he was instructed to join none of the existing churches, and he was advised that God had a work for him to do. He later learned that this work was to usher in a new gospel dispensation—“the dispensation of the fullness of times,” when all things would be gathered together in one to prepare the human family for the Second Coming of the Lord (Ephesians 1:10).¹⁹

God also brought heaven to earth by divine visitations and angelic messengers. Through these instructions, Joseph revealed much about God’s kingdom and his purposes for humankind, apostolic authority, ancient scriptures, the divine church, the temple, temple ordinances, and theology. As a result the Latter-day Saints have greatly enlarged the Christian canon, adding “plain and precious” gospel truths not found in the Bible (1 Nephi 13:40). Thus Joseph could pen as the ninth Article of Faith for the Saints, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

With Joseph Smith’s revelations in mind, let us return to some of McDonald’s questions. Joseph’s answers to these questions are tacit in his report of his revelations but are also often explicit in their specific content. Thus, being Christian, he asserted, does not “necessarily” mean having a closed canon; it means having an open one, as Moroni in the Book of Mormon explicitly and prophetically wrote:

And again I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations. . . . Behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; . . . For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing? (Mormon 9:7–9)

Does the same Spirit that produced the written documents of the first century still speak today? In most of the revelations Joseph received directly, he recorded the Lord speaking in first person; the phrase “thus saith the Lord” appears ninety-nine times in uniquely Latter-day Saint scripture. In a dramatic fashion, Joseph burst open the canon that had been regarded as closed for hundreds of years.

2. Divine Authority

Joseph’s claims to revelation shake the theological world at its very foundation. But at the same time, he proclaimed that the revelations offer the “more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19) and a firmer foundation: a foundation of living prophets and apostles who have the authority to say, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Christendom and Divine Authority. Jesus Christ is the only source from which claims to divine authority can be credibly based in Christendom. The first to claim such divine authority, as we have seen, were Jesus’s apostles, whom he personally called and ordained. The apostles claimed, and were recognized by fellow Christians, to possess teaching, sacramental, and governing authority. With their passing, the question of authority became critical. The practical precedent that was established presumed authority in those who were tutored by the apostles. Olson explains:

Men like Polycarp [who had been tutored by John or other apostles] were considered the best and most authoritative sources of information about what the apostles taught and how they led the churches. Polycarp’s aura of special authority [subsequently] fell upon his own disciples—men like Irenaeus who were trained in the Christian faith by him. . . . [U]ntil the New Testament was identified and agreed upon by Christians in the fourth century, this oral tradition and the authority of apostolic succession proved invaluable in the Christian struggle against heresies and schisms within the church.²⁰

After the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire and attempts to establish orthodoxy by way of creedal decree, the Western churches adopted the Bishop of Rome as the “single supreme head”

to which all other officers in the church became subordinate.²¹ Thus, the Catholic Church claims that (1) “apostolic succession is found in the Catholic Church,” (2) “none of the separate Churches have any valid claim to it,” and (3) the Roman Bishop possesses the supreme power to govern the church.²² The Orthodox Church claims exactly the same apostolic succession while maintaining that all bishops are equal in authority. For them, “no particular bishop per se or document . . . has say over the churches.”²³

In time, Protestantism emerged with a new answer to the question of authority: Olson writes, “Three major Protestant principles are usually identified as setting them apart from the church of Rome and its official theology: *sola gratia et fides* (salvation by grace through faith alone), *sola scriptura* (scripture above all other authorities for Christian faith and practice) and the priesthood of all believers.”²⁴ Thus, for the Reformers doctrinal authority is founded solely in the Bible. Furthermore, sacramental authority is found in the virtuous lives of believers, rather than by authoritative call and hand-to-head ordination. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* diplomatically outlines the central argument:

Now in this respect there are several points of controversy between Catholics and every body of Protestants. Is all revealed truth consigned to Holy Scripture? or can it, must it, be admitted that Christ gave to His Apostles to be transmitted to His Church, that the Apostles received either from the very lips of Jesus or from inspiration or Revelation, Divine instructions which they transmitted to the Church and which were not committed to the inspired writings? Must it be admitted that Christ instituted His Church as the official and authentic organ to transmit and explain in virtue of Divine authority the Revelation made to men?²⁵

Joseph Smith and Divine Authority. Into the confusing whirlwind of answers to these complex questions stepped a theologically untrained young man of twenty-four years of age. Armed with claims of direct conferrals of divine authority by angelic ministrants, Joseph Smith challenged the foundations of Christendom with his claim of authority from God to both speak and act in his name. Here, I will briefly set out Joseph’s witness that angelic visitants conferred upon

him divine authority, which, they said, had long been absent from the church.

In 1829 as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were engaged in translating the Book of Mormon, they came across certain passages that made it clear to them that, in Oliver's words, "none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel."²⁶ Subsequently, on May 15, 1829, Joseph and Oliver went to a wooded area in Pennsylvania to pray to the Lord concerning the matter. In answer to their prayers, John the Baptist "descended in a cloud of light" and, acting under the direction of Peter, James, and John, laid his hands upon them and ordained them, conferring the Aaronic Priesthood, "which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins" (Joseph Smith–History 1:68–69).²⁷ Not long after John the Baptist's appearance, Peter, James, and John visited Joseph and Oliver and conferred on them the Melchizedek Priesthood, which empowered them to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost and to officiate in the higher ordinances of the gospel.²⁸ They also ordained Joseph and Oliver to be apostles of Jesus Christ, thus restoring the office that they themselves had held while on the earth.²⁹

These ordinations by angelic ministrants grounded Joseph Smith's claims to divine authority. Whereas Catholics claim an unbroken line of authority from the days of Peter, Joseph proclaimed that through apostasy the chain had been broken and the authority lost. Whereas Protestants claim that all believers hold priesthood authority, Joseph claimed that God restored divine authority by literal hand-to-head transfer by the very prophets and apostles whose lives and words are recounted in the Bible.³⁰ On the basis of these revelatory events, Joseph taught that there is no salvation between the two ends of the Bible without divine authority.³¹ He elaborated:

We believe that no man can administer salvation through the gospel, to the souls of men, in the name of Jesus Christ, except he is authorized from God, by revelation or by being ordained by some one whom God hath sent by revelation, as it is written by Paul, Romans 10:14, "and how shall they believe in him, of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and

how shall they preach, except they be sent?” and I will ask, how can they be sent without a revelation, or some other visible display of the manifestation of God. And again, Hebrews 5:4, “And no man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God as was Aaron.”—And I would ask, how was Aaron called, but by revelation?³²

3. Jesus Christ³³

As one claiming to have apostolic authority and to be a “special witness” of Christ, Joseph had much to teach about the identity and mission of Jesus of Nazareth that would challenge Christendom’s Christologies.

