

CHAPTER 11



RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE: JOSEPH SMITH AND THE ENIGMA OF MORMONISM

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Because I spend a significant percentage of my time in outreach—attempting to establish friendships for the church and the university, to build bridges of understanding—I am often asked what it is that contributes to the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are, I suppose, a myriad of answers. In 1974 an article appeared in the popular magazine *Christianity Today* entitled “Why Your Neighbor Joined the Mormon Church.” Five reasons were given:

1. The Latter-day Saints show genuine love and concern by taking care of their people.
2. They strive to build the family unit.
3. They provide for their young people.
4. Theirs is a layman’s church.
5. They believe that divine revelation is the basis for their practices.

After a brief discussion of each of the above, the author of the article concluded: “In a day when many are hesitant to claim that God has said anything definitive, the Mormons stand out in contrast, and many people are ready to listen to what the Mormons

think the voice of God says. It is tragic that their message is false, but it is nonetheless a lesson to us that people are many times ready to hear a voice of authority.”¹ Well, so much for judging things by their fruits (see Matthew 7:15-20)!

Other reasons for church growth include the spirit of community among the Latter-day Saints; the industriousness of the people and their influence for good in society; the LDS adherence to time-honored moral values and a vigorous health code; and the church’s doctrinal positions on timely but age-old issues. What I would like to suggest is another major factor that fascinates curious onlookers: an unusual kind of balance struck by the Latter-day Saints in which paradoxes or seeming contradictions—in doctrine and in practical living—are resolved. Let me suggest several as examples.

Wholly Other, Heavenly Father

Most people, even religious people, wrestle with who and what God is. Is he a force? Is he a *he*? A set of governing laws? The Unmoved Mover? The unknowable, unreachable, untouchable, unfathomable One? A person, a personality, or a being of some kind? Latter-day Saints teach a rather bold doctrine—that God is a man, an exalted and glorified man, a “Man of Holiness” (Moses 6:57). Joseph Smith stated in 1843: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22). When we pray “Our Father which art in heaven,” we mean just what we say. He is the Father of the spirits of all men and women (see Numbers 16:22; 27:16; Hebrews 12:9).

We believe that God possesses every godly attribute in perfection, meaning that there is no knowledge he does not possess nor any power he cannot exercise. He is “infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of

1. Donald P. Shoemaker, “Why Your Neighbor Joined the Mormon Church,” *Christianity Today* 19 (11 October 1974): 11-13.

heaven and earth, and all things which are in them” (D&C 20:17). He embodies “glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fulness, from everlasting to everlasting” (D&C 109:77). At the same time, he is infinitely capable of being personal and available; his infinity precludes neither his immediacy nor his intimacy. Because he is a person, a personage, he is touched by the feeling of our infirmities, just as is his Beloved Son (see Hebrews 4:15).

Fallen Man, Eternal Man

What is the nature of man? Is he prone to choose the right, serve others, and make noble contributions to society? Or, on the other hand, is man a depraved creature, a sinful infidel who seeks only the gratification of the flesh? Which is it? To resolve this dilemma, we must first recognize that some statements from Latter-day Saint literature speak of man’s *eternal* nature, while others speak of his *mortal* or fallen nature.

Joseph Smith taught that man is an eternal being. He declared that the intelligence of man “is not a created being; it existed from eternity, and will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be eternal.”² Subsequent church leaders have explained that the attributes, powers, and capacities possessed by our Father in Heaven reside in men and women in rudimentary and thus potential form. Thus there is a sense in which we might say that men and women, being spiritual heirs to godliness, are good by nature; that is, they are good because they are related to and products of the Highest Good. God is good, even the embodiment and personification of all that is noble, upright, and edifying, and we are from him. Such teachings would surely have stood in stark contrast to the more traditional belief in total depravity held by most Christians in the nineteenth century.

2. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 158; see also 181, 352-54.

