

Mormon Theology – a Moving Target

The following 2 articles are from www.2think.org and www.lds-mormon.com:

One of the more curious evolutions in Mormon theology is that of God. Any active member of the LDS faith will now tell you that Jehovah of the Old Testament was in fact Jesus and the father of this Jehovah-Jesus is God or Elohim. In fact, a [recent proclamation](#) confirms this changed belief. Both of these supposed beings have bodies. When this same Mormon begins to read some of the writings of the early church leaders (including the first edition of the [Book of Mormon](#)) they are generally surprised to find out that this wasn't always the doctrine of the church.

[Up to the turn of the century the LDS Church taught that Jehovah was the Father.](#) With the turn of the century and new interpretations, such as that given by James Talmage in *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith*, the concept started to change. Joseph believed Jehovah and Elohim to be one in the same (The Father) and Jesus to be Jesus (The Son).

Until the early 20th century it was taught that Jehovah was the name of God the Father, along with Elohim. Biblical scholars state that Elohim is a Hebrew plural for God and JHVH was the symbol for the unspeakable name of I AM. Even the LDS hymnist sings:

"Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah
Jesus annoited that Prophet and Seer."
W. W. Phelps, *Praise to the Man*

Joseph Smith taught that the two were separate individuals. Jesus and Jehovah were two personalities. Jehovah being the singular form of the name of God the Father in the Hebrew and Jesus Christ, Our supposed redeemer and His Son. Joseph Smith taught:

The Lord (Jehovah) hath spoken through Isaiah (xiii: 1),
saying, "Behold my servant whom I uphold--mine elect in

whom my soul delighteth;" evidently referring to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, chosen, or elected by the Father. (I Peter i:20). "Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, who by Him do believe in God to serve Him in the redemption of the world, to be a covenant of the people (Isaiah xlii: 6), for a light to the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel, having ordained Him to be the judge of the quick until dead (Acts x: 42), that through Him forgiveness of sins might be preached (Acts xiii: 38), unto all who would be obedient unto His Gospel."(Mark xvi: 16, 17).

Joseph Smith, [*History of the Church*](#), Vol. 4, Ch. 14, p. 256

If you will put away from your midst all evil speaking, backbiting, and ungenerous thoughts and feelings' humble yourselves, and cultivate every principle of virtue and love, then will the blessings of Jehovah rest upon you, and you will yet see good and glorious days; peace will be within your gates, and prosperity in your borders; which may our heavenly Father grant in the name of Jesus Christ, is the prayer of yours in the bonds of the covenant.

Joseph Smith & Hyrum Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 4, Ch. 12, p. 226

...trusting in the arm of Jehovah, the Eloheim, who sits enthroned in the heavens...

Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 5, Ch. 5

But may the Almighty Jehovah shield and defend me from all their power, and prolong my days in peace, that I may guide His people in righteousness, until my head is white with old age. Amen.

Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 5, Ch. 9

Brigham Young taught this doctrine too. Brigham Young says:

We cannot even enter the temple when it is built, and perform those ordinances which lead to spiritual blessings, without performing a temporal labor. Temporal ordinances must be performed to secure the spiritual blessings the Great Supreme has in store for his faithful children. Every act is first a temporal act. The Apostle says, faith comes by hearing. What should be heard to produce faith? The preaching of the Word. For that we must have a preacher; and he is not an invisible spirit, but a temporal, ordinary man like ourselves, and subject to the same regulations and rules of life. To preach the Gospel is a temporal labor, and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is the result of a temporal labor. To be baptized is a temporal labor, both to the person administered to and the administrator. I am a living witness to the truth of this statement, for I have made my feet sore many a time, and tired myself out traveling and preaching, that by hearing the Gospel the people might have faith. The blessings we so earnestly desire will come to us by performing the manual labor required, and thus preparing all things necessary to receive the invisible blessings Jehovah has for his children.

Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 9:240.

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. This should have convinced every person that ever heard of him of his divine authority and power, for no other man was able to teach as he could, and no person can reveal the things of God, but by the revelations of Jesus Christ.

Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 8:206.

John Taylor also taught that Jesus Christ and Jehovah were separate beings:

But what is the reason for all this suffering and bloodshed, and sacrifice? We are told that without shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. This is beyond our comprehension. Jesus had to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself, the just for the unjust, but, previous to this grand sacrifice, these animals had to have their blood shed as types, until the great antitype should offer up himself once for all. And as he in his own person bore the sins of all, and atoned for them by the sacrifice of himself, so there came upon him the weight and agony of ages and generations, the indescribable agony consequent upon this great sacrificial atonement wherein he bore the sins of the world, and suffered in his own person the consequences of an eternal law of God broken by man. Hence his profound grief, his indescribable anguish, his overpowering torture, all experienced in the submission to the eternal fiat of Jehovah and the requirements of an inexorable law.

John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, p. 116

Neither Joseph Smith, nor Hyrum Smith, nor Sidney Rigdon, nor Brigham Young, nor myself, nor anybody associated with the Church at the present time, has had anything to do with the origination of these things. This work was commenced by the Almighty; it has been carried on by him, and sustained by his power, and if it is ever consummated it will be by the power and direction and sustenance of the Lord Jehovah, of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and then through the medium of the priesthood here upon the earth. These things originated in the heavens, in the councils of the Gods; and the organization of the priesthood and the power thereof, and everything pertaining thereto, have been committed from the heavens through Joseph Smith, principally, and through others who have been associated with him in this great work.

John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses*, 24:227, 1884.

Go! to all the gospel carry,
Let the joyful news abound;
Go till every nation hear you,
Jew and gentile greet the sound;
Let the gospel,
Echo all the earth around.
Bearing seed of heavenly virtue,
Scatter it o'er all the earth;
Go! Jehovah will support you,
Gather all the sheaves of worth,
Then, with Jesus,
Reign in glory on the earth.

John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, p. 388

Yet today the doctrine has been changed. How can such an essential doctrine be changed? During the Presidency of Joseph Fielding Smith there is still disagreement within the First Presidency on the doctrine that should be central to the profession of faith:

Question: Will you be kind enough to answer the following question? Who is it that speaks to Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses and the Prophets of the Old Testament? Is it our Eternal Father or Jesus who was known as Jehovah?

Answer: We have had several discussions on this question, but we seem to be hopelessly divided. Some of our members maintain that it is Jesus Christ who represented the Father, others that it was the Father himself.

Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, Vol. 1, p. 13

Spencer W. Kimball had a difficult time accepting the doctrine:

I was surprised and perhaps shocked a little when I learned that it was the Son, Jehovah, or his messengers who led

Abraham from Ur to Palestine, to Egypt, and back to the land of Palestine. I did not realize that it was Jesus Christ, or Jehovah, who inspired the long line of prophets in their leadership of the people of God through those centuries.

The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p. 8

It seems strange that a church that has direct revelation and that claims that its founder actually spoke face to face with both God and Jesus could be so confused on such a seemingly basic doctrine. This isn't the only doctrine which is now rigidly in place despite very different origins. The [Melchizedek Priesthood](#) has also evolved over the years. Joseph Smith's own version of [his visitations](#) from God the Father and Jesus rapidly evolved during his lifetime. The first few versions didn't even mention the supposed fact that two personages were involved.

The [idea of God having a body](#) didn't come about until 1835 or shortly thereafter. Although it is one of the core doctrines of Mormonism today, it wouldn't even be included in the Mormon canon of scripture had Willard Richards not jotted it down on April 2, 1843. (It subsequently ended up as part of [D&C 130](#)). Joseph Smith apparently said the words found in D&C 130, or words similar, as a response to Elder Orson Hyde's speech in which Apostle Hyde stated that God was a warrior who dwelt in our hearts.

[Here is another essay from the same web-site:](#)

The following are some excerpts from "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology" by Thomas G. Alexander which appeared in [Sunstone](#), July-August 1980. Alexander teaches at BYU. His thoughts tie in well with [my essay on the changing nature of God in LDS doctrine](#).

Perhaps the main barrier to understanding the development of Mormon theology is an underlying assumption by most Church members that there is a cumulative unity of doctrine. Mormons seem to believe that particular doctrines develop consistently, that

ideas build on each other in hierarchical fashion. As a result, older revelations are interpreted by referring to current doctrinal positions. Thus, most members would suppose that a scripture or statement at any point in time has resulted from such orderly change. While this type of exegesis or interpretation may produce systematic theology and while it may satisfy those trying to understand and internalize current doctrine, it is bad history since it leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.

Historians have long recognized the importance of the Nauvoo experience in the formulation of distinctive Latter-day Saint doctrines. What is not so apparent is that before about 1835 the LDS doctrines on God and man were quite close to those of contemporary Protestant denominations.

Of course the problem of understanding doctrine at particular times consists not only in determining what was disseminated but also in pinpointing how contemporary members perceived such beliefs. Diaries of Church leaders would be most helpful. Currently available evidence indicates that members of the First Presidency, particularly Joseph Smith, [Oliver Cowdery](#), Frederick G. Williams, and [Sidney Rigdon](#) were the principal persons involved in doctrinal development prior to 1835. Unfortunately, the only available diary from among that group is Joseph Smith's, which has been edited and published as [*History of the Church*](#).

Church publications from this period are important sources of doctrine and doctrinal commentary, given the lack of diaries. After the publication of the [Book of Mormon](#) in 1830, the Church supported *The Evening and the Morning Star* in Independence (June 1832-July 1833) and *Kirtland* (December 1833-September 1834). In October 1834, the *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, October 1834-September 1837) replaced the *Star*. Both monthlies published expositions on doctrine, letters from Church members, revelations, minutes of conferences, and other items of interest. William W. Phelps published a collection of Joseph Smith's revelations in the [1833 Book of Commandments](#), but destruction of the press and most copies left the *Star* and

Messenger virtually the only sources of these revelations until 1835. In that year, the Doctrine and Covenants, which included the *Lectures on Faith* and presented both revelation and doctrinal exposition, was published.

The doctrines of God and man revealed in these sources were not greatly different from those of some of the religious denominations of the time. [Marvin Hill](#) has argued that the Mormon doctrine of man in New York contained elements of both Calvinism and Arminianism, though tending toward the latter. The following evidence shows that it was much closer to the moderate Arminian position, particularly in rejecting the Calvinist emphasis on absolute and unconditional predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, and absolute perseverance of the elect. It will further demonstrate that 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.

The Book of Mormon tended to define God as an absolute personage of spirit who, clothed in flesh, revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Abinidi's sermon to King Noah in Mosiah chapters 13-14 is a good example). The first issue of the Evening and Morning Star published a similar description of God, the "Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ," which was the Church's first statement of faith and practice. With some additions, the "Articles" became section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The "Articles," which according to correspondence in the Star was used with the Book of Mormon in proselytizing, indicated that "there is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting, the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth and all things which are in them." The Messenger and Advocate published numbers 5 and 6 of the *Lectures on Faith*, which defined the "Father" as "the only supreme governor, an independent being, in whom all fulness and perfection dwells; who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life." In a letter published in the Messenger and Advocate, Warren

A. Cowdery argues that "we have proven to the satisfaction of every intelligent being, that there is a great first cause, prime mover, self-existent, independent and all wise being whom we call God . . . immutable in his purposes and unchangeable in his nature."

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." Abinidi's sermon in the Book of Mormon explored the relationship between God and Christ: "God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son-The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son-And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth." (Mosiah 15:1-4.)

The *Lectures on Faith* differentiated between the Father and Son somewhat more explicitly, but even they did not define a materialistic, tritheistic Godhead. In announcing the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants which included the *Lectures on Faith*, the Messenger and Advocate commented editorially that it trusted the volume would give "the churches abroad ... a perfect understanding of the doctrine believed by this society." The Lectures declared that "there are two personages who constitute the great matchless, governing and supreme power over all things-by whom all things were created and made." They are "the Father being a personage of spirit," and "the Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle, made, or fashioned like unto man, or being in the form and likeness of man, or, rather, man war, formed after his likeness, and in his image." The "Articles and Covenants" called the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost "one God"

rather than the Godhead, a term which Mormons generally use today to separate themselves from *trinitarians*. [see p. 53]

The doctrine of the Holy Ghost presented in these early sources is even more striking compared to the point of view defended in our time. The Lectures on Faith defined the Holy Ghost as the mind of the Father and the Son, a member of the Godhead, but not a personage, who binds the Father and Son together. This view of the Holy Ghost reinforced trinitarian doctrine by explaining how personal beings like the Father and Son become one God through the noncorporeal presence of a shared mind.

As Marvin Hill and Timothy Smith have argued, much of the doctrine that early investigators found in Mormonism was similar to contemporary Protestant churches. The section on the nature of God in the "Articles and Covenants," now Doctrine and Covenants 20:17-28, was similar to the creeds of other churches. In fact, what is now verses 23 and 24 is similar to passages in the Apostle's Creed.

... between 1842 and 1844 Joseph Smith spoke on and published doctrines such as the plurality of gods, the tangibility of God's body, the distinct separation of God and Christ, the potential of man to become and function as a god, the explicit rejection of ex nihilo creation, and the materiality of everything including spirit. These ideas were perhaps most clearly stated in the King Follett discourse of April 1844.

Because doctrine and practice changed as the result of new revelation and exegesis, some members who had been converted under the doctrines of the early 1830s left the Church. John Corrill exhibited disappointment rather than rancor and defended the Church against outside attack, but left because of the introduction of doctrine which he thought contradicted those of the Book of Mormon and the Bible.

It seems clear that certain ideas which developed between 1832 and 1844 were [internalized after 1835](#) and accepted by the Latter-

day Saints. This was particularly true of the material anthropomorphism of God and Jesus Christ, advanced perfectionism as elaborated in the doctrine of eternal progression, and the potential godhood of man.

Between 1845 and 1890, however, certain doctrines were proposed which were later rejected or modified. In an address to rulers of the world in 1845, for instance, the Council of the Twelve wrote of the "great Eloheem Jehovah" as though the two names were synonymous, indicating that the identification of Jehovah with Christ had little meaning to contemporaries. In addition, Brigham Young preached that Adam was not only the first man, but that he was the god of this world. Acceptance of the King Follett doctrine would have granted the possibility of Adam being a god, but the idea that he was god of this world conflicted with the later Jehovah-Christ doctrine. Doctrines such as those preached by Orson Pratt, harking back to the *Lectures on Faith* and emphasizing the absolute nature of God, and Amasa Lyman, stressing radical perfectionism which denied the necessity of Christ's atonement, were variously questioned by the First Presidency and Twelve. In Lyman's case, his beliefs, contributed to his excommunication.

The newer and older doctrines thus coexisted, and all competed with novel positions spelled out by various Church leaders. The *Lectures on Faith* continued to appear as part of the Doctrine and Covenants in a section entitled "Doctrine and Covenants," as distinguished from the "Covenants and Commandments" which constitute the current Doctrine and Covenants. The Pearl of Great Price containing the Book of Abraham was published in England in 1851 as a missionary tract and was accepted as authoritative in 1880. The earliest versions of Parley P. Pratt's Key to the Science of Theology and Brigham H. Roberts's The Gospel both emphasized an omnipresent, nonpersonal Holy Ghost, though Pratt's emphasis was radically materialistic and Roberts's more allegorical. Both were elaborating ideas addressed in the King Follett sermon. Such fluidity of doctrine, unusual from a twentieth-century perspective, characterized the nineteenth-century Church.

By 1890 the doctrines preached in the Church combined what would seem today both familiar and strange. Yet, between 1890 and 1925 these doctrines were reconstructed principally on the basis of works by three European immigrants, James E. Talmage, Brigham H. Roberts, and John A. Widtsoe. Widtsoe and Talmage did much of their writing before they became Apostles, but Roberts served as a member of the First Council of the Seventy during the entire period.

Perhaps the most important doctrine addressed was the doctrine of the Godhead, which was reconstructed beginning in 1893 and 1894. During that year James E. Talmage, president of Latter-day Saints University and later president and professor of geology at the University of Utah, gave a series of lectures on the Articles of Faith to the theological class of LDSU. In the fall of 1898 the First Presidency asked him to rewrite the lectures and present them for approval as an exposition of Church doctrines. In the process, Talmage reconsidered and reconstructed the doctrine of the Holy Ghost. In response to questions raised by Talmage's lectures, George Q. Cannon, "commenting on the ambiguity existing in our printed works concerning the nature or character of the Holy Ghost, expressed his opinion that the Holy Ghost was in reality a person, in the image of the other members of the Godhead—a man in form and figure; and that what we often speak of as the Holy Ghost is in reality but the power or influence of the spirit." The First Presidency on that occasion, however, "deemed it wise to say as little as possible on this as on other disputed subjects."

The impact of the *Articles of Faith* on doctrinal exposition within the Church seems to have been enormous. Some doctrinal works like B. H. Roberts's 1888 volume *The Gospel* were quite allegorical on the nature of God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. In the 1901 edition, after the publication of the *Articles of Faith*, Roberts explicitly revised his view of the Godhead, modifying his discussion and incorporating Talmage's more literal interpretation of the Holy Ghost.