Christendom’s Christologies. Christology attempts to answer the question Jesus asked of his first disciples: “Whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). As “the keystone of theology for serious Christians,” Christology has been pursued using two fundamentally different methodologies: “Christology from above” and “Christology from below.”³⁴ Christology from above takes at face value the confessions of faith in the deity of Christ as expressed in the New Testament, affirming that Christ is both God and Savior. Conversely, Christology from below begins with an inquiry into the historical Jesus. It goes behind the theological interpretations of the New Testament writers and attempts to ascertain the historical and factual foundation of Christological claims. Currently, there is a constant flux of both from-above and from-below scholarship.

Although Christologies vary considerably, one noteworthy attempt at a unifying declaration has been made by the World Council of Churches, which requires that all applicants believe in “the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior.”³⁵ Yet even this declaration has found its Christian critics. Some assert that Jesus was not a special revelation of God but only an extraordinary person. While some deny the God-nature of Jesus, other Christologies deny the actuality of his resurrection and atonement and even deny that Christ was morally perfect. In some Christologies, even the sayings of Jesus are turned into the “theological interpretations of his followers.”³⁶ The most famous work in this regard has been done by the Jesus Seminar in California.

The Seminar scholars assert that Jesus was not born of a virgin, not born of David's lineage, and not born in Bethlehem.³⁷ The divide in contemporary Christologies is astonishingly wide.

Joseph's Christology. Joseph Smith's "method" of arriving at Christological insights differs from both the traditional from-above and from-below approaches. In fact, it most closely parallels the method of Paul. Pauline Christology begins with his conversion experience, in which the resurrected Christ appeared and spoke with him.³⁸ Joseph, like Paul, also reported that he saw and conversed with the risen Lord on several occasions.³⁹ The source of Joseph's knowledge is thoroughly reflected in his deliverance of his Christology. Instead of lengthy prose articulating reasoned historical research or sustained exegeses of biblical texts, one finds in Joseph's statements short, clear descriptions.⁴⁰

In the resulting unique and expansive portrait of Christ, Joseph Smith agreed with, added to, and sometimes repudiated contemporary Christologies. He did so not only through direct personal encounters with the risen Lord, but also from revealed biblical and extrabiblical recorded encounters of others. Many of the latter are recorded in the Book of Mormon. Throughout the century preceding Christ's birth, Book of Mormon prophets foretold his incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. For instance, King Benjamin prophesied (ca. 124 BC):

The Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles. . . . And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . the Creator of all things. . . . And lo, he cometh . . . that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name; and even after all this they . . . shall crucify him. And he shall rise the third day from the dead. (Mosiah 3:5–10)⁴¹

According to the Book of Mormon, these transcendent events were established most clearly and powerfully by the risen Lord himself when, following his ascension in Jerusalem, he visited an expectant community of believers in the Western Hemisphere. He was introduced by God, the Father:

Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him. . . . As [the multitude] understood they cast their eyes . . . towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them . . . [And he] spake unto the people saying: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and . . . feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. (3 Nephi 11:7–14)

But this is not all. Consider two further disclosures. According to a canonized account, the risen Lord appeared to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in Hiram, Ohio, on February 16, 1832. Of this experience, they wrote:

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:22–24)

Four years later in the newly dedicated temple in Kirtland, Ohio, Christ again appeared and spoke, this time to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. They described their experience:

We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us . . . His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters . . . saying: I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father. (Doctrine and Covenants 110:2–4)

When accepted as true, these self-disclosures of the risen Lord repudiate the humanistic conclusions of the Jesus Seminar and of liberal Christologies, and they powerfully confirm the faith of Christians who affirm with Joseph that Jesus Christ is the Eternal God, the Creator, the God of Israel, God incarnate, merciful Savior, risen Lord, and advocate with the Father.

4. God and the Godhead

Reflection on his first vision in due time yielded Joseph more insights: Jesus Christ is truly God's beloved Son; God the Father and Jesus Christ are two distinct persons, gloriously embodied and humanlike in form; and men and women were literally created in their image. These experiential insights stand in dramatic contrast with the typical propositions found in conventional theologies.

The Nature of God: Conventional Theism. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has sometimes been distinguished from the god of the philosophers and theologians.⁴² The latter is a human construction—a product of rational theologizing, with no explicit basis in revelation. While the philosophers' god is variously conceived, it is commonly portrayed as absolutely sovereign, all-controlling and all-determining, wholly other, absolutely simple, immaterial, nonspatial, nontemporal, immutable and impassible, the creator of all things out of nothing.⁴³ Although there is, as already seen, much diversity within Christian understandings of God, I will refer to this composite portrait of God as “the god of the philosophers.”⁴⁴

The God of Joseph Smith. The God who revealed himself to Joseph Smith is radically unlike the god of the philosophers. He did not create all things out of nothing; to the contrary, he created the physical universe out of chaotic matter. That God is not all-controlling and all-determining; to the contrary, we on earth have morally significant freedom. Even God's gracious gift of forgiveness of sins awaits our free acceptance. Joseph's God is neither timeless, immutable, impassible, nor eternally static. To the contrary, he is “the living God” who is profoundly “touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” and responsive to our needs and petitionary prayers

(Hebrews 3:12; 4:15).⁴⁵ God is not absolutely simple, immaterial, non-spatial, nor wholly other. To the contrary, he formed our bodies in the very image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) of his own, and he speaks with people “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11). In sum, the God who revealed himself to Joseph is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not the god of the philosophers and theologians. Of the many differences between Joseph’s living God and the god of human constructions, I will focus on three: divine embodiment, the Godhead, and God’s loving passibility.