Because Latter-day Saints believe in a “fortunate fall,” that the fall of our first parents was as much a part of the plan of God as the atonement—indeed, the atonement derives from the fall—they do not believe in the traditional doctrine of human depravity. “When our spirits took possession of these tabernacles,” President Brigham Young observed, “they were as pure as the angels of God, wherefore total depravity cannot be a true doctrine.”³ Latter-day Saints tend to agree with C. S. Lewis on this matter of human depravity. For one thing, Lewis concluded that if people are truly depraved they cannot even decide between what is good and what is evil. “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.”⁴

On the other hand, LDS scripture, especially the Book of Mormon, is replete with references to the fallen nature of man—the affirmation that the fall of Adam and Eve was real; that it takes a measured toll on each of us, both physically and spiritually; and that unless one partakes of Christ’s divine regenerating powers he or she remains in a fallen and unredeemed condition. Hence the debate between those who argue for man’s nobility and those who argue for man’s ignobility is resolved by asking the question, Which nature are we speaking of? Man is basically good, at least his eternal nature is. Man is basically fallen, at least his mortal nature is. Brigham Young summed up our position on the fall this way: “It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us, so that we may escape from this world into the celestial kingdom.”⁵

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 10:192.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 61; see *Christian Reunion and Other Essays* (London: William Collins Sons, 1990), 60.

5. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:301.

Elder Brother, Lord Omnipotent

In an eagerness to draw closer to Christ, some Christians have begun to cross a sacred line and go beyond that reverential barrier that must be observed by true followers of the Christ. They speak of Jesus as though he were their next-door neighbor, their buddy or chum, their pal. This is not the way to intimacy with the Savior. Oddly enough, strangely enough, it is not through humanizing Jesus, through trying to make him one of the boys, that we draw close to him and incorporate his saving powers. It is, rather, through recognizing his godhood, his divinity, his unspeakable power. In short, the more I sense his greatness, his infinity, his capacity to transform the human soul and my utter helplessness without him, the more I come unto him. It is through the recognition of our own nothingness and weakness that strength is derived (see Mosiah 2:20-21; 4:11-12, 26; Moses 1:10).

This is somewhat related to the LDS tendency to speak of Jesus as our elder brother. He is, of course, our elder brother in that he was what the scriptures call the firstborn of all creation (see Colossians 1:15). But it is of interest to me that the Book of Mormon prophets never speak of Jehovah as our elder brother. Rather, he is the Almighty God, the Eternal Judge, the Holy One of Israel, the Holy Messiah, the Everlasting Father, the Father of heaven and of earth, the God of nature, the Supreme Being, the keeper of the gate, the King of heaven, and the Lord God Omnipotent. One church leader, Elder M. Russell Ballard, explained to LDS students:

We occasionally hear some members refer to Jesus as our Elder Brother, which is a true concept based on our understanding of the premortal life with our Father in Heaven. But like many points of gospel doctrine, that simple truth doesn't go far enough in terms of describing the Savior's role in our present lives and His great position as a member of the Godhead. Thus, some non-LDS Christians are uncomfortable with what they perceive as a secondary role

for Christ in our theology. They feel that we view Jesus as a spiritual peer. They believe that we view Christ as an implementor for God, if you will, but that we don't view Him as God to us and to all mankind, which, of course, is counter to biblical testimony about Christ's divinity.

Let me help us understand, with clarity and testimony, our belief about Jesus Christ. We declare He is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Creator, the Savior, the Captain of our Salvation, the Bright and Morning Star. He has taught us that He is in all things, above all things, through all things and round about all things, that He is Alpha and Omega, the Lord of the Universe, the first and the last relative to our salvation, and that His name is above every name and is in fact the only name under heaven by which we can be saved. . . .