By 1900 it was impossible to consider the doctrines of God and man without dealing with [evolution](#). [Darwin's](#) *Origin of Species* had been in print for four decades, and scientific advances together with changing attitudes had introduced many secular-rational ideas. James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe had confronted these ideas as they studied at universities in the United States and abroad. As early as 1881 Talmage had resolved to "do good among the young," possibly by lecturing on the "harmony between geology and the Bible." In 1898 Talmage urged George Q. Cannon to have the General Authorities give, careful, and perhaps official consideration to the scientific questions on which there is at least a strong appearance of antagonism with religious creeds." Cannon agreed, and Talmage recorded a number of interviews with the First Presidency on the subject. In a February 1900 article Talmage argued that science and religion had to be reconciled since "faith is not blind submission, passive obedience, with no effort at thought or reason. Faith, if worthy of its name, rests upon truth; and truth is the foundation of science."

Even though the publications of Talmage, Roberts, and Widtsoe had established the Church's basic doctrines of the Godhead, members and nonmembers were still confused. In 1911, George F. Richards spoke in the Tabernacle on the nature of God. Afterward, a member challenged him, arguing that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were one God rather than three distinct beings. Richards disagreed and cited scriptural references including Joseph Smith's first vision.

In February 1912, detractors confronted elders in the Central States Mission with the Adam-God theory. In a letter to President Samuel O. Bennion, the First Presidency argued that Brigham Young did not mean to say that Adam was God, and at a special priesthood meeting during the April 1912 general conference, they presented and secured approval for a declaration that Mormons worship God the Father, not Adam.

Reconsideration of the doctrine of God and the ambiguity in discourse and printed works over the relationship between God the

Father and Jesus Christ pointed to the need for an authoritative statement on the nature and mission of Christ.

Official statements were required to canonize doctrines on the Father and the Son, ideas which were elaborated by the progressive theologians. A clarification was particularly necessary because of the ambiguity in the scriptures and in authoritative statements about the unity of the Father and the Son, the role of Jesus Christ as Father, and the roles of the Father and Son in creation. A statement for the Church membership prepared by the First Presidency and the Twelve, apparently first drafted by Talmage, was published in 1916. The statement made clear the separate corporeal nature of the two beings and delineated their roles in the creation of the earth and their continued relationships with this creation. The statement was congruent with the King Follett discourse and the work of Talmage, Widtsoe, and Roberts.

This elaboration, together with the revised doctrine of the Holy Ghost, made necessary the revision and redefinition of work previously used.

The clarification of the doctrine of the Holy Ghost and the relationship between the three members of the Godhead also made necessary the revision of the *Lectures on Faith*. A meeting of the Twelve and First Presidency in November 1917 considered the question of the lectures, particularly lecture five. At that time, they agreed to append a footnote in the next edition. This proved unnecessary when the First Presidency appointed a committee consisting of George F. Richards, Anthony W. Ivins, James E. Talmage, and Melvin J. Ballard to review and revise the entire Doctrine and Covenants. The initial reason for the committee was the worn condition of the printer's plates and the discrepancies which existed between the current edition and Roberts's edition of the History of the Church.

Revision continued through July and August 1921, and the Church printed the new edition in late 1921. The committee proposed to delete the *Lectures on Faith* on the grounds that they were "lessons

prepared for use in the School of the Elders, conducted in Kirtland, Ohio, during the winter of 1834-35; but they were never presented to nor accepted by the Church as being otherwise than theological lectures or lessons." How the committee came to this conclusion is uncertain. The general conference of the Church in April 1835 had accepted the entire volume, including the Lectures, not simply the portion entitled "Covenants and Commandments," as authoritative and binding upon Church members. What seems certain, however, is that the interpretive exegesis of 1916 based upon the reconstructed doctrine of the Godhead had superseded the Lectures.

If the 1916 statement essentially resolved the Latter-day Saint doctrine of God along the lines suggested by Talmage, Widtsoe, and Roberts, the work of these three men, while suggesting a doctrine of man, did not lead to a similar authoritative statement, except on the question of the relation of the creation to natural selection. Still, the work of these progressive theologians provided a framework for understanding man which went relatively unchallenged until the recent development of Mormon neo-orthodoxy.

The following is an interview with Sterling McMurrin, a devout Mormon and professor of theology and history at the University of Utah. What is interesting is his admission of and frustration with evolving Mormon Theology.

Date: Sun, 3 Oct 1993 11:22:29 -0400 (EDT)

From: David Anderson

To: Saints-Best

Subject: (SB) Newell interviews McMurrin

[This is a transcript, lovingly typed in from tape by Arta Johnson <4710241@UCDASVM1.admin.ucalgary.ca>, of an interview with [Sterling McMurrin](#) at the August 1993 SLC [Sunstone](#) Symposium.]

Jack: Welcome to a conversation with [Sterling M. McMurrin](#). I am [Jack Newell](#) and it is my pleasure to be able to introduce him and engage in this conversation with him today. Sterling Moss McMurrin is the E.E. Erikson distinguished professor of history at the university of Utah, Emeritus, where he has also served as Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Academic Vice-President and Provost. His field is the Philosophy of History and the History of Philosophy. He served as United States Commissioner of Education under John F. Kennedy in the early 1960's and Professor McMurrin is the author of many books on the philosophy of religion including, [The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion](#) which has been in press constantly since 1965 and *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* since 1959. Both of these still available at the University of Utah Press. Sterling has long been what I would describe as a loving critic of the Mormon church, described as everything from a heretic to a long time Mormon, and indeed he is both.

Jack: Sterling, you have two very influential and admirable sets of grandparents. Joseph W. McMurrin was your grandfather, in the First Quorum of the Seventy with B.H. Roberts in the 1930's, a very influential gentleman I am sure.

Your other grandfather, Moss was the founder of the Deseret Livestock Company. So you have in your veins people of influence in the world and influence in the spiritual realms. How did they influence your perspective on life as you were growing up?

Sterling: Well, I think both of my grandfathers had considerable influence on me. Especially my mother's father who was the chief founder of the Deseret Livestock Company. That is because I was with him a great deal on cattle and sheep ranches right up to the time of his death when I was a college student. He was a man of very great stature in my opinion. My grandfather, Joseph W. McMurrin was a very powerful figure, back in the old days when the tabernacle used to ring with great oratory. Most of the people there these days have no idea of what happened in the old days. I remember a biographer of Brigham Young, for instance, Werner, who in the introduction to his book on Brigham Young, said that Brigham Young would get up in the tabernacle and "God bless" the people for some things and "God damn" them for others. Those were the good old days when going to conference meant something.

Jack: You took a different path than either one of your grandfathers. How did you end up becoming a professor and interested in things theological?

Sterling: You mean, how come I failed so miserably? I had a teacher who once said ... (He was a great figure in the philosophy of religion), ... he said, "I have a brother who always had the nerve to do the things that I wanted to do. And I was afraid. And he would go ahead and do them. And he ended up as a successful man in the world of affairs and I became a Professor of Christian theology and Christian ethics." So if you can't succeed in something more important, go in for teaching philosophy.

Jack: Now before you taught philosophy, you taught in the church's institute and seminary system in the 1930's. What did you teach and how did you feel about that at that point in your life?

Sterling: Well, I became a seminary teacher in 1937 and I taught classes mainly in Old Testament and New Testament. I liked the Old Testament better than the New Testament. To me it was far more interesting and I don't think they let me teach the classes, as I recall, in church history and doctrine which they used to have in those days. Later on when I was the Director of the Institute at the University of Arizona, I taught some classes in mormon theology and then courses in the history of religion and comparative religion.

Jack: Did you feel comfortable in terms of teaching the church doctrine and church history at that point?

Sterling: O sure, sure. I feel comfortable now in teaching church doctrine. It is just that they don't want me to teach it. I have been thrown out of more Sunday School classes than most of these people have attended. (Sterling seems to be speaking of his audience. They laugh.) I think that mormon doctrine is a fascinating subject. I have no objection to teaching it at all. Now there is much of it that I don't believe. But there is a great deal in Platonism and Aristotelianism that I don't believe, but I have made a living at teaching that stuff. (Audience laughs.) A kind of a living, you know.

Jack: I have heard you say on a number of occasions that Mormon theology has greater strengths than church leaders are even aware of.

Sterling: Well, I think that is true. In order to appreciate the real strengths in mormon theology, as well as it's weaknesses, a person has to have some kind of comprehension, it seems to me, of the history of religion and theology and know a good deal about what has been going on in the world in those areas, in order to compare the Mormon theology with others. You mentioned a book of mine, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. That was written originally as lectures given at the University of Utah. Then the university press wanted to publish it as a book. Then one of my colleagues, Sidney Engleman, who no doubt, some of you would

have known, a non-Mormon, a highly cultivated Mormon watcher, very critical of Mormonism in a sophisticated way said to me when he read the book, "You know, you have made Mormonism look a lot better than it really is." I said, "That is exactly what I intended to do. The other writers make it look worse than it is." (audience laughs) I mean that quite seriously. Mormon theology has strengths that virtually all, not all, but virtually all of the writers in the church seem to have been unaware of.

Jack: And what are these strengths?

Sterling: Well, at the present time of course, there is more attention given to them than there was 30 years ago when I did that book. The chief strength of Mormon theology is its opposition to absolutism in theology. And right to this day the general run of the accepted, not all Mormon writers, but the accepted Mormon writers ... (There aren't many accepted Mormon writers in this crowd here today, probably.) ... but the accepted Mormon writers are involved in the traditional, absolute theology and they don't seem to realize that what Joseph Smith did was make a break with that. They are busily engaged now, some of the officials of the Church who turn out books ... (I sometimes wonder where some of them find time to do anything else) ... they turn out so many of these books. These books are steeped with absolutism that Mormonism made a break with. That is the strength of Joseph Smith as a religious leader. If you examine what the history of religion has said, he had a few ideas of his own and [a few of them, I think, are very good ideas](#), not all of them, but some of them.

Jack: Sure. Name some other strengths that you see in addition to the notion of a limited God.

Sterling: Well, a good deal that is related to that -- that is that God is a being who is involved in world process, rather than being some kind of a static entity, that god is a temporal being. It is the temporal facet of the nature of God which distinguishes Mormonism. And I think that in some ways the materialistic facet of Mormonism. I mean the materialism in metaphysics, not ethics.

A perfectly good word that is ruined by people using it if you like good automobiles or something like that. I should tell you, if I may, of an incident that occurred years ago when I was doing work at Princeton University. This would have been in 1953. I called on Doug (typist's note: I could not make out the last name), a British philosopher at Princeton, a man of great stature in the field of philosophy and he had been a teacher at Stanford in earlier years of Obert Tanner whom some of you know very well. And they had become very good friends. And in the course of our conversation he said to me, "You know, it seems to me that Obert Tanner said that God had a body. No...", he said "...that can't be true ... that couldn't be true. It seems to me that Tanner said to me that you Mormons believe that God has a body like a human being. That can't be true, surely."

And I said, "Yes, that is what Tanner told you and that is what the Mormons believe." And he slapped his hand down on the table and he says, "God damn, it is nice to find a religion that makes some sense." (audience laughter) Now you understand that he didn't say that he thought it was true. Just that it made some sense. He didn't think it was true. But it is a strength of Mormonism to bring God down out of the emperiam, out of the clouds and try to, in some way or another, and make some way for God to be a living being.

This is the great thing in the Bible, you see, that distinguished the Biblical God from the typical deity of the ancient world, is that God is a living God. And this is stressed over and over again in the Bible. [This, I think, is a real strength of mormon theology.](#) The problem is that in their efforts to do this, too many of the Mormon writers get involved in a lot of ludicrous stuff so that they humanize God as if he is just somebody down the road who has been here longer than we have, knows a lot more than we know, but after all, he is one of us. Well, that is a form of blasphemy and that is what you get in a lot of Mormon writing.

Jack: Are there other strengths in the theology of Mormonism that you would like to point out at this time?

Sterling: Yes. If you regard this as a theological item. The Mormon emphasis on the freedom of the will. Or what Mormons call, this is using an old fashion terminology, what Mormons call, free agency. This is a very great strength in Mormonism. St. Augustine, the greatest of the theologians, denied the freedom of the will in some of his writings, although in other of his writings he defended it. Martin Luther in his controversies with Erasmus, the Catholic humanist, argued against the freedom of the will. There are many arguments against the freedom of the will in John Calvin. If you take the three most important of the Christian theologians, in the history of Christianity and this is a great strength in Mormonism, the emphasis on the freedom of the will. The problem is, Mormon writers have never contributed anything whatsoever to the solution of the problems that are associated with a belief in the free will, at the same time holding to a principle of universal causation that events which occur are caused to occur. My point is that you take a person like B. H. Roberts who laid great stress on the claim of freedom of the will and it is a good thing he did. He made no contributions, as far as I know of, to the problem of the freedom of the will. It is not a simple problem. It is a very difficult problem to make a case for free will.

Jack: Let's take these two terms we have been using: Mormon theology. What is theology?

Sterling: Well, theology is what is done to try to make sense out of what the people believe. I mean that quite seriously. People believe certain things. The early Christians believed that Christ was divine. And so the theologians had to make some kind of sense out of that. And what they did, eventually, in the 4th century was come up with the Nicean creed which employed Aristotelian metaphysics to make the case that Christ is divine as the Father is divine. There is an American philosopher of religion, I don't think he is any too good. I kind of told him that once and he didn't much like it. He was professor of philosophy at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Henry Nelson Wyman. And Wyman in the ... he wrote a book entitled (it is a wonderful title), *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth*. This has been going on for some time. And in

the first page of that he said the theologian is like a cook. He takes all of the ingredients and puts them together in theological formula in such a way that the people like it. It is good. Now, he says, the philosopher of religion is like a dietician. He sniffs around to see what the theologian has put in the stew, whether the people liked it or not. Now that is rather crude. I have made it even cruder than he did. But I think it is a very good idea. The term theology is a derivative of two Greek words: theo and logo which simply means the word about god, or the study of god as it is sometimes put. Now Immanuel Kant said that the subject matter of theology is God, Freedom and Immortality. And that is usually what we think of in connection with theology, at least God and Immortality.

Philosophy is a different matter. It is an analytical pursuit to try to find out the meanings of things. And it, as you will know Jack, and others, the term philosophy in Greek means the love of wisdom.

Jack: Now theology is the task of trying to make sense of what the people believe, does Mormon theology go back to what Joseph taught?

Sterling: Yes, Yes. I think Mormonism makes a great mistake when it departs too far from the position of Joseph Smith. I say that because I think that Joseph Smith was a genuine revolutionary in religion. He didn't accept the establish religion. Now [Thomas Alexander](#) at the BYU, brilliant historian, has done [some excellent things](#) on the early development of Mormon theology. And he has shown, and I think he is quite right, that in the beginning it was not radically different. As you go back into the Kirtland era, it is not radically different than much Christian theology. [Sidney Rigdon](#) had a lot to do with it. He was an accomplished Campbellite minister. The Campbellites were an offshoot of the baptists. He read a lot of baptist theology into Mormonism. Faith, repentance and baptism. That comes out of the baptist church largely through Sidney Rigdon, I think. But as time went on down to the time of the death of Joseph Smith you get the development of the more radical type of thing that showed up. For instance in the King Follett sermon which I think is a gross statement of ideas that can

be worked at in a somewhat more refined way. You see, Joseph Smith said in the King Follett address, just a few months before he died, that we are co-equal with God. Well, the church rather wisely toned that down. It now reads, co-eternal. That is, the ego that was uncreated is co-eternal, not co-equal. That is probably what Joseph Smith had in mind.

I have a good deal of respect for Joseph Smith, but some of his ideas are extreme. He had rather extreme ideas, I think, [on marriage](#). (laughter) It didn't do Mormonism much good. I am not sure that it didn't, to be frank with you. If it hadn't have been for polygamy, I suspect ,... well, I for one wouldn't have been here. Yes, I would. Yes, I would. I am 3/4 polygamist, but always by the first wife. (laughter) (Sterling laughs himself, turns to the audience and says) Now there are a lot of you who wouldn't be here if you weren't first wifers. (more laughter)

But my point is that the whole polygamy issue ... I know that it is impossible for historians to tell what causes what, always ... but the whole polygamist hassle helped to make Mormonism what it is. We can thank the Lord that it is gone, though it will never completely disappear. And there are plenty of people in this room who are kind of looking forward to polygamy in the hereafter. (laughter) It is hard to tell just exactly what the church teaches on that. But the church would never have been what it is today with[out] polygamy. We wouldn't have had our great martyrs and so on. And [polygamy probably lead to Joseph Smith's assassination](#). And if I may hazard an historical observation. And I wouldn't want to be completely misunderstood. I think it was a fortunate thing for the church historically that Joseph Smith died when he did. Because the church was beginning to fall apart. It seems like it was beginning to go to pieces and something needed to be done to pull things together. And Brigham Young is the one who pulled things together. I think Brigham Young is a very great man. I don't agree with a lot of his stuff, but I think he was a man of very great stature. I don't think Joseph Smith was a man of great stature. I think he was a charismatic, prophetic type. And I wouldn't quite put him in Brigham Young's class as a leader.

