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Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition

Robert L. Millet

Much has been said in recent years about the development and “evolution” of thought and practice in Mormonism. Of particular interest to some is what is perceived to be a “reconstruction of Mormon doctrine,” a movement on the part of the Church away from a traditional view of God, man, and salvation, toward a radical “progressive theology.”1 In 1980 Thomas G. Alexander suggested that “the doctrines of God and man revealed in [the early publications of the Church] were not greatly different from those of some of the religious denominations of the time.” Further, “the doctrine of God preached and believed before 1835 was essentially trinitarian, with God the Father seen as an absolute personage of Spirit, Jesus Christ as a personage of tabernacle, and the Holy Ghost as an impersonal spiritual member of the Godhead.”2

More recently, O. Kendall White has described what he calls a type of “Mormon neoorthodoxy.”3 In White’s view, a spirit of optimism gripped the nation in the years before the First World War, a spirit deriving from the Enlightenment; it was an era wherein a growth in science and technology had led to overly positive attitudes toward man and his potential. People began to conclude that no problems in society were beyond the reach of man’s noble talent to resolve, and thus the first part of this century witnessed the growth of the “social gospel” movement, wherein attempts were made to engage the challenges of society with the positive and lifting teachings of Jesus. World War I brought about a massive change in perspective. It became obvious to modern man, especially many of the clergy, that man could not solve his own problems, could not deal humanely with his fellows, simply could not make it alone. These feelings of frustration, pessimism, and self-doubt began to be reflected in what came to be known

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as “neoorthodox” theology. Thus neoorthodoxy represented a “crisis theology,” an attempt to deal with a threat to previously established belief systems. Theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner, and Karl Barth all recognized the need for a turn to a higher power, a return to the “orthodox” theology of the Reformation—an emphasis upon such doctrines as the sovereignty of God, the moral depravity of man, and salvation by grace.

From White’s perspective, Mormonism emerged in the midst of Restorationism, with a theology not terribly unlike other Protestant faiths of the day. White believes, however, that in time Joseph Smith and the Mormons, especially as a result of such teachings as the King Follett Sermon, reached beyond their primitivist roots and developed into a progressive and expansive faith characterized by such beliefs as (and we note the contrast to Reformation thought) a finite God, the innate goodness of man, and exaltation by works. But with the expansion of the Church in the modern world, White proposes that a “crisis” in faith has taken place in the lives of many modern Mormons, particularly as they have engaged a growing secularization, more liberal ethical systems, accelerated efforts of anti-Mormons, or revisionist explanations for foundational events of Mormonism. He suggests that a form of “Mormon neoorthodoxy” has begun to develop—an attempt to return to a tighter “redemptive” theological system, based primarily upon a belief in the sovereignty of God, the moral depravity of man, and salvation by grace. Because Joseph Smith’s progressive brand of Mormonism ingeniously linked the other-worldly with the here and now—because it pointed man in a positive and lifting direction, away from the pessimistic worldview of traditional Protestantism—White fears that “few things portend a more ominous future” for the Church than the growing trend toward a redemptive theology, what he calls Mormon neoorthodoxy.4

The work of the Restoration has unquestionably been a broadening and expanding process. Joseph Smith knew more about God and man in 1844 than he knew in the spring of 1820; both the Prophet’s and the Church’s understanding has come in a “line upon line” manner.5 However, I believe it is a mistake to accept in wholesale and uncritical fashion many of the presuppositions and conclusions of those, like Alexander and White, who propose a clear delineation between Joseph Smith’s pre-1835 thought—especially the teachings of the Book of Mormon—and what came from the Prophet in the latter part of his ministry. The teachings of the Book of Mormon are not trinitarian, and the Prophet’s pre-1835 theology was neither primitive nor Protestant. Further, while the recent reemphasis by the institutional Church on the teachings of
Modern Mormonism

the Book of Mormon (and thus on a “redemptive theology”) may be an effort to strengthen the Saints in a day of cultural crisis, the idea that such a move represents a straying from the post-1835 thought of Joseph Smith is an unwarranted conclusion. On the key doctrines of God, man, and salvation, the Prophet’s early teachings did not differ markedly from that which he declared just prior to his death.

JOSEPH SMITH AND “TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY”

To suggest that the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith’s “early thought” is to place the Nephite record within the developmental process of Joseph Smith and the Saints. It is, therefore, to accentuate the man, the translator, at the expense of the record. It is one thing to acknowledge that the words in the Book of Mormon reflect Joseph Smith’s language and background; this is as it should be, for the Book of Mormon is translation literature. It is quite another to suggest that the theology in the Book of Mormon reflects either the Prophet’s environment or his own religious worldview. We have little historical evidence to suggest that Joseph Smith had studied—or was even aware of—many of the great theological issues of his day. A hypothesis that posits an “expansionist” model of Book of Mormon translation (that much of the theology of the Book of Mormon represents Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century expansion upon an ancient core source, the Nephite plates)6 or one that views the Book of Mormon as other than a theological “constant” tends to call into question the historicity of the record and its ancient contents. For Joseph Smith to use the English language with which he was familiar in recording the translation is historically consistent; to create the doctrine (or to place it in the mouths of Benjamin or Abinadi) is unacceptable and is tantamount to deceit and misrepresentation: it is to claim that the doctrines and principles are of ancient date (as the record itself declares), when, in fact, they are a fabrication (albeit an “inspired” fabrication) of a nineteenth-century man. We have every reason to believe that the Book of Mormon came through Joseph Smith, not from him.