Divine Embodiment. In language again reflecting direct experience over reasoned discourse, Joseph declared, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22). In similar simple declarations of revealed fact, Joseph made it clear that the Father and the Son created our bodies in the very image and likeness of their own. Thus, he taught that humans are theomorphic. “When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he *is a man like ourselves*” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:1; emphasis added).

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and things by His power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man.⁴⁶

Indeed, “it is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another.”⁴⁷ From these self-disclosures, it became evident to Joseph Smith that the Father’s and the Son’s risen bodies, while like human bodies in form are, in some respects, substantially unlike our corruptible bodies. In Joseph’s account of his First Vision, he reports that the “brightness and glory [of the Father and the Son] defy all description” (Joseph Smith–History 1:17). And a newly revealed report of Moses’ face-to-face encounter with God reads:

The presence of God withdrew from Moses, that his glory was not upon Moses; and Moses was left unto himself. And as he was left unto himself, he fell unto the earth. And it came to pass that it was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man; and he said unto himself: Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed. But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him. (Moses 1:9–11)

So glorious is God's personage that Moses had to undergo a temporary transfiguration of his own body simply to withstand God's presence.

The Godhead. Joseph penned this simple first Article of Faith: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." On the basis of his revelations, Joseph taught that the Godhead consists of three distinct persons, each separately embodied. Thus, Joseph rejected (and explicitly so) the traditional but extrabiblical idea that they constitute one metaphysical substance. Rather, they constitute one mutually indwelling divine community, perfectly united in mind, will, purpose, work, and love. The recorded revelations given to and through Joseph repeatedly declare, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God"; in these revelations, the word "God" is used to designate the individual members of the Godhead, as well as the divine community (cf. Doctrine and Covenants 20:28; 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:36). Taken in their totality, Joseph's revelations disclose a social trinity, rather than a "one substance," tritheistic or modalistic model of the Godhead.⁴⁸

Passibility. Conventional theism, influenced by Greek metaphysics, reasons that God must be timeless and unchanging and, hence, impassible—that is, unchangeable by another. In contrast, the revelations that came to and through Joseph Smith disclose God's tender and profound passibility. Consider two such passages from these revelations, the first from the Pearl of Great Price record of Enoch, an antediluvian prophet:

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept. . . . And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? . . . The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency; And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, . . . but behold they are without affection, and they hate their own blood. (Moses 7:28–29, 32–33)

The second comes from the Book of Mormon account of the visit of the resurrected Lord to a gathering of ancient Americans. As his visit was drawing to a close, the Lord advised the gathering that he was leaving. But he “cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them.” Discerning their desires, the Lord lingered, responding, “Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you.” He inquired if there were any sick among them and told them, “Bring them hither and I will heal them, for I . . . see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you.” Next, Jesus invited them to bring their little children to him, and he prayed for them. The record continues: “No one can conceive of the joy which filled [their] souls.” Seeing that *their* joy was full, Jesus said, “Blessed are ye because of your faith. And *now* behold, *my* joy is full. And when he had said these words, he wept.” Then he “took their little children, *one by one*, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. And when he had done this he wept again” (3 Nephi 17:3–8, 17–25; emphasis added). The resurrected Lord had planned to leave his people earlier, but he lingered because he discerned that the people wanted him to stay. And when their joy was full, *then* was his joy full.

Dallas Willard once caricatured the god of the philosophers as “a great unblinking cosmic stare.”⁴⁹ In Joseph’s theology, there is no ground for such a caricature. His revelations powerfully and reassuringly disclose the tender passibility of God, who profoundly loves each of us.

5. A Theomorphic Understanding of Men and Women

But what or who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Let's begin at the beginning.

Beginningless Beginning. In his book *Eternal Man*, Latter-day Saint philosopher Truman G. Madsen succinctly summarizes Joseph's answers to the above questions:

Regarding the ultimate identity of man, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that man as a primal intelligence is eternal. Likewise the spirit-elements that compose his Divinely-sired spirit and the matter-elements that compose his physically-sired body are eternal. Except in procreation, these elements of the total self never become an *essential* part of any other self. Once united, their destiny is to be glorified and "inseparably connected" throughout all eternity.⁵⁰

While acknowledging that Joseph's affirmations about intelligences leave much that remains indeterminate, Madsen suggests that a careful reading yields these four points:

Individuality. A person as a self had a beginningless beginning. He or she has never been identified wholly with any other being. Nor is he or she a product of nothing. "Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. . . . There is no creation about it."⁵¹

Autonomy. The self is free. All intelligence "is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself . . . otherwise there is no existence."

Consciousness. There is no inanimate intelligence or unconscious mind. These are contradictions in terms. Selfhood and individual consciousness are unending. "The intelligence of spirits had no beginning; neither will it have an end."

Capacity for Development. "All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement."⁵²

Spirits Begotten, Not Made. A revelation pronounced by Joseph states that the inhabitants of the world are the "begotten sons and daughters unto God" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:24). Thus the entire human family are God's children, not creatures merely. Joseph's successors in the prophetic office have spelled out this concept more fully:

The Father of Jesus is our Father also. Jesus Himself taught this truth, when He instructed His disciples how to pray: “Our Father which art in heaven,” etc. Jesus, however, is the firstborn among all the sons of God—the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. . . . All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity.⁵³

Bodies Created in God’s Image. In an early account in the Book of Mormon, a prophet was permitted to see the preincarnate Lord and his premortal spirit body (ca. 2200 BC). The Lord explained to the brother of Jared, “Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image. Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; . . . and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh” (Ether 3:15–16). This passage corroborates Genesis 1:27, which appears in slightly altered form in another revelation given through Joseph: “And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them” (Moses 2:27).