He was a bad judge of people. Rather bad, you know. Brigham Young was a good judge of people. He knew when to have them around and when to get rid of them, in more ways than one. (Laughter). But Joseph Smith, you know, [John C. Bennett](#) a famous apostate who caused him a bit of trouble. John C. Bennett wrote to Joseph Smith. He was a charlatan of the worse order and an adventurer. And if I am not mistaken about this, he wrote to Joseph Smith, told him he would like to join him and said, I'll be your right hand man. And Joseph Smith wrote back and said he didn't want him and said, God is my right hand man. Now that is really a piece of presumption. But later on he did business with John C. Bennett and it resulted in all kinds of trouble. Well, that is a little beside the point.

Jack: Well, one thing that you mentioned on theology. The two things that you mentioned as distinctive strengths of Mormon theology: the notion of a limited god and free-will. If you were writing the *Theological Foundations of Religion* today, instead of in 1965, would you be able to say those things, or has our theology, in fact evolved to a point where the emphasis on what you regarded as the strengths is no longer there?

Sterling: I tell you Jack, I wouldn't compromise what I put in those essays. But I would have a preface that made the point. As a matter of fact I am doing some essays on the philosophy of Mormonism and in the preface I have made the point that today [it is very difficult to determine what is the official doctrine of the Mormon church](#). I think it is very difficult. Back when I was learning things about Mormonism, when James E. Talmage and B. H. Roberts and Orsen Whitney--(Here are people of great intellectual strengths and Talmage and Roberts died in 1933 as you will know.) -- It was when I was a college student. Back in those days you could tell what the Mormon church believed and what it didn't believe. But it wasn't every Tom, Dick and Harry in the general authorities who were turning out books. And now a days, everyone is turning out these books and people think that, of course, they know what they are talking about, and so you have a

hard time. I mean you have a hard time comparing some of Neal Maxwell's writings with B. H. Roberts.

A few years ago, Daniel Rector said to me ... there was a small group that got me to talk with them. A little priesthood group outside of church. They didn't invite me to meet them in church. A little elder's quorum, but outside. And he came. And I talked about some of these things. The very things you have just named. And Daniel Rector, whom I met, a very bright young man, not so young now, he said, "You know, you are a Talmage / Roberts / Widstoe Mormon. The church doesn't believe these things any more. They don't go in for that kind of theology anymore." And I thought. What is this kid trying to tell me. He said, "You have lost touch with reality." So I got around and got in touch with reality and discovered he was absolutely right. He was absolutely right. Those men have been forgotten. And we now ... I haven't read many of these things lately, so I could be corrected. What the philosophers call as corrigible. Not incorrigible. My stuff is corrigible. But my impression now is that it would be very difficult to just take the things that are being put out now and determine just what it is that the beliefs of the Mormon church are now.

Jack: Why has that change occurred?

Sterling: Well, I think it has occurred because ... well, I don't know why it has occurred. I was going to say it has occurred partly because the general authorities are not now drawn so much from people like Roberts, Talmage and Widstoe and Joseph Merrill and Orson F. Whitney. I don't mean that they don't draw from people of real stature. I have a very high regard for most, not all, but most of the general authorities of the church. I think they are people of great stature and integrity. But those we looked to, a few years ago, as leaders for the intellectual life of the church have betrayed us.

Jack: How has that happened?

Sterling: They have betrayed us. Oh, I don't know. The leadership of the church just seems to have lost touch with reality. You take

this [situation down at the BYU](#). It is a deplorable, a deplorable situation. I have plenty of sympathy for the church on things like that. The church general authorities. They are there to preserve the faith. At least that is what they consider themselves to be there for. To be the preservers of the faith. It is difficult at times to tell just what sort of faith they are preserving, but that is the function. And some of these BYU teachers, unfortunately, have minds of their own. Some of us heard this young woman, Marti Bradley in this room before we started, a brilliant statement in defense of academic freedom. They have minds of their own and the church doesn't know what to do with them. Just doesn't know what to do with them. I think it is a serious question as to whether the church should have a university. A church that is committed to any extent to thought control shouldn't have a university. Just shouldn't have it. And this contention has gone on for a long time and it flairs up from time to time. I don't know what they can do.

Now when I say a university, I don't say that it wouldn't be wise for the church to support the people in education. I might just tell you that the commissioner of education when I worked for the church, Franklin L. West, some of you here knew him, Franklin West was a physicist and dean of the college in Logan. He became commissioner of education back in the 30's and was until Wilkinson came on the scene. And Franklin L. West used to advise the people to have their young people go to the universities of their choice and especially in their own states. That was the official policy of the church. They weren't of the opinion that they had to go to the BYU. Well, the church has been able to support an interest in religion through the Institutes. And very effectively, I think. And still have the students get an education in institutions where there is genuine freedom. The University of Utah, in my opinion, is in the intellectual sense, as free an institution as there is in the world. And I can give evidences for that. A student at the BYU should have the same opportunities.

Now the BYU officials, you know, and Wilkensen used to make a great deal of this, is to say that the BYU is a freer institution than the University of Utah. It was freer because they could take

courses in Mormonism. At the University of Utah we didn't have real intellectual freedom because we couldn't give courses in Mormonism. Well, you know there are different ways of arguing all of this. But it is a travesty that an institution that talks about the glory of God is intelligence, and a man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge and that makes free agency and freedom of the will a foundation of the faith, to behave as they sometimes do behave. Not always. But right now, at the BYU.

Jack: You certainly weren't at the BYU, but in the 1950's local authorities of the church began proceedings to excommunicate you Sterling. What was that over? What were they angry about?

Sterling: I am not sure. They were just mad. No, it didn't have anything to do with the BYU. I taught at the BYU the summer of 1977. And it was as pleasant an experience of teaching as I ever had in my life. It was a delightful experience. Now there were 2 spies assigned to both of my classes. But I knew that you see. So, if you know there are spies there, it adds to the fun. They were very bright. I gave them both "A"s. I really did. Well, they were both bright. They were smart. And they were good spies. They finally confessed near the end of the course. They were in both classes. I taught 2 classes. One on contemporary philosophical types and one on the history of the philosophy of religion in the occident. And they were very good students. They weren't spies for the administration, I hasten to say. They were spies for Sidney B. Sperry who was a leading man there in religion. He wasn't the head of the religion department. But he was a major figure. And they had done a good job. I got along very well, down there with everybody. Now the head of religion got fired, they told me, partly because of his having me there. But this was fortunate for him because he went out and made a lot of money. Became quite well to do.

Jack: Now let's get back to ... excommunication.

Sterling: Oh, I was just trying to avoid that. I heard this often, that I am excommunicated. It is nothing new. But it was fairly new

back then, back in 1954. I began hearing in my ward that I was being excommunicated and so on, so I called on the bishop. The Bishop was an employee of the church, not one of the authorities, but rather high level civil servant of the church.

Jack: He was called to do right as he saw it.

Sterling: You bet your life. Anyway, I called on him and asked him what was going on. I was hearing these things. And he said to me, these are his exact words, in a very formal way, he said, "Sterling, it is my ecclesiastical duty to investigate you to determine whether you should be brought to trail for excommunication. Well, they were investigating me. A rather interesting thing. I had two sessions with him. Before the first session broke up he asked me if I would furnish him the names of people they could use as witnesses against me. You know, I didn't think that is the way you were supposed to go about it. And I said, "Look you are supposed to get your own witnesses." But he said, "We haven't been able to find anybody." This is a true story. And I said, "Now look. I have taught Sunday School classes, and this, and that and the other and surely you can find somebody." And he said, "No, we haven't been able to find anybody." So I said, "Well, I will give you two names." I had had two long sessions dealing with my heresies with Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee, together. Joseph Fielding Smith was President of the Quorum of the Twelve and Harold B. Lee was next. And as you know they both became presidents of the church. But this was when President McKay was President, before Joseph Fielding. I said, "I can give you two names that would make excellent witnesses because they are fully conversant with all of my heresies. All of them. Well, maybe not all of them, but all of the basic ones."

President Smith said to me, "Now Brother McMurrin, we want you to know" (they were very nice to me, they were both very nice), he said, "... we want you to know that in this church a man is free to believe whatever he wants to believe just so he accepts certain of the fundamentals." I thought, a good statement. Well, I said, "Now President Smith, the problem is it's those fundamentals that I

simply don't believe." So we took it from there. But I said to the Bishop, I said, "President Joseph Field Smith and Apostle Harold B. Lee." He said, "You know we can't use them." Well, I said, "Why can't you use them?" Well, I discovered later on why they couldn't very well use them. Joseph Fielding instigated the thing in the first place.

Ah, I liked him much. I liked him very much. The thing I liked about Joseph Fielding Smith was he was honest and courageous. He said what he thought and he didn't care whether anybody liked it or not. And I admired that in him. (tape turns over and for several seconds Sterling's voice is too unclear for me to hear, but picking up what I can, it seems he is saying) ... the commissioner of education told me once that ... Joseph Fielding Smith ... officer of the church board of education and they had the purse strings for the Institute and the BYU and so on and he told me that Joseph Fielding Smith more than any other person that he dealt with was ready to put money into education.

The man believed Mormonism. He really believed it. Some of them don't believe it, you see. But he really believed it. He thought that it would come out on top, regardless of what goes on in these institutions, that mormonism will win. I admired him greatly.

Jack: Anyway, back to the bishop.

(some conversation back and forth which I will delete in the interest of brevity, but which can be heard on the tape)

Sterling: Should I tell the rest of this? Well, I haven't told you everything that went before. I have to tell one other thing. I went down to conference, that was just before this happened, stake conference and Joseph Fielding was the speaker. He was the visitor. And he was very dramatic. Those of you that remember him. He said, "There are wolves among us, wolves among us. WOLVES, among us, I tell you, wolves among us. And a couple of people in my high priest's quorum went up to talk to him afterwards and inadvertently mentioned my name. And he said, "Is that Sterling McMurrin you are talking about." And they said,

"Yes." And he said, "He is the chief wolf I have been telling you about."

I shouldn't tell you all this. And he told them, "He is not to be permitted to come to your priesthood meetings and if he does come, he is not to be permitted to say anything. He is going to be excommunicated." And that's the way this got out in my ward.

I haven't said, but I must tell you that I liked Joseph Fielding Smith very much and after he became president of the church we had some very pleasant communications. The day after, ... shall I tell another one?

Jack: Sure.

Sterling: Well, the day after he became President of the Church, Sister Jessie Evans Smith, who most of you will remember had a very distinctive voice, called me on the telephone. Natalie answered the telephone. It was about 10 o'clock at night. And she recognized her voice and she handed me the phone and she says, "It is President Smith's wife, Jessie Evans Smith." She said, "Sterling." I said, "Sister Smith, well how is President Smith?" "Oh, he's wonderful, He's wonderful. Now that is what I am calling about. Joseph told me to call you and tell you that he doesn't want you and Natalie to take us off of your list."

Now I had never heard that expression before, but I kind of got the point of it. And I said, "Now Sister Smith, you tell President Smith that I will make a deal with him. As long as he keeps me on his list, I'll keep him on my list." Anyway, I could tell you a lot more in that direction but I shouldn't take the time, Jack.

Jack: But in this other direction, you're still in trouble with this bishop who says he's going to press charges. (Typist's note: laughter from audience as Jack keeps pressing Sterling to tell the story which Sterling keeps moving away from.) What happened?

Sterling: Well, I guess I will have to tell you that. A couple of days later, it may have been 3 or 4 days, President MacKay called

me up. I was going for lunch with one of my colleagues who was not a member. He called me on the telephone and he said, "Somebody has been calling who says he is David O MacKay. I guess it's just a joke."

And I thought, "This may not be such a joke." And I had no sooner put up the phone ... (He had said, "I gave him your home phone number.") And I had no sooner put up the phone than ... I shouldn't tell these things ... but President MacKay said, "I want to come and see you." And I said, "President MacKay, you can't come and see me. I'll come and see you." He said, "No sir, I'm coming to see you." Well, he lived on South Temple in those days. Some of you will remember the old Union Building was still the Union Building. And I said to President McKay ... I shouldn't have even used this language, but I said, "Well now, President MacKay. What do you say, we meet on neutral ground." He thought that was a good idea. So I said, "Well, I will meet you in the Union Building. Give me a little time to get there ahead of you." I had a key to the Aurbach Room, a very beautiful room there that they usually had locked. And we had a long talk.

President McKay started by saying, "What is it that a man is not ... " (Sterling interrupts his own story to say to Jack), "These are his exact words." "...What is it that a man is not allowed to believe? or be asked out of this church? Is it [evolution](#)?" Now nothing had been said in connection with my case about evolution, but he brought it up. (Jack murmurs with an understanding nod of the head to Sterling.) He said, "Is it evolution? I hope not, because I believe in evolution." Then he went to two or three other things. He said, "Is it something else? I hope not, because I believe in that."

I said, "Well, I will tell you something, President MacKay." He was making *me* look so good. I was feeling guilty as the devil, you know. And I still have guilt feelings about this. I said, "President MacKay, I think I caused some trouble in my ward. The teacher was saying that we believe that the negroes..." (This was [before the revelation](#) of course.) "...we believe that the negroes are

cursed because of the curse of Cain. That is why they can't hold the priesthood." And I just said, I told them that I didn't want to argue the case, but I wanted them to know that I didn't believe that. And President MacKay said, "Well, I'm glad you said that, because I don't believe it either." And he said, "That was never a doctrine of this church. It is not a doctrine of this church and it never will be a doctrine of this church." He said, all it is, is we believe that there is scriptural precedent, these are his exact words "scriptural precedent". I knew he was referring to the Pearl of Great Price item that the negroes should not now be given the priesthood. Now he said, "That is a practice and it is a practice that is going to be changed."

Now this was back in 1954. He said, "It is a practice that is going to be changed and it is not a doctrine of the church." And I said, "Well, now President MacKay, couldn't you make the statement that you just made to me in conference? Or put it on the front page of the *Deseret News* with the lines on it, you know, like they used to do sometimes with the statements from the First Presidency?" I said, "There are 1,000's of people in the church that believe that is a doctrine of the church. Now couldn't you make that statement in conference?" He sat there and with a kind of a benign smile you know, and I thought, there is such a thing as pushing the prophets a little too far. So I didn't say anymore. And he was thoughtful. And he said, "Well, all I can do is say that that is not a doctrine of the church, that it is only a practice and that it is going to be changed."

Well, we were sitting closer than you and I are and he reached over and he would grab me by the knee, you know (at this point Sterling moved to get closer to Jack. Jack responded and moved closer to Sterling. Sterling took his own hand and grabbed his own knee and tightened his fingers and said), I can still feel it. He had very strong hands. And on the matter of the trial. He didn't mention trial. He said, "They can't do this to you. They can not do this to you." And I said, "Well, now President MacKay, you know more than I know about what they can do." But I said, "It looks like that is what they are going to do." "Well," he said, "if they bring you up for

excommunication from the church, I'll be there as the first witness on your behalf." "Well," I said, "I couldn't ask for a better witness."

Well, anyway, I don't know what happened about that, Jack, but I never heard anymore about the trial.

I would like, while we are talking about this occasion with President MacKay. He was most gracious and marvellous, but toward the end of our long conversation he said, "There's just one piece of advice that I would like to give you. Just one piece of advice. It is the advice that my uncle ..." (somebody or other and he let me know that he was the black sheep of the MacKay crowd). He said, "He came down to the station to see me off on my mission and when he shook hands with me he said, 'David, I just have one piece of advice for you. You just [think and believe as you please.](#)'" And President MacKay said, "And that's my advice to you."

"Well, you know," I said, "President MacKay, that is wonderful advice. Couldn't you give that advice in conference?" And he kind of laughed. Anyway, I am using up too much time.

Jack: No. No. Sterling, you have known many of the church's presidents in your lifetime and many apostles and I know you hold many of them in very high esteem and respect. There are 2 or 3 that I have sensed in our conversations over the years for whom you hold real affection. And I think David O. MacKay is one of those and I think Joseph Fielding Smith is another. Am I correct?

Sterling: That's quite true. Quite true. And President Kimball. I think a marvelous human being. I had strong feelings also for President Lee. He was disappointed in me, to be frank with you. But he was very gracious in every way, right up until just before he died. After this session that I had, there was a 3rd session with Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee. And they were both very gracious. And some people might suppose that they were a little on the mean side. I didn't get called in. They just asked me if I would come in. That's different than being called in, I think. And the first session, they wanted me to talk to them about the

problems of what Harold B. Lee called the intellectuals of the church and Joseph Field Smith called the educated men of the church.

Jack: These are the "so-called" intellectuals.