Presumably those who believe the Book of Mormon presents a trinitarian concept of God assume that the book reflects the prevailing sentiments of the nineteenth century concerning God. This is worthy of at least brief discussion. Although the Book of Mormon prophets speak of the “oneness” of the members of the Godhead, this need not imply trinitarianism. There were, in fact, many people in the nineteenth century who believed in the oneness of the Godhead but rejected the mysterious notions associated with
trinitarianism. David Millard, a minister who organized an Eastern Christian Church, published a pamphlet in 1818 in which he attacked the prevailing view of the Trinity. He undertook a scriptural analysis of the New Testament to prove his point. “The whole tenor of scripture,” he asserted, “concurs in the testimony, that Christ is verily the Son of God, as really so as Isaac is the son of Abram.” Millard further stressed the illogicality of the Nicean concept: “Three Gods are not one God, any more than three times one are one or two and one are one: which not only destroys the rules of multiplication and addition, but is flat inconsistency.” William Ellery Channing, known as the father of Unitarianism, declared in a famous Baltimore sermon in 1819, “We object to the doctrine of the Trinity,” for “when we attempt to conceive of three Gods, we can do nothing more than represent to ourselves three agents”—meaning, of course, three different persons. In a letter dated 19 May 1835 concerning his beliefs prior to conversion to the Latter-day Saint faith, William W. Phelps no doubt reflected the views of other lay persons in nineteenth-century New England: “I was not a professor at the time, nor a believer in sectarian religion, but a believer in God, and the Son of God, as two distinct characters, and a believer in sacred scripture.” There is no indication in Phelps’s letter that such a belief was contrary in any way to the teachings of the restored Church; in fact, the statement implies that his preconversion beliefs were in harmony with the teachings of the Latter-day Saints.

In writing of the formative period of LDS history, Alexander notes that “there is little evidence that church doctrine . . . specifically differentiated between Christ and God. Indeed,” he continues, this distinction was probably considered unnecessary since the early discussions also supported trinitarian doctrine. Joseph Smith’s 1832 account of the First Vision spoke only of one personage and did not make the explicit separation of God and Christ found in the 1838 version. The Book of Mormon declared that Mary “is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh,” which as James Allen and Richard Howard have pointed out was changed in 1837 to “mother of the Son of God.”

Contrary to Alexander’s claims, there is evidence to suggest that the Saints understood very early and very clearly the distinct and separate nature of the Father and Son. In 1831 John Whitmer wrote of an occasion wherein Joseph Smith “saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Father making intercession for his brethren, the Saints.” In February of 1832 Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon beheld in vision the Father and Son as separate personages (D&C 76:20–23). To be sure, in his
Modern Mormonism

1832 account of the First Vision, Joseph wrote, “I was filled with the Spirit of God and he opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me.” However, Milton V. Backman, Jr., has rightly pointed out, “The thrust of the 1832 history was not who appeared but the Lord’s message to him.” It is interesting to note a statement by John Taylor in 1880 in which he declared that “as a commencement [to the work of restoration] the Lord appeared unto Joseph Smith, both the Father and the Son [note that John Taylor refers to both the Father and the Son as the Lord], the Father pointing to the Son said ‘this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him.’”

The Book of Mormon also distinguishes between the Father and the Son in many instances. For example, in 1 Nephi 11:24 Nephi writes, “And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men.” Phrases such as “the Son of God,” and “the Son of the Everlasting God” occur scores of times throughout the remainder of the record. The presentation in the Book of Mormon is similar to that in the New Testament concerning the separateness yet oneness of the members of the Godhead. Although the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are separate and distinct individuals, they are infinitely more one than separate: one God, one Godhead, united in purpose, power, and glory (see 2 Ne. 31:21; Alma 11:44; Moro. 7:7). And yet they are separate persons. Consider the following points where the Book of Mormon distinguishes between the Father and the Son:

1. We pray to the Father in the name of the Son (2 Ne. 32:9; 3 Ne. 18:19–20; Morm. 9:27; Ether 4:15; Moro. 4:3; 5:2; 8:3; 10:4).
2. We worship the Father in the name of the Son (2 Ne. 25:16; Jacob 4:4–5).
3. Christ received powers from his Father (Mosiah 15:2–3; Hel. 5:10–11; Morm. 7:5).
4. Christ’s atonement reconciles us to God (Alma 12:33–34; Moro. 7:22, 26–27).
5. The voices of the Father and Son are distinguished (2 Ne. 31:10–15).
6. The entire ministry of Christ among the Nephites and his constant reference and deference to the Father evidence their separateness (3 Ne. 11–28).

