



12-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Mouw, Richard J. (2005) "Joseph Smith's Theological Challenges: From Revelation and Authority to Metaphysics," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 44 : Iss. 4 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol44/iss4/17>

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Joseph Smith's Theological Challenges: From Revelation and Authority to Metaphysics

Richard J. Mouw

In his published dialogue with the Evangelical theologian Craig Blomberg, Stephen Robinson observed that one of the factors that makes it so difficult for Mormons and Evangelicals to understand each other is the issue of terminology. The theology of the Latter-day Saints, he noted, has not been shaped by the same developments that Protestants have experienced since the days of the Reformation. This means, Robinson said, that “Latter-day Saints are generally quite naïve when it comes to the technical usage of theological language.”¹

David Paulsen is one of several Latter-day Saint scholars who have provided, in a decidedly non-naïve manner, helpful explanations of Mormon doctrines in a careful interaction with thinkers in the mainstream of historic Christianity. He has focused—and I think helpfully—on the question of authority. Certainly when we Evangelicals have critiqued Latter-day Saint thought, we have typically focused, not on the issue of authority as such, but on *Joseph Smith's* claim to authority. In doing so we have largely limited the options to the ones described by Joseph Smith himself. In his account of the reactions of his Protestant neighbors to his testimony regarding the First Vision he wrote, “I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; . . . there were but few who believed

him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad” (Joseph Smith–History 1:24). And so has it continued to be in the Protestant world; we have responded to Joseph’s claim that the ancient prophetic office had been restored in his own person by insisting that he was either a clever huckster or a possessed agent of Satan.

David Paulsen challenges us to look more directly at the theological issues proper. To do this, we must temporarily bracket the questions about the truth of Joseph Smith’s actual claims to have directly encountered the members of the Godhead, and to think instead about the very possibility of authoritative new revelations. As Paulsen lists the questions that he asks us to consider, he rightly prefaces the question of whether God has actually spoken through the prophet Joseph Smith with the more fundamental questions: “So what about God? Where is he? Can he speak? Will he speak?”²

I do think it is good for those representing traditional Christian thought to engage in the theological exercise of bracketing the specific concerns about Joseph Smith’s personality in order to explore the more basic questions posed by Paulsen. Whatever one makes of the account, say, of the First Vision, there is no doubt that it has provided the foundation for developing a highly influential religious perspective and that it is important for us to examine critically the basic features of that perspective. I once came across a comment by Karl Barth, in response to someone who had criticized him for making positive use of something that Søren Kierkegaard had written, with the critic insisting that Kierkegaard was not reliable because he had been mentally unstable. Barth replied that while Kierkegaard may have been mentally unstable, it is important to attend to the fact that many mentally stable people agreed with Kierkegaard’s views. Similarly, in bracketing our assessments of Joseph Smith’s character, we can acknowledge that many clear-thinking Latter-day Saints have been deeply influenced by the theological perspective set forth by the founder of Mormonism. It is no small question why that perspective has taken such a firm hold in the lives of so many people. And there is no doubt that the fundamental emphasis on the very idea of a “living prophet” has resonated in many Latter-day Saint hearts and lives.

As David Paulsen rightly notes, the question of whether we can acknowledge new teachings that are in some sense to be accorded equal weight to the revelations set forth in the Old and New Testaments has long been a matter of major disagreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics.³ The Catholic view is that there is a legitimate “development of dogma” that provides teachings that can be gathered together under the rubric of “tradition,” and these teachings are to be received by the Christian community as the Spirit’s continuing normative guidance to the church. Thus, for example, the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ is to be believed because it is set forth in the New Testament, but the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary is to be believed because it came to be considered an authoritative extension of that biblical doctrine by the office of the *magisterium*.

The basic issue between Protestants and Catholics on this issue was addressed by the great American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray. He observes that since both Protestant and Catholic communities have experienced considerable theological development over the centuries, the issue is not whether to accept theological teachings that go beyond the formulations set forth in the Bible. Both Protestants and Catholics, for example, accept as authoritative those formulations about the Trinity that employ language and concepts—including the term *Trinity* itself—that go beyond the explicit language of the biblical writers. Where Protestants and Catholics differ, says Murray, is on questions of this sort: “What is legitimate development, what is organic growth in the understanding of . . . the primitive discipline of the church, and what, on the other hand, is accretion, additive increment, adulteration of the deposit, distortion of true Christian discipline . . . what are the valid dynamisms of development and what are the forces of distortion?”⁴

A key word here for understanding the Catholic perspective is “organic.” When Catholic authorities exercise their teaching function, “they bring forth,” in the words of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, “from the treasury of Revelation new things and old, making it bear fruit and vigilantly warding off any errors that threaten their flock.”⁵ This “bearing fruit” metaphor is often used to explain

how the Roman Church's magisterial deliverances are to the contents of scripture as a piece of fruit is to the original seed. These teachings do not, for Catholics, provide us with new information; rather, they are considered an explanation of that which is already implicit in biblical revelation.