Sterling: No! Not "the so-called" intellectuals. They were sincere. This is the real intellectuals, like we have here, not "the so-called one" that they have down at the BYU." (Warm laughter from the audience again). Well, anyway, I completely revealed from start to and the second session was completely concentrated on my views, I completely revealed my heresies, which are as bad as anybody could have, I think. And yet, Joseph Fielding Smith when we got up and we shook hands, and I was quite moved by this, by what I felt was his generosity. First he had said, "My door is open to you every hour of the day, every day of the week, every week of the year, if you will come in and talk to me about the problems of the educated people of the church." That was his attitude. And he said, "You know some things about that that we don't know and we need to know about that." I greatly admired him for this. And when we shook hands he said, "In spite of all of the heresies you have revealed to us, your disbeliefs, I want you to know that you have the Holy Ghost." Now in the case of Harold B. Lee he walked out with me. I thought that was very generous of Joseph Fielding. In fact, far too generous.

Harold B. Lee walked out with me and he said, you will excuse me for telling you this, but this is what he said, he said, "Sterling you could do great things for this church and you could become a very dangerous man for this church." And I said, "I don't want to be dangerous to the church." And so we shook hands and that was that.

Later, a friend of mind, George Boyd, who had been an institute director sent me a copy of correspondence. He asked me about it. I said, "I had never heard about it." He said, "Well, every Institute in the church has got copies of it." It was correspondence between President Smith and a man in Salt Lake. He had written to

President Smith, said he had been a student of mine and so on and so on and he didn't understand why I hadn't been excommunicated from the church. And apparently, either this guy or somebody in President Smith's office, there is always somebody who will leak this stuff, got a copy of this letter on official apostolic stationery from President Smith to him saying, "I have done everything I can do to get him excommunicated. I have failed. You will have to take it to a higher power." (Sterling laughs.) I thought that was great. I just loved him for that.

Jack: Now dealing with these heresies that you have talked about in general terms, what's the most outside possibility? Do you regard the universe as a friendly place for human beings?

Sterling: No, I don't. No. I am somewhat pessimistic. I don't think the universe is on our side. Now I have had teachers whom I greatly respect who can give you marvellous arguments from ... coming in from various directions to show that humanity is at home in the universe. And after all, the universe has thrown us up and will destroy us. We are perfectly at home. We just aren't going to be at home forever. But I regard the world as an unfriendly place. I don't see how anyone can take into account the enormous amount of suffering that the human race endures and think in any other terms than that the world doesn't give a damn for the human race.

Jack: On the whole would you say the world's great religions have been an aid in ameliorating some of those ...

Sterling: (Sterling interrupts Jack) Well, I think for the most part, that is what religion is about. Religion is an attempt to convince us, or to convince ourselves that the suffering and evil of the world can be sublimated and that ultimately God is in heaven and all is well. William James, you know, said, "In times like this, God has no business hanging around heaven." And that is the way I feel about it. William James is my saint among philosophers. And of the great philosophers, he is the one that held views closest to Mormonism. He said, "God is down in all of the muck and dirt."

and these are his exact words. He's not in heaven, he's down in all of the muck and dirt of the universe, trying to clean it up. So that I have essentially a pessimistic view of the human condition. I don't believe in it.

Oh, incidentally, one of the great strengths of Mormonism. I am sorry that I failed to mention it. One of the truly great strengths of Mormonism is its abandonment of the idea of original sin. That is the worst idea that ever in fact entered the human mind. And it is a view that virtually all of the great Christian religions, not in any other religion, not in Judaism, but in Christianity. And this is one of the great strengths of Mormonism that it refuses to accept the idea of original sin. In original sin, you know, we sin because we are sinners. Now in Mormonism, you sin because you are over eight years old. You are sinful because you sin. You don't sin because you are sinful. But the dominant view in Christianity has been and in the orthodox theology still is, human beings sin because they are by nature sinful. Not necessarily, by nature, but because they are sinful.

Jack: You have a pessimistic view towards the human condition.

Sterling: Oh yes.

Jack: Sceptical about religions. But frankly, Sterling, I don't know anyone who I believe has a more fundamentally Christian attitude towards other people, who seems to enjoy life more in all of the highest senses, who is more spiritual at the core than you. In what do you anchor this verve for life, this respect for others?

Sterling: Well, that is a very gracious thing for you to say and it is a gross overstatement of course.

Jack: I have witnesses in the audience.

Sterling: You have? Well, I have my witnesses, too. All kind of people here know how bad I am. Well you know, the main thing that I can think of is, that I'm a Mormon. I mean that quite

seriously. You see, one of the really good things about Mormonism is that it brings happiness to people. In fact, I think that is the best thing about Mormonism. It brings a sense of well-being and happiness and desire to do things, and so on. And I think that has had that kind of effect on me and certainly now on millions of others. I realize that one might find the same thing in other religions. People say to me, well, why don't you quit the church. I have people saying this all of the time. Some of you are probably wondering why I don't quit the church. Well, I don't see much point in quitting the church. I don't know of any better church. I know of churches where there is more freedom of thought, as in the case of the Unitarians and [I like the Unitarians](#) and I have some association with Unitarianism. But I don't know of any better church than Mormonism. I have no inclination to turn away from, to turn my back on Mormonism.

Now, any day now, the church might decide to dispense with me, and I will say very frankly and very honestly, I don't see any reason why they shouldn't. I really don't. It's just that simple. And if I were called in for ex... sometimes they say, "What would you do if you were called in to be excommunicated?" Well, I can tell you one thing for sure. I wouldn't miss the trial like some of my friends have, who don't bother to go to the trial. I wouldn't miss it on a bet. Now, I would want a witness there, but not a witness on my behalf. Now if President McKay had shown up, I wouldn't have objected to anything he said. But I wouldn't want a witness there on my behalf. But I would want a witness, somebody else who could tell what happened there. I would want somebody to see what happened. But I wouldn't try to defend myself at all in an excommunication trial. Because I don't have any defense.

I would have to say, "Now look, you are the people who are sort of on trial. You have got to decide whether you want guys like me in the church or not." And there are good reasons for not having people like me in the church, and there may be, for all I know, there may be some good reasons for having people like me in the church. When I was a young man and started teaching seminary for the church there were liberally minded seminary teachers, you

know. And we thought we could make a contribution to the church. We really did. Well, I don't think that any longer. The church belongs to the true believers who are 100% tithe payers and the general authorities. I used to think the church belongs to all of us. That was back in my youthful idealistic days, you see. I don't believe that any longer. I seriously don't believe that any longer. And if they decide to get rid of people like me, which I am well aware would include a lot of people in this audience, I would think they would be perfectly within their rights.

Jack: Now seriously ...

Sterling interrupts: I would make no defense at all.

Jack: When did the young idealistic Sterling that you describe begin to evolve away from that view?

Sterling: Well, I am not sure, but I can think of a few things. During the 3rd year that I was teaching for the church seminary in Mountpelier, Idaho and the commissioner of education had written to me and asked if I would write a paper on the philosophy of religion. He didn't say Mormonism. That would be acceptable in a graduate philosophy seminar. So I wrote such a paper and it was an argument for the Mormon conception of God in connection with moral philosophy. A non-absolutistic god. And the Commissioner liked it and the people he worked with, liked it and they published it in a magazine which they had called *Weekday Religious Education*, that the church published and sent out to all of it's teachers of religion at BYU and the seminaries and institutes and so on. It was a very nice thing. It had a lot of very nice things in it. And so they published it in that. And one of the apostles took it to President Grant. Now I have this from Dr. West, the Commissioner himself. President Grant called him in and put my article in front of him and he said, "I have given this article to 7 lawyers, 7 lawyers, and everyone of them agrees that this is nothing but a lot of damn tommyrot." That was his language. "It is nothing but a lot of damn tommyrot. Now this man is to be fired and we do away with this magazine." And well, he did away with the magazine. I

have a fine record on doing away with magazines. (Warm laughter of audience.)

That happened way back in the early 1940's. Well, they didn't want to fire me. They were nice. My bosses, Lynn Bennion was my immediate boss. They didn't want to fire me, so they sent me down to Arizona. I once was giving a talk to a group in the Lion House, back in the 60's and President Kimball--, he hadn't become President yet--and there were several general authorities there. It was a banquet. It is not clear to me how I got invited to be the speaker with all of these general authorities, but you know President Kimball came from Arizona and we now have a pope from Poland. And I said to President Kimball, you know, going to Arizona for an apostle was like going to Poland for a pope. He was the first apostle from outside of Utah. President Benson was from Idaho, but he came a few minutes later. President Kimball thought that was a good joke. Can I tell a joke on the pope, since he is in our midst? This kid came home all bloodied up and his dad said, "What is the matter with you?" Well, he said, "The Amalie kids down the street beat me up." And his dad said, "Well, why did they do that?" "Well," he said, "I said some dirty things about the pope." And his dad said, "Well, surely you knew that the Amalie kids were Catholics?" And he said, "Yeah, but I didn't know the damn pope was a Catholic." (Warm laughter again.)

Well, to finish this story, they sent me to Arizona. And I had been there in the seminary at Mesa. I had the college work at Tempe and the seminary at Mesa. I had been there about 6 weeks and some kid with a stern look on his face, young man came in and said, "President Grant is outside in his car and he wants to speak to you." And I thought, "My Lord, the President of the Church has taken the time out to trace me clear down to Arizona." So I went out and he was in the car and he apologized for not being able to get out. He was having trouble with his legs, sciatica or something. He wondered if I would get in the car and talk and we just had a wonderful time. I'm pretty sure he had forgotten that, had forgotten that I was the guy that he had told them to fire. But when he died, I was in Tucson, when he died I gave the eulogy at the big stake

affair that they had in his memory. I liked President Grant very much. I didn't blame him for telling them to fire me. I think I would have done the same thing. It wasn't the best article in the world. Anyway. I love the church, you know, and they leave me alone. I get along famously with the church. There are several of the general authorities, if I run into them at some concert or something, they speak to me and I hold that any general authority who will speak to me in public has real prophetic powers. I like them. I like them. Sure, there are some that won't speak to me in public.

Jack: There is a lot of talk right now about threats to the church, and as you know, Elder Packer gave a speech in May suggesting that the chief threats to the church on the so-called intellectuals, the homosexuals and the feminists. What would you say if you were to say what are the chief threats to the welfare of the LDS church in the future are?

Sterling: Oh, I thought you were going to ask me to comment on Elder Packer.

Jack: Oh, I wouldn't restrain you from doing that.

Sterling: I was kind of looking forward to the opportunity. Well, I will just make a very short statement. I think he is a total disaster to the LDS church. Now I think, and I mean this very seriously, I think the chief threat to the church, what you might call its intellectual and moral integrity and so on is that **this** sort of thing goes on and they don't like it. Now I think **that** is the chief threat.

Now I asked that young man that was the head of Sunstone, what's his name? I asked him, "Do the general authorities come to any of these meetings?" His father was one of the general authorities and I think he came. I said they ought to be here and see what the people are thinking, instead of sitting up there condemning the people who come here and telling BYU professors to stay away, and so on and so on. "No," he said, "they don't come. But they have their

spies here." And I suppose they do. Now I don't object to them having their spies here. I think it is a good thing if the general authorities of the church have people coming to every one of these sections if they will report back honestly as to the attitudes and thoughts of the people. Because they are out of touch. They are out of touch with the people. They go to the stakes and the wards and people fawn over them and want to touch the hem of their garments and so on. Not their *garments*. (laughter) I am mixing up my biblical language with my Mormon language. And they are objects of adulation and everything. That's alright. But you see, they have no ... you take people like Dallin Oaks and Neal Maxwell. Dallin Oaks and Neal Maxwell know better than to do some of the things they do in condemning the people in the ... (typists note: couldn't understand the word)--as a kind of a hatchet job as Dallin functioned with respect to Linda Newell and her colleague on the book *Emma Smith*. They know better than that. I mean, they came out of universities. And what is it that enables people who have good ideas and right thoughts to get taken over by that kind of a position, so they get swallowed up in that authoritarian and dogmatic stance that so many of them assume? That is the great threat to the church. The very fact that Sunstone exists, and I think it is a wonderful thing--these Sunstone affairs--the very fact that it exists shows the weakness in the church, that people can't go to church and say what they think. They have to get out somewhere else to say what they think. For a long time there were these so-called church history groups meeting. And I guess there still are. They were all over the church because people wanted to go somewhere where they could say what they thought and communicate with others honestly. I am going to have to tell you a little story.

The church history group when my wife and I came to Utah to live in 1948, we were taken into a church history group which had the governor in it, and Obert Tanner, and Lynn Bennion and Lee Career and Scott Matheson, the governor's father, the older Scott Matheson who was the U.S. district attorney. Now I will never forget at the end of the year, we didn't meet in the summer, they were talking about what a wonderful year we had had. And Scott

Matheson said, "This has been a wonderful year. This has been the most faith destroying year we have had." Well, I shouldn't tell all of these things, should I.

The following articles of faith sound Christian until the definitions and conditions of Mormon theology are applied to them. See the book review on page (78) for some definitions.

LDS ARTICLES OF FAITH

A journalist once asked Joseph Smith exactly what Mormons believed. Smith wrote the following document in response. They have since become **The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**.

1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.
2. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression.
3. We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.
4. We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.
5. We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.
6. We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.
7. We believe in the [gift of tongues](#), prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.
8. We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

9. We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.
10. We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.
11. We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.
12. We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.
13. We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul--We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

The following objections have to be understood in the light of evolving Mormon theology. Many of these objections have been removed because of additional and recent revelation. The Mormon stance on blacks was revised when the federal government threatened them with jail time for violating the 1964 Civil Rights Act. You'll see "no longer taught" on one of them.

TEN REASONS WHY I CANNOT BE A MORMON
by Rev. John Hornok

1. MORMONISM DOES NOT TEACH THAT THE BIBLE IS THE INFALLIBLE WORK OF GOD.

"We believe the Bible to be the Word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the book of Mormon to be the word of God" (Articles of Faith, No. 8).

2. MORMONISM TEACHES THAT GOD IS AN EXALTED MAN AND HAS A PHYSICAL BODY.

"God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man" (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pg. 345).

4. MORMONISM TEACHES THAT JESUS WAS MARRIED AND THAT HE IS POLYGAMOUS.

"We say it was Jesus Christ who was married at Cana of Galilee" (Journal of Discourses, Vol 2, p. 80). Mormonism teaches that Jesus was the natural child of Adam and Mary. "When the Virgin Mary conceived the Child Jesus....He was not begotten by the Holy Ghost. And who is his Father? He is the first of the human family" (Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses, pp. 50-51). No longer taught

5. MORMONISM TEACHES THAT THE TRUE CHURCH CEASED TO EXIST UNTIL IT WAS RESTORED TO JOSEPH SMITH.

The church (LDS) was restored April 6, 1830 by Joseph Smith (Doc. & Cov., 20:1).

6. MORMONISM TEACHES ANOTHER (PERVERTED) GOSPEL THAN THAT OF THE BIBLE.

The gospel to Mormonism is: "Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Receiving the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands, Morality, Loyalty, Tithing, Word of Wisdom, Duty Celestial Marriage (for eternity)" (LDS chart of FREE AGENCY and Articles of Faith, No. 4).

7. MORMONISM TEACHES SALVATION FOR THE DEAD BY PROXY WATER BAPTISM

This doctrine is based on one misunderstood Scripture: "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Cor. 15:29). Paul did not practice baptism for the dead. He excluded himself by using the pronoun "they" rather than "we" or "ye". He is asking a question rather than making a statement. "It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

8. MORMONISM TEACHES GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH FOR THE DEAD

"Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worth of all acceptation" (Doc. & Cov., Sec. 128:24).

9. MORMONISM TEACHES THAT THERE ARE MODERN DAY PROPHETS AND MODERN DAY REVELATIONS FROM GOD.

Mormonism claims that Joseph Smith received the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist. The Melchizedek Priesthood and Apostleship was restored by Peter, James and John shortly afterwards in 1829 (Doc. & Cov., Sec. 13).

10. MORMONISM TEACHES THAT SALVATION DEPENDS UPON GOOD WORKS AND ACCEPTANCE OF JOSEPH SMITH.

"No man who rejects the testimony of Joseph Smith can enter the kingdom of God" (Doctrines of Salvation, vol. 1 pg. 190). "Men have work to do it they would obtain salvation" (Doctrines of Salvation. vol. 3, pg 91).

Is Mormonism Christian?(from Questions & Answers, Ex-Mormons for Je

True or False

1. Mormonism teaches that there is more than one God.
2. Mormonism teaches that Jesus Christ is the spirit brother of Lucifer.
3. Mormonism teaches that Jesus Christ was born after sexual intercourse between God the Father and Mary.
4. Mormonism teaches that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones.
5. Mormonism teaches that God the Father was once a man.
6. Mormonism teaches that we can become gods, and rule over our own planets.
7. Mormonism teaches for a half-century that Adam is our Father and God.
8. Mormonism teaches that Jesus Christ is a polygamist.
9. Mormonism teaches that negroes have dark skin because they are cursed by God, and are an inferior race.

What does the Mormon leadership believe today?

This discussion thread relates to Hinckley's quotes that appeared in a San Francisco newspaper which Mormons were trying to rationalize away as either insignificant or merely Hinckley not wanting to give non-members the "meat before the milk".