In the final analysis, the Book of Mormon is about as trinitarian as the New Testament. Bernhard Lohse writes, “as far as the New Testament is concerned, one does not find in it an actual doctrine of the Trinity”; it was “well into the fourth century before the doctrine of the Trinity was dogmatically clarified.” As Backman has said, no one
has located a publication (such as an article appearing in a church periodical or statement from a missionary pamphlet) written by an active Latter-day Saint prior to the martyrdom of the Prophet that defends the traditional or popular creedal concept of the Trinity. . . . Moreover, there are no references in critical writings of the 1830s (including statements by apostates) that Joseph Smith introduced in the mid-thirties the doctrine of separateness of the Father and Son.¹⁵

Only eleven days before his death, Joseph Smith said, "I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and the Holy Ghost a distinct personage or spirit, and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods."¹⁶ It seems unreasonable and out of character that Joseph Smith would have expounded a doctrine that was at variance with the teachings of a book he claimed to have received years earlier from God.

THE NATURE OF GOD: FROM THE LECTURES ON FAITH TO KING FOLLETT

Kendall White has suggested a shift in Joseph Smith’s teachings over the years regarding the nature of God—from a traditional Protestant view of God as an infinite and transcendent being to a “finite” being who was once a man as we are now. The two key texts for such a delineation are, of course, the Lectures on Faith, delivered to the School of the Elders in the winter of 1834–35, and the King Follett Sermon, delivered on 7 April 1844. As to the authorship of the lectures, Larry E. Dahl has written recently:

It appears that several of the brethren participated in writing the lectures. It is clear that Joseph Smith and perhaps others prepared them for publication after they were written. Undoubtedly, the lectures were, in the words of the Prophet John Taylor, “published with the sanction and approval of the Prophet Joseph Smith.” It would therefore seem appropriate to use quotations from the Lectures on Faith and attribute the ideas, principles, and doctrine to the Prophet Joseph.¹⁷

“There are two personages,” the School of the Elders was instructed,

who constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created and made, that are created and made. . . . They are the Father and the Son—the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power, possessing all perfection and fulness, the Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle. (5:1–2)

This is a perplexing passage that has caused some confusion and may have contributed eventually to the decision to delete the
Modern Mormonism

Lectures on Faith from the Doctrine and Covenants in 1921. The problem lies in the fact that the Prophet appears to be teaching that God the Father is a “personage of spirit” while Jesus is a “personage of tabernacle.” It is possible that Joseph Smith simply did not understand the corporeal or physical nature of God at the time the Lectures on Faith were delivered. His knowledge of things—like that of all men and women—was often incremental, and his development in understanding was therefore a “line upon line” development. As a result of the First Vision, the boy prophet knew that the heavens were no longer sealed; that Satan was more than myth or metaphor; and that the Father and Son were separate and distinct personages. But there is no mention in any of his four accounts of the First Vision of the fact that God has a body of flesh and bones. The earliest reference to the corporeality of God seems to come in a sermon on 5 January 1841. It was not until 2 April 1843 in Ramus, Illinois, that the Prophet gave instructions on this matter that are the basis for D&C 130:22–23: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also. But the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit.”

It is also possible, however, that Joseph Smith did indeed understand that God has a body but that the passage in lecture 5 has been misunderstood. What then could the phrase mean? To begin with, we should note that the complete expression is not “a personage of spirit” but rather “a personage of spirit, glory, and power.” This may well be intended more as a description of God’s divine nature—a statement regarding his exalted and glorified status—than of his physical being. The word spirit, as used, for example, in Moses 1, is a synonym for glory or power: God’s Spirit is his glory (see Moses 1:9, 15). Thus it is that lecture 5 later speaks of “the Father and the Son possessing the same mind, the same wisdom, glory, power, and fulness—filling all in all; the Son being filled with the fulness of the mind, glory, and power; or, in other words, the spirit, glory, and power, of the Father, possessing all knowledge and glory” (5:2). Note that the phrase “spirit, glory, and power” is here used to describe what makes the Son one with the Father—the attributes of Godhood.

It is interesting that in the catechism following lecture 5 the response to the question, “What is the Father?” is given: “He is a personage of glory and of power.” The rather obvious omission is any reference to the Father as a personage of spirit—perhaps because to say such would be repetitious; we have already established that he is a personage of power and glory, which to Joseph Smith may have been exactly the same as saying he is a personage of spirit. It is also worth noting in the catechism that all of the
scriptures cited to establish the Father as a personage of power and glory speak of his attributes and his exaltation. Noticeably absent is John 4:24 ("God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth")—the one passage from the Bible that might have been used to establish clearly that God is a spirit. But Joseph Smith would not cite this passage from the King James Bible, since he had previously learned by revelation (some time between November 1831 and 16 February 1832) that this verse required an inspired translation: "The hour cometh and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him. For unto such hath God promised his Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth" (JST, John 4:25–26). It is possible, indeed, that the inspired revision of the Bible had some impact on the Prophet’s thought regarding the nature of God; that is to say, if he did not know of the corporeality of God at the time of the First Vision, did he know it by the time he had translated these verses in John?22

We are indebted to Milton V. Backman, Jr. for bringing to light an important document—a description of Mormonism by a Protestant clergyman in Ohio. Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had lived among the Saints in Kirtland for four years, published the following in the 11 August 1836 Ohio Observer: "They [the Mormons] contend that the God worshiped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god. They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself."23 If a non-Mormon had observed as early as 1836 that the Latter-day Saints were teaching that God has a body, it is certainly possible that such things were known by Joseph Smith a year earlier at the time the Lectures on Faith were presented.24