Morally Significant Freedom. As eternal intelligences begotten as sons and daughters of God, humans have morally significant freedom. This is clearly taught in the revelations that came through Joseph. “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:30). Thus, humans “are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27). Joseph told the Saints that “Satan was generally blamed for the evils which we did, but if he was the cause of all our wickedness, men could not be condemned. The devil could not compel mankind to do evil; all was voluntary,” and later in the same address he affirmed that “God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not; and such ideas as were entertained [on these subjects] by many were absurd.”⁵⁴

The Purpose of Mortal Existence and Our Eschatological Potential. Joseph taught, “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.” He further argued that, as noted earlier, our minds “are susceptible of enlargement.”⁵⁵

And just how much enlargement did Joseph have in mind? He took as his paradigm the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ. In much the same way that Christ “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:13), and so are we expected to advance from grace to grace until we, too, receive a fullness from the Father. Consider these words from Joseph Smith:

You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all 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, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. . . .

What did Jesus do? Why; I [Jesus] 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. 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 his children.⁵⁶

Joseph viewed this process as one that would take a very substantial amount of time to complete: “It will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them [the principles of exaltation]. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”⁵⁷ Mortals are, indeed, in many ways extremely lacking in Godly attributes, yet so profound was Joseph’s doctrine of their potential that he taught that with time, growth, and grace men and women could eventually arrive at a Godlike station:

“Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; . . . then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power.” The blessings of this exaltation are placed under strict principles and guidelines, which only those who endure on the gospel path in faithful obedience shall find: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye abide my law ye cannot attain to this glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:20–21).

The Fall. Joseph’s views of the fall and its effects presented (and still present) a major challenge to the varying theologies of Christendom. Contrary to the negative view of the fall prevalent in traditional Christianity, Joseph affirmed that the fall was a “fortunate fall” wherein mankind fell “downward, yet forward.”⁵⁸ As usual, Joseph’s thought was shaped by the revelations that he received and the records he translated.

Nowhere is Joseph’s theology of a fortunate fall more explicit than in the book of Moses. Here one reads of Adam and Eve’s reaction to the consequences brought about by their transgression, fall, and subsequent removal from the Garden of Eden. Surprisingly, they both rejoice in, rather than lament, their new condition. Adam says:

Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God. And Eve, his wife heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters (Moses 5:10–12).

Similarly, Lehi (ca. 600 BC), a prophet-leader in the Book of Mormon, explained the benefits of the fall. He taught that Adam and Eve’s fall placed them in a world wherein moral opposites are allowed to coexist. “For 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 nor misery, neither good nor bad” (2 Nephi 2:11). The fall, then, far from being an unanticipated aberration from God’s will, is to be embraced as a crucial component of

God's salvific designs for the whole of his creation. As Lehi's text goes on to note, "All things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:24–25).

Joseph's own words affirm the wisdom of the fall: "Adam did not commit sin in eating the fruits, for God had decreed that he should eat and fall . . . [That] he should die was the saying of the Lord; therefore, the Lord appointed us to fall and also redeemed us—for where sin abounded grace did much more abound."⁵⁹ When coupled with the atonement of Christ, the fall becomes an indispensable blessing by affording us meaningful moral freedom to choose righteousness from among the evils of a fallen world.

In affirming such an unorthodox, positive view of the fall, Joseph did not overlook the untoward consequences of the fall that plague our mortal condition. Joseph's revelations concur with traditional Christianity teachings that because of the fall humanity was universally lost and became estranged from God's presence.⁶⁰ Yet Joseph did not teach that all humans inherit a totally depraved nature (original sin). Rather, he understood that all humans inevitably sin (universal sinfulness) because of opposition and moral imperfection. Even with the inevitability of our failures, Joseph taught that however existentially estranged we may become by our sinful choices, by Christ's justifying and sanctifying grace, we can be reconciled. Joseph advocated an extremely ennobling image of humans in which *every* person possesses the capacity, with divine assistance and grace, to refine his or her own fallen nature toward righteousness. Joseph 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."⁶¹

In summary, Joseph's teachings present a unique portrait of humanity. A person is a child, not a creature, of God; thus, we are of the same species as God. This relationship, Joseph taught, has profound implications for our ultimate potential: we contain within ourselves the capacity to grow unto the likeness of God. We possess morally significant freedom, which we may use for our ultimate

exaltation or condemnation. The fall, coupled with the atonement, is a necessary part of God's plan for our moral development.

Indeed, Joseph's ennobling view of humans and their eschatological potential stands in striking contrast and challenge to more negative views of men and women within conventional Christian theologies. Carl Mosser, Evangelical theologian and coeditor and author of *The New Mormon Challenge*, astutely views the contrast from another angle: "Smith's teachings about the eschatological potential of men and women challenges Christian theology to think more deliberately about what the redeemed are redeemed *for*. Too often, in my view, Christian theologians are content to reflect on *how* we are redeemed (the mechanics) and on what we are redeemed *from*."⁶²

6. Salvation for the Unevangelized

By resolving long-standing theological perplexities, the risen Lord's self-disclosures reported by Joseph Smith can greatly increase one's understanding of the Lord's salvific gifts. The fate of the unevangelized is one such difficulty. Thomas Morris explains the perplexity (which he calls a "scandal") this way:

The scandal . . . arises with a simple set of questions asked of the Christian theologian who claims that it is only through the life and death of God incarnated in Jesus Christ that all can be saved and reconciled to God: How can the many humans who lived and died before the time of Christ be saved through him? They surely cannot be held accountable for responding appropriately to something of which they could have no knowledge. Furthermore, what about all the people who have lived since the time of Christ in cultures with different religious traditions, untouched by the Christian gospel? . . . How could a just God set up a particular condition of salvation, the highest end of human life possible, which was and is inaccessible to most people?⁶³

Stephen Davis expresses a similar perplexity in an article in *Modern Theology*: "Is it right for God to condemn [a woman "who lived from 370–320 B.C. in the interior of Borneo"] to eternal hell just because she was never able to come to God through Christ? Of course not . . . God is just and loving."⁶⁴

The perplexity that Morris and Davis express appears to be more than a paradox; we seem to stare contradiction right in the face. It can be expressed in the form of an inconsistent triad, a set of three premises, the conjunction of any two of which logically entails the falsity of the third:

- (1) God is almighty, perfectly loving and just, and desires that all of his children be saved.
- (2) Salvation comes only in and through one's knowledge and personal acceptance of Christ and his atonement.
- (3) Vast numbers of God's children have lived and died never having heard of Christ, let alone having had a fair chance to accept his salvific gift.