> > > Pres. Hinckley, on the other hand, was speaking to the general public,
> > > not church members. They are unprepared for strong doctrine. Unprepared
> > > spiritually, not intellectually.
> >
> > So you are saying that one should lie to those who aren't on the inside
> > in order to insure that milk is always given before meat?
>
> No, no, no; did he actually *lie*, or did he give a less than specific answer?

Here is the [actual quote](#):

Q: There are some significant differences in your beliefs. For instance, don't Mormons believe that God was once a man?

A: I wouldn't say that. There was a little couplet coined, "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become." Now that's more of a couplet than anything else.

Did he [lie](#) or was he just being "less than specific"? I think it was the former.

Lorenzo Snow may have started this "little couplet" as Hinckley now calls it, but Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and virtually every General Authority since then ([including Hinckley himself!](#)) has taught it. See D&C 130 for a scriptural reference where it is nearly canonized.

If you type the phrase and similar phrases into the CD-ROM that includes all of the conference addresses and Joseph Smith's teachings, you will find that "I wouldn't say that" to the question "don't Mormons believe that God was once a man?" is more than just a "less than specific" answer. It is an incorrect answer.

and from alt.religion.mormon

Wow. That's a pretty heavy quote. Appears as though Pres. Hinckley is trying to distance himself from the teachings of Joseph Smith:

"God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!.....It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God.....yea, that God himself, the father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible...." (from *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* and [History of the Church](#), 6:302-17)

And many others since then. Here are just a few...

"He [God] is our Father--the Father of our spirits, and was once a man in mortal flesh as we are, and is now an exalted being. It appears ridiculous to the world, under their darkened and erroneous traditions, that God has once been a finite being;" (Brigham Young in the *Journal of Discourses*, v. 7, p. 333)

"The Gods who dwell in the Heaven...have been redeemed from the grave in a world which existed before the foundations of this earth were laid. They and the Heavenly body which they now inhabit were once in a fallen state....they were exalted also, from fallen men to Celestial Gods to inhabit their Heaven forever and ever." (Apostle Orson Pratt in *The Seer*, page 23)

"You and I--what helpless creatures are we! Such limited power we have, and how little can we control the wind and the waves and the storms! We remember the numerous scriptures which, concentrated in a single line, were stated by a former prophet, Lorenzo Snow: 'As man is, God once was; and as God is, man may

become." (President Spencer W. Kimball in "Our Great Potential" from the April 1977 Priesthood Session of General Conference)

"While serving in Pennsylvania several years ago, I was pleasantly surprised to be visited by a minister of a huge Protestant congregation. We exchanged pleasantries and discussed the doctrinal subjects on which we could find benign agreement. Suddenly he interrupted our conversation by stating, "You teach one belief with which I could never agree. It is your idea that 'as God is, man may become.' " (See [*History of the Church*](#), 6:302-17.) He held a well-worn white Bible in his hand. I asked him to turn to Matthew 5:48. His nimble fingers quickly turned to that reference, and he read, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." He gasped and then hesitatingly agreed to man's great potential. We read other scriptures, such as: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." (Gen. 1:26.) He understood, and found a new respect for our teachings. He left a wiser man, and I felt a renewed gratitude for the inspiring truths that we understand and teach." ("Learning Our Father's Will" Elder Hugh W. Pinnock, famous for his involvement in the [Mark Hofmann scandal](#), October 1984 Sunday Afternoon Session of General Conference)

Yet [another interesting change](#).....

And from Gordon B. Hinckley himself when speaking to members instead of to potential converts:

I believe that I am a child of God, endowed with a divine birthright. I believe that there is something of divinity within me and within each of you. I believe that we have a godly inheritance and that it is our responsibility, our obligation, and our opportunity to cultivate and nurture the very best of these qualities within us. (BYU 1992)

On the other hand, the whole design of the gospel is to lead us onward and upward to greater achievement, even, eventually, to godhood. This great possibility was enunciated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the King Follet sermon (see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp.

342-62) and emphasized by President Lorenzo Snow. It is this grand and incomparable concept: As God now is, man may become! (See *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, comp. Clyde J. Williams, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984, p. 1) Our enemies have criticized us for believing in this. Our reply is that this lofty concept in no way diminishes God the Eternal Father. He is the Almighty. He is the Creator and Governor of the universe. He is the greatest of all and will always be so. But just as any earthly father wishes for his sons and daughters every success in life, so I believe our Father in Heaven wishes for his children that they might approach him in stature and stand beside him resplendent in godly strength and wisdom. (Conference Report, Oct. 1994)

Hinckley's credibility sunk even lower when in the 1997 October General Conference he said,

I personally have been much quoted, and in a few instances misquoted and misunderstood. I think that's to be expected. None of you need worry because you read something that was incompletely reported. You need not worry that I do not understand some matters of doctrine. I think I understand them thoroughly, and it is unfortunate that the reporting may not make this clear. I hope you will never look to the public press as the authority on the doctrines of the Church.

He blames the press for misquoting him despite the fact that he said basically the same thing, on three different occasions, and they were reported via three separate sources of the "public press". See [this page](#) for those sources. *Time* responded to Hinckley's assertion of being misquoted with a complete excerpt of the question and answer as follows:

Here is the relevant excerpt from President Hinckley's interview with *Time*:

Q: Just another related question that comes up is the statements in the King Follet discourse by the Prophet.

A: Yeah

Q: ... about that, God the Father was once a man as we were. This is something that Christian writers are always addressing. Is this the teaching of the church today, that God the Father was once a man like we are?

A: I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it. I haven't heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don't know. I don't know all the circumstances under which that statement was made. I understand the philosophical background behind it. But I don't know a lot about it and I don't know that others know a lot about it.

The following article states the Christian viewpoint on and proofs for the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Doctrine of the Trinity is a distinctive of the Christian faith. It is part of what makes Christianity what it is. It cannot be denied by anyone claiming to be a Christian. If this viewpoint is rejected by any religion, then by definition that religion is not Christian. It is a cult – meaning it rejects Christian orthodoxy.

The Trinity, the Definition of Chalcedon, and Oneness Theology

by James White

I. Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity requires a balanced view of Scripture. That is, since the doctrine itself is derived from more than one stream of evidence, it requires that all the evidence be weighed and given authority. If any of the foundational pillars of the doctrine (monotheism, the deity of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit, etc.) be ignored or even rejected, the resulting doctrinal system will differ markedly from the orthodox position, and will lose its claim to be called "biblical." For centuries various small groups have **rejected the doctrine of the Trinity**. In modern times these groups have frequently attracted quite a following; Jehovah's Witnesses as the modern heirs of Arius have over 3 million people actively engaged in their work; **the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons)** are heirs of ancient polytheism and mystery religions, and nearly 10 million adhere to their teachings. A smaller number of people, however, cling to the third-century position of modalism - the teachings of men such as Sabellius or Praxeas or Noetus. Though fewer in number, it is this position, popularly called the "Oneness" teaching, that prompts this paper's clarification of the Biblical position regarding the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Jesus Christ. Oneness writers strongly deny the doctrine of the Trinity. In the words of David K. Bernard,

"The Bible does not teach the doctrine of the trinity, and trinitarianism actually contradicts the Bible. It does not add any positive benefit to the Christian message....the doctrine of the trinity does detract from the important biblical themes of the oneness of God and the absolute deity of Jesus Christ."[\[1\]](#)

The attack on the Trinity launched by Oneness writers can be divided into two camps. There are some writers who know what the doctrine is

and disagree with it; unfortunately, many others don't know what it is and attack it anyway, normally misrepresenting the doctrine in quite obvious ways. For example, one writer, while ridiculing the use of the term "mystery" in reference to the Trinity said, "When asked to explain how God could be one and three persons at the same time the answer is, "It's a mystery." "[2]

Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity does not say God is one person and three persons or one being and three beings, but that within the one being of God there exists eternally three persons. It is easy to see why many find the doctrine unintelligible, especially when they trust writers who are not careful in their research. This Oneness teaching is quite attractive to the person who wishes, for whatever personal reason, to "purge" the faith of what they might consider to be "man's philosophies." There are a number of Oneness groups in the United States, located primarily in the South and Midwest. The United Pentecostal Church is the largest of the Oneness groups in the U.S.; others include the Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, and the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith. Each of these groups has thousands of followers, many of whom are quite evangelistic in spreading their faith. Given that many of the issues that Oneness addresses are not familiar ground for most Christians, it is good to examine these issues in the light of Biblical revelation and theology so that the orthodox Christian will be able to "give a reason" for the hope that is within us. This survey will be broken into four sections. First, the important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity relevant to the Oneness position will be examined. These would include the Christian definition of monotheism, the existence of three persons, the pre-existence of the Son and the internal operations of the Trinity. Secondly, vital issues relevant to Christology will be addressed, such as the Chalcedonian definition, the unipersonality of Christ, and the relationship of the Father and the Son. Thirdly, the Oneness position will be defined and presented, and finally that position will be critiqued.

II. Trinitarian Concepts

The very word "Trinity" is made up of two terms - "tri" and "unity." The doctrine travels the middle road between the two, and neither can be allowed to predominate the other. Trinitarians have but one God - the charge of polytheism or tritheism leveled at the orthodox position ignores the very real emphasis, drawn from the Biblical witness to one God, on monotheism. This can be seen, for example, in the definition of the Trinity given by Berkhof:

A) There is in the Divine Being but one indivisible essence (ousia, essentia). B) In this one Divine Being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. C) The whole

undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons. D) The subsistence and operation of the three persons in the divine Being is marked by a certain definite order. E) There are certain personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished. F) The Church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery beyond the comprehension of man.^[3]

Twice the emphasis is made that the essence or being of God is indivisible. There is but one being that is God. The doctrine of the Trinity safeguards this further by asserting that "the whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons." This follows logically on the heels of asserting the indivisibility of the being of God, for if three Persons share that one being, they must share all of that being. The Father is not just 1/3 of God - he is fully Deity, just as the Son and the Spirit. The Biblical evidence for monotheism is legion, and it is not within the scope of this paper to review all those passages. The Shema might be sufficient to demonstrate the point, for this recital begins at Deuteronomy 6:4 with the words, "Hear, O Israel; Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one." This concept of monotheism separates Judaism (and Christianity) from any kind of polytheistic religion. Given monotheism as a basis, it must be stressed that the bald statement of monotheism does not imply nor denote unitarianism. When the Bible says God is one, this does not mean that God is unitarian (i.e., uni-personal) in his mode of existence. Frequently individual writers will quote from the many passages that teach that there is one God and will infer from this a denial of the tri-personality of God. This is going beyond what is written. It is vital, if justice is to be done to the Biblical teaching, that all of the witness of Scripture be given due consideration. If the Bible presents more data that clarifies the meaning of God's "oneness," then this information must be taken into account. Does, then, the Bible indicate the existence of more than one Person in the divine nature? It most certainly does. John Calvin expressed the proper balance well in the Institutes:

"Again, Scripture sets forth a distinction of the Father from the Word, and of the Word from the Spirit. Yet the greatness of the mystery warns us how much reverence and sobriety we ought to use in investigating this. And that passage in Gregory of Nazianus vastly delights me: "I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one." Let us not, then, be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity. Indeed, the words "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" imply a real distinction - let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously

designated from his works, are empty - but a distinction, not a division."[\[4\]](#)

Before looking at the particular Biblical data, it is good to make the same emphasis as made by Gregory via Calvin - though this paper will emphasize the triunity of God, this is only because of the object of clarification, that being the Oneness teaching. Balance demands that both elements - the existence of three persons as well as the absolute claim of monotheism - be maintained. The Christian church maintains that the terms Father, Son and Holy Spirit refer to actual Persons, not simply modes of existence. As the popular, short definition goes, "There is within the one being that is God three co-equal and co-eternal Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father, etc. Each is eternal - the Father has always been, the Son has always been, and the Spirit has always been. No person precedes the other, no follows another. Charles Hodge said in reflecting on the early church councils,

"These Councils decided that the terms Father, Son, and Spirit, were not expressive merely of relations ad extra, analogous to the terms, Creator, Preserver, and Benefactor. This was the doctrine known as Sabellianism, which assumed that the Supreme Being is not only one in essence, but one in person. The Church doctrine asserts that Father, Son, and Spirit express internal, necessary, and eternal relations in the Godhead; that they are personal designations, so that the Father is one person, the Son another person, and the Spirit another person. They differ not as *alio kai alio*, but as *allos kai allos*; each says I, and each says Thou, to either of the others. The word used in the Greek Church to express this fact was first *prosopon*, and afterwards, and by general consent, *hupostasis*; in the Latin Church, "persona," and in English, person. The idea expressed by the word in its application to the distinctions in the Godhead, is just as clear and definite as in its application to men."[\[5\]](#)

Some Oneness writers have gone so far as to say, "To say that God is three persons and find substantiation for it in the Scripture is a work in futility. There is literally nothing in the Bible that supports God being three persons."[\[6\]](#)

However, as the Church throughout the ages has seen fit to reject the modalistic presentation, there must obviously be some reason for this. Such reason is found in the teaching of Scripture itself. The Bible presents a number of categories of evidence that demonstrates the existence of three Persons all sharing the one being that is God. First,

the Persons are described as personal; that is, the attributes of personhood and personal existence are ascribed to the three. Secondly, clear distinctions are made between the Persons, so that it is impossible to confound or confuse the three. The second Person, the Son, is described as being eternal (as is the Spirit, but in this context, given the denial of the eternal nature of the Son by the Oneness position, and the acceptance of the eternity of the Spirit by the same group, this point is more tangent to the issue) and is differentiated in this pre-existence from the Father.

Finally, we see real and eternal relationships between the Persons (the opera ad intra.) One of the characteristics of personal existence is will. Few would argue the point in relationship to the Father, as He obviously has a will. So too, the Son has a will, for he says to the Father in the Garden, "not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39) The ascription of will to the Persons indicates the ability to reason, to think, to act, to desire - all those things we associate with self-consciousness. As we shall see later, there is a difference between nature and person, and one of those differences is the will. Inanimate objects do not will; neither do animals. Part of the *imago dei* is the will itself.

Another aspect of personhood seen to exist with each of the Persons is the ability to love. In John 3:35 we read that "the Father loves the Son..." This is repeated in John 5:20. In John 15:9 the Father loves the Son, and the Son in return loves those who are His own. In Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17, we are again reminded of the Father's love for Jesus in 17:23, and in verse 24 we are told that this love between Father and Son has existed from all eternity. That love marks every word of Jesus concerning the Father is beyond dispute, and is it not fair to say that the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Church is an act of love as well? Hence we see that the persons described in these passages (and in many others) are capable of love, a personal attribute. It might be argued that these personal attributes are simply applied to the three manifestations of God, but that this does not necessarily mean that there are three Persons. However, the Bible clearly differentiates between the three Persons, as the brief survey to follow demonstrates. One of the more well-known examples of the existence of three Persons is the baptism of Jesus recorded in Matthew 3:16-17. Here the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is being baptized (and is again described as being the object of the Father's love, paralleling the Johannine usage), and the Spirit is descending as a dove. [\[7\]](#)

Jesus is not speaking to himself here (as many non-Christian groups tend to accuse the Trinitarians of making Jesus a ventriloquist), but is spoken to by the Father. There is no confusing of the Persons at the

baptism. The transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17:1-9 again demonstrates the separate personhood of the Father and the Son. The Son's true pre-existent glory is unveiled for an instant in the presence of the Father in the cloud. Communication again takes place, marked with the familiar love of the Father for the Son. Both the deity and the separate personhood of the Son is clearly presented in this passage. The Father spoke to the Son at another time, recorded in John 12:28. Again, the distinction of person of the Father and the Son is clearly maintained.

Some of the most obvious passages relevant to the Father and the Son are found in the prayers of Jesus Christ. These are no mock prayers - Jesus is not speaking to Himself (nor, as the Oneness writer would put it, is Jesus' humanity speaking to His deity) - He is clearly communicating with another Person, that being the Person of the Father. Transcendent heights are reached in the lengthiest prayer we have, that of John 17. No one can miss the fact of the communication of one Person (the Son) with another (the Father) presented in this prayer. The usage of personal pronouns and direct address put the very language squarely on the side of maintaining the separate personhood of Father and Son. This is not to say that their unity is something that goes far beyond simple purpose; indeed, given the background of the Old Testament, the very statements of the Son regarding His relationship with the Father are among the strongest assertions of His Deity in the Bible.

But, as stated before, the doctrine of the Trinity is pre-eminently a balanced doctrine that differentiates between the being or nature of God and the Persons who share equally that being. If there is more than one God, or if there is less than three Persons, then the doctrine of the Trinity is in error. Striking is the example of Matthew 27:46 where Jesus, quoting from Psalm 22:1 cries out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" That the Father is the immediate person addressed is clear from Luke's account where the next statement from Jesus in his narrative is "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)[\[8\]](#)

Some early heresies (predominately gnostic in character) had to posit some kind of "separation" of the Deity from the human Son at this point (and indeed, some Oneness writers could be accused of the same problem). That this is the Son addressing the Father is crystal clear, and the ensuing personhood of both is inarguable.