Finally, Joseph Smith’s teachings about Deity in no way suggest that God is a finite being. Elohim is an exalted man, but he possesses in their fulness the attributes of Godhood. We have no indication whatever that Joseph changed his views on God’s infinite nature between the time of the Lectures on Faith and the King Follett Sermon. In short, I find no evidence to suggest that Joseph the Prophet “outgrew” the lessons about God found in the Book of Mormon (for example, 2 Ne. 9:20; Alma 26:35; Moro. 7:22) or the Lectures on Faith (4:11–19), or that he in some way “progressed” beyond the notion that our Father in Heaven is, in fact, God Almighty. M. L. Davis, a Washington correspondent for the New York Enquirer offered this description of Joseph Smith in a letter to his wife dated 6 February 1840:
My dear Mary:—I went last evening to hear “Joe Smith,” the celebrated Mormon, expound his doctrine. I, with several others, had a desire to understand his tenets as explained by himself. He is not an educated man; but he is a plain, sensible, strong minded man. Everything he says, is said in a manner to leave an impression that he is sincere. There is no levity, no fanaticism, no want of dignity in his deportment. . . .

He commenced by saying, that he knew the prejudices which were abroad in the world against him, but requested us to pay no respect to the rumors which were in circulation respecting him or his doctrines. He was accompanied by three or four of his followers. He said, “I will state to you our belief, so far as time will permit.” “I believe,” said he, “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.”

He then spoke rationally of the attributes of Divinity, such as foreknowledge, mercy &c.25

James Burgess recorded a sermon of the Prophet delivered on 9 July 1843 in which Joseph explains how God can be both omnipresent and at the same time “a personage of tabernacle.” “What part of God is omnipresent?” Joseph asked. He responded: “It is the Spirit of God which proceeds from him; consequently, God is in the four winds of heaven, and when man receives intelligence is it not by the Spirit of God?”26 One is able to better appreciate Joseph Smith’s humility before the Almighty in a prayer offered on 23 August 1842:

O, thou who seest and knowest the hearts of all men; thou eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Jehovah, God; thou Elohim, that sitteth, as saith the Psalmist, enthroned in heaven; look down upon thy servant Joseph at this time; and let faith on the name of thy Son Jesus Christ, to a greater degree than thy servant ever yet has enjoyed, be conferred upon him, even the faith of Elijah; and let the lamp of eternal life be lit up in his heart, never to be taken away. And let the words of eternal life be poured upon the soul of thy servant, that he may know thy will, thy statutes, and thy commandments, and thy judgments to do them.27

In 1842, just two years before his death, the Prophet explained concerning the Great God: “The past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal now.”28 Simply because God has not always been God, it need not follow that he is not now a possessor of that fulness of light, truth, and glory that constitute him as infinite.

In the Lectures on Faith, God is described as being the perfect and infinite embodiment of every good attribute and virtue. For example, he is said to possess a fulness of knowledge, faith or
power, justice, judgment, mercy, and truth. Indeed, the lectures explain that unless the Saint does know and acknowledge that God possesses these attributes in perfection he cannot exercise faith in him unto life and salvation (see Lectures on Faith, 4:1–19). But though God is absolute in the sense that he embodies and possesses the perfections of Deity, he is not absolute or transcendent in the classical credal sense—in the sense that he is unapproachable, is "the wholly other," beyond the reach or comprehension of finite man. Rather, the God described in the Lectures on Faith, like the God spoken of a decade later in the King Follett Sermon, is one who can be known and understood, who can be approached and seen, even by mortal man. Lecture 2 declares:

Let us here observe that after any portion of the human family are made acquainted with the important fact that there is a God, who has created and does uphold all things, the extent of their knowledge respecting his character and glory will depend upon their diligence and faithfulness in seeking after him, until, like Enoch, the brother of Jared, and Moses, they shall obtain faith in God, and power with him to behold him face to face. (4:55)

Lecture 5 teaches that man can become a joint heir, a coinheritor with Christ to all that the Father has; further, he can, through the Spirit, become one with the Father and the Son, be "transformed into the same image or likeness" of "him who fills all in all." Thus, "as the Son partakes of the fulness of the Father through the Spirit, so the saints are, by the same Spirit, to be partakers of the same fulness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and the Son are one, so, in like manner, the saints are to be one in them" (5:2–3). In short, the God of the Lectures on Faith is one who desires to glorify his children and make them even as he is.

MAN: DIVINE OR DEPRAVED?