. . . [W]e can understand why some Latter-day Saints have tended to focus on Christ's Sonship as opposed to His Godhood. As members of earthly families, we can relate to Him as a child, as a Son, and as a Brother because we know how that feels. We can personalize that relationship because we ourselves are children, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. For some it may be more difficult to relate to Him as a God. And so in an attempt to draw closer to Christ and to cultivate warm and personal feelings toward Him, some tend to humanize Him, sometimes at the expense of acknowledging His Divinity. So let us be very clear on this point: it is true that Jesus was our Elder Brother in the pre-mortal life, but we believe that in this life it is crucial that we become "born again" as His sons and daughters in the gospel covenant.⁶

6. M. Russell Ballard, "Building Bridges of Understanding," *Ensign*, June 1998, 66-67.

Grace and Works

Various Christian churches wrestle with how much of the responsibility for salvation rests upon men and women and how much rests with God. Not long ago I heard an Evangelical speaker remark, “A Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted.” This bespeaks the notion of salvation by grace alone, the idea that nothing can be added to the finished work of Jesus Christ—including man’s paltry and pitiful efforts to be good and do good. On the other hand, many others in the religious world speak as though human action is vital: we are to pray as if everything depended upon God and then act as if everything depended upon us. Roman Catholics believe that while men and women are saved by the grace of God—his unearned divine assistance, his unmerited favor—the seven sacraments are necessary in order to be accepted by and acceptable to God.

The Book of Mormon clearly states that “salvation is free” (2 Nephi 2:4). It cannot be purchased, bartered for, or, in the strictest sense, earned. Further, salvation or eternal life is “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 6:13; 14:7); it is only “through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” that people may be forgiven, renewed, and transformed spiritually (2 Nephi 2:8; see 31:19; Moroni 6:4; D&C 3:20). Now, having established that Latter-day Saints believe in the grace and mercy of God (and that we cannot, worlds without end, make it into heaven without divine assistance), I hasten to add that we have a strong religious work ethic. For us, works matter. They matter very much. Mormons are known as a hard-working bunch. We believe we have an obligation to go to church, pay tithes and offerings, visit the sick, minister to the poor, and in general live a life that would evidence our belief in Jesus Christ. In today’s jargon, we believe that if we talk the talk we really ought to walk the walk. In short, more is expected of us than a verbal confession of faith.

And so how do we reconcile what would normally be two opposite ends of a theological spectrum? We answer that our good

works, though a *necessary* condition for our salvation—in fact, they manifest our earnest desire to keep our covenant to love God and serve his children—are not *sufficient* for salvation. Another way of saying this is that there are not enough meetings to attend, prayers to offer, or selfless acts of service to assure our entry into the celestial kingdom. As the Book of Mormon puts it, we are saved by grace “after all we can do,” meaning, above and beyond, notwithstanding, in spite of all we can do. As C. S. Lewis stated, “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question, but it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary. . . . You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate into water-tight compartments, what exactly God does and what man does when God and man are working together.”⁷

Salvation Here and Hereafter

Whereas the ultimate blessings of salvation and glorification do not come until the next life, there is a sense in which people in this life may enjoy the assurance of salvation and the peace that accompanies that knowledge (see D&C 59:23). True faith in Christ produces hope in Christ—not worldly wishing but expectation, anticipation, assurance. As the apostle Paul wrote, the Holy Spirit provides the “earnest of our inheritance,” the promise or evidence that we are on course, in covenant, and thus in line for full salvation in the world to come (Ephesians 1:13-14; see 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 5:5). That is, the Spirit of God operating in our lives is like the Lord’s “earnest money” on us—his sweet certification that he seriously intends to save us with an everlasting salvation. Thus if we are striving to cultivate the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are living in what might be called a “saved” condition.

7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 148-49; see *Christian Reunion*, 18.

One of the most respected Evangelical theologians, John Stott, has written:

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.⁸

Brigham Young taught:

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 for us to receive it to-day, and not wait for the millennium. Let us take a course to be saved to-day, and, when evening comes, review the acts of the day, repent of our sins, if we have

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

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 labours of another day, and strive to live the whole day to God and nobody else.⁹

“I am in the hands of the Lord,” Brother Brigham pointed out, “and never trouble myself about my salvation, or what the Lord will do with me hereafter.”¹⁰ 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 to-day, it is upon the same principle that it will continue to-morrow, the next day, the next week, or the next year, and, we might say, the next eternity.”¹¹

David O. McKay, the ninth president of the church, likewise explained 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.”¹² In short, salvation is in Christ, and our covenant with Christ, our trust in his power to redeem us, should be demonstrated in how we live. The influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a sign to us that we are on course, “in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:17), and thus in line for the fulness of salvation.