One of the high-water marks of Synoptic Christology is to be found in Matthew 11:27. Here the reciprocity between the Father and Son is put forth with exactness, while at the same time dictating the absolute deity

of both. The relationship of the Father and Son is the topic under discussion in both John 5:16ff and John 8:12ff. The Apostle again walks a tight line in maintaining the distinct personhood of Father and Son while asserting the full deity of Jesus Christ. Outside of a Trinitarian concept of God, this position of John's is unintelligible. Important in this discussion is the fact that in the very same passages that the Deity of the Son is emphasized his distinction from the Father is also seen. This causes insuperable problems for the Oneness position, as we shall see. In John 5:19-24, Jesus clearly differentiates himself from the Father, yet claims attributes that are only proper of Deity (life, judgment, honor). In John 5:30 the Son says He can do nothing of Himself, yet in 37-39 he identifies Himself as the one witnessed to by the Scriptures who can give eternal life. Only Yahweh of the Tanakh can do so.

Hence, the deity spoken of by Jesus is not the Father dwelling in the Son, but is the Son's personally. This is seen even more plainly in chapter 8. Here it is the Son who utilizes the phrase *ego eimi* in the absolute sense, identifying Himself as Yahweh. It is the Son who says He is glorified by the Father (v. 54) and yet only four verses later it is the Son who says, "Before Abraham came into existence, I AM!" Clearly the Son is fully deity just as the Father. And what of the Spirit? Jesus said in John 14:16-17 that the Father would send another (Gr: *allos*) comforter. Jesus had been the Comforter for the disciples during His earthly ministry, but He was about to leave them and return to heaven where he had been before (John 17:5). The Holy Spirit, identified as a Person by John (through his usage of the masculine *ekeinos* at John 16:13), is sent both by the Father (John 14:16) as well as by the Son (16:7).^[9] The Spirit is not identified as the Father, nor as the Son, for neither could send Himself.

Hence, it is clear from this short review that the Scriptures differentiate between the Person of the Father and the Person of the Son, as well as differentiating between these and the Spirit. The next area that must be addressed is the Biblical teaching of the pre-existence of the Son, or, as often referred to by Oneness writers, the "eternal Son theory." That the Son, as a divine Person, has existed from all eternity, is a solidly Biblical teaching. Most denials of this teaching stem from a misunderstanding of the term *monogenes*^[10] or the term "begotten" as used in Psalm 2:7. Such denials cannot stand under the weight of the Biblical evidence. Though other passages could be examined, we will limit the discussion to seven Biblical sections that clearly teach the pre-existence of the Son as a Person within the divine being. What may be the most obvious passage is found in Colossians chapter 1, verses 13 through 17.

Here the "beloved Son" is described as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn (Gr: prototokos) of all creation." He (the Son) is then described as the Creator in what could only be called exhaustive terms. Certainly, if the Son is the creator, then the Son both pre-existed and is indeed eternal, for God is the creator of all that is. It will not do to say that this passage says that God created all things for the Son who was yet to exist; for verse 16 is emphatic in announcing that it was "in Him" that all things were created (the usage of *en* is the instrumental of agency). Without doubt the Son is presented here as pre-existent. The same can be said of Philippians 2:5-7, the *Carmen Christi*. This passage has spawned literally hundreds of volumes, and an in-depth exegesis is not called for here. Rather, it is obvious that the Son is presented here as eternally existing (*huparchon*) in the very *morphe tou theou* - the form of God. This One is also said to be "equal with God." Note there is here no confounding of the Persons (just as throughout Scripture) yet there is just as plainly an identification of more than one Person under discussion.

It was not the Father with whom the Son was equal who became flesh and "made Himself of no repute"; rather, it was the Son who did this. The opening chapter of the book of Hebrews identifies the Son as pre-existent as well. Verse 2 echoes Colossians 1:13-17 in saying that it was "through the Son" that the worlds were made. This Son is the "radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His being." Again the distinction of the Son from the Father is maintained at the exact same time as the absolute deity of the Son is put forward, a balance found only in the doctrine of the Trinity and not in non-Christian theories. The Son, verse 3 says, "upholds all things by His powerful word." This is directly analogous to the final statements of Colossians 1:17, and demands the continuous and eternal existence of the Son to make any sense whatsoever. In light of this, it is clear that the interpretation of verse 5, which quotes from Psalm 2, that asserts a beginning for the Son misses the entire point of the opening of Hebrews. In its original context, this passage did not indicate that God had literally fathered the king to whom the Psalm was addressed; certainly, therefore, such a forced meaning cannot be placed on this usage either. Rather, the writer of Hebrew's purpose is to exalt the Son and demonstrate His superiority even to the angels, going so far as to clearly identify the Son as Yahweh in verses 10 through 12. It would be strange indeed if the writer tried to show the real nature of the Son by saying that He, like the angels, was a created, non-eternal being. The Lord Jesus Himself never attempted to say He had a beginning, but was instead aware of His true nature.

In the real "Lord's prayer" of John 17, he states in verse 5, "And now you glorify me, Father, with the glory I had with you (*para seauto*) before the

worlds were made." Jesus is here conscious of the glory which He had shared with the Father in eternity, a clear reflection of Philippians 2, Hebrews 1, and, as we shall see, John 1. As Yahweh declares that he will give his glory to no other (Isaiah 48:11) yet another identification of the Son as being one with the Father in sharing the divine name Yahweh is here presented. This glorious pre-existence of which Jesus here speaks is also seen in John 14:28 when Jesus, having said He was returning to the Father, points out to the disciples that they should have rejoiced at this, for rather than His continued existence in His current state of humiliation (the "being made of no repute" of Philippians 2), He was about to return to His glorious position with the Father in heaven, a position which is "greater" than the one He now was enduring.

Many passages in the New Testament identify the Lord Jesus Christ as Yahweh. One of these is John 8:58, where, again speaking as the Son, Jesus asserts his existence before Abraham. As pointed out above, it does not do to say that this was simply an assertion that the deity resident within Him pre-existed (in Oneness teaching, the Father) but rather it was He as the Son who was "before Abraham." In John 3:13 Jesus said, "no one has gone up into heaven except the one who came out of heaven, the Son of man."[\[11\]](#) Jesus' own words indicate that He was aware of His origin and pre-existence. What is also interesting is the name for Himself that is used - the Son of Man. One would expect the Son of God to be used here, but it is not. Jesus was one Person, not two. The Son of God was the Son of Man. One cannot divide Him into two Persons.

The most striking evidence of the pre-existence of the Son is found in the prologue of the Gospel of John. This vital Christological passage is incredible for its careful accuracy to detail - even down to the tenses of verbs the author is discriminating in his writing. It again must be asserted that, without a Trinitarian understanding of God, this passage ends up self-contradictory and illogical. John defines his terms for us in verses 14 and 18. In verse 14 he tells us that the Logos of whom he has been speaking became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. He also tells us that it is Jesus Christ who, though clearly not the Father Himself, is the one who "makes the Father known" and who is, indeed, the monogenes theos[\[12\]](#) the "unique God." That verse 18 has under consideration two separate Persons is beyond dispute. That these two Persons are the Father and the Son is just as sure, for John so identifies them. With this in mind, the first three verses are crystalline in their teaching. John asserts that the Logos was "in the beginning," that is, the Word is eternal. This Logos was "with God" (Gr: pros ton theon.)[\[13\]](#)

This latter phrase can only refer to personal contact and communion, a point to be expanded on in much of the Gospel of John. Hence, from this phrase, it is clear that one cannot completely identify the Person of God (in John's usage here, the Father) with the Logos (i.e., the Son). However, he goes on in the third clause to provide that balance found throughout the inspired text by saying, "the Word was God." The NEB renders this clause, "and what God was, the Word was." Perhaps Dr. Kenneth Wuest came the closest when he translated, "And the Word was as to His essence absolute deity." By placing the term *theos* in the emphatic position, and by using that term itself (rather than *theios* - a "godlike" one), John avoids any kind of Arian subordinationism. At the same time, John does not make *logos* and *theos* identical to one another, for he does not put an article before *theos*. By so doing he walks the fine line between Arianism and Sabellianism, subordinationism and modalism.

Finally, John asserts, as did Paul before him, that the Logos is the Creator. "Through him were all things made which have been made." This is exactly the point of Colossians 1:15-17 and Hebrews 1:2. As John identified the Logos as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then his testimony must be added to all the others in proclaiming the pre-existence of the Son. Having seen the pre-existence of the Son, then we are forced by the Biblical data itself to deal with the internal relationships of the Persons who make up the Godhead. Though many Oneness writers would object to the terminology utilized to discuss this subject, it is they, not the Trinitarian, who are ignoring the Biblical material and its clear teaching. Though an in-depth discussion of the *opera ad intra* is not warranted in this paper, it might be good to point out that we are obviously here not discussing simply an economic trinity. All of the above evidence points to real and purposeful distinctions (not divisions) within the Being of God that are necessary and eternal, not temporal and passing. God has eternally been trinal and will always be so. The relationship between the essence of God and the Persons is not a subject of Biblical discussion directly; but we are forced to deal with the issue nevertheless - by the Scriptural testimony itself. G. T. Shedd expressed it this way:

"The essence...is not prior, either in the order of nature or of time, to the persons, nor subsequent to them, but simultaneous with them. Hence, the essence is not one constituent factor by itself, apart from the persons, any more than the persons are three constituent factors by themselves, apart from the essence. The one essence is simultaneously three persons, and the three persons are one essence. The trinity is not a composition of one essence with three persons. It is not an essence without distinctions united with three distinctions, so as to make a

complex. The trinity is simple and uncomplex. "If," says Twesten,... "we distinguish between the clearness of light and the different degrees of clearness, we do not imply that light is composed of clearness and degrees of clearness." Neither is God composed of one untrinal essence and three persons."[\[14\]](#)

With these Trinitarian concepts in mind, the specific Christological questions must now be addressed.

III. Christological Concepts

"Therefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [homoousios] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [theotokos]; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation [en duo phusesin, asungchutos atreptos, adiairetos achoristos]; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence [hupostasis], not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us."[\[15\]](#)

In 451 A.D. the Council of Chalcedon formulated this definition of the Person of Christ. The council was called as a result of the controversy concerning the relationship of the divine and the human in the Lord Jesus.[\[16\]](#) The Nestorian controversy, monothelism, the Eutychian controversy, and others, had precipitated the council. It can be safely said that we have yet to get beyond Chalcedon in our theology - modern orthodox Christological formulations have not proceeded beyond the Chalcedonian definition. Chalcedon's emphasis on the two natures but one person in Christ was anticipated in its main elements by the Athanasian creed. A portion of that creed reads, "He is perfect God and He is perfect man, with a rational soul and human flesh...Although He is God and man, He is not two but one Christ...because He is one person." The relationship between the divine and the human in Christ is as unique as the God who brought this situation about. Indeed, to understand this

relationship one must first define the terms being utilized, and this was one of the main contributions of Chalcedon. Schaff noted that one of the main importances of Chalcedon was

"The precise distinction between nature and person. Nature or substance is the totality of powers and qualities which constitute a being; person is the Ego, the self-conscious, self-asserting, and acting subject. There is no person without nature, but there may be nature without person (as in irrational beings). The Church doctrine distinguishes in the Holy Trinity three persons (though not in the ordinary human sense of the word) in one divine nature of substance which they have in common; in its Christology it teaches, conversely, two nature in one person (in the usual sense of person) which pervades both. Therefore it cannot be said: The Logos assumed a human person, or united himself with a definite human individual: for then the God-Man would consist of two persons; but he took upon himself the human nature, which is common to all men; and therefore he redeemed not a particular man, but all men, as partakers of the same nature of substance. The personal Logos did not become an individual anthropos, but sarx, flesh, which includes the whole of human nature, body, soul and spirit."[\[17\]](#)

In his discussion of the Person and work of Christ, Dr. Berkhof gives the following information:

"The term "nature" denotes the sum-total of all the essential qualities of a thing, that which makes it what it is. A nature is a substance possessed in common, with all the essential qualities of such a substance. The term "person" denotes a complete substance endowed with reasons, and, consequently, a responsible subject of its own actions. Personality is not an essential and integral part of a nature, but is, as it were, the terminus to which it tends. A person is a nature with something added, namely, independent subsistence, individuality."[\[18\]](#)

What does all of this mean? It means that when Jesus spoke, He spoke as one Person, not two. One cannot say that, when claiming deity, Jesus' "deity" spoke, or when He referred to His humanity, it was His "human nature" that spoke. It can be seen from this that natures don't speak - only Persons do. And, since Jesus is one Person, not two, He speaks as a whole Person. Hence, when Jesus speaks, He speaks as Jesus. This is in direct contradistinction to Oneness teaching that is fond of making either the Deity in Jesus speak (whom they identify as the Father) or the humanity (the Son). The two natures (divine and human) make up but one Person, Jesus Christ. The divine nature is the Son of God, the eternal Logos. The Chalcedonian definition defines the unipersonality of Christ.[\[19\]](#) Jesus was a true Person; he was not non-human, nor less than human, nor a multiple personality. He had two natures, but those

natures were made personal by only one Person, the Word made flesh. Hence, though Jesus may say things that indicate his two natures, what he says represents His whole being, not a certain part thereof. One might well ask the question, what does Scripture say concerning this question? How does the Bible present this teaching? Stuart Olyott answers that question:

"It does so by three strands of teaching. The first is its entire failure to give us any evidence of two personalities in our Lord Jesus Christ...In all that is recorded of our Lord Jesus Christ there is no word spoken by him, no action performed and no attribute predicated of him, which suggests that he is not a single indivisible person...A second line of biblical evidence is found in considering the terms in which the New Testament writers wrote of Christ...There is not a hint that two personalities came to redeem them that were under the law, but one. Both natures are represented as united in one person...But there is a third line of scriptural proof which settles the issue beyond question...It is the fact that what can be true of only one or the other of Christ's two natures is attributed, not to the nature, but to the one person. He is spoken of in terms true of either one or the other of his natures."[\[20\]](#)

Olyott gives a number of Biblical examples. Acts 20:28 is cited. Here Paul speaks of the Church of God which "he purchased with His own blood." Christ's blood, of course, was part of his human nature, yet this attribute (the blood) is predicated here directly of the divine nature ("God"). "What could only be true of his human nature is said to have been accomplished by the divine person. There is not a human Christ and a divine Christ - two Christs. There is but one Christ." (p. 105) Another example is 1 Corinthians 2:8 which speaks of the fact that the rulers of this age "crucified the Lord of glory." Again, though Christ died in human terms, it is the divine Person who is said to have been crucified. No hint is given whatsoever of two persons in the one Jesus; rather, Christ is one Person composed of two natures. But could the term "Father" simply refer to the divine nature in Christ, as Oneness writers assert? The New Testament does not allow for this. As we have already seen, the Biblical witness sharply distinguishes between the Father and the Son. We have seen that Jesus Christ is unipersonal; He is one person. It is just as clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is never identified as the Father, but is shown to be another Person beside the Father.

A large class of examples of this would be the greetings in the epistles of Paul. In Romans 1:7 we read, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."[\[21\]](#) 1 Corinthians 1:3 is identical, as is 2 Corinthians 1:2. Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, and Philippians 1:2. Nowhere does Paul identify Jesus as the Father. Even more significant

in this respect is what is known as Granville Sharp's Rule. This rule of Greek grammar basically stated says that when two singular nouns are connected by the copulative kai, and the first noun has the article, while the second does not, both nouns are describing the same person. There are a number of Granville Sharp constructions in the New Testament that emphasize the deity of Christ, most especially Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1. But, no Granville Sharp construction ever identifies the Father as Jesus Christ. The care taken by Paul and the other apostles in differentiating between the Father and Jesus Christ speaks volumes concerning their faith. Some might object to the Trinitarian doctrine of Christ by saying that if we say the Son is (to use a human term) "begotten" eternally by the Father (i.e., there is a relationship that is eternal and timeless between the Father and the Son) that we are in effect positing either subordinationism or tri-theism, depending. Dr. Shedd replied as follows:

"But if the Father is unbegotten, does it not follow that he alone is the absolute Being? and is not this Arianism? Not so. For one and the same numerical essence subsists whole and undivided in him who is generated, as well as in him who generates; in him who is spirated, as well as in those two who spirate. There can therefore be no inequality of essence caused by these acts of generation and spiration."[\[22\]](#)

Such language seems, to many, to be foreign to the "simple" message of the Gospel. But such an objection ignores the heights of Ephesians 1, as well as the object under discussion - that being the very Person of the Lord of glory. One writer expressed it this way:

"Jesus cannot be analyzed and calculated. But whoever speaks of him in human words is entering into the realm of "rational" speech. There is no unique language for the realm of the incalculable and the "irrational." Thus, where we express "eschatological history," the origin and the goal, God's reality in the man Jesus, our language collapses; it becomes paradoxical. We could also say that our language then expresses awe. It says those things which leave men "speechless." Its terms are not then a means for grasping but rather for making known that we have been grasped. It is not then a form of mastery, but testimony to the overpowering experience which has come upon man."[\[23\]](#)

IV. Oneness Theology Defined

Having examined some of the pertinent issues relevant to Christian theology, the statements of Oneness exponents themselves will now be examined. The following material is taken from original sources and materials. Following the definition of the position, specific objections will be dealt with. David K. Bernard presented a paper at Harvard Divinity

School in 1985. In this paper, Bernard provided a good summary of Oneness teaching:

"The basis of Oneness theology is a radical concept of monotheism. Simply stated, God is absolutely and indivisibly one. There are no essential distinctions or divisions in His eternal nature. All the names and titles of the Deity, such as Elohim, Yahweh, Adonai, Father, Word, and Holy Spirit refer to one and the same being, or - in trinitarian terminology - to one person. Any plurality associated with God is only a plurality of attributes, titles, roles, manifestations, modes of activity, or relationships to man."[\[24\]](#)

He added in his book, *The Oneness of God*,

"They believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are manifestations, modes, offices, or relationships that the one God has displayed to man."[\[25\]](#)

Hence, from Bernard's statements it is clear that the Oneness position adheres to the classical modalistic terminology of such ancient writers as Praxeas of Sabellius or Noetus. However, it would be an error to think that, from the Oneness perspective, the Father, Son and Spirit are one Person. To see exactly what this position is stating, it would be good to look at statements regarding each of the "Persons" as seen by the Trinitarian perspective. First, the question can be asked, "Who is the Father in Oneness theology?"