In writing of the "orthodox" Mormon view of human nature, O. Kendall White observes that "if traditional Mormonism's concept of God deviates from classical Christianity, its assessment of human nature is an even more radical departure." Further, he claims that "traditional Mormon optimism is not limited to the denial of human contingency. It is boldly expressed in the claim that human nature is basically good, that an individual is 'a God in embryo.' "

Then, describing what he has labeled the Mormon "neoorthodox" position, he writes: "Although acknowledging the Fall as necessary for human exaltation, Mormon neoorthodoxy typically emphasizes the negative consequences of the Fall" by adopting such language as "carnal man" and "evils of the flesh."
Modern Mormonism

Since Mormon neoorthodox theologians work within the context of Mormon metaphysics, their concept of the human predicament is not identical with Catholic or Protestant doctrines of original sin. They accept the traditional Mormon belief in the innocence of infants and perceive the Fall as having at least some positive consequences. Disclaimers to the contrary, Mormon neoorthodoxy comes close to traditional Christian doctrines of human nature, though without abandoning important traditional Mormon beliefs.30

As early as his translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith knew that Adam's was a “fortunate fall,” that Adam and Eve's action in the Garden of Eden was as much a part of the foreordained plan as the atonement of Christ (2 Ne. 2:22–25). In addition, the Prophet recorded in his inspired translation of Genesis (November–December 1830) that God had forgiven Adam and Eve of their transgression in the Garden, that “the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt.” At the same time, and in the same revelation, the Lord made it clear that “inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts” (Moses 6:53–55). That is to say, Joseph Smith learned and taught that there was no original sin and that man does have the power to choose good in mortality; he also learned from the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 16:1–3; Alma 22:14; Ether 3:2) and his Bible translation, however, that there are real and noticeable effects of the Fall.

Modern scripture forcefully attests that those who take advantage of the atonement of Christ thereby rise above a carnal and fallen state. But those who love Satan more than God—who choose to come out in open rebellion against God and his ways—are carnal, sensual, devilish, enemies to God (see Mosiah 3:18–19, 16:1–3; D&C 20:20; Moses 5:13). We have no indication that Joseph Smith, either in private conversations or in public discourse, ever taught doctrine or expounded positions different from those found in the scripture that came through him. On some occasions he spoke of the nobility of man and on others of the fallen nature of man. The situation, the circumstances, the audience, and the specific point to be made were factors in determining what aspect of the doctrine of God, man, and salvation the Prophet chose to lay stress upon. For example, M. L. Davis, the newspaperman mentioned above, summarized the Prophet's teachings on man and the fall as follows:

“I believe in the fall of man, as recorded in the Bible; I believe that God foreknew everything, but did not foreordain everything; I deny that foreordain and foreknow is the same thing. He foreordained the fall of man; but all merciful as He is, He foreordained at the same time, a plan for redemption for all mankind. I believe in the Divinity
of Jesus Christ, and that He died for the sins of all men, who in Adam had fallen." He then entered into some details, the result of which tended to show, his total unbelief of what is termed original sin. He believes that it is washed away by the blood of Christ, and that it no longer exists. As a necessary consequence, he believes that we are all born pure and undefiled. That all children dying at an early age (say eight years) not knowing good from evil, were incapable of sinning; and that all such assuredly go to heaven. "I believe," said he, "that a man is a moral, responsible, free agent; that although it was foreordained he should fall, and be redeemed, yet after the redemption it was not foreordained that he should again sin."

Some three and a half years later, Joseph explained in Nauvoo that after God had created the heavens and the earth he came down on the sixth day and said: Let us make man in our own image. In whose image? In the image of [the] Gods created they them, male and female—innocent, harmless, and spotless, bearing the same character and the same image as the Gods. And when man fell he did not lose his image, but his character still [retained] the image of his Maker.

Having sifted through these remarks, one might be prone to conclude that Joseph Smith believed and taught only that man was noble and Godlike. To draw such a conclusion, however, would be to ignore the Prophet's teachings on the other side of the issue and thus to misrepresent his whole theological view. For example, in a letter to his wife Emma on 13 October 1832, Joseph wrote:

This day I have been walking through the most splendid part of the city of New York. The buildings are truly great and wonderful to the astonishment of every beholder, and the language of my heart is like this: Can the great God of all the earth, Maker of all things magnificent and splendid, be displeased with man for all these great inventions sought out by them? My answer is, No, [he] cannot be, seeing these works are calculated to make men comfortable, wise, and happy.

But then the Prophet went on to say:

Therefore not for the works can the Lord be displeased, only against man is the anger of the Lord kindled, because they give Him not the glory; therefore their iniquities shall be visited upon their heads and their works shall be burned up with unquenchable fire. The iniquity of the people is printed in every countenance and nothing but the dress of the people makes them look fair and beautiful. All is deformity. There is something in every countenance that is disagreeable, with few exceptions. Oh, how long, O Lord, shall this order of things exist and darkness cover the earth and gross darkness cover the people? . . . When I reflect upon this great city, like Ninevah, not discerning their right hand from their left, yea, more than two hundred thousand souls, my bowels [are] filled with compassion towards them and I am determined to lift up my voice in this city and leave the event with God, who holdeth all things in his hands.
Modern Mormonism

In 1843 the Prophet declared simply that “there is one thing under the sun which I have learned and that is that the righteousness of man is sin.” In the same year, he said, “I do not think there have been many good men on the earth since the days of Adam, but there was one good man and his name was Jesus.”

Joseph Smith denied that man was by nature (because of the Fall) a morally depraved creature; he did not believe that Adam’s “sin” was entailed upon his posterity through conception or birth. But he did teach that we live in a fallen sphere; that man is conceived into a world of sin; and that we have an obligation to respond to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, put off the natural man through the atonement of Christ, and be redeemed from and rise above the state of things on earth.