As Murray's questions indicate, we Protestants worry that what Catholics consider proper organic development is in fact an "adulteration of the deposit." Thus, we insist that various dogmas about Mary and the teaching regarding papal infallibility are not only extrabiblical in their content but are actually incompatible with the "deposit" of revealed truths in the scriptures. The doctrine of the Trinity, on the other hand, is seen by Protestants as a legitimate doctrinal development because it does capture and does explicate the clear sense of what the Bible teaches. While we believe that the original apostles would not recognize various present-day teachings about Mary, we believe that they could sing without any sense of puzzlement the words of the classic Protestant hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty/God in three Persons, blessed Trinity."⁶

We can admit, then, that debates within historic Christianity about adding to the original revelations contained in the Old and New Testaments have a kind of rough parallel with, say, Protestant differences with Mormonism's claims to new revelations. But we cannot push the fact of that parallel too far. Joseph Smith did not talk about a new magisterial teaching office; instead, he insisted on a restored office of *prophet*. His new teachings, then, came not as the result of reflections on the meaning of an original revelation in the Old and New Testaments but from new information that he claimed to receive directly from the members of the Godhead. In this sense, it is not even so important that he brought forth the Book of Mormon, now subtitled by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." As Richard Bushman has pointed out,

From the outset doctrine came day by day in revelations to Joseph Smith. Those revelations comprised the backbone of belief, the doctrine and covenants for the church. . . . [Indeed] most of the applicable Book of Mormon doctrines and principles were revealed

anew to Joseph Smith, and [they] derived their authority from the modern revelation as much as from the Book of Mormon.⁷

The real authority for Mormonism resides not in books but in deliverances from living prophets. The written word has power only as the record of prophetic utterances that have already been received.

Actually, if we are looking for parallels to the Mormon view of authority within mainstream Christianity, Pentecostalism provides us with a better example than does Roman Catholicism. Here, too, there is a strong emphasis on the present-day restoration of the supernatural gifts of the original apostolic era. Indeed, it would not be difficult to find in Pentecostal literature words similar to Joseph Smith's account, in an 1831 Kirkland deliverance, of the gifts that have been restored for the church;⁸ on that occasion Joseph spoke of some being "given, by the Spirit of God, the word of wisdom," to others "the word of knowledge," to others "to have faith to be healed," to others "the working of miracles," as well as prophesying, "discerning of spirits," speaking in tongues, etc. (Doctrine and Covenants 46:17–26).

Here, too, though, the parallel is not strict. Pentecostals typically affirm a high view of biblical authority, insisting that while present-day prophecies may go beyond the content of the Bible, they may not conflict with biblical teaching. Indeed, the prophecies that are regularly delivered in Pentecostal circles are usually not doctrinal teachings at all. Rather, they have the character either of very specific pieces of counsel, as in, "Go ahead with the plans for a new church building," or warnings about judgments that will come about if people continue in their present course.⁹ While Pentecostal Christians might not use the word "organic," they would insist that present-day prophecy must in an important sense "bring forth"—to use the words again of the Vatican II document quoted earlier—"from the treasury of Revelation new things and old, making it bear fruit and vigilantly warding off any errors that threaten their flock."

In contrast to "extrabiblical" themes in both Catholic and Pentecostal thought, Joseph Smith's view does not require strict continuity with the content of past revelations. The Mormon prophetic office is not strictly bound by its previous utterances. The prophet may even call for major teachings of the past to be repealed and for

major practices that were once mandated to be overturned.¹⁰ Joseph Smith's theology of the extrabiblical allows for and promotes an expectation of "newness" in the "extra" that goes beyond anything advocated in either Catholicism or Pentecostalism.

