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Millet: Joseph Smith Encounters Calvinism



With a recent resurgence of interest in Calvinism, Robert L. Millet's comparison of the teachings of Joseph Smith and John Calvin is timely. The Restoration, says Millet, provides a "striking contrast" to the Reformers' views on the Atonement, divine election, the depravity of man, and God's grace.

Joseph Smith Encounters Calvinism

Robert L. Millet

Joseph Smith once remarked that he intended “to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.”¹ He hoped that “Mormonism” would “revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease and men to become friends and brothers.”² Doctrinal disputes dominated the centuries before the time of Joseph Smith. Religious wars and theological debates raged between Catholics and Protestants in Germany during the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), as well as between Puritans and Episcopalians in England during the Cromwellian Revolution (1640–1660). The underlying issues long remained hotly debated.

Mormonism, which did not spring into existence in a spiritual or intellectual vacuum, offered divine responses to what Christians of Joseph Smith’s day either generally accepted or were still discussing. For example, many Reformers such as John Hus (c. 1374–1415), Martin Luther (1483–1546), and John Calvin (1509–1564) emphasized the exclusive authority of the Bible, salvation by grace alone, and the “priesthood of all believers,” which was in direct opposition to the Catholic reliance on traditions in addition to scripture, on ordinances in addition to grace, and on the necessary powers of bishops and priests. Among the main points of controversy were five ideas advanced by the Calvinists, namely, the total depravity of man, God’s unconditional election of certain people, the limited nature of the Atonement, the irresistibility of God’s grace, and the perseverance of the Saints. These basic tenets of Calvinism were formulated in response to the “five points

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 366.

2. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 316.

of Arminianism.” After giving a brief account of the Calvinist-Arminian controversy, this article will compare the teachings of Joseph Smith on these same five points of doctrine. My focus of attention will be on the prevailing views of Calvin, but I will also bring the Arminian points of view into the discussion as well—not only because these points clarify the essence of these important debates, but they also sharpen the comparison between Joseph Smith and John Calvin, showing just how relevant, useful, and distinctive the theological contributions of Mormonism actually are.

THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN CALVIN AND ARMINIUS

John Calvin was a French theologian and Protestant reformer whose influence continues to be felt throughout the world today. Recent decades have seen a major revival of Calvinist or Reformed theology, particularly among Evangelical Christians. Reactions to Calvin’s teachings in the sixteenth century came almost immediately and most strongly from reformer Jacob Arminius (1559–1609) and his followers, known as the Remonstrants. Arminius was a Dutch theologian who himself had been schooled in the emerging Reformed tradition but had begun to find fault with its premises and conclusions. After Arminius’s death, a document called the Five Articles of Remonstrance was prepared to set forth the major views and concerns of Arminius and his followers. Its points included:

1. God decreed from the foundation of the world that certain individuals who accept Jesus Christ and his gospel will receive eternal life, while all rebellious unbelievers will be damned. In other words, Arminians believed in predestination but not in unconditional election of individuals to eternal life.
2. Jesus Christ suffered and died for the sins of all humankind, but only the faithful (namely those who accept him as Lord and Savior) will enjoy the reconciliation and pardon that come through the Atonement.
3. Man cannot obtain saving faith through his own unaided efforts; he cannot generate it within himself; divine aid or grace is required.
4. The grace or enabling power provided by Deity is the channel that initiates the process of conversion, is the power by which one is sanctified throughout life, and is the final means by which one is glorified in the world to come.
5. Some cooperative and synergistic endeavor exists between man and God; yet this cooperation, on the part of man, is merely a nonresistance to God’s outstretched hand.³

3. I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing and summarizing these principles, as set forth in Roger E. Olson, *Arminianism: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 32. See also Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about*

As Roger Olson of Truett Seminary at Baylor University has explained, the Arminian Articles had direct bearing on doctrines such as original sin, the salvation of children, grace, repentance, faith, and mercy: “Arminians believe that Christ’s death on the cross provides a universal remedy for the guilt of inherited sin so that it is not imputed to infants for Christ’s sake.” In other words, “in Arminian theology all children who die before reaching the age of awakening of conscience and falling into actual sin (as opposed to inbred sin) are considered innocent by God and are taken to paradise.”⁴ Moreover, the Remonstrants taught, in harmony with their Dutch leader, that “Christ’s atoning death on the cross removed the penalty of original sin and released into humanity a new impulse that begins to reverse the depravity with which they all come into the world.” In other words, every person born into the world is entitled to what the Remonstrants called “prevenient grace,” which is “simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible.” This initial grace is, however, resistible by those who choose to reject Jesus’s pardoning mercy.⁵ Finally, the Remonstrants did not set forth an official position relative to the question of whether a man or woman may fall from grace or whether they enjoy “eternal security” following conversion.⁶

A noteworthy proponent of Arminian theology was John Wesley (1703–1791), the father of Methodism, a man President Brigham Young more than once lauded to be as good a man as lived on earth.⁷ Today, many millions of Christians hold to the principles of Arminianism, whether they be Methodist, a part of one of the many offshoots of Methodism (the Holiness movements), or Baptist. Many Christians today, who may not be precise about or knowledgeable of their own theological tradition—even a surprising number who have a Reformed background—hold to Arminian perspectives. Their own personal, homespun version of religion is often instinctively more Arminian than Calvinistic.

The Synod of Dort, however, held in 1618–19 (over a period of seven months), opposed Arminius. The final decree of this council was the response of the Reformed theologians to the Remonstrants’ challenge. Only thirteen Arminian representatives were present at this synod, and they were not allowed to vote. As a result, Calvin’s system became a major part of

Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

4. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 33.

5. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 34–35.

6. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 32.

7. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards and Sons, 1851–86), 7:5; 11:126.

orthodox Christianity's statement of faith and eventually was incorporated in 1646 into the very significant Church of England document known as the Westminster Confession of Faith. Essentially, the followers of Calvin responded to each of the "five points of Arminianism," namely, (1) freedom of the will, (2) conditional election, (3) universal atonement, (4) resistible grace, and (5) falling from grace.⁸ The Calvinist theologians then created the acronym TULIP to set forth their basic beliefs on these five points. The letters refer to:

- T = Total Depravity
- U = Unconditional Election
- L = Limited Atonement
- I = Irresistible Grace
- P = Perseverance of the Saints

In short, the Five Points of Calvinism were a direct reaction to the Five Points of Arminianism.

With this as background, I now turn to compare these five principles of Calvinism and Reformed theology with the teachings of Joseph Smith and the Restoration's perspective on each of them. The following discussions draw from the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and the teachings of Joseph Smith and his apostolic and prophetic successors in order to clarify the similarities and differences between LDS teachings and the key points of doctrine advanced by John Calvin and his adherents still today.