SALVATION: BY GRACE OR BY WORKS?

Kendall White claims that because of an optimistic assessment of human nature, “traditional Mormonism does not emphasize the grace of God”:

In contrast with orthodox preachers who quote Paul’s “by grace are ye saved,” most Mormons rely more on James’s “faith without works is dead.” There is a significant absence of Pauline theology in traditional Mormonism, though Mormons often quote Paul. Mormons do quote Paul’s moral exhortations, but typically reinterpret his concept of grace to mean that humanity will be physically resurrected through the gracious act of God.

The traditional Mormon doctrine of salvation is set apart from classical Christianity by its emphasis on merit and insistence upon the perfectability of the individual. Individuals must participate in various sacraments, such as baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and temple endowments, must obtain the necessary secular and religious knowledge, and must develop the requisite moral character to become like God. In contrast with classical Christianity, Mormonism emphasizes human rather than divine responsibility.

Mormon neoorthodoxy, on the other hand, is characterized, according to White, by

an apparent lack of concern for the gradual development of character through the performance of good works. . . . Its doctrine of salvation requires a sudden, permanent, and total regeneration of human nature. Moral behavior is secondary to a surrender of will through “spiritual rebirth.” The central task for the sinner is to put off the “natural man” and become a saint through the atonement of Christ.

If “traditional Mormonism” is defined in terms of what many persons in the Church believe, then one might agree with White’s
conclusion; it may well be that too many Mormons are possessed of a "works-righteousness" mentality. But if traditional Mormonism is defined in terms of the doctrines found in the scriptures delivered through Joseph Smith, then White's thesis is seriously flawed. The Book of Mormon stresses that "there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Ne. 2:8). There was no question in the minds of the Nephite prophets that salvation (meaning exaltation or eternal life—the Book of Mormon does not make a distinction between the two) was "free," freely available to all through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (see 2 Ne. 2:4, 8). Grace is definitely a central issue in the Book of Mormon. The prophets declared repeatedly that in the end man's merits cannot deliver him from death and hell, but rather he must rely "wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save" (see 2 Ne. 31:19; Alma 22:13–14, 24:10; Moro. 6:3–4).

Yet one cannot conclude categorically that the teachings of the Book of Mormon and of the early Latter-day Saints were of grace alone. Works of righteousness—receiving the ordinances of salvation and enduring faithfully to the end—were seen as essential to salvation. Note the following statements from the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass that I [Nephi] said unto them [his brothers] that it [the river of filthy water in Lehi's dream] was a representation of things both temporal and spiritual; for the day should come that they must be judged of their works, yea, even the works which were done by the temporal body in their days of probation. (1 Ne. 15:32)

I say unto you [Alma speaking to the people of Zarheemla], can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold, your works have been the works of righteousness upon the face of the earth? (Alma 5:16; see also v. 41)

Therefore, prepare ye the way of the Lord, for the time is at hand that all men shall reap a reward of their works, according to that which they have been—if they have been righteous they shall reap the salvation of their souls, according to the power and deliverance of Jesus Christ; and if they have been evil they shall reap the damnation of their souls, according to the power and captivation of the devil. (Alma 9:28)

And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good.

And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore all things shall be restored to their proper order. . . . (Alma 41:3–4)
Too often we fail to recognize the invaluable reconciliation of the grace-works issue in the Book of Mormon. Stated simply, grace is a necessary but insufficient condition; works is a necessary but insufficient condition; the works of man (those things we can do), when coupled with the grace of God (those things only the Lord can do), are sufficient for salvation (see 2 Ne. 25:23; Moro. 10:32). It is misleading to suggest that Joseph Smith and the Saints forsook the doctrine of salvation by grace in favor of a view of exaltation by works. I know of no place in the Prophet’s sermons where he dismisses or lessens the importance of the grace of Christ, or where he stresses the works of man to the exclusion of the redemptive labors of the Lord. In fact, he cautioned the leadership of the Church in Nauvoo against pride and self-sufficiency:

When the Twelve or any other witness of Jesus Christ stands before the congregations of the earth and they preach in the power and demonstration of the Holy Ghost, and the people are astonished and confounded at the doctrine and say that that man has preached a powerful discourse, a great sermon, then let that man or those men take care that they do not ascribe the glory unto themselves; but be careful that they are humble and ascribe the praise and glory to God and the Lamb, for it is by the power of the Holy Priesthood and the Holy Ghost that they have power thus to speak. What art thou, O man, but dust; and from whom [hast] thou received thy power and blessings but from God?

The inspired translation of Romans 4:16 points up the mandatory union of divine assistance and individual deeds: “Therefore ye are justified of faith and works, through grace, to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed.”