David Paulsen is right when he contends that Joseph Smith's "claim to direct revelation from God" in fact "challenges every variety of Christian thought and, at the same time, serves to ground all of Joseph's additional claims." To be sure, those claims may turn out to be, as Paulsen puts it, "biblically consistent, rationally plausible or existentially appealing"—but those features do not make them authoritative. What really counts, as Paulsen says, is that those claims "were directly revealed by God" to a living prophet.¹¹

In the final analysis, then, after looking at the basic theological issues, we have no alternative but to "un-bracket" the question of the truth of Joseph Smith's claims to having received direct revelations from God. And that is obviously a key item for continuing dialogue. For now, however, I want simply to acknowledge the importance of a question that I referred to briefly earlier: Why has Joseph Smith's theology had such an appeal for so many people? Mormonism has gone from being a small and rather exotic manifestation of the restorationist-primitivist impulses that came to play in the half-century or so after the American Revolution to what is now an emerging world religion.

Joseph Smith saw that the restoration of the prophetic office brought doctrinal certainty amid what he described as "this war of words and tumult of opinions" (Joseph Smith—History 1:10) in the religious world of his own day—a factor that David Paulsen sees as commending Mormonism to our present theologically pluralistic environment. That is obviously an important attraction for many. But I see another factor also at work.

One of Joseph Smith's key doctrinal emphases was his theology of God proper. Although he and Mary Baker Eddy went in opposite directions on metaphysical issues—with Joseph arguing for a thorough-going physicalism and the founder of Christian Science insisting on a thorough-going mentalism—their respective theologies have had a similar spiritual result, namely, bringing God and

human beings much closer together. Mrs. Eddy, for example, would endorse the Mormon claim that God and human beings are of the same species with her own teaching that “in divine science, man is the true image of God.”¹²

This teaching is, of course, deeply offensive to both Jews and Christians, for whom the denial of a radical metaphysical distance between Creator and creature violates the biblical warnings against idolatry. But it is one thing to make that point, and another for Christians to ask ourselves whether the early- to mid-nineteenth-century movements that reduced this metaphysical distance can, in any significant way, be seen as a corrective to weaknesses in our own theology and practice.

Joseph Smith's theology, along with that of other restorationist-primitivist groups and Mrs. Eddy (and we can also mention here the transcendentalism of Joseph's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson) emerged in an environment shaped significantly by the high Calvinism of New England Puritanism. As a high Calvinist myself, I think I can make a case that the legitimate *metaphysical* distance between God and his human creatures as advocated by the Puritans tended to reinforce in the Puritan mind and heart an unhealthy *spiritual* distance from the Calvinist deity. Thus it should not surprise us that movements arose to shrink the spiritual distance, even if we must deeply regret that they did so by also shrinking the distance of Being.

There are correctives to this problem that New England Calvinism could have found within the resources of its own orthodox Christian theology. But whatever the efforts to draw on those resources at the time, they were not enough to stem the tide of the movements that challenged the metaphysics of Calvinism as such. When traditional Christians condemn those movements without also acknowledging the spiritual realities that the dissenting groups were addressing, we are missing an important opportunity for theological self-understanding.

David Paulsen has invited us to think long and hard about whether God is still alive and whether he can still speak new things to us.¹³ I am willing to continue to debate that subject. But even more

fundamental to me than the debate about whether or not God is still alive is the question of what it takes for a human being to enter into a restored positive relationship with a living God. And I find the actual words of Joseph Smith in dealing with this central concern to be a helpful place to focus. For example, on the occasion of the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1830, Joseph proclaimed, “We know that all men must repent and believe on the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.” And then he added, “And we know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true; . . . to all those who love and serve God with all their might, minds, and strength” (Doctrine and Covenants 20:29–31).

I have no problem saying these same words in addressing the basic issues of sin and salvation. I am pleased that Ezra Taft Benson asked that the hymn, “How Great Thou Art,” be made a part of Latter-day Saint hymnody. I find it hopeful that we can sing these words together:

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin,
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
How great thou art! How great thou art!¹⁴

My continuing question for my Latter-day Saint friends is whether we mean the same things by the words of this hymn, and, if we do, whether the metaphysics set forth by Joseph Smith attributes to God those features that grant him the power to save us. I can think of no more important subject for our ongoing conversations.

Notes

1. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 13.

2. David Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," in this volume, 202.
3. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 179, 182–83.
4. John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), 53.
5. Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), chap. 3, sec. 25, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.
6. Reginald Heber, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (1826), <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/h/o/holyholy.htm>.
7. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 142.
8. For an account of how these various gifts were seeing as being restored in the famous Pentecostal "Azousa Street Revival" of 1906, see Vinson Synon, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 95–116.
9. For an account of how counsel regarding specific life-situations fits into the larger Pentecostal understanding of various modes of revelation, see Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostalism and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 81–84.
10. See Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declarations 1 and 2.
11. See Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 177.
12. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875; repr., Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1991), 259.
13. See Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 177.
14. "How Great Thou Art," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 86.