1. TOTAL DEPRAVITY

A Reformed Perspective

Calvinism rests upon the central teaching of the sovereignty of God the Almighty. He is the Father of lights. He is over all, above and beyond all. Nothing takes place that is not part of his mind or his plan. God embodies every virtue, every divine attribute, and every positive quality. He has all power, knows all things, and is, inasmuch as he is incorporeal, everywhere present, in and through all things. Further, God is holy. As a transcendent and eminent being, he is separate and apart from all his creations and stands independent of the same. He is timeless (outside of time), impassible (incapable of feeling pain or suffering injury or damage), and immutable (does not change).

8. See Frank S. Page, *Trouble with the Tulip*, 2d ed. (Canton, Ga.: Riverstone Publishing, 2006), 26–28.

Mortal men and women, on the other hand, are fallen, corrupt, wayward, prone to evil, rebellious—they are depraved. Man was created in the image and likeness of God, to be sure, but as a result of the Fall that image has been bent and marred. Humanity is unholy. In other words, no one deserves to be saved; all are sold under sin and deserve only to be damned and condemned by the wrath and justice of God.

Our good works, as Isaiah was instructed, are as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). It is not that men and women are as bad as they can possibly be, nor is it impossible for them to perform noble actions, but rather every facet of the human personality is corrupt and at odds with the purposes of Deity. Total depravity is not, as Edwin H. Palmer has observed, absolute depravity. “Absolute depravity means that a person expresses his depravity to the *n*th degree at all times. Not only are all of his thoughts, words, and deeds sinful, but they are as vicious as possible. . . . It is not that he cannot commit a worse crime; rather it is that nothing that he does is good. Evil pervades every faculty of his soul and every sphere of his life.”⁹ The Heidelberg Catechism clarifies that good works are “only those which are done from true faith, according to the law of God, and to His glory.”¹⁰ Palmer adds: “A relatively good work, on the other hand, may have the correct outward form but not be done from a true faith or to the glory of God. Thus non-Christians can perform relatively good deeds, even though they themselves are totally depraved.”¹¹

An LDS Perspective

Joseph Smith taught that we worship “a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting, the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them” (D&C 20:17). Our Father in heaven is a gloried, exalted, resurrected being, “the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; . . . in Him every good gift and every good principle dwell; He is the Father of lights; in Him the principle of faith dwells independently, and He is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings center for life and salvation.”¹² The Almighty sits enthroned, “with glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment,

9. Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism: A Study Guide*, enl. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1980), 9.

10. Question and Answer 91, cited in Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 11.

11. Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 11.

12. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 2:2.

mercy, and an infinity of fulness” (D&C 109:77). He is not a student, an apprentice, or a novice.

In 1840, Matthew S. Davis, a man not of the LDS faith, heard Joseph Smith preach in Washington, D.C. In a letter to his wife, he explained that Joseph taught, “I believe that there is a God, possessing all the attributes ascribed to Him by all Christians of all denominations; that He reigns over all things in heaven and on earth, and that all are subject to his power.” Davis also reported that he heard the Mormon prophet say, “I believe that God is eternal. That He had no beginning, and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end.”¹³

As to the nature of humanity, Latter-day Saints often distinguish between *eternal man* and *mortal man*. We believe that we are the spirit sons and daughters of God, that we have upon us God’s image and likeness, and that within us, albeit in rudimentary form, are divine attributes and qualities. In short, we have the power and potential, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, to grow spiritually and become more and more Christlike, more and more like God, to become, as Peter taught, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

At the same time, we live in a fallen world, are conceived in sin (Moses 6:55; see also Ps. 51:5), and inhabit a corruptible and fallen body. While Latter-day Saints do not believe they are either accountable or responsible for Adam’s transgression in Eden (Moses 6:53; A of F 2), it is safe to say that they are affected dramatically by that fall—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. In the words of the brother of Jared, “because of the fall our natures have become evil continually” (Ether 3:2). We are, in the language of Lehi, “lost because of the transgression of [our first] parents” (2 Ne. 2:21). In my view, there are few doctrines that receive a stronger confirmation in daily life than the Fall. People are sinful, they stray, they often avoid what is elevating and yearn for that which is despicable. If they are devoid of divine aid and without spiritual resuscitation, they remain forever lost and fallen (1 Ne. 10:6), enemies to God and to themselves (Mosiah 3:19; Alma 41:11), spiritually stillborn. This is a sobering perspective on the Fall, but without it there may be no solid reverence for the holy Atonement; one does not fully appreciate the medicine if he or she does not suspect or take seriously the malady.¹⁴

13. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:78–79.

14. See Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 33.

And yet in spite of the clarity of teachings, particularly within the Book of Mormon, regarding the cataclysmic effects of the Fall, few Mormons would speak of humankind as “totally depraved” by nature. For one thing, most followers of Joseph Smith would state that because God had forgiven Adam and Eve their transgression in Eden, there is no “original sin,” “original guilt,” “curse of Adam,” or taint perpetuated through the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve (Moses 6:53–54; see also Moro. 8:8). From an LDS perspective, the Fall was as much a part of the foreordained plan of the Father as the Atonement; Jesus was indeed “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8; Moses 7:47). We are not now, as traditional Christianity would aver, a part of God’s Plan B, Plan A having been foiled by our first parents’ presumptuous and power-hungry quest to be like the Almighty.

C. S. Lewis did not hold to a traditional Christian view of human depravity either, but rather represents eloquently a perspective similar to the views and attitudes of Latter-day Saints. For one thing, Lewis concluded that if people are depraved, they cannot even decide between what is good and what is evil. “The doctrine of Total Depravity—when the consequence is drawn that, since we are totally depraved, our idea of good is worth simply nothing—may thus turn Christianity into a form of devil-worship.” Lewis also observed: “I disbelieve that doctrine [total depravity], partly on the logical ground that if our depravity were total we should not know ourselves to be depraved, and partly because experience shows us much goodness in human nature.”¹⁵

Lewis observed that the Fall offered “a deeper happiness and a fuller splendour” than if there had been no Fall. Because man has fallen, he pointed out, “for him God does the great deed.” For man, the prodigal, “the eternal Lamb is killed.” Thus “if ninety and nine righteous races inhabiting distant planets that circle distant suns, and needing no redemption on their own account, were made and glorified by the glory which had descended into our race”—namely Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God—then “redeemed humanity” would become “something more glorious than any unfallen race.” “The greater the sin,” he continued, “the greater the mercy: the deeper the death, the brighter the rebirth. And this super-added glory will, with true vicariousness, exalt all creatures and those who have never fallen will thus bless Adam’s fall.”¹⁶ Or, stated more simply, redeemed humanity will rise to greater heights hereafter than unfallen humanity.

15. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 32, 59; see also C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reunion and Other Essays* (London: William Collins Sons, 1990), 60.

16. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 162.

It has been my experience that few Christians with whom I have associated are completely comfortable with the stark expression that people are by nature totally *depraved*. That word seems an apt description of characters like Ghengis Khan or Adolf Hitler or Ted Bundy or Osama bin Laden, but very few of us have daily dealings with such types. As a result, my observation is that there has been an effort among Christian writers to make this concept more palatable.¹⁷ Many of my Reformed colleagues speak instead of “Total Inability,”¹⁸ of men and women’s incapacity to extricate themselves from the chains of hell without the intervention of a Savior. They note that total depravity is merely a graphic expression intended to sober us to the everlasting reality that we are helpless and hopeless without the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ and the cleansing powers of his Atonement. As my Evangelical friend and colleague Richard Mouw put it, “Even if we were not fallen, we would be totally dependent on God’s goodwill.”¹⁹

In summary, Joseph Smith’s teachings provide a more optimistic picture of the human race than either Calvinism or Arminianism, both of which hold to a view of human depravity. The Book of Mormon describes us as fallen and lost, natural men, without the mediation of Jesus Christ (1 Ne. 10:6; Mosiah 3:19). At the same time, there would be no place within LDS circles for a kind of Edwardsian “sinners in the hands of an angry God”²⁰ motif; neither would there be place for the Arminian claim that man “by himself [can] neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good.”²¹ All humans are the spirit sons and daughters of their Father in Heaven, Latter-day Saints are taught, and from him we inherit remarkable spiritual possibilities.

2. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

A Reformed Perspective

John Calvin taught clearly that God loves all of his children and would that all might be saved. As I have indicated above, however, no single person *deserves* to be saved, for, in the words of Paul to the saints at Rome, “all

17. I say this in light of the revival of the old-time Calvinism through the writings and sermons of such contemporary Evangelical Christians as John Piper, R. C. Sproul, James Montgomery Boice, and John F. MacArthur.

18. See Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 14.

19. Richard J. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 28.

20. Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) is perhaps the most revered Calvinistic theologian/evangelist of the First Great Awakening.

21. The Five Articles of the Remonstrants (1610), Dennis Bratcher, ed., www.crivoice.org/creedremonstrants.html.

have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). However, the Almighty chose from before the foundations of this world—long before they were born on earth (while they were yet only anticipations in the mind of the Father)—to save a portion of his creatures whom he designates as the *elect*. All others are among the *reprobate*, the lost, the damned.

The Westminster Confession explains that the elect are chosen, not for any act of their own, not for any grand deeds they will necessarily perform as mortals, but rather as a supernal manifestation of God’s loving kindness. The reprobate are damned from eternity. The elect are those who will respond to the word in mortality, while the reprobate will remain outside the pale of heaven’s mercies and Christ’s salvation.²² This doctrine, known to the world as predestination, affirms that God’s purposes will not fail, that salvation will come to his elect unconditionally. Richard Mouw calls this a form of “divine selectiveness.” It is “a divine power that seems to reach down and grab a person by surprise.” Further, he adds, “many of us have to admit that our coming to faith has a strong element of being drawn in against our own inclinations.”²³

Another Calvinist aptly described the reaction to divine election or predestination by most persons on the street: “When the terms *predestination* or *divine election* are used, a shiver goes down many people’s spines; and they picture man caught in the clutches of a horrible, impersonal Fate. Others—even those who believe in the doctrine—think it is something that is all right for the theological classroom, but that it has no place in the pulpit. They would rather have people study it in secret in the privacy of the home.” This writer went on to certify, to the contrary, that predestination “is perhaps the finest, warmest, most joyous teaching in all the Bible. It will cause the Christian to praise and thank God for saving him, a good for nothing, hell-deserving sinner.”²⁴

Or, as R. C. Sproul has declared:

Our final destination, heaven or hell, is decided by God, not only before we get here, but before we are even born. It teaches that our ultimate destiny is in the hands of God. Another way of saying it is this: From all eternity, before we ever live, God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven and others he chose to pass over, to allow them to follow the consequences of their sins into eternal torment in hell.

22. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.6a, 12.1, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/.

23. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 31, 32.

24. Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 24.

Further, to say “that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over his entire creation. If something could come to pass apart from his sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate his sovereignty. . . . If God is not sovereign, then God is not God.”²⁵

An LDS Perspective

The doctrine of divine election or predestination is comforting to many Christians, inasmuch as it lays stress upon God’s power to accomplish his eternal purposes. It is a tight theological system, void of any doctrinal wiggle room. People are either saved or damned. They are either chosen before they were ever born to be heirs of heaven or selected before they took their first breath as inheritors of hell. It is interesting to note that four members of young Joseph Smith’s family joined the local Presbyterian Church in Palmyra (JS–H 1:7), and we would be safe in presuming that Reformed theology informed the teachings of that church. Joseph Smith Sr. was a deeply spiritual man and found himself more attracted to Universalism, a belief that the Almighty will eventually find a way, through his infinite love and endless patience, to save all of his children and bring them to heaven. Young Joseph reported that he was somewhat impressed with Methodism (JS–H 1:8) and thus may have been more Arminian in his thinking at that young age.

It would seem that the earliest serious study in the Prophet Joseph’s life bearing upon the question at hand would have been his translation of the Book of Mormon. This text certainly points its readers to the majesty of God and to the plight of fallen men and women and of their utter helplessness without the intervention of a Savior. And yet it also speaks at great length about our capacity to choose for ourselves whether we will take the path of salvation or the path of damnation (2 Ne. 2:25–26; Hel. 14:30). Similar teachings are to be found in the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 58:26–28; 61:22; 62:8).

Joseph Smith clarified that election is a synergistic work between man and God: “This is the election we believe in, . . . in the words of the beloved Peter and Paul, we exhort you to ‘work out your *own salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is *God which worketh in you* both to will and to do His good pleasure.”²⁶ Instead of trying to separate into “water-tight compartments” what God does and what man must do, God and man are working

25. R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God: Know God’s Perfect Plan for His Glory and His Children* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1986), 22, 26.

26. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:266; italics added.

together toward the salvation of the human soul.²⁷ To be sure, while many Reformed thinkers are convinced that every electron that moves does so under the sovereign eye of Deity and every human decision to choose right or yield to evil is predetermined according to a *monergistic* plan (God governs in all affairs and preplans the end from the beginning), yet a form of human free will exists.²⁸ In that vein, since the time of Calvin many of his followers have tended to shy away from what has been called “double predestination,” the belief that God not only chooses some for heaven but also actively predestines some to eternal hell and torment; instead, they accept that man’s movement toward the good is God-directed and God-empowered, while an individual must actually choose *not* to accept Christ. That is, the depraved demonstrate why they should be damned. On the other hand, John Wesley plainly taught that an acceptance of unconditional election necessitates an acceptance of double predestination.²⁹

Joseph Smith may have encountered the doctrine of premortal existence, the belief that we lived as spirits or organized intelligences (Abr. 3:22–23) before we were born, as early as his translation of Alma 13 in the Book of Mormon, although Orson Pratt offers his opinion that these teachings may not have registered with the Prophet at the time.³⁰ It was most likely when Joseph was involved in his inspired translation of Genesis (Moses 3:5; 4:1–4) that the concept of life before this life burst upon his understanding. Out of this salient teaching came the doctrine of foreordination. “Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the grand council of heaven.”³¹ And yet the thirteenth chapter of Alma makes clear that all premortal calls and assignments are conditional, that not all of those who were ordained there to carry out important labors in this second estate will live worthy of their foreordination (Alma 13:4). In the words of President Harold B. Lee:

Despite that calling which is spoken of in the scriptures as “foreordination,” we have another inspired declaration: “Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen” (D&C 121:34). This suggests that even though

27. See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 131–32. Lewis makes specific reference to Paul’s synergistic thinking in Philippians 2:12–13, in which the Philippian saints are told to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, but then are instructed that it is God who is working within them both to do and will his good pleasure. An LDS perspective might be stated similarly.

28. See, for example, Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2001).

29. See Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 108.

30. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:249.

31. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 365.

we have our free agency here, there are many who were foreordained before the world was, to a greater state than they have prepared themselves for here. Even though they might have been among the noble and great, from among whom the Father declared he would make his chosen leaders, they may fail of that calling here in mortality.³²

Latter-day Saints place freedom of the will at the heart of the plan of salvation and insist that only a free and open acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ—motivated by one’s acknowledgment of and love for the Savior—brings happiness here and eternal reward hereafter. In a similar vein, Arminian Roger Olson points out that “the main reason Arminians reject the Calvinistic notion of monergistic salvation, in which God unconditionally elects some to salvation and bends their wills irresistibly, is that it violates the character of God and the nature of a personal relationship. If God saved unconditionally and irresistibly, why doesn’t he save all? . . . If the humans chosen by God cannot resist having a right relationship with God, what kind of relationship is it?”³³

Moreover, while Mormonism diverges less from Arminianism than from Calvinism on the point of election, it should be remembered that the LDS concept of election goes beyond matters of personal belief and includes the performance of ordinances by those in authority. An Arminian “priesthood of all believers” stands in stark contrast to the ordered system of Church priesthood offices and keys as found among Latter-day Saints.

Further, Latter-day Saints almost never use the term *predestination* in connection to their own salvation; however, Joseph Smith indicated that there was one matter that was indeed predestined from before the world was, namely, the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The King James Version of Romans 8:29–30 reads: “For whom he [God the Father] did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Even though the word “whom” at the beginning of these three phrases is a plural relative pronoun (*hous*) in the Greek, note how the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of this passage reads these as singular references to Christ, consistent with the singular “firstborn” in verse 29: “For him [Christ] whom he [God the Father] did foreknow (*proegnō*), he also did predestinate (*proōrisen*) to be conformed

32. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1973, 7. For a strong statement against predestination, see James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 191.

33. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 38.

to his [God's] image, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, him whom he did predestinate [apparently still referring to Jesus], him he also called; and him whom he called, him he also sanctified; and him whom he sanctified, him he also glorified."

Clearly, the JST shifts the emphasis away from the supposed predestination of the saints to the predestination of Christ, consonant with Peter's focus in Acts 2:23 on the deliverance and crucifixion of Jesus by lawless hands "by the determinate (*hōrismenēi*) counsel and foreknowledge (*prognōsei*) of God." If salvation is to come, it will come through Christ and in no other way. That proposition is set, fixed, established, and unchangeable. It is predestined. Joseph Smith thus explained that "unconditional election of individuals to eternal life was not taught by the Apostles," but rather that through the plan established from the foundation of the world, "God did elect or predestinate, that all those who would be saved, should be saved in Christ Jesus, and through obedience to the Gospel."³⁴

As to the matter of reprobation, the concept that persons were preordained to damnation and to serve as a hindrance and impediment to the ongoing work of God's kingdom, President Joseph Fielding Smith stated:

Every soul coming into this world came here with the promise that through obedience he would receive the blessings of salvation. No person was foreordained or appointed to sin or to perform a mission of evil. No person is ever predestined to salvation or damnation. Every person has free agency. Cain was promised by the Lord that if he would do well, he would be accepted (Gen. 4:6–7; Moses 5:22–23). Judas had his agency and acted upon it; no pressure was brought to bear on him to cause him to betray the Lord, but he was led by Lucifer. If men were appointed to sin and betray their brethren, then justice could not demand that they be punished for sin and betrayal when they are guilty.³⁵

The scriptures plainly attest that Christ "will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). The Lord is longsuffering toward us, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

In summary, while many of the fires of "high Calvinism"³⁶ burned brightly and steadily in the nineteenth century, principally within Presbyterian and Congregational circles, the Book of Mormon writers spoke

34. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 189.

35. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:61.

36. Theodore Beza (1519–1605), the man many consider to be Calvin's successor, did much to extend and intensify Calvin's teachings into what is known as high Calvinism.

of a God who would extend himself to bless and save all his children but who would extend salvation only to those who made a personal choice for the gospel of Jesus Christ. God had not predestined the Zoramites, who extolled their elect status atop the Rameumptom (Alma 31), nor would he save or damn any soul either casually or capriciously.

3. LIMITED ATONEMENT

A Reformed Perspective

The Reformed perspective on the saving breadth of Christ's Atonement rests upon the two previous elements of the faith: total depravity and unconditional election. Since no one deserves to be saved, and since only a select portion of God's children will enjoy eternal life, it follows that only some of the human population will accept and apply the propitiatory offering of Jesus's suffering and death. That is to say, the Atonement is limited to those who are elected to salvation, only to those predestined for heaven.

In defining a limited Atonement, or as some have called it, "Particular Redemption,"³⁷ Calvin himself pointed out:

The whole world does not belong to its Creator except that grace rescues from God's curse and wrath and eternal death a limited number who would otherwise perish. But *the world itself is left to its own destruction, to which it has been destined*. Meanwhile, *although Christ interposes himself as mediator, he claims for himself, in common with the Father, the right to choose*. "I am not speaking," he says, "of all; I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18). If anyone asks whence he has chosen them, he replies in another passage: "From the world" (John 15:19), which he excludes from his prayers when he commends his disciples to the Father (John 17:9). This we must believe: when he declares that he knows whom he has chosen, he denotes in the human genus a particular species, distinguished not by the quality of its virtues but by heavenly decree.³⁸

Calvin later added that "the doctrine of salvation, which is said to be reserved solely and individually for the sons of the church, is falsely debased when presented as effectually profitable to all."³⁹

This point of view raises questions: For whom did the Savior give his life? For whom did he intend to die? To which men or women does Christ open the door to salvation here and glorification hereafter? "The doctrine of the limited atonement," Richard Mouw has observed, "has been the most debated of the TULIP teachings within the Calvinist camp, and there are

37. See Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 40.

38. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.22.7; italics added.

39. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.22.10.

more than a few Calvinists who . . . simply reject it outright.” That is to say, they are now four-point rather than five-point Calvinists. “Actually,” Mouw continues,

it has always struck me that the L in TULIP contains the one odd adjective of the lot. The other four adjectives have a somewhat expansive feel to them: “total,” “unconditional,” “irresistible,” “persevering.” And then right in the middle the Calvinists plunk down the word “limited.” Not that this disproves the doctrine—if the atonement is limited, so be it. But surely there is something wrong with giving the impression that the one important thing we want to emphasize about the atoning work of Jesus Christ is that it is “limited.” This certainly does not capture my mood when I reflect on what Jesus accomplished in his atoning work. In my best moments I like to sing about the *magnitude* of the work of the cross.⁴⁰

Presumably, most Calvinists would not suppose that any offering made by the divine Redeemer, any price paid by him, would or should be wasted. Surely, in other words, the infinite Atoner would not suffer or die for persons who will never recognize, receive, and rejoice in his tender mercies.

An LDS Perspective

Latter-day Saints believe in the Bible and in the message of the Bible, especially as pertaining to the most significant moment in salvation history—the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Consequently, in evaluating the Reformed doctrine of Limited Atonement, with our Arminian friends we are left to wrestle with numerous biblical verses that emphasize the universal reach of the Savior’s Atonement (see Matt. 18:14; John 1:29; 3:16–17; Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:21–22; 2 Cor. 5:14–15; Heb. 2:9). In summary, as Paul wrote to Timothy, Christ “will have *all men to be saved*, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4; italics added). Further, “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our sins only, but also *for the sins of the whole world*” (1 Jn. 2:1–2; italics added).

The Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants likewise speak of the broad and comprehensive scope of our Lord’s suffering and death (2 Ne. 9:21, 23; 26:24, 27; 3 Ne. 11:10–11, 14; 27:13–14; D&C 18:10–11; 19:16; 138:1–4). The crux of the matter? “And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us—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; . . . Who

40. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 40, 44.

glorifies the Father, and *saves all the works of his hands*, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him” (D&C 76:40–41, 43, italics added).

In summary, Calvinists feel that the economy of God dictates that only those who are predestined in mortality to come unto Christ are the elect, the Atonement being limited to whom God chooses. Arminians would open that avenue a bit more widely, saying that Christ died on the cross for all mankind, though only those who believe can actually enjoy the gift.⁴¹ Latter-day Saints would open up the matter of election more widely still; while not Universalists (they do not believe that every son and daughter of God will enter into the eternal presence of God in the highest heaven), theirs is in several respects a universal view of salvation: “His blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned” (Mosiah 3:11). With Christ’s death and rising again, the resurrection is a free and completely universal gift: “Behold, he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead. . . . All shall come forth from the dead” (Alma 40:3–4). The plan of God made the opportunity for the highest salvation open to all of God’s children. Joseph Smith stated the doctrine succinctly in the Wentworth Letter: “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, *all mankind may be saved*, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (A of F 3; italics added).

4. IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

A Reformed Perspective

From a religious perspective, grace is a gift from God. It is unearned divine assistance, unmerited divine favor, divine enabling power to accomplish things that could never otherwise be accomplished. The Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace is inextricably linked with the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the unconditional election of those chosen for eternal life before the world was. Calvinists propose that God is all-powerful, that his eternal intentions will be realized, and that nothing happens that he has not decreed. Sometimes spoken of as the *effectual* or *efficacious* or *unconquerable* or *certain* call, this doctrine states that the saved will be saved, the elect will be elected, the faithful will always come to faith.

Edwin Palmer cautioned:

But do not misunderstand the word *irresistible*. To some it may give the meaning of causing someone to do what he does not want to do. . . . All

41. Articles of the Remonstrants, www.criovoice.org/creedremonstrants.html.

that irresistible grace means is that God sends his Holy Spirit to work in the lives of people so that they will definitely and certainly be changed from evil to good people. It means that the Holy Spirit will certainly—without any and’s, if’s and but’s—cause everyone whom God has chosen from eternity and for whom Christ died to believe in Jesus.⁴²

Timothy George provided a slightly softer description of irresistible grace:

It means simply that God is able to accomplish what He has determined to do in the salvation of lost men and women. Arminians are right to protest the notions of mechanical necessity and impersonal determinism suggested (and sadly sometimes taught) under the banner of *irresistible grace*. God created human beings with free moral agency, and He does not violate this even in the supernatural work of regeneration. Christ does not rudely bludgeon His way into the human heart. He does not abrogate his creaturely freedom. No, He beckons and woos. He pleads and pursues, He waits and wins.⁴³

God is sometimes spoken of by Christians—reverently, I hasten to add—as the “Hound of Heaven,” a phrase coined by the English poet Francis Thompson.⁴⁴ It refers to God’s tenacity in seeking out his elect, the Good Shepherd’s quest to bring home the lost sheep, a sovereign, loving, and unstoppable force that eventually brings the wanderer to repentance and to faith in the Almighty through the mediation of his beloved Son. Some have pointed toward this celestial scheme as found in the twenty-third Psalm: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me”—more precisely, will haunt me, will track me, will stalk me—“all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6). God will entice and lead his elect to salvation.

An LDS Perspective

Although Latter-day Saints believe that salvation is available to all men and women (A of F 3), they acknowledge at the same time that the effects of the Fall tend to entice humankind away from God, from godliness, and from an acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To counteract this influence, there are unconditional blessings and benefits—graces that flow from the Almighty. For one thing, Latter-day Saints believe that every man and woman born into mortality possesses the Light of Christ or the Spirit of Jesus Christ. An important manifestation of the Light of

42. Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 57–58.

43. Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God’s Pursuit, Our Response* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011), 74.

44. Cited in Lyle W. Dorsett, *And God Came In: An Extraordinary Story—Joy Davidman, Her Life and Marriage to C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), 64.

Christ is conscience, a moral monitor by which people know right from wrong, good from evil, important from insignificant. If persons are true to this light within them, they will in time be led to higher light and deeper understanding (Moro. 7:12–19; D&C 84:44–48). A second avenue of the Latter-day Saint version of prevenient grace would include the freedom to choose, a freedom that comes as a result of the redemption from the Fall (see 2 Ne. 2:25–27; 10:23; Hel. 14:30–31).

Latter-day Saint prophets have taught that how we lived before we were born does indeed have an influence upon us in this life. Those who were true and faithful in the first estate come to this earth with a spiritual predisposition to recognize and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Master's sheep do in fact know his voice (see John 10:4, 27).⁴⁵ This is, however, a conditional election, an inclination, and a proclivity, not a destiny or an assured reality. For, as we have seen already, some who exercised exceedingly great faith in the first estate “reject the Spirit of God [in this life] on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds” (Alma 13:4).

In summary, while God is all-powerful, omniloving, and omnibenevolent, Latter-day Saints generally believe that God can be resisted; his proffered gift of salvation can be spurned; a hardened heart and a sin-filled or preoccupied soul can fail to hear the still, small voice. Likewise, in contrast to the Arminian fourth article of remonstrance,⁴⁶ Latter-day Saints believe that human agency can involve more than a nonresistance to grace; it can be an active force for good that works in tandem with God's saving power. They tend to sing what they believe, and the hymn declares:

Know this, that every soul is free
 To choose his life and what he'll be;
 For this eternal truth is giv'n:
 That God will force no man to heav'n.
 He'll call, persuade, direct aright,
 And bless with wisdom, love, and light,
 In nameless ways be good and kind,
 But never force the human mind.⁴⁷

45. See Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 149–50; Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 12–14; Lee, Conference Report, 7–8; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: The First Coming of the Son of Man*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81), 1:23; Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 38–39.

46. Articles of the Remonstrants, www.crivoice.org/creedremonstrants.html.

47. *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. 240.

5. PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

A Reformed Perspective

This final element of TULIP may be stated quite simply: once saved, always saved. In other words, once individuals have been saved—have acknowledged their sinfulness, have recognized their pitiable plight, have received Jesus as Savior and Lord, and have given their heart and life to him—there is nothing that can be done to break that binding seal. Once a person has committed to Christ, Christ is forevermore committed to the eternal glorification of the person; he or she will go to heaven and have no reason to fear hell. The flame that burns brightly in the soul, the peaceful assurance of “eternal security,” cannot be quenched. As Charles Hodge explains, salvation here and hereafter is as fixed and immutable as God’s love: “The perseverance of the saints is to be attributed not to the strength of their love of God, nor to anything else in themselves, but solely to the free and infinite love of God.”⁴⁸

An LDS Perspective

It should be obvious why this is perhaps the most mentioned and the most treasured of the five points—it removes all worry about the future and allows people to live unshackled from anxiety concerning their standing before God. It is likely also one of the most abused of all the tenets of Calvinism, one that enables people to make a profession of faith and thereafter live any way they choose, knowing resolutely that they are heaven-bound. Sin does not get in the way. Apostasy does not foreclose future privileges. Indecency and immorality pose no threat. Many Calvinists sense the problems with such an entitled view and would be quick to add that persons who have truly been saved would not do such things. Their hearts have been changed. They have been liberated from both the taint and the tyranny of sin. They have been born again and have become new creatures in Christ.

I agree that true conversion to the Lord should result in such a mighty change. When men and women sincerely nail their sins to the cross of Christ, their identity is changed and their nature is transformed. And yet, as major Christian writers have pointed out recently, too many professing Christians have walked an aisle, signed a card, prayed a prayer, and still not forsaken worldliness. They talk the talk but do not walk the walk: they do not live essentially any differently than people of the world.

48. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1838), 126.

And why is this? The consensus among many of these recent Christian writers is that so much emphasis has been placed upon salvation as a free gift, upon the grace of Deity and the warning against legalistic obedience, that too little emphasis has been placed upon the discipleship associated with the Savior's invitation: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23), or: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Salvation has been teased apart from discipleship. Conversion and rebirth have been separated from obedience. An unintended but inappropriate wall has been constructed between justification and sanctification.⁴⁹

Joseph Smith taught that if people receive the gospel, strive to remain loyal and true to the Savior, as manifest by their desire to keep his commandments, "hungering and thirsting after righteousness" and being "willing to serve God at all hazards" (2 Pet. 1:10), they will eventually make their calling and election to eternal life sure.⁵⁰ That is, they will have passed the tests of mortality, will have had the day of judgment advanced, and will receive the promise and assurance here of eternal life hereafter. And yet even this lofty assurance is something from which one may fall. That is, the Saints may fall from grace. Every human soul is called upon to "endure to the end" (Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; James 5:11; 1 Ne. 13:37; 3 Ne. 15:9; 27:16–17; D&C 6:13; 14:7; 18:22; 20:25, 29; 50:5; 101:35), to remain steadfast and true—clearly with and only through the enabling power of Christ—until they have safely passed into the world to come.⁵¹

Notice the following statements from early Christian thinkers, which are often quoted by Latter-day Saints to support their understanding of the perseverance of the saints:⁵²

The whole past time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger. . . . Take heed, lest resting at our ease, as those who are the called, we fall asleep in our sins. For then, the wicked prince, acquiring power over us, will thrust

49. See Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005); Robert Jeffress, *Grace Gone Wild: Getting a Grip on God's Amazing Gift* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Water Brook Press, 2005); Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006); John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003).

50. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 149–50.

51. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 3:325–54.

52. All are taken from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981).

us away from the kingdom of the Lord. . . . Let us beware lest we be found to be, as it is written, the “many who are called,” but not the “few who are chosen.” (Barnabas, in *ANF* 1:139)

He who hopes for everlasting rest knows also that the entrance to it is toilsome and narrow. So let him who has once received the gospel not turn back, like Lot’s wife, as is said—even in the very hour in which he has come to the knowledge of salvation. And let him not go back either to his former life . . . or to heresies. (Clement of Alexandria, in *ANF* 2:550)

It is neither the faith, nor the love, nor the hope, nor the endurance of one day; rather, “he that endures to the end shall be saved.” (Clement of Alexandria, in *ANF* 2:600)

No one is a Christian but he who perseveres even to the end. (Tertullian, in *ANF* 3:244)

Some think that God is under a necessity of bestowing even on the unworthy what He has promised [to give]. So they turn His liberality into His slavery. . . . For do not many afterwards fall out of [grace]? Is not this gift taken away from many? These, no doubt, are they who, . . . after approaching to the faith of repentance, build on the sands a house doomed to ruin. (Tertullian, in *ANF* 3:661)

John Stott, a respected Christian thinker, made the following insightful observation about salvation:⁵³

Salvation is a big and comprehensive word. It embraces the totality of God’s saving work, from beginning to end. In fact, salvation has three tenses, past, present, and future. . . . I have been saved (in the past) from the penalty of sin by a crucified Saviour. I am being saved (in the present) from the power of sin by a living Saviour. And I shall be saved (in the future) from the very presence of sin by a coming Saviour. . . .

If therefore you were to ask me, “Are you saved?” there is only one correct biblical answer which I could give you: “yes and no.” Yes, in the sense that by the sheer grace and mercy of God through the death of Jesus Christ, my Saviour, He has forgiven my sins, justified me and reconciled me to himself. But no, in the sense that I still have a fallen nature and live in a fallen world and have a corruptible body, and I am longing for my salvation to be brought to its triumphant completion.⁵⁴

53. With but very few exceptions, the word *salvation*, as used in ancient and modern scripture, means the same thing as exaltation or eternal life (see Mosiah 3:18; Alma 11:40–41; Hel. 13:38; D&C 6:13; 14:7; 123:17; Abr. 2:11; A of F 3; and Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978], 129, 306). This is why I feel comfortable with the quotation above from Stott: if we are being true to our canonical texts, when we speak of salvation, we are speaking of eternal life in the highest heaven, just as those Christians not of our faith would be. Neither they nor we are speaking only of resurrected immortality.

54. *Authentic Christianity from the Writings of John Stott*, ed. Timothy Dudley-Smith (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 168.

In the document entitled “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration” (1999) are found these words: “Salvation in its full sense is from the guilt of sin in the past, the power of sin in the present, and the presence of sin in the future. Thus, *while in foretaste believers enjoy salvation now, they still await its fullness.*”⁵⁵

From an LDS perspective, is there any way to know we are saved other than receiving the more sure word of prophecy? I think there is. That same Holy Spirit of Promise—promised to the followers of Christ—that searches the hearts of men and women, that ratifies and approves and seals ordinances (sacraments) and seals the faithful, that same Holy Spirit serves, as Paul indicates, as the “earnest of our inheritance” (2 Cor.1:21–22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). The Lord’s “earnest money” on us, his down payment, his indication to us that he will save us, is the Holy Spirit. We know that we are on course when the Spirit is with us. We know that our lives are approved of God when the Spirit is with us. We know that we are in Christ, in covenant, when the Spirit is with us. And we know, I suggest, that we are saved when the Spirit is with us. If we live in such a way that we enjoy the gifts of the Spirit, then we are in the line of our duty, we are approved of the heavens, and if we were to die suddenly, we would go into paradise and eventually into the highest heaven. The following is an intriguing statement from Brigham Young:

If a person with an honest heart, a broken, contrite, and pure spirit, in all fervency and honesty of soul, presents himself and says that he wishes to be baptized for the remission of his sins, and the ordinance is administered by one having authority, is that man saved? Yes, to that period of time. Should the Lord see proper to take him then from the earth, the man has believed and been baptized, and is a fit subject for heaven—a candidate for the kingdom of God in the celestial world, because he has repented and done all that was required of him at that hour. . . .

It is present salvation and the present influence of the Holy Ghost that we need every day to keep us on saving ground. . . .

I want present salvation. I preach, comparatively, but little about the eternities and Gods, and their wonderful works in eternity; and do not tell who first made them, nor how they were made; for I know nothing about that. *Life is for us, and it is for us to receive it today, and not wait for the Millennium. Let us take a course to be saved today,* and, when evening comes, review the acts of the day, repent of our sins, if we have any to repent of, and say our prayers; then we can lie down and sleep in peace until the morning, arise with gratitude to God, commence the labors of another day, and strive to live the whole day to God and nobody else.⁵⁶

55. Cited in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 88; italics added.

56. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:124–25; italics added.

“I am in the hands of the Lord,” President Young pointed out, “and never trouble myself about my salvation, or what the Lord will do with me hereafter.”⁵⁷ As he said on another occasion, our work “is a work of the present. *The salvation we are seeking is for the present, and sought correctly, it can be obtained, and be continually enjoyed.* If it continues today, it is upon the same principle that it will continue tomorrow, the next day, the next week, or the next year, and, we might say, the next eternity.”⁵⁸

“If we are saved,” Brother Brigham declared, “we are happy, we are filled with light, glory, intelligence, and we pursue a course to enjoy the blessings that the Lord has in store for us. If we continue to pursue that course, it produces just the thing we want, that is, *to be saved at this present moment.* And that will lay the foundation to be saved forever and forever, which will amount to an eternal salvation.”⁵⁹

Likewise, President David O. McKay taught that “the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . is in very deed, in every way, the power of God unto salvation. It is salvation here—here and now. It gives to every man the perfect life, here and now, as well as hereafter.”⁶⁰ On another occasion, he stated: “Sometimes we think of salvation as a state of bliss after we die. I should like to think of salvation as a condition here in life today. I like to think that my Church makes me a better man, my wife a better woman, . . . my children nobler sons and daughters, here and now. I look upon the gospel as a power contributing to those conditions.”⁶¹

Living in a state of salvation does not entail an inordinate confidence in self but rather a hope in Christ. To hope in our modern world is to wish, to worry, to fret about some particular outcome. In the scriptures, however, hope is expectation, anticipation, and assurance. Faith in Christ gives rise to hope in Christ. “And what is it that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you that ye shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal” (Moro. 7:41). To have faith in Christ is to have the assurance that as we rely wholly upon his merits and mercy and trust in his redeeming grace, we will make it (see 2 Ne. 31:19; Moro. 6:4).

57. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:276.

58. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:131; italics added.

59. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:131; italics added.

60. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 6.

61. David O. McKay, cited in *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, February 28, 1953. For a recent excellent treatment of the concept of “being saved” in LDS theology, see *True to the Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 150–53.

As early as the time of the organization of the Church in April 1830, the Saints were instructed:

And we know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true; and we know also, that sanctification 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. But there is a possibility that man may fall from grace and depart from the living God; therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation; yea, and even let those who are sanctified take heed also. (D&C 20:30–34)

“The doctrine that the Presbyterians and Methodists have quarreled so much about,” Joseph Smith noted some fourteen years later,

once in grace, always in grace, or falling away from grace, I will say a word about. They are both wrong. Truth takes a road between them both, for while the Presbyterian [the Calvinist] says: “Once in grace you cannot fall”; the Methodist [Arminian] says: “You can have grace today, fall from it tomorrow, next day have grace again; and so follow on, changing continually.” But the doctrine of the Scriptures and the spirit of Elijah [the sealing power, the power by which people are sealed to eternal life] would show them both false, and take a road between them both, for, according to the scripture, if men have received the good word of God, and tasted of the powers of the world to come, if they fall away, it is impossible to renew them again, seeing they have crucified the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame [see Heb. 6:4–6; compare Matt. 12:31–32]; so there is a possibility of falling away; you could not be renewed again, and the power of Elijah cannot seal against this [unpardonable] sin.⁶²

Jesus will not only bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real and thus provide that final spiritual boost into eternal life, but he will also extend to us that enabling power so essential to daily living, a power that equips us to conquer weakness and begin to partake of the divine nature. In light of the above, I suggest that being in a saved condition is living in the quiet assurance that God is in his heaven, that Christ is the Lord, and that the plan of redemption is real and in active operation in our personal lives. I would grant that this state of salvation means we are not totally free of weakness, but it means we can proceed confidently in the Savior’s promise that in him we will find strength to overcome, as well as rest and peace, here and hereafter.

In summary, Calvinists believe in the perseverance of the saints, that once they are saved or fully converted to Christ they will forevermore be saved; one cannot fall from grace. Arminians are less decisive on the issue,

62. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 338–39.

but generally they believe that grace will always attend believers on the condition of their nonresistance to God.⁶³ Joseph Smith taught that people may know that their course in this life is pleasing to God⁶⁴ and, further, that those who pursue righteousness with devotion can know that their calling and election to eternal life is sure. But the scriptures make plain the sobering fact that the Saints must press forward, endure to the very end, and hold to the rod of faith until they have finished their work on earth.

CONCLUSION

The principle that drove and informed the writings and sermons of John Calvin was the sovereignty of God. One who seeks to be sensitive to what Calvin emphasized can appreciate why each of what his followers called the “Five Points of Calvinism” is linked inextricably with divine sovereignty:

- God is in complete control of everything.
- As the supreme Creator, he is utterly above and beyond his entire creation; all things bow in humble reverence before him.
- For anything to take place independent of him or apart from his active participation is a contradiction in terms.
- No one can or will be saved who was not already decreed and destined for salvation from eternities past.
- The economy of God requires that the Atonement of Christ—the immediate means of salvation—operates only in behalf of the elect, those who are predestined for heaven.
- Because God is omnipotent, he will bring all of the elect to faith.
- All those who have been called will be chosen for salvation; not one of them will be lost.

Joseph Smith also revealed a sovereign God who has all knowledge and all power; the major difference in that understanding of God’s power is set forth in modern revelation: “Man was also in the beginning with God.

63. The fifth article states: “Whether they [mankind] are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginning of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of neglecting grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full confidence of our mind.” Articles of the Remonstrants, <http://www.crivoice.org/creedremonstrants.html>.

64. *Lectures on Faith*, 3:5; 6:4–7.

Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, *neither indeed can be*. 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. Behold, here is the agency of man” (D&C 93:29–31; italics added). Hence, a Latter-day Saint response to the above bullet points might include a dynamic interaction between the will of God and the agency of his children:

- God is sovereign but does not control the moral agency of humankind.
- God’s will and desire is that all humanity be saved; because people have the power to reject his grace, some things happen independent of God’s will.
- A loving God does not decree or enforce a limited salvation; all are free to choose eternal life through the Atonement of Christ.
- The Atonement of Christ is infinite and eternal, and through it all may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.
- God is omnipotent according to all righteous powers that exist, but he cannot force into salvation the elect who later use their independent agency to reject him.

Clyde D. Ford pointed out that

although the Book of Mormon contains teachings that are similar to those of various early nineteenth-century groups, clearly Book of Mormon theology does not consistently reproduce any existing early nineteenth-century theological perspective. . . . Thus the Book of Mormon presents neither a completely early nineteenth-century Arminian nor Calvinistic theology but sometimes offers . . . a compromise between the two and at other times, a unique perspective, such as the question of accountability for those not exposed to Christian teaching.⁶⁵

God demonstrates his infinite love by being willing to entrust men and women with the moral agency that could in the end either save them or damn them. God does predestinate that if salvation is to come it will come in and through the person and power and work of Jesus Christ, or it will come not at all. The Prophet Joseph made known a Savior who suffered and bled and died for all, even though the painful truth is that the substitutionary Atonement will not prove efficacious for those who refuse the proffered gift.

65. Clyde D. Ford, “Lehi on the Great Issues: Book of Mormon Theology in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 4 (2005): 95.

Joseph Smith also revealed a God whose aim is to save all of his children who will be saved, not merely those who were preselected before birth. The respected Roman Catholic Father Richard John Neuhaus has written:

If we pray for the salvation of all, it would seem that we must hope for the salvation of all. How is it possible for you to pray for what you do not hope for? At the same time, we must take seriously the many statements in the New Testament that some, perhaps many, might be damned. . . .

If it is possible that many will be eternally lost and *if* it is possible that all will be saved, which should we hope for? In view of the command to love all people, must we not hope that in the end all will be saved? Can we love others and *not* hope that they will be saved? . . .

The hope that all may be saved, the hope for . . . all the rest of unknown humanity living and dead, offends some Christians. It is as though salvation were a zero-sum proposition, as though there is only so much to go around, as though God's grace to others will somehow diminish our portion of grace. . . .

But one hears the objection, "What's the point of being a Christian if, in the end, everyone is saved?" People who ask that should listen to themselves. What's the point of being first rather than last in serving the Lord whom you love? What's the point of being found rather than lost? What's the point of knowing the truth rather than living in ignorance? What's the point of being welcomed home by the waiting father rather than languishing by the pig sties? What's the point? The question answers itself.⁶⁶

God will not compel obedience, nor will he pass over anyone's sins.⁶⁷ At the same time, because he loves his children and desires their happiness and joy, he will do all in his power to save them. As Joseph Smith put it, "Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive."⁶⁸ The preaching of Joseph Smith, the message of the Book of Mormon, and the divine encouragement from modern revelation seemed as a cool breeze, a refreshing spiritual oasis to those nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints who had felt only the parching winds of high Calvinism. Many have yearned through the centuries to worship more than an impersonal, impassible deity; to enjoy fellowship with that Lord who did not dictate all things but invited us to be yoked with him; and to be clasped in the loving arms of him who acknowledges human dignity by insisting on human agency. The

66. Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 49, 57.

67. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 187, 189.

68. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 257.

restored gospel represented a stark and often ignored theological corrective. For Latter-day Saints today, it stands as a striking contrast to the Reformers and a welcome invitation into God's plan of happiness.

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