Static and Dynamic

To some extent, the growth and spread of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be attributed to what some would feel to be contradictory and irreconcilable processes: (1) constancy and adherence to “the ancient order of things”; and (2) development and change, according to needs and circumstances. Mormonism may thus be characterized as a religious culture with both static

9. *Journal of Discourses*, 8:124–25, emphasis added.

10. *Journal of Discourses*, 6:276.

11. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:131, emphasis added.

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

and dynamic elements, a church acclimated to both conservative and progressive postures. The Saints have held tenaciously to and grounded themselves in what they perceive to be the particular beliefs and rites of both ancient Judaism and first-century Christianity. W. D. Davies, a respected New Testament scholar, once observed in an address at Brigham Young University that “Christianity has forgotten its Jewish roots.” “Mormonism arose in a place and time,” Davies continued, “when many utopian, populist, socialistic ideas were in the air. It gave these a disciplined, organized American outlet and form: what it did was to re-Judaize a Christianity that had been too much Hellenized.” “Mormonism certainly injected, and I hope will continue to inject, into the American scene the realism of Judaism and thus challenged a too-Hellenized Christianity to renew its contact with its roots in Israel.”¹³

At the same time, through a belief in modern and continuing revelation, Latter-day Saints have made shifts and developments in policies and procedures according to pressing needs and anticipated challenges. For example, much of the Judeo-Christian world would consider the Bible (particularly the parts they accept as scripture) as embodying the *canon*—the rule of faith and practice. As one of my professors in graduate school emphasized and reemphasized, if the word *canon*, the accepted books of scripture, means anything at all, it is then set, fixed, closed, and established. The LDS canon, on the other hand, is open, flexible, and (when church leaders feel divinely directed) expanding.

The sixth article of faith states: “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.” On the doorstep, a young LDS missionary might be asked, “What is it that you folks believe has been restored?” My guess is that often the missionary would respond something like this: “We believe that the church

13. W. D. Davies, “Israel, the Mormons and the Land,” in *Reflections on Mormonism*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 91-92.

set up by Jesus in the first century has been reestablished.” And, in general, the missionary would be correct. In point of fact, however, the answer is actually much broader than that, for Mormonism represents a restoration not only of New Testament Christianity but also the principles, doctrines, and divine authority enjoyed by prophets and righteous men and women in the Old Testament. In other words, while Latter-day Saints seek to live in harmony with the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, they also participate in such matters as temple worship, a religious activity much more commonly associated with ancient Israel.¹⁴

Education and Religiosity

For some time now, studies have indicated that higher education tends to have a strong negative influence on religiosity. Various explanations have been offered, but perhaps the most popular is the secularizing effect of post-high school study on one’s commitment to the faith. The British physicist Paul Davies observed: “If the [Christian] Church is largely ignored today it is not because science has finally won its age-old battle with religion, but because it has so radically reoriented our society that the biblical perspective of the world now seems largely irrelevant.”¹⁵ A related explanation posits that “higher education tends to both expand one’s horizons and increase exposure to countercultural values. Such exposure works to erode the traditional plausibility structures which maintain the poorly understood religious convictions so typical of American religion. In other words, poorly grounded religious beliefs have simply been unable to stand in the face of challenges generated by modern science and higher education.”¹⁶

14. See Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 46, 59, 68, 85.

15. Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 2.