The third premise appears indisputable, forcing us to give up either the first or the second, both of which seem warranted on biblical authority. So how is this inconsistent triad to be resolved?

Christian Solutions. Christian theologians are not without answers, most of which have been grouped into three broad categories: restrictivism, universalism, and "wider-hope" theories. Restrictivists hold that all who, prior to death, do not know of and accept Christ's salvific gift will be damned.⁶⁵ Universalists argue that eventually all mankind will be saved, although there are several variations on this theme.⁶⁶

Between the two extremes—restrictivism and universalism—wider-hope theories affirm that while salvation may not be universally achieved, it is nonetheless universally *accessible*. There are basically three wider-hope views: inclusivism, universal evangelization before death, and eschatological evangelization. Inclusivists believe that while Christ's atonement is ontologically necessary for salvation, it is not epistemically necessary. "Those who never hear the gospel of Christ may nevertheless attain salvation before they die if they respond in faith to the revelation they do have."⁶⁷ Those who believe in universal evangelization *before death* advance three main stances: (1) all who seek God will find him in this life; (2) all people who have not heard the gospel will have that opportunity

at the moment of dying; and (3) God will judge the unevangelized by how they would have responded had they heard the gospel message (middle knowledge). Proponents of eschatological evangelization affirm that the unevangelized will hear and have the chance to receive the gospel after this life; whether it occurs immediately after death or in a purgatory-like state is in dispute, but both affirm that persons must freely accept Christ.

Proponents all claim biblical warrant for their respective positions. But this is precisely the problem. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 15:29, Paul alludes to a contemporaneous Christian practice of living persons being baptized on behalf of the dead. *Die Taufe für die Toten*, a study by German scholar Mathis Rissi, reveals that this verse has been interpreted in over a hundred different ways.⁶⁸ Many of these interpretations are mutually exclusive, and, meanwhile, people with salvation at stake live and die with no way to definitively resolve the issue by appealing to the Bible.

Joseph Smith and Salvation for the Unevangelized. Joseph received a number of revelations that offer to settle the question definitively. Interestingly, the answer can be seen as a comprehensive synthesis of all the major Christian responses, allowing one to make sense of all the biblical data. It affirms important strands of universalism, inclusivism, and restrictivism, all of which coherently coalesce in a doctrine of postmortem evangelization. What makes this synthesis of otherwise inconsistent ideas possible is God's revelations to Joseph, which affirm that in the eschaton, there are multiple degrees of salvation within three broad kingdoms of glory.⁶⁹ Salvation, Joseph clearly taught, is not an all-or-nothing affair.

What Joseph's revelations articulated is *very* good news, indeed, evidencing our Savior's love, grace, and mercy, while confirming universalism in four ways. First, resurrection is universal; Christ has saved the entire human family from permanent bodily death.⁷⁰ Second, "all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability [will be] saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven [the highest kingdom of glory]" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:10). Third, all persons except the "sons of perdition" will ultimately be saved from the second death ("an everlasting death as to things pertaining

unto righteousness,” for “the plan of redemption could have no power” [Alma 12:32]), and, most significantly, fourth, the saved will all dwell in a heavenly kingdom, the glory of the least of which exceeds all human comprehension.⁷¹

The inclusivist insights in these revelations give good news, including (1) God desires the salvation of all of his children and invites everyone to come unto him;⁷² (2) God endows all of his children with “the Light of Christ,” which enables them to distinguish between good and evil and which, without overriding agency, inclines them toward God;⁷³ (3) God reveals saving light in addition to the Light of Christ to every people;⁷⁴ and (4) God will base his judgment on how faithfully human persons adhere to whatever light they have.⁷⁵ The Book of Mormon makes clear that God does not confine his revelations to Christians.⁷⁶

Joseph’s revelations also confirm the partial truth of restrictivism. The exclusivist conditions for salvation in the celestial kingdom are clearly set out.⁷⁷ Thus, the risen Lord affirms his earlier teaching that “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto . . . exaltation” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:22; cf. Matthew 7:14). The good news is that, in God’s graciousness and love, he will ensure that every person, either on this side or the other side of veil, will have a full chance to satisfy these conditions.

The crown of Joseph’s contribution to this issue is found in the revelations he received from Christ affirming postmortal evangelization and proxy sacraments for the dead performed by the living. Modern-day revelation affirms that Christ himself initiated the work of redemption of the dead when he descended into spirit prison in the period between his death on the cross and his resurrection (Doctrine and Covenants 138). This knowledge and the sealing authority to perform these sacred ordinances came to Joseph through a series of revelations, the most pertinent of which was Elijah’s restoration of the sealing powers of the priesthood (Doctrine and Covenants 110). Holders of these sealing powers are authorized to perform vicarious ordinances for the dead, all of which, if the partakers thereof are faithful to the covenants related to the ordinances, are efficacious for eternity. In a powerful funeral sermon delivered in Nauvoo, Illinois,

on August 15, 1840, the Prophet disclosed that the Lord would permit the Saints to be baptized on behalf of their friends and relatives who had departed this life. He told the Saints, “The plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God.”⁷⁸

On the basis of subsequent revelations, Joseph taught that the living and the dead are dependent upon each other for salvation: “They [the dead] without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:15). The vicarious ordinances to help accomplish this mutual perfection, he later explained, include not only baptisms for the dead but also the endowment of the holy priesthood and sealings of family members to each other for eternity.