A final comment is in order regarding Kendall White’s description of the neoorthodox position as one which has “an apparent lack of concern for the gradual development of character through the performance of good works” and instead “requires a sudden, permanent, and total regeneration of human nature.” Bruce R. McConkie (designated by White as being neoorthodox in his views) expressed the following ideas about sudden regeneration and gradual development in 1968:

A person may get converted in a moment, miraculously. That is what happened to Alma the younger. He had been baptized in his youth, he had been promised the Holy Ghost, but he had never received it. He was too worldly-wise; he went off with the sons of Mosiah to destroy the church. . . . Alma was in this state, and then this occasion occurred when a new light came into his soul, when he was changed from his fallen and carnal state to a state of righteousness. In his instance the conversion was miraculous, in the snap of a finger, almost. . . . But that is not the way it happens with most people. With
most people conversion is a process; and it goes step by step, degree by degree, level by level, from a lower state to a higher, from grace to grace, until the time that the individual is wholly turned to the cause of righteousness. Now this means that an individual overcomes one sin today and another sin tomorrow. He perfects his life in one field now, and in another field later on. And the conversion process goes on, until it is completed, until we become, literally, as the Book of Mormon says, saints of God instead of natural men.40

Some eight years later, Elder McConkie talked in similar terms about being born again:

We say that a man has to be born again, meaning that he has to die as pertaining to the unrighteous things in the world... But that doesn’t happen in an instant, suddenly. That... is a process. Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous that they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the Church are concerned, we are born again by degrees, and we are born again to added light and added knowledge and added desires for righteousness as we keep the commandments.41

WHO (WHAT) IS ORTHODOX?

I wrote my doctoral dissertation at a university in the south-east under the direction of a former Presbyterian minister, now a scholar of some repute in the field of Religion in America, and one quite familiar with the history of the LDS church. When he finished reading the first draft of my dissertation, a study of the expanding concept of Zion in Mormon theology, he pushed the papers to the center of the long seminar table where we were working and said, “Bob, I don’t think you are making your points strongly enough.” I asked what he meant, and he offered observations to the following effect:

The Mormon position in the religious world is stronger than I think you realize. You people are able to pull off something that no other religious group has been able to do; you are able to reconcile the irreconcilable. The LDS faith is able to effect the union of the priestly and the prophetic—the static and the dynamic—elements of religion. You hold tightly to the beliefs and rites of ancient Israel and first-century Christianity with one hand and reach into the future through continuing revelation with the other. That’s quite a feat. No one else has been able to do it!

He then suggested that I write with a bit more confidence and defend our position on particular matters with the zeal that had characterized Joseph and Brigham and the early Saints. I was both shamed and instructed, and the lesson has been taken to heart.
One meets with great difficulty in categorizing or rubricizing Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet, or for that matter Mormonism as a whole. Was he a liberal thinker? Was he conservative? Do we take a literal or a figurative view of scripture? Because of our access to prophetic vision and revelation, it is nearly impossible to classify or even describe Mormonism adequately through already-established creeds or labels. Some models may be temporarily helpful in comparing and contrasting Mormonism with other social or religious phenomena, but when we force the phenomena to fit the model we may end up with a caricature rather than a characterization.

It is not so easy to determine what is “traditional” or “orthodox” Mormonism. Orthodoxy has to do with a straight and proper walk, with appropriate beliefs and practices. In our case, it may or may not be a course charted by Joseph Smith or Brigham Young or some Church leader of the past. Some who claim to be orthodox on the basis of following the teachings of Brother Joseph—for example, members of polygamous cults—are not in harmony with the Church’s constituted authorities and are therefore not orthodox.

“When the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred,” President Harold B. Lee said in 1964, “there were many saints who died spiritually with Joseph. So it was when Brigham Young died; so it was when John Taylor died. . . . We have some today willing to believe someone who is dead and gone and to accept his words as having more authority than the words of a living authority today.”42

In a meeting of the Council of Fifty held on 10 March 1844, Joseph Smith gave an assignment to revise the Constitution of the United States so as to make it the “voice of Jehovah.” Later in the week, John Taylor, as a representative of a special committee of three, responded that no progress had been made toward the preparation of a constitution for the kingdom of God. The Prophet acknowledged that he knew of the impossibility of drafting such a document; he had approached God in prayer and received the following direction: “Ye are my Constitution and I am your God and ye are my spokesmen, therefore from henceforth keep my commandments.”43 “In the Church,” Orson Pratt explained in commenting on this revelation, “we take the law of God and his priesthood as the constitution of his Church—here in this Council we have a living constitution, not a written one—which we must conform to.”44 The Church is to be governed by current, daily revelation. “Are we then,” Orson Pratt asked on a later occasion, “to be governed in all respects by those limited things that we were governed by in our childhood? Will there be no change of circumstances? Yes,” he answered, “but these will all be in accordance
with the development made by the progress of the kingdom. . . . New circumstances require new power, new knowledge, new additions, new strength.\textsuperscript{45} To fix ourselves too tightly to the words of a past prophet-leader—even Joseph Smith—is to approximate the mindset of certain fundamentalist Protestant groups who reject modern divine communication in the name of allegiance to the final, infallible, and complete word of God found between the covers of the Bible. Creeds and categories and constitutions often prove to be more confining than comforting.