16. Stan L. Albrecht, “The Consequential Dimension to Mormon Religiosity,” *BYU Studies* 29/2 (1989): 100.

Since their beginnings, the Latter-day Saints have placed tremendous stress on the value of education; it is a religious principle that men and women should strive to gain all of the education and training possible to better themselves and their circumstances in life. Thus for both males and females, the percentage of Latter-day Saints who have completed post-high school education or training is significantly higher than the nation as a whole. Research demonstrates that 53.5% of LDS males have some type of post-high school education, compared to 36.5% for the U.S. population. For females, 44.3% have received some post-high school education, 27.7% for the U.S. population. In addition, the Mormons defy the long-held thesis concerning higher education and religiosity. Weekly attendance at church for males works as follows: those with only a grade school education attended 34% of the time, while Mormon males with post-high school education attended 80% of the meetings. The same results followed in such other areas of religiosity as financial contributions, frequency of personal prayer, and regular personal scripture study. In short, the secularizing influence of higher education does not seem to hold for the Latter-day Saints.¹⁷

Empirical and Personal

It is not uncommon to hear comments about what some perceive to be an LDS overreliance upon feelings, sentiment, or emotion. Feelings do indeed play an important role in our faith and way of life, inasmuch as we believe that it is through the feelings (as well as through the mind) that Deity manifests divine truth to the sincere seeker. But so also is the mind a vital part of one's faith and commitment. I have heard people within the church say that they would live the life of a Latter-day Saint even if they should come to believe it is all untrue. I am not one of those kinds of persons. My religious convictions must be based, not alone upon what I feel but

17. See Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," *Review of Religious Research* 26/1 (1984): 49-54.

also upon what I perceive and grasp and comprehend intellectually. My faith needs to be as satisfying to my mind as it is soothing and settling to my heart. There must be, to draw upon the words of the apostle Peter, a *reason* (meaning “a rational base”) for the *hope* (meaning “the inner conviction”) within me (see 1 Peter 3:15). I have chosen to be a practicing Latter-day Saint, not just because it makes me feel good inside but also because it makes good sense to me; the pieces fit together harmoniously. While there are still matters on the shelf, matters of faith in which tangible evidence is for the moment wanting, I refuse to allow my faith to be held hostage by what I do not know, or by what science has or has not uncovered to date, when in fact what I do know is so grand and mind-expanding. Thus for me Mormonism is “a rational theology.”¹⁸

Professor Randall Balmer of Barnard College at Columbia, a respected historian of religion, undertook a gentle but straightforward critique of his own religious tradition:

I believe because of the epiphanies, small and large, that have intersected my path—small, discrete moments of grace when I have sensed a kind of superintending presence outside of myself. I believe because these moments . . . are too precious to discard, and I choose not to trivialize them by reducing them to rational explanation. I believe because, for me, the alternative to belief is far too daunting. I believe because, at the turn of the twenty-first century, belief itself is an act of defiance in a society still enthralled by the blandishments of Enlightenment rationalism. . . .

Let me lay my cards on the table. More than twenty years of personal reflection and a couple of decades studying evangelicalism in America have persuaded me that . . . evangelicalism stands to lose far more by surrendering its piety than it does by reexamining its theology. . . .

18. See John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1915).

For roughly the last century we evangelicals have imbibed Enlightenment standards of rationality for our theological discourse. That is, we have taken the simple “good news” of the New Testament—the revolutionary notion that the grace of God rescues us from the ravages of our own depravity—and we have dissected it and bent it and crammed it into rationalistic categories that we think will be acceptable to the intellectual community.

One reading of evangelical theology in the twentieth century is that evangelicals were obsessed with fighting the battles they lost a century earlier. . . . Evangelical theologians have expended untold energies responding to the assaults of Enlightenment skeptics.

The evangelical response to . . . intellectual challenges has been, in my judgment, utterly misguided. To these arguments about religious belief, informed by Enlightenment rationalism, evangelicals mounted counterarguments, also informed by Enlightenment rationalism. . . .

Somehow, I don’t think Jeffrey [who asks how he can know there is a God] wants me to rehearse the ontological, the teleological, and the cosmological arguments for the existence of God. . . . So instead of dusting off the teleological argument, I think I’ll remind Jeffrey about Karl Barth, arguably the most important theologian of the twentieth century. Toward the end of his life, after he had written volume after volume on the transcendence of God and the centrality of Jesus, Barth was asked to sum up his work. The good doctor paused for a minute and no doubt looked out the window and played with the stubble on his chin before responding with the words of a Sunday school ditty: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”¹⁹

19. Randall Balmer, *Growing Pains: Learning to Love my Father’s Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 34, 42-43, 44-45, 61-62.