I began this section by outlining the soteriological problem of evil, which I expressed in the form of an inconsistent triad. Joseph Smith affirmed that Jesus Christ, himself, is the resolution to this inconsistent triad. Christ, Joseph declared, has revealed himself to be not only Lord but also Savior of both the living and the dead. His arms are extended to all people of all times and places.⁷⁹

Conclusions

In bringing his story of Christian theology to a close, Olson explores the possibility of Christian unity in the future. He suggests that “diverse voices, when brought together in harmony, can make a chorus out of cacophony and a choir out of confusion.”⁸⁰ Such harmony might be accomplished, Olson believes, with the arrival of a new Christian theologian—perhaps one from a third-world country who has fresh ideas.⁸¹

After pondering Olson’s story of Christian theology, I find his hoped-for solution puzzling indeed. If the gifted theologians who have graced the Christian scene for the past two thousand years have failed to unite the diverse voices, why hold out hope that one will yet do so? Can a person by reason alone find out God? (cf. Job 11:7). The history of Christian theology demonstrates the dubiety of such a method. The need for revelation seems to be unavoidable.

So what about God? Where is he? Can he speak? Will he speak? Did he speak to Joseph Smith? Joseph Smith challenged Christianity with answers he claimed were revealed, not reasoned. Some may conclude the truth of his claims from the mere fact of his witness, but Joseph never advocated this sort of logical or circular justification. Rather, because he knew from experience that God will speak now, Joseph taught that if a person wants to know the truth, he or she should “search the revelations which we publish, and ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you, and if you do it with an eye single to His glory nothing doubting, He will answer you by the power of His Holy Spirit. You will then know for yourselves.”⁸²

Notes

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1. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 25.

2. Especially pertinent to this point is the declaration in Hebrews 5:4 that “no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.” Divine authority cannot be acquired at will. Thus, *a fortiori*, as Peter explained to Simon Magus, who wanted the power to bestow the Holy Ghost, it cannot be acquired by purchase: “Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:20–22).

3. Acts 10:9–17, 34–48; 15:1–11, 23–29. The apostles claim divine guidance for this decision in Acts 15: 28: “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”

4. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 25.

5. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 610–13.

6. Elsewhere I have argued at length that no natural or cultural explanations can adequately account for the range, depth, and unique synthesis of Joseph Smith’s vision. Even the most determined cultural reductionist must still, in the end, deal with Joseph’s claims to divine revelation. See my article

“The Search for Cultural Origins of Mormon Doctrines,” in *Excavating Mormon Pasts: The New Historiography of the Last Half Century* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2004), 27–52.

7. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 272–73.

8. Dean C. Jesse, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:155.

9. Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995). This issue is discussed by Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, “How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation,” *FARMS Review* 11, no. 2 (1999): 5–6. They assert that the Bible *does not say* that it is insufficient in providing information on how one is to be saved and go on to state what they believe is the real issue: “(1) What body of information is necessary for salvation? and (2) Does the Bible contain this information? If the Bible contains a sufficient body of information for the establishment and continuing proclamation of the Christian gospel, then no more scripture is *necessary*.” They cite the third and fourth Articles of Faith to support the view that even Latter-day Saints would have to agree that faith, repentance, water baptism, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost is sufficient for salvation; and all of this is taught in the Bible.

Additionally, Mosser and Owen quote Grudem’s “concise and helpful definition” of the “sufficiency of Scripture”: “The *sufficiency of Scripture* means that Scripture contains all the words of God which he intends his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly and for obeying him perfectly.” According to the “Advent Argument,” the next *stage of redemptive history* has not yet arrived (the Second Coming); therefore, at this time, the canon is closed in practice, but can reasonably be said to be open in theory. Mosser and Owen, “How Wide the Divide?” 5, 8, emphasis in original.

10. The Westminster Assembly of Divines, convened by the English Parliament in 1643, completed the *Confession of Faith, Shorter Catechism and Larger Catechism* in 1647. These documents have served as the doctrinal standards, subordinate to the word of God, for Presbyterian and other churches around the world. The text of the *Confession* is that adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. It is derived from a 1646 manuscript edited by S. W. Carruthers and incorporates revisions adopted by American Presbyterian churches as early as 1788. Database online. Available from <http://www.opc.org/documents/standards.html>.

11. G. H. Joyce, “Revelation,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Database online, available from <http://www.newadvent.org/>.

12. 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” (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.

13. McDonald identifies several ancient writings that 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—isolated sayings of Jesus that were preserved in first instance by oral tradition and eventually found their way into 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 that “I for one am not in favor of rejecting the present biblical canon in order to create *a new closed canon of scriptures*” (257). And concerning the currently *known* collection of noncanonical 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” (257). It would seem then, that he would leave the canon open for early documents, which would add to our understanding of Christ.

14. McDonald uses as an example the epistle to the Hebrews: “Although there was considerable doubt about [its] authorship . . . among the church fathers, the book nevertheless was included in the biblical canon because its message was both relevant and important to the Christian communities that adopted and preserved it as scripture.” 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?” (255).

15. 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?” (256).

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

17. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 73.

18. 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 unified on this issue, the accounts vary in other ways. See Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Joseph Smith's Recitals of the First Vision," *Ensign* 15 (January 1985): 8–17; Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 1–33; James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820," in *Opening the Heavens*, 35–75.

19. In the 1832 and 1835 accounts, Joseph receives a forgiveness of sins, taken from Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 3, 4–6, 50–51, 59; the command to "go not after" the existing churches is recounted in the 1838 (canonized) version, the 1842 "Wentworth Letter" account, as well as Pratt's later accounts (1840, 1869, 1871, 1874); the promise of a later restoration is taken from the 1842 account in Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1980), 4:536, where the exact language reads: "I was expressly commanded 'to go not after them,' at the same time receiving a promise that the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."