It was in Nauvoo in 1841, during the zenith of his ministry and only three years before his death, that Joseph Smith made his now-famous statement that the Book of Mormon is “the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion.”\textsuperscript{46} It would seem that by that time in his life he could speak not only with authority but also with perspective. After having received hundreds of revelations from God, after having seen numerous visions and preached a myriad of doctrinal sermons, surely the Prophet was in a position to be able to place the Book of Mormon (and its doctrines) in a proper theological context. Only the night before his martyrdom,

Hyrum Smith read and commented upon extracts from the Book of Mormon, on the imprisonments and deliverance of the servants of God for the Gospel’s sake. Joseph bore a powerful testimony to the guards of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Gospel, the administration of angels, and that the kingdom of God was again established upon the earth.\textsuperscript{47}

Such a scene certainly bespeaks more than sentimental attachment on the part of the Prophet to the scriptural record that had come through his instrumentality almost two decades earlier.

Kendall White is correct in detecting a movement afloat in Mormonism in the latter part of the twentieth century. It is a movement toward a more thoroughly redemptive base to our theology, but a movement that is in harmony with the teachings of the Book of Mormon and one that may be long overdue.\textsuperscript{48} These recent developments may represent more of a retrenchment and a refinement than a reversion. I believe that “few things portend a more ominous future” for us than to fail to take seriously the Book of Mormon and the redemptive theology set forth therein; the only real “crisis” to fear would be attempts to build Mormonism upon any other foundation.
Modern Mormonism

NOTES


4Ibid., 176.


7The True Messiah Exalted, or Jesus Christ Really the Son of God, Vindicated; in Three Letters to a Presbyterian Minister (Canadaguia, N.Y.: N.p., 1818), 5–8.


9The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1 (May 1835): 115.


11F. Mark McKieran and Roger D. Launius, eds., An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 67, punctuation corrected. That it was Joseph Smith who saw the vision (it is unclear from the Whitmer account) is attested by Levi Hancock, who said of this occasion: "Joseph Smith then stepped out on the floor and said, 'I now see God, and Jesus Christ at his right hand, let them kill me, I should not feel death as I am now.' " (Levi Hancock, Journal, n.d., 33, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah).


14Bernhard Lohse, A Short History of Christian Doctrine (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 37, 38; see also Edmund J. Fortman, The Triune God (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 14; J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 87–88; Martin E. Marty, A Short History of Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 90. Father Charles Curran, a Roman Catholic priest of Rochester, New York, in speaking of the trinitarian controversy and its relation to scripture, said, "We [the Christians] went through the problem of appropriating the word in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries with the great trinitarian and Christological councils where we finally came to the conclusion of three persons in God and two natures in Jesus. Many people at the time said, 'Well, you can’t say that because those words aren’t in the scriptures.' That’s right, they aren’t in the scriptures, they are borrowed from Greek philosophy, but they are the on-going account of the believing community to understand, appropriate and live the word of God in its own circumstances" ("Creative Fidelity: Keeping the Religion a Living Tradition," Sunstone 11 [July 1987]: 45).


19Ehat and Cook, eds., Words of Joseph Smith, 60; see also statements on 16 February 1841 (p. 63) and on 9 March 1841 (p. 64).

20Ibid., 173.

21Bruce R. McConkie offered the following as commentary on this passage from lecture 5: "Each is a personage of spirit; each is a personage of tabernacle. Both of them have bodies, tangible bodies of flesh and bones. They are resurrected beings. . . . A personage of spirit, as here used and as distinguished from the spirit children of the Father, is a resurrected personage. Resurrected bodies, as contrasted with mortal bodies, are in fact spiritual bodies [See 1 Cor. 15:44; D&C 88:27]" (A New Witness for the Articles of Faith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985], 72–73).

22At an even earlier date, November–December 1830, the Prophet’s inspired translation resulted in detail concerning God that might have suggested his corporeality—that he had created man "in the image of his own body" (Moses 6:9).


25Quoted in Ehat and Cook, eds., Words of Joseph Smith, 32.

26Ibid., 230–31, spelling and punctuation corrected.

27Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), 536.

28History of the Church 4:597.

29White, Mormon Neoorthodoxy, 68–69.

30Ibid., 96–97.

31Ehat and Cook, eds., Words of Joseph Smith, 33, 6 February 1840.

32Ibid., 231, 9 July 1843, spelling and punctuation corrected.

33Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 252–53, spelling and punctuation corrected.


35History of the Church 5:401.

36White, Mormon Neoorthodoxy, 101–2.

37Ibid., 104.

38For a detailed discussion of an LDS view of grace and works, see my book By Grace Are We Saved (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989).

39Ehat and Cook, eds., Words of Joseph Smith, 7, 2 July 1839, spelling and punctuation corrected.

40Bruce R. McConkie, address at BYU First Stake Conference, 11 February 1968.

41Bruce R. McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” 1976 Brigham Young University Devotional Speeches of the Year (Provo: Brigham Young University Publications, 1977), 399. President Harold B. Lee also taught that the new birth is generally a quiet but steady process (see Stand Ye in Holy Places [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974], 58–61).


46History of the Church 4:461.

47Ibid. 6:600.

48President Ezra Taft Benson has reminded us that our failure to take seriously the Book of Mormon during the last sixty years has contributed to the condemnation spoken of in D&C 84:54–61, a scourge and judgment that still rests upon the Church (see A Witness and a Warning [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988] for a summary of President Benson’s teachings on the subject. See also Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” Dialogue 17 [Autumn 1984]: 35–74, for a discussion of how the Book of Mormon was utilized in the formative period of Church history).