Individual vs. Community

The ideal society in Latter-day Saint theology, the holy city or City of God, is known as Zion. Mormons believe that the ancient prophet Enoch stands as the scriptural prototype of a success story—a story of a people who forsook their sins, emptied themselves of pride and arrogance, and looked to the good of their neighbors continually. They established Zion and were translated—taken into heaven without tasting death (see Hebrews 11:5; Moses 7:69). “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18).

Joseph Smith’s vision of the kingdom of God was extremely broad and comprehensive. It consisted of more than preaching and study and Sabbath services; it entailed the entire renovation of the order of things on earth, the transformation of man and the elevation of society. And at the heart of that sublime vision was the doctrine of Zion, a doctrine and a worldview that would shape the early church and point the Saints of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries toward the eschatological ideal.

Joseph Smith seems to have first encountered the concept of Zion (in a sense other than the holy mount or holy city in Jerusalem) in his translation of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon prophets spoke of Zion as a holy commonwealth, a *society* of the Saints, a *way of life* that was to be established or brought forth under God’s direction. Among the earliest revelations given, now found in the Doctrine and Covenants, was the repeated command, “Now, as you have asked, behold, I say unto you, keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion” (D&C 6:6; also 11:6; 12:6; see 14:6). Zion thus came to be associated with the restored *church* and the grander work of the restoration, and the faithful could take heart in the midst of their troubles, for Zion was the city of God (see D&C 97:19). Indeed, in speaking of the sacred spot

where the people of God congregated, the Lord said: “Behold, the land of Zion—I, the Lord, hold it in mine own hands” (D&C 63:25).

The idea that there was a specific location for the city of Zion within North and South America was taught very early. For a time it was Kirtland, Ohio, and then Joseph Smith received a revelation identifying the center place of Zion as Independence, Jackson County, Missouri (see D&C 57). In addition, Zion is spoken of in scripture as a banner or *ensign* around which a weary or beleaguered people may rally. It is also a *standard* against which the substance and quality of all things are to be evaluated. The Saints are expected to judge all things by a set of guidelines obtained from a source beyond that of unenlightened man (see D&C 64:37-38).

In addition, Zion was and is to be the focus, the convergence, and the concentration of all that is good, all that is ennobling, all that is instructive and inspirational. In short, according to Brigham Young, “every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints.”²⁰ The Saints “rapidly collect the intelligence that is bestowed upon the nations,” President Young said on another occasion, “for all this intelligence belongs to Zion.”²¹ Zion is people, the people of God, those people who have come out of the world of Babylon into the marvelous light of Christ. In this vein the Lord encouraged his little flock: “Verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—THE PURE IN HEART; therefore, let Zion rejoice, while all the wicked shall mourn” (D&C 97:21). Thus Zion is *a state of being*, a state of purity of heart that entitles one to be known as a member of the household of faith. Brigham Young therefore spoke of the Saints having Zion in their hearts: “Unless the people live before the Lord in the obedience of His commandments,” he said, “they cannot have

20. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:224.

21. *Journal of Discourses*, 8:279.

Zion within them.” Further, “As to the spirit of Zion, it is in the hearts of the Saints, of those who love and serve the Lord with all their might, mind, and strength.”²² On another occasion he affirmed: “Zion will be redeemed and built up, and the Saints will rejoice. This is the land of Zion; and *who are Zion? The pure in heart are Zion; they have Zion within them.* Purify yourselves, sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and have the Zion of God within you.”²³ “*Where is Zion? Where the organization of the Church of God is. And may it dwell spiritually in every heart; and may we so live as to always enjoy the Spirit of Zion!*”²⁴

Zion is a place. Zion is a people. Zion is a holy state of being. It is the heritage of the Saints. “The building up of Zion,” Joseph Smith taught,

is a cause that has interested the people of God in every age; it is a theme upon which prophets, priests and kings have dwelt with peculiar delight; they have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the day in which we live; and fired with heavenly and joyful anticipations they have sung and written and prophesied of this our day; but they died without the sight; we are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the Latter-day glory.²⁵

Zion is, as it were, heaven on earth.