20. "At times, however, this special aura of authority could present problems for Christianity as some of the apostles' successors introduced their own ideas into the stream of early theology. As we will see, occasionally these fathers of the generation after the apostles gave the gospel their own unique interpretations" (Olson, 40–41). The introduction of personal ideas by persons who could not definitively and authoritatively say "thus saith the Lord," Olson says, was the most problematic aspect of giving precedent to those who could trace chronologically through relationships back to the Savior.

21. G. H. Joyce, "The Pope," *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

22. J. Wilhelm, "Apostolic Succession," *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

23. In practice, the Church of Constantinople has functioned for centuries as the church responsible for guiding and preserving the worldwide unity of the family of self-governing Orthodox Churches. But it must be noticed that this responsibility is merely a practical and pastoral one. It carries no sacramental or juridical power with it and it is possible that in the future this function may pass to some other church.

24. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 370–71.

25. Jean Bavinck, "Tradition and Living Magisterium," *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

26. Oliver Cowdery in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 15.

27. See also Brian Q. Cannon and *BYU Studies* Staff, “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents,” in *Opening the Heavens*, 215–63. Presupposed here is authority existing in varying degrees within a framework of various offices, just as the New Testament church attests. As the sixth Article of Faith states, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.”

28. While the exact date is not known, scholars place the event sometime between May 15, and the end of June 1829. For a fuller treatment of this issue, see “The Restoration of the Priesthood (Doctrine and Covenants 13 and 27)” by Charles R. Harrell in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 1: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 86–99.

29. In Doctrine and Covenants 27:12, the Lord confirms this bestowal of divine authority: “I have sent unto you [Peter, James, and John], by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry and of the same things which I revealed unto them.”

30. G. R. Evans, *Problems of Authority in the Reformation Debates* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 219, 223, 218. “Both sides in the sixteenth century could broadly agree that ‘every power which was in the college of the apostles is now in the Church.’ The difference of opinion was about the distribution of that power (with its connotation of ‘dominion’) in the Church. . . . They said that the ordained ministry had, not a special or higher power, but a license to ‘use’ a power which belongs to all Christians equally. This *usus* is what is bestowed by popular assent (*plebes assensu*) and taken away by the same means” (219). “The Trent Fathers found the same contentions in Calvin’s writings as in Luther’s that if bishops alone (*solī episcopi*) confer ‘priesthood’ (*sacerdotium*), they do it *illegitime*, for the true agent (*agens*) and conferring authority (*conferens*) is the people. It is the people who have *auctoritas et potestas* from God to ordain” (223). The Protestant reformers described all Christians as ‘equally priests’ . . . with an ‘equal power.’ . . . Luther’s case in *Concerning the Ministry* (the treatise he wrote for Bohemia in 1523) is set out like this: Christ is our High Priest, and through union with him we are all priests, without rite of ordination, and without having a special character impressed on us. The primary office of ministry, the ministry of the Word, is, he says, common to all Christians. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow; no other remembrance of the Lord’s Supper than that which any Christian can observe; there is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose; any Christian can pray; any Christian may judge of doctrine. These make up the royal and priestly office. The emphasis

here was upon the equality of individuals, not upon the collective character of the ‘Priesthood of all believers,’ that is, their shared participation in the single Priesthood which is unique to Christ” (218–19).

31. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 59.

32. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 56–57.

33. In the year 2000, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a declaration to the world entitled “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” This is an official statement of Latter-day Saint Christology. I will reference Joseph’s revelations to corresponding passages in the Declaration.

34. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 10, 12. As a general rule, the “from above” method was dominant in the early centuries, up until the enlightenment. During the enlightenment, the main orientation of Christology was “from below.”

35. “Basis,” Constitution of the World Council of Churches, <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/con-e.html>. The World Council of Churches is an umbrella organization for cooperation between over a hundred churches worldwide.

36. Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 120.

37. These include Roman Catholic John Dominic Crossan and seventy-three other scholars.

38. Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 45.

39. Acts 26:14; 1 Corinthians 9:1; Joseph Smith–History 1:16–20; Doctrine and Covenants 110:1–10.

40. See, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 76:22–24 and 110:2–4, quoted later in the paper.

41. See also 2 Nephi 25:26; Mosiah 15:1; Alma 7:9–10; 34:9–16.

42. Among the prominent thinkers who have drawn this distinction are Blaise Pascal, Martin Buber, Jehuda Halevi, Charles Hartshorne, and Clark Pinnock. Pascal believed in a personal God. During his spiritual conversion experience, Pascal penned these words: “From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past midnight. Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and intellectuals. . . . The God of Jesus Christ” (Marvin R. O’Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997], 96). Jehuda Halevi argued that philosophy’s practice of inference has led to false notions of God, which includes the belief that “God neither benefits nor injures, nor knows anything of our prayers or offerings, our obedience or disobedience” (Isaak Heinemann, ed., “Jehuda Halevi: Kuzari,” *Three Jewish Philosophers* [New York: Harper and Row,

1965], 113–4). In the words of Martin Buber, “the man who says, ‘I love in God the father of man,’ has essentially already renounced the God of the philosophers in his innermost heart” (Martin Buber, *To Hallow This Life: An Anthology*, ed. Jacob Trapp [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958], 10). For a rigorous defense of the claim that these two god-descriptions cannot refer to the same being see Norbert Samuelson, “That the God of the Philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” *Harvard Theological Review* 65, no. 1 (January 1972): 1–27. And see also Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially chapter 10, “The God of Reason and the God of Faith,” 121–29.

43. I use the definite description, “*the* god of the philosophers” to refer to god-concepts which are significantly constituted by attributes derived through rational theologizing without explicit basis in biblical revelation, including most notably those attributes enumerated in the text corresponding to this note. So understood, the description encompasses both the god of scholastic theism and the god of nineteenth-century transcendental idealism—the two god-concepts which bear the brunt of William James’s pragmatic critique. There are, of course, significant differences between the various gods denominated by my description. For instance, the god of Thomas Aquinas is a person while the god of F. H. Bradley is not.