"The term Father refers to God Himself - God in all His deity. When we speak of the eternal Spirit of God, we mean God Himself, the Father."[\[26\]](#)

"If there is only one God and that God is the Father (Malachi 2:10), and if Jesus is God, then it logically follows that Jesus is the Father."[\[27\]](#)

Hence, from this perspective, God is the Father. All that can be predicated of God is predicated of the Father and the Father only. This shall be seen more clearly as we examine the other required questions. "Who is the Word in Oneness theology?" This question receives two answers from Oneness writers - there is a seeming contradiction in response to this question. John Paterson identified the Word as the Father Himself:

So we conclude that the Word was the visible expression of the invisible God - in other words, the invisible God embodied in visible form;...From the Scriptures quoted it should be obvious that the Word was not merely

an impersonal thought existing in the mind of God but was, in reality, the Eternal Spirit Himself clothed upon by a visible and personal form..."[28]

In distinction to this, other writers put forward a non-personal "Word": "The Logos (Word) of John 1 is not equivalent to the title Son in Oneness theology as it is in trinitarianism. Son is limited to the Incarnation, but Logos is not. The Logos is God's self expression, "God's means of self disclosure," or "God uttering Himself." Before the Incarnation, the Logos was the unexpressed thought or plan in the mind of God, which had a reality no human thought can have because of God's perfect foreknowledge, and in the case of the Incarnation, God's predestination. In the beginning, the Logos was with God, not as a separate person but as God Himself - pertaining to and belonging to God much like a man and his word. In the fulness of time God put flesh on the Logos; He expressed Himself in flesh." [29]

Bernard further added in *The Oneness of God*:

"The Word or Logos can mean the plan or thought as it existed in the mind of God. This thought was a predestined plan - an absolutely certain future event - and therefore it had a reality attached to it that no human thought could ever have. The Word can also mean the plan or thought of God as expressed in the flesh, that is in the Son. What is the difference, therefore, between the two terms, Word and Son? The Word had pre-existence and the Word was God (the Father), so we can use it without reference to humanity. However, the Son always refers to the Incarnation and we cannot use it in the absence of the human element. Except as a foreordained plan in the mind of God, the Son did not have pre-existence before the conception in the womb of Mary. The Son of God pre-existed in thought but not in substance. The Bible calls this foreordained plan the Word (John 1:1, 14)." [30]

Thomas Weisser adds, "The Logos of John 1 was simply the concept in the Father's mind. Not a separate person!" [31] But Robert Brent Graves muddies the water even more by stating, "Only when we begin to take John at his word that God "became flesh" can we begin to understand the power and the authority of Jesus Christ." [32] Hence, one group of Oneness exponents seem to be saying that the Word was the Father Himself, but manifested in the flesh (Paterson and possibly Graves) while others see the Word as simply the plan of God put into place at the opportune time. Asking the further question, "Who is the Son in Oneness theology?" might shed some light on the Word issue as well. The answer to this is unanimous - the Son is the human aspect of Christ. The Son is a created being who is not in any way divine. The Son did not pre-exist, and indeed, the "Sonship" of God will cease at a time in the future. [33]

Important for Oneness teachers is the idea of a begotten Son (see footnote #10 and discussion at that point).

Robert Brent Graves says,

"Although some religious authors have depicted Christ as an "eternal Son. Actually the concept of an eternal Son would not allow the possibility of a begotten Son; for the two would be a contradiction in terms."[\[34\]](#)

For the Christian to understand just what the Oneness position is asserting, it is necessary that, before continuing looking at each Person individually, we must look to Jesus and the Oneness teaching concerning Him. The key to understanding this theological viewpoint is found in the teaching that Jesus is both the Father and the Son. Paterson explains as follows:

"Therefore, when we say that Jesus is both God and Man, we mean that He is both Father and Son. As the Father, He is absolutely and PURELY God; as the Son, He is absolutely and PURELY Man. When Jesus claims to be God, it is with respect to His Essence as the Eternal Spirit, the Father; and when He says, "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), it is with respect to His created nature as Man, the Son...In this connection, let me make this point crystal clear - the doctrine enunciated in this booklet emphasizes the very real humanity of Christ; it is not at all the same as teaching that the Father IS the Son, or that the Son IS the Father. Such teaching is confused, illogical, and unscriptural - but when we say that Jesus is BOTH Father and Son, BOTH God and Man, that is a vastly different matter."[\[35\]](#)

Likewise, Bernard states,

"Oneness believers emphasize the two natures in Christ, using this fact to explain the plural references to Father and Son in the Gospels. As Father, Jesus sometimes acted and spoke from His divine self-consciousness; as Son He sometimes acted and spoke from His human self-consciousness. The two natures never acted in conflict, for they were united into one person. Aside from their emphasis on the two natures of Christ, Oneness teachers have given inadequate attention to many areas of Christology. Some have made statements that sound Apollinarian because of failure to define and use terms precisely, but Oneness scholars overwhelmingly reject this implication. If carefully developed, Oneness may be seen as compatible with the Christological formulation of the Council of Chalcedon, namely that Christ as two complete natures - deity and humanity - but is only one person."[\[36\]](#)

Despite Bernard's assertion, the Oneness position patently denies the uni-personality of Christ. To maintain the uni-personality of God, the Oneness position has to make Jesus into two persons, the Father and the Son. Even Bernard demonstrates this when he says, "Sometimes it is easy to get confused when the Bible describes Jesus in these two different roles, especially when describes Him acting in both roles in the same story...He could speak as man one moment and then as God the next moment."[\[37\]](#) As we've seen, natures do not speak, only persons do. Bernard seems aware of the weakness of the Oneness position at this point, for he is much more willing to admit the depths of the subject than most Oneness writers. He says,

"While the Bible is clear in emphasizing both the full deity and full humanity of Jesus, it does not describe in detail how these two natures are united in the one person of Jesus Christ. This, too, has been the subject of much speculation and debate. Perhaps there is room for divergent views on this issue since the Bible does not treat it directly."[\[38\]](#)

Bernard is one of the few Oneness writers who does not directly attribute the doctrine of the Trinity to Satan. He seems aware of the fact that the Oneness position avoids the supposed "philosophical language" by basically ignoring the issue that was faced squarely at Nicea and Chalcedon.

This viewpoint gives a unique twist to what otherwise might sound somewhat like orthodox teaching:

"From the Bible we see that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures in a way that no other human being has ever had. One nature is human or fleshly; the other nature is divine or Spirit. Jesus was both fully man and fully God. The name Jesus refers to the eternal Spirit of God (the Father) dwelling in the flesh. We can use the name Jesus to describe either one of His two natures or both. For example, when we say Jesus died on the cross, we mean His flesh died on the cross. When we say Jesus lives in our hearts, we mean His Spirit is there."[\[39\]](#)

But what Biblical support can the Oneness teacher gather? One of the favorite references is Colossians 2:9, which, in the King James Version (which seems to enjoy predominance in their camp) reads, "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." For them, the Godhead would refer to all that makes up God, i.e., the Father:

"According to these verses of Scripture, Jesus is not a part of God, but all of God is resident in Him. If there were several persons in the

Godhead, according to Colossians 2:9 they would all be resident in the bodily form of Jesus." [40]

However, even here the position is foundationless, for the Greek term, *theotetos*, is best rendered "Deity" and refers to the being of God - "that which makes God God" is how B. B. Warfield expressed it. Not only this, but the same epistle had already clearly differentiated between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father in 1:3, and had asserted the pre-existence of the Son in 1:15-17.

The many passages that teach the pre-existence and separate personality of the Son cause the Oneness position great difficulties, as can be seen from the attempts to fit these passages into the system. Hebrews chapter one gives a good example:

"Hebrews 1:2 states that God made the worlds by the Son. Similarly, Colossians 1:13-17 says all things were created by the Son, and Ephesians 3:9 says all things were created by Jesus Christ. What does creation "by the Son" mean, since the Son did not have a substantial pre-existence before the Incarnation? "Of course, we know that Jesus as God pre-existed the Incarnation, since the deity of Jesus is none other than the Father Himself. We recognize that Jesus (the divine Spirit of Jesus) is indeed the Creator. These verses describe the eternal Spirit that was in the Son - the deity that was later incarnated as the Son - as the Creator. The humanity of Jesus Christ could not create, but God who came in the Son as Jesus Christ created the world. Hebrews 1:10 clearly states that Jesus as Lord was the Creator. "Perhaps these scriptural passages have a deeper meaning that can be expressed as follows: Although the Son did not exist at the time of creation except as the Word in the mind of God, God used His foreknowledge of the Son when He created the world." [41]

Elsewhere Bernard added,

"According to Hebrews 1:2, God made the worlds by the Son. Certainly, the Spirit (God) who was in the Son was also the Creator of the worlds. This passage may also indicate that God predicated the entire work of creation upon the future manifestation of the Son. God foreknew that man would sin, but He also foreknew that through the Son man could be saved and could fulfill God's original purpose in creation. As John Miller stated, "Though He did not pick up His humanity till the fulness of time, yet He used it, and acted upon it, from all eternity." " [42]

Likewise, the problem of Jesus' prayer life elicits some intriguing interpretation:

"The prayers of Christ represent the struggle of the human will as it submitted to the divine will. They represent Jesus praying from His human self-consciousness not from His divine, for by definition God does not need to pray. This line of reasoning also explains other examples of the inferiority of the Son in power and knowledge. If these examples demonstrate a plurality of persons, they establish the subordination of one person to the other, contrary to the trinitarian doctrine of co-equality. "Other examples of communication, conversation, or expression of love between Father and Son are explained as communication between the divine and human natures of Christ. If used to demonstrate a distinction of persons, they would establish separate centers of consciousness in the Godhead, which is in effect polytheism."[\[43\]](#)

"Do the prayers of Christ indicate a distinction of persons between Jesus and the Father? No. On the contrary, His praying indicates a distinction between the Son of God and God. Jesus prayed in His humanity, not in His deity...How can God pray and still be God? By definition, God in His omnipotence has no need to pray, and in His oneness has no other to whom He can pray...Some may object to this explanation, contending that it means Jesus prayed to Himself. However, we must realize that, unlike any other human being, Jesus had two perfect and complete natures - humanity and divinity."[\[44\]](#)

The above hardly squares with Bernard's earlier statement that the two natures are joined into one person. Communication between natures is illogical; between persons it is normal. If Oneness teachers wish to maintain a surface acceptance of Chalcedonian definitions, they should at least make it clear that they are defining terms in a completely different way than orthodox theology.

Finally, a common element of Oneness-Pentecostal writing is the criticism of the usage of non-Biblical terminology to answer the questions of God's existence and being. This is a common attack utilized by many anti-Trinitarian groups. Why use such terms as "nature" or "person" or "ousia" or any of the other terms borrowed from philosophy? Doesn't this indicate a reliance upon pagan sources? we are asked. Though this point will be answered more fully below, it might be pointed out that the Oneness position is faced with the same choice as the Trinitarian - questions can be put to their position that cannot possibly be answered in solely Biblical terminology. Either these questions must be ignored or they must be answered by using words or phrases not drawn directly from the Scriptural witness. In summary, the Oneness position asserts that God is uni-personal. All the titles of Deity are applicable to the one being who is God - Father, Lord, King, Holy Spirit, Jehovah, etc. The Son of God is the manifestation of the Father in the flesh. The Son is not

eternal nor pre-existent. Jesus is the Father and the Son - Father in his divinity and Son in his humanity. Hence, the Trinity is said to be a misunderstanding of the Biblical teaching, and many Oneness writers attribute the doctrine to pagan sources.[\[45\]](#)

V. Brief Criticism and Reply

Since the opening of this paper dealt with the Scriptural witness concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, space need not be taken in rebutting many of the statements of the Oneness position. The following points should focus on the particular problems:

A) The Oneness position cannot explain logically or Biblically the clear references to the pre-existence and Creatorship of the Son such as Colossians 1, Hebrews 1 and John 1.

B) This position fails to demonstrate any kind of identification of Jesus Christ as the Father, and ignores or inadequately explains the many references that demonstrate the personal distinctions of Father and Son.

C) This position relies heavily on assumed and unproven presuppositions, such as the uni-personality of Yahweh. These writers tend to be very selective in their choice of facts, which can also be seen in their easy rejection of textual evidence that contradicts their position.[\[46\]](#)

D) The Christological formulation of the Oneness position is untenable and without Scriptural support. There is no evidence that Jesus was two persons, nor that the two "natures" communicated with one another.

E) The understanding of the Logos given in Scripture is totally lacking in the Oneness perspective. The clear personal nature of the Logos must be sacrificed to maintain the system.

F) The position asserts historical claims[\[47\]](#) that are not solidly based in fact.[\[48\]](#) For example, Oneness writers will assert that the "three persons theory" was a late innovation, while noted patristic authority J.N.D. Kelly has noted,

"Before considering formal writers, the reader should notice how deeply the conception of a plurality of divine Persons was imprinted on the apostolic tradition and the popular faith. Though as yet uncanonized, the New Testament was already exerting a powerful influence; it is a commonplace that the outlines of a dyadic and a triadic pattern are

clearly visible in its pages. It is even more marked in such glimpses as are obtainable of the Church's liturgy and day-to-day catechetical practice."[\[49\]](#)

These criticisms, substantiated by earlier references, are sufficient to allow the student of Scripture to reject the Oneness position as holding any real claim to being a "biblical teaching." The only remaining question is the validity of the criticism regarding the usage of non-biblical language and terminology. It has already been pointed out that any theological system that makes any kind of brave attempt to answer the inevitable questions that arise when the nature, attributes and being of God is discussed will have to utilize non-Biblical terminology in framing its answers. Why? First, since the Scriptures themselves rarely ask these questions, and the questions themselves are often derived from non-Biblical sources and utilize non-Biblical language and categories of thought, the honest respondent will have to express truth in such a way as to both be intelligible to the questioner, as well as be honest with the subject. The important question is, are we willing to sacrifice the true teaching of Scripture on the imaginary altar of slavery to the limited terminology of the Biblical writers?

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield aptly addressed this very question:

"The term "Trinity" is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. A doctrine so defined can be spoken of as a Biblical doctrine only on the principle that the sense of Scripture is Scripture. And the definition of a Biblical doctrine in such un-Biblical language can be justified only on the principle that it is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystalized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view. Or, to speak without figure, the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us in Scripture, not in formulated definition, but in fragmentary allusions; when we assemble the disjecta membra into their organic unity, we are not passing from Scripture, but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture. We may state the doctrine in technical terms, supplied by philosophical reflection; but the doctrine stated is a genuinely Scriptural doctrine."[\[50\]](#)

References:

1. David Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, (Hazelwood, Missouri: Word Aflame Press) 1985, p.298

2. Thomas Weisser, *Three Persons from the Bible? or Babylon*, (U.S.) 1983, p. 3.
3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1941) pgs. 87-89.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) 1960, pp. 141-142.
5. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Volumes, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company) 1986, 1:459.
6. Weisser, *Three Persons*, p. 2.
7. The particular responses of the Oneness theologians will be noted at a later point in the presentation.
8. The words of Jesus at Matthew 27:46 have come in for many kinds of interpretation. Unfortunately, many of the theories have compromised both theology proper, as well as Christology. That the Father never was separated from or abandoned the Son is clear from many sources. The second person is utilized by Jesus, not the third in verse 46. Immediately on the heels of this statement Jesus speaks to the Father in the vocative ("Father, into your hands..."). Whatever else Jesus was saying, He was not saying that, at the very time of His ultimate obedience to the Father, that the Father there abandoned Him. Rather, it seems much more logical to see this as a quotation of Psalm 22 that is meant to call to mind all of that Psalm, which would include the victory of v. 19ff, as well as verse 24 which states, "For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help."
9. It would be a grave error to identify the Father and the Son as one person, or to say that Jesus is both the Father and the Son, simply due to their mutual work and actions. As there is only one God, overlapping of work and action is hardly to be thought unusual, and does not indicate an identity of person but rather an identity of nature.
10. James Hope Moulton, George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company) 1930, pp. 416-417. See also Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John*. (New York: United Bible Societies) 1980, p. 24.
11. The variant reading "...who is in heaven." is opposed by P66 and P75 along with Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. These witnesses are joined by the Coptic versions, a few uncials, minuscules, and Fathers.
12. The reading monogenes *theos* is strongly supported by the manuscript witnesses. This is the reading of P66 and P75 as well as the

original reading of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, a few other uncials, and a large number of the early Fathers. That there is good reason to see *monogenes huios* as an assimilation to John 3:16 is obvious; just so, that *monogenes theos* has no logical antecedent is just as true.