The LDS doctrine of a divine plan—including that which deals with heaven and the hereafter—is especially appealing to those who encounter Mormonism. “Expressions of the eternal nature of love and the hope for heavenly reunion,” Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang have written in their book, *Heaven: A History*, “persist in contemporary Christianity.”

22. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:253.

23. *Journal of Discourses*, 8:198, emphasis added.

24. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:205, emphasis added.

25. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 231.

Such sentiments, however, are not situated within a theological structure. Hoping to meet one's family after death is a wish and not a theological argument. While most Christian clergy would not deny that wish, contemporary theologians are not interested in articulating the motif of meeting again in theological terms. The motifs of the modern heaven—eternal progress, love, and fluidity between earth and the other world—while acknowledged by pastors in their funeral sermons, are not fundamental to contemporary Christianity. Priests and pastors might tell families that they will meet their loved ones in heaven as a means of consolation, but contemporary thought does not support that belief as it did in the nineteenth century. There is no longer a strong theological commitment.

They continue:

The major exception to this caveat is the teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are frequently referred to as the Mormons. The modern perspective on heaven—emphasizing the nearness and similarity of the other world to our own and arguing for the eternal nature of love, family, progress, and work—finds its greatest proponent in Latter-day Saint (LDS) understanding of the afterlife. While most contemporary Christian groups neglect afterlife beliefs, what happens to people after they die is crucial to LDS teachings and rituals. Heavenly theology is the result not of mere speculation, but of revelation given to past and present church leaders. . . .

There has been . . . no alteration of the LDS understanding of the afterlife since its articulation by Joseph Smith. If anything, the Latter-day Saints in the twentieth century have become even bolder in their assertion of the importance of their heavenly theology. In the light of what they perceive as

a Christian world which has given up belief in heaven, many Latter-day Saints feel even more of a responsibility to define the meaning of death and eternal life.²⁶

Unlike so many in the religious world, the Latter-day Saints anticipate celestial life on a material world. Orson Pratt, an early church leader, eloquently made this point as follows:

A Saint who is one in deed and in truth, does not look for an immaterial heaven, but he expects a heaven with lands, houses, cities, vegetation, rivers, and animals; with thrones, temples, palaces, kings, princes, priests, and angels; with food, raiment, musical instruments, etc., all of which are material. Indeed, the Saints' heaven is a redeemed, glorified, celestial, material creation, inhabited by glorified material beings, male and female, organized into families, embracing all the relationships of husbands and wives, parents and children, where sorrow, crying, pain, and death will be known no more. Or to speak still more definitely, this earth, when glorified, is the Saints' eternal heaven. On it they expect to live, with body, parts, and holy passions; on it they expect to move and have their being; to eat, drink, converse, worship, sing, play on musical instruments, engage in joyful, innocent, social amusements, visit neighboring towns and neighboring worlds; indeed, matter and its qualities and properties are the only beings or things with which they expect to associate. . . .

Materiality is indelibly stamped upon the very heaven of heavens, upon all the eternal creations; it is the very essence of all existence.²⁷

26. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 312-13, 322.

27. *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 62-63.

Christian, But Different

One of the frequently debated issues in the religious world today is whether Latter-day Saints are Christians. Some of our harsher critics even go so far as to suggest that we worship “a different Jesus.” We resonate with the words of C. S. Lewis: “It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men’s hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense. . . . When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.”²⁸

Latter-day Saints are not Catholic. We are not Protestant. That is to say, we do not fall within the historical line of Christianity; genealogically speaking, we do not trace our authority to Roman Catholicism or to those who chose to protest against the abuses of the Mother church and sought for major reform. Because the Latter-day Saints believe in a period of apostasy or falling away in which divine authority and doctrinal truths were lost after the deaths of the original apostles, we do not accept the creeds of Christianity that grew out of the major church councils. Thus if the crucial criteria for Christian status is either an unbroken historical link with the Christian church or an acceptance of the creeds, then clearly we are not Christian.