44. Of course, these summary descriptions of God are a gloss over the richly diverse portraits of deity found in the different Christian theological traditions. There is no time to identify their most fundamental differences, let alone delineate their subtle nuances. Instead, I will focus on Joseph’s vision of God. Partisans of particular Christian theologies will have to make more specific comparisons, discerning which aspects of their own views are confirmed and which are challenged by those of Joseph.

45. The “living God” reference is in several places in the book of Hebrews: 9:14, 10:31, and 12:22.

46. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 295. More particularly, God revealed that that he had a body of flesh and bones. Joseph continues: “That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones” (293).

47. “And that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, *the same as Jesus Christ himself did*; and I will show it from the Bible. . . . 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. As the Father hath power in Himself, so hath the Son power in Himself, to lay down His life and take it again, so He has a body of His own. The Son doeth what he hath seen the Father do: then the Father hath some day laid

down His life and taken it again; so He has a body of His own; each one will be in His body; and yet the sectarian world believe the body of the Son is identical with the Father's." Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 295.

48. Many Christian thinkers are showing a renewed interest in this kind of trinitarian thought. One of the preeminent theological ideas that is circling in the midst of this intellectual revival is that of social trinitarianism. Social trinitarianism, or the social analogy of the Trinity, reasserts the religious teaching that the Godhead is composed of three separate and distinct persons who are perfectly one in thought, word, intention, and action. Those who affirm this doctrinal notion of deity largely base their perspective on primitive Christian views of the Godhead and the economic vision of the Trinity.

49. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 244–45.

50. Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 23–24.

51. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 341. Speaking of our conscious identity, our 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. I do not believe the doctrine; I know better. Hear it, all ye ends of the world; for God has told me so; and if you don't believe me, it will not make the truth without effect. . . . 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 [co-eternal] with God himself. (Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 340–41).

52. Madsen, *Eternal Man*, 24–25.

53. "The Origin of Man" (1909), quoted 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, 1965–1975), 4:205.

54. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 134.

55. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 519. The preceding remarks were part of the King Follett Discourse, Nauvoo, April 7, 1844.

56. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 347–48.

57. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 348.

58. Robert L. Millet, *Alive in Christ: The Miracle of Spiritual Rebirth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 75; Elder Orson F. Whitney observed

that “The fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression’s highway.” Forace Green, comp., *Cowley & Whitney on Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.

59. Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 238.

60. See 2 Nephi 2:21, 26; Mosiah 3:19; Mosiah 16:3–5; Alma 12:22; Alma 42:7–9; Doctrine and Covenants 20:18–20.

61. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 33.

62. Carl Mosser, email message to author, January 2, 2005.

63. 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). “I think the most that can reasonably be said,” he concludes, “is that a measure of pious agnosticism is appropriate here” (180). Reflection on the soteriological problem of evil is hardly new in the history of Christianity as evidenced by Dr. Jeffrey A. Trumbower’s recent book, *Rescue for the Dead: the Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

64. Stephen T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (January 1990): 176.

65. For the biblical proof-texts for which the restrictivists base their position see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

66. Some universalists hold that God sovereignly overrides human freedom unilaterally, fulfilling his desire to save all mankind. Others contend that all persons, given eons of time, will eventually *freely* choose salvation in Christ. Another division separates universalists into restorationists and ultra-universalists. Restorationists believe that the hell is something that can be escaped, a purgatory that one may leave through accepting Christ; ultra-universalists reject any notion of hell, believing that all will be saved immediately at or following death.

67. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 215.

68. Mathis Rissi, *Die Taufe für die Toten* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1962).

69. See Doctrine and Covenants 76:50–113.

70. Book of Mormon prophet Amulek is explicit: “The day cometh that *all* shall rise from the dead and stand before God, and be judged according to their works. . . . Now, this restoration shall come to *all*, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous” (Alma 11:41, 44; emphasis added). See also 2 Nephi 9:22; Jacob 6:9; Alma 40:4–10; 3 Nephi 26:4–5; Doctrine and Covenants 29:26; 76:15–85; 88:14–32.

71. “And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, . . . that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; *That through him all might be saved* . . . except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:40–43; emphasis added).

And thus we saw, in the heavenly vision, *the glory of the teletial, which surpasses all understanding*; And no man knows it except him to whom God has revealed it. And thus we saw the glory of the terrestrial which excels in all things the glory of the teletial, even in glory, and in power, and in might, and in dominion. And thus we saw the glory of the celestial, which excels in all things—where God, even the Father, reigns upon his throne forever and ever. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:89–92; emphasis added)

72. (1) 2 Nephi 26:33; Alma 5:33.

73. (2) The religious teaching that all people, regardless of the time of their birth in relation to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ, are able to access the inspiration of Heaven, can be found throughout Christian history. One such example is found in Trumbower’s statement that even, “according to Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE) Abraham, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others had had a share of the Logos, which was later fully embodied in Christ.” See *Rescue for the Dead*, 49.

74. (3) Alma 29:8, see also 2 Nephi 29:12.

75. (4) Joseph taught: “He [God] 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 be judged by that law” (Dahl and Cannon, *Encyclopedia*, 389). See also Doctrine and Covenants 82:3; Alma 39:6.

76. Alma 29:8; Compare with the following pronouncements by the First Presidency in 1978:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe in the gospel. Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come . . . Our

message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father. Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 203–4.

77. See Doctrine and Covenants 76:51–69. For instance, the restrictivist conditions for entrance into the celestial kingdom include faith in Christ, repentance, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, receipt of the Gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, and enduring faithfully unto the end.

78. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 49.

79. Of the prophet to whom Christ revealed this good news and on whom he restored the sealing powers to redeem the dead, the apostle John Taylor wrote these canonized words: “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (Doctrine and Covenants 135:3).

80. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 591, 609.

81. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 612.

82. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 11. Joseph continues, “You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God; nor will there be any room for speculation” (11–12).