13. Some try to render this as "the Word was pertaining to God" on the basis of the occurrence of *pros ton theon* in Hebrews 2:17 and 5:1. However, this attempt fails for the two instances in Hebrews are different syntactical constructions; the presence of the neuter plural article before the phrase in Hebrews changes the subject to an assumed "things." Also, John 1:1b represents a sentence structure using the verb form *en* while this is not so in Hebrews.

14. William G. T. Shedd, *Shedd's Dogmatic Theology*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1980, pg. 253.

15. As cited by Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press) 1963, pp. 144-145.

16. For a discussion of the Council of Chalcedon, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company) 1910, 3:740-762.

17. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:751.

18. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company) 1941, pp. 321-330.

19. See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Doctrine of the Person and the Work of Christ, Section III, "The Unipersonality of Christ."

20. Stuart Olyott, *Son of Mary, Son of God*, (England: Evangelical Press) 1984, pp. 103-105.

21. Some Oneness writers such as Robert Brent Graves have attempted to assert that the copulative *kai* found here and in the other epistolary greetings should not be translated in its normal sense of "and" but rather as the equative "even." Hence, Graves translates 1 Cor. 1:3 as "Grace to you and peace from God our Father even the Lord Jesus Christ." That there is no scholarly support for such an assertion is clear, for Graves would hardly be consistent and say "Grace to you, even peace..." which would be required should he follow his own suggestion through.

22. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 303.

23. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company) 1962, 2:116.

24. David K. Bernard, *Essentials of Oneness Theology*, (Hazelwood, Missouri: Word Aflame Press) 1985, p. 8.

25. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 15.

26. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 98.

27. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 66.

28. John Paterson, *God in Christ Jesus*, (Hazelwood, Missouri: Word Aflame Press) 1966, p.
29. Bernard, *Essentials in Oneness Theology*, p. 22.
30. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 103.
31. Weisser, *Three Persons*, p. 35.
32. Robert Brent Graves, *The God of Two Testaments*, (U.S.) 1977, p. 35.
33. See Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 106.
34. Graves, *The God of Two Testaments*, p. 44.
35. Paterson, *God in Christ Jesus*, p. 22.
36. Bernard, *Essentials in Oneness Theology*, p. 19.
37. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 88.
38. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 90.
39. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 86.
40. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 57.
41. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, p. 115.
42. Bernard, *Essentials in Oneness Theology*, p. 21.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
44. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, pp. 176-177.
45. See Weisser, *Three Persons*, pp. 17-28.

46. Bernard rejects, for example, the reading of *monogenes theos* at 1:18 by saying, "We do not believe these variant readings are correct...This verse of Scripture does not mean that God is revealed by God, but that God is revealed in flesh through the humanity of the Son." Here theology determines textual criticism.

47. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, pp. 236 ff as an example.
48. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 Volumes, (New York: Harper and Row) 1975, 2:144-145 gives a brief account of the origins of the modalistic teaching.
49. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (New York: Harper and Row) 1978, p. 88.
50. B. B. Warfield, *The Works of B.B. Warfield*, 10 volumes, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House) 1929, 2:133.

Are Mormons Christians? by Stephen E. Robinson

A Book Review by Gordon R. Lewis

from the Christian Research Journal, Fall 1992, page 33. The Editor-in-Chief of the Christian Research Journal is Elliot Miller. "Are Mormons Christians?" by Stephen E. Robinson (Bookcraft, 1991)

A Summary Critique

Although a god allegedly told Joseph Smith in his first vision that he should join none of the Christian denominations, Stephen Robinson now wants "to show that the arguments used to exclude Latter-day Saints from the 'Christian' world are flawed" (p. vii). Robinson, chairman of the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, has taught religion at Presbyterian and Methodist-related schools. He may be the only Latter-day Saint (LDS) to earn tenure in a non-LDS college. Among a host of recent efforts by Mormons to gain acceptance for their church as Christian, Robinson's book is surely the most important and sophisticated.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Crucial to Robinson's argument is his understanding of the nature of Christianity and what a Christian is. In chapter 1 he proposes a **generic** definition of Christianity that fits all who are usually classed as "Christian": Protestants -- from liberal to evangelical, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox. With such an inclusive definition, Robinson succeeds in showing that LDS may be regarded Christian.

But this approach to legitimizing Mormonism can only succeed if a Christian does not need to believe in one personal, transcendent God, one incarnate Christ, the completed atonement, and one gospel of grace through faith alone. For mere descriptive purposes, historians may classify every group that calls itself Christian as Christian. Jesus Christ, however, did not do this. Jesus taught that

"the way" was narrow and that we should not assume that all who call Jesus "Lord" are really Christians (Matt. 5:20; 7:13-23).

In defining the one true church, would Robinson be satisfied with a generic definition that includes **all** churches calling themselves Christian? Not if the LDS is the one true church -- with baptism accompanied with the laying on of hands by those in authority in the "restored priesthood." Robinson's generic pattern of defining terms like "church" or "Christian" is too broad to be useful for purposes of normative Christian doctrine.

Robinson's generic definition of a Christian from **Webster's Third New International Dictionary** is: "One who believes or professes or is assumed to believe in Jesus Christ and the truth as taught by him; an adherent of Christianity; one who has accepted the Christian religious and moral principles of life; one who has faith in and has pledged allegiance to God thought of as revealed in Christ; one whose life is conformed to the doctrines of Christ" (1). The second most common meaning of "Christian" in Robinson's book is: "A member of a church or group professing Christian doctrine or belief" (1).

Having raised the issue of the nature of Christianity, Robinson fails to interact with the relevant literature. For example, he does not deal with evangelical literature such as J. Gresham Machen's **What Is Christianity?** (Eerdmans, 1950), **What Is Faith?** (Eerdmans, 1948), and **Christianity and Liberalism** (Eerdmans, 1946). Nor does he consider Samuel J. Craig's **Christianity Rightly So Called** (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957). These writers show why liberalism -- as represented in Ludwig Feuerbach's **The Essence of Christianity** (Harper & Brothers, 1957), Adolph Harnack's **What Is Christianity?** (Harper & Brothers, 1957), and William Hamilton's **The New Essence of Christianity** (Association Press, 1961) -- cannot be regarded as genuine Christianity.

Robinson's chapter on "The Exclusion by Name-Calling" correctly shows the difficulty of defining a "cult" on psychological and

sociological criteria, and points to the need for objective doctrinal criteria for determining what a cult is. He wrongly concludes, however, that "there are simply no objective criteria for distinguishing religions from 'cults'" (29). Such a sweeping generalization is uncharacteristic of responsible scholarship and fails to take account of my proposal in a 1966 publication,

Confronting the Cults: "The term cult here designates a religious group which claims authorization by Christ and the Bible but neglects or distorts the gospel, the central message of the Savior and the Scriptures." [1] In this same book, I list seven questions drawn from explicit New Testament statements -- all dealing with what one must believe to be saved -- that enable one to distinguish authentic Christian faith from inauthentic faiths. Several of these questions are concerned with the person of Christ.

AN ISSUE THAT "REALLY MATTERS" -- ONE'S VIEW OF CHRIST

After attempting to answer many charges and alleged misrepresentations, Robinson thinks he gets down to the core issue in his "Conclusions" (111-14): "Surely by now it will have dawned on the discerning reader that of all the various arguments against Latter-day Saints being considered Christians, not one -- not a **single** one -- claims that Latter-day Saints don't acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. Consider the enormous implications of this fact. The only issue that really matters is the only issue that is carefully avoided!" (111)

The error in this sweeping statement becomes evident upon examining what Mormons mean when they say "Jesus is Lord." In 1966 my chapter on "The Bible, the Christian and Latter-day Saints" asked: "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ (the anointed Messiah) who was God (John 1:1) and became flesh (1:14)?" [2] All of these beliefs are entailed in the biblical affirmation that Jesus is Lord. Mormons holding official church doctrine do not exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

For Robinson, the fact that Mormons have an exalted view of Christ is sufficient for classifying them as Christians:

In fact, to use the terminology of biblical scholars, the Latter-day Saints have a very high Christology. That is, for the Latter-day Saints Jesus is not merely a good man, a teacher, or even a prophet; he is not merely a human being; he is not the son of Joseph and Mary who later became God's Son. In common with other Bible-oriented Christians, the Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus is the pre-existent Word of the Father who became the literal, physical, genetic Son of God. As the pre-existent Word he was the agent of the Father in the creation of all things. As the glorified Son he is the agent of the Father in the salvation of all humanity. We believe he was conceived of a virgin by the power of the Holy Ghost. We believe he led a sinless life, that he was morally and ethically perfect, that he healed the sick and raised the dead, that he walked on the water and multiplied the loaves and the fishes. We believe he set a perfect example for human beings to imitate and that humans have an obligation to follow his example in all things. Most important of all, we believe that he suffered and died on the cross as a volunteer sacrifice for humanity in order to bring about an atonement through the shedding of his blood. We believe that he was physically resurrected and that he ascended into the heavens, from which he will come at the end of this world to establish his kingdom upon the earth and eventually to judge both the living and the dead (113).

This "high Christology" may be impressive, but it is more like that of the ancient Arians who believed there was a time when the Word was not (a view similar to that of contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses), than the view espoused by historic Christianity.

Robinson's Jesus remains a **creature with a beginning in time** and not the Creator who is worthy of worship as God.

Jesus' **oneness** with God the Father and His **distinctness** from the Father are best accounted for by the Trinitarian teaching of **oneness in essence** and **distinctness in persons**. It is true, as Robinson points out, that affirmations of Jesus' oneness in purpose

with God (as opposed to oneness in nature with God) account for some passages on the functional unity of Father and Son (e.g., John 17:11). But this is not the case with other passages, such as John 1:1: "The Word was with God and **the Word was God**". Only if Jesus was of the same nature and being as God could the same divine attributes apply. Jesus said, "No one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27), and "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (v. 30).

When Jesus explains that "I and the Father are one" in this context, He teaches more than mere agreement of purpose; He makes clear their **oneness in sovereign power**. The later creeds did not "invent" the concepts of Christ's divine and human natures, as Robinson argues (86); they found the Bible teaching His human and divine characteristics and integrated that teaching coherently.

If the Christ of a Mormon is not the one true God (John 17:3) who is eternal (John 1:1; Heb. 1:8-12; 5:6; 13:8), the object of worship is a creature and worship itself becomes idolatry. If the Christ of a Mormon is a spirit-child who has been procreated -- like countless other spirit children by the flesh-and-bone Father and one of his wives -- then he is not uniquely of the same nature as the Father, as the Bible and the historic church teach. If the LDS Christ is our finite brother, not different in kind from us, he is therefore not uniquely Immanuel -- "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). The Christ of the Bible is the unique God-man -- incarnate, crucified, and risen once-for-all. Only if He was infinite God in human flesh could His blood have infinite value for the justification of all the billions of people who have ever sinned.

IS A "HIGH" CHRISTOLOGY SUFFICIENT?

The first Christians believed that Jesus was Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). They also believed in one God, and Jesus was included in the Godhead. A "high Christology" is not necessarily enough to fit the evidence that He was far more than the first or highest being in creation; He is the God-man.

Robinson claims that the Nicene Creed "not only differs from, but adds new concepts to, the biblical view" (73). He admits that the Bible teaches oneness and threeness, but maintains that "the scriptures themselves do not offer any explanation of how the threeness and the oneness are related" (72).

Here Robinson fails to appreciate the careful reasoning behind the creed. Certainly the Scriptures do not explain **how** God can be three persons in one being, but they do lead us to the conclusion that He **is**. Both the Old and New Testaments deny polytheism (the belief in many gods) and teach that there is **one** God. Thus the Bible's teaching forbids a view of the threeness that leads to more than one God. However, a word study of "one" in Scripture shows that in any one family, nation, or church, we may expect a plurality of persons. Husband and wife are "one" flesh; Israel is "one" nation with many people; the church is "one" body with many personal members. The Bible's teaching on God's oneness excludes polytheism but includes the possibility of **diversity in unity**. The Bible also makes clear that within the unity of the Godhead are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It further teaches that each of the three **is** God and each thinks, feels, wills, and relates in personal ways.[3]

Three types of passages need to be accounted for in one's Christology. (1) Some passages speak of the limitations Christ assumed when He took on a human nature in order to purchase man's redemption. From this human perspective Christ could say, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). (2) Some passages refer to His eternal personal distinctness from the Father as Son (John 3:16), Word (John 1:1), radiance (Heb. 1:3), and so forth. (3) Some passages speak of His essential oneness with the Father in being and attributes (John 10:30). The conclusion that the three persons are one in both purpose and in essence best accounts for the Bible's teaching that there is one divine Being and that the fellowshiping Father, Son, and Spirit subsist as distinguishable personal consciousnesses within that oneness.

A Trinitarian statement such as we have in the Nicene Creed on oneness of being and threeness of co-equal persons is not something foreign to Scripture, but derived from it. The Trinitarian doctrine most coherently integrates the varied lines of teaching about God's oneness and threeness in Scripture. We ask Mormons to believe the doctrine on **scriptural authority alone**. As B. B. Warfield said, "The formulation of the doctrine, although not made in Scripture, is not opposed to Scripture. When we assemble the...[separate parts of Scripture] into their organic unity, we are not passing from Scripture, but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture." [4] These "separate parts" of Scripture include the New Testament teaching that

(1) there is but one God;

(2) the personality of Jesus Christ is God manifested in the flesh at Bethlehem, and the personality of the Holy Spirit is God manifested at Pentecost. "What we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing but the formulation in exact language of the conception of God presupposed in the religion of the incarnate Son and outpoured Spirit."

The doctrine that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures -- one truly divine and the other truly human -- is a more coherent account of the biblical data than a Mormon formulation in which he is not essentially God. Similarly, the doctrine that God is one in essence and subsists in three persons -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- is more coherent with the teaching on the oneness and threeness of God than a committee of two separate flesh-and-bone gods. (Although Mormons argue that to be persons the first two needed flesh-and-bone bodies, the third "personage" in this triumvirate, the Holy Ghost, is not flesh and bone.)

New concepts are added to Scripture, not by the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon, but by Joseph Smith's doctrine of a flesh-and-bone God (see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 130:22).

Robinson's uncritical acceptance of Joseph Smith's interpretation of an alleged vision makes it impossible for him to accept the Trinitarian teaching of the Bible. Is one young man's interpretation of a poorly substantiated vision a reliable base on which to

challenge the Bible's consistent refutation of polytheism and support of one God who is spirit? If God's eternal being includes a flesh-and-bone body, Solomon could not have said, "The heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). The eternal Word added a human nature (made up of a human body and spirit) for purposes of incarnation and redemption in space and time; but remained truly divine. The **body** is the material aspect of His human nature, the divine nature forever remains **spirit**. So long as Mormons contradict Scripture by affirming more than one God they are not worshiping the one God whom Christians worship and serve.

It is not anti-Mormon argumentation that excludes the LDS from the Christian faith, but their own disbelief of the biblical teaching about Jesus. The Scriptures grant the right to be called "Christian" to all who receive Jesus (John 1:12) as the eternal (not just pre-existent) Word who was continuously and personally **with** the one true God (v. 1) and was the one true God (v. 1) who became flesh (v. 14).

DO CHRISTIANS AFFIRM DEIFICATION?

Generally speaking, Robinson accurately says, "No two denominations, and few individual Christians agree on every detail of Christian doctrine" (57). Given the freedom people have in Christ, diversity of beliefs often appears in details. Robinson correctly reports that Christians "do not agree among themselves upon exactly what the standard is" (58) -- that is, there is no single, complete standard of Christian doctrine for all Christian denominations. Admittedly, "the doctrine of Christians is not always true" (59). Christians affirm inerrancy **only** of Scripture. In chapters 6 and 8, Robinson would appear to be arguing that since Christians can believe in doctrines that are neither biblical nor true