On the other hand, Latter-day Saints believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ—that he taught, comforted, liberated, forgave sins, performed miracles (such as stilling the storms, healing the sick, and raising the dead), suffered and died as a substitutionary atonement, and rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion. We believe he came to earth as the Son of God with power to do what no mortal man or woman could ever do. Further, we believe his teachings provide a pattern for the abundant life and happiness here and

28. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, xiv-xv.

eternal reward hereafter. In short, Latter-day Saints claim to be Christian, but different.

Conclusion

For Joseph Smith, spirituality was a state of being, a condition achieved through the merging of the temporal and the spiritual, the finite and the infinite. Spirituality was essentially the result of a righteous life coupled with heightened perspective, an increased sensitivity to the things of God. Spirituality consisted of tying the heavens to the earth, imbuing men and women with the powers of God, and thereby elevating society. Such a change in one's nature was to be undertaken in the world, amidst the throes of spiritual opposition; one need not resort to monasticism in order to come out of the world. It was to be accomplished by every person, not just priest or minister, "for God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve [Apostles], and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them."²⁹ Brigham Young spoke of Joseph Smith's ability to communicate spiritual matters:

When I saw Joseph Smith, he took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God. . . .

The excellency of the glory of the character of brother Joseph Smith was that he could reduce heavenly things to the understanding of the finite. When he preached to the people—revealed the things of God, the will of God, the plan of salvation, the purposes of Jehovah, the relation in which we stand to him and all the heavenly beings, he reduced his teachings to the capacity of every man, woman, and child, making them as plain as a well-defined pathway. . . .

²⁹. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 149.

When you hear a man pour out eternal things, how [good] you feel, to what a nearness you seem to be brought with God. What a delight it was to hear brother Joseph talk upon the great principles of eternity.³⁰

In a very real sense, Mormonism seeks to put back together many dimensions of faith and religious practice that centuries of debate have chosen to separate. The restoration of the gospel entails a kind of de-Platonizing influence; an effort to deconstruct the “wholly other” deity; to reacquaint and rejoin mortal man with what has become the unknowable and unapproachable god of the philosophers. The following revelation came to Joseph Smith in September 1830: “Wherefore, verily I say unto you that *all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal*” (D&C 29:34; emphasis added). Thus the restoration set in motion by Joseph Smith is intended to be a major revolution. Less than two months before his death, Joseph stated boldly: “I calculate to be one of the instruments of setting up the kingdom of [God foreseen by] Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world. . . . It will not be by sword or gun that this kingdom will roll on: the power of truth is such that all nations will be under the necessity of obeying the Gospel.”³¹

And so, Mormonism seeks to reconcile the irreconcilable, to show how Latter-day Saints are Christian, but different; how we can worship and look reverentially to a God who is an exalted Man; how we can be fallen beings with limitless eternal possibilities; how we can strike the delicate balance between the fathomless work of an infinite God and the earnest efforts of finite humankind; how Mormonism possesses both static and dynamic elements, how it is inextricably linked to the past but directed toward the future;

30. A combined expression of Brigham Young from three separate addresses in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:332; 8:206; 4:54.

31. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 366.

how higher education has an almost sacramental dimension, that learning and study are a vital part of our faith and a somewhat unexpected contributor to sustained faithfulness in the church; and, finally, how the LDS heaven is anything but “pie in the sky in the great by and by”; Latter-day Saints rejoice in the fact that this earth will become the celestial kingdom, a tangible sphere on which glorified, pure, and refined men and women will live and enjoy eternal associations forever.

I have chosen to use the words “reconciling the irreconcilable” to refer to this process of synthesis that takes place within LDS culture. Generations have dissected and analyzed theology to the point that we have almost drained religious thought and practice of their dynamic features, created artificial distinctions when perhaps such were never intended, and thereby established opposites between concepts that are really quite similar or at least closely related. Joseph Smith spoke once of two poles of a doctrinal issue and then added “Truth takes a road between them both.”³² Or, as he stated on another occasion, “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”³³

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32. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 338.

33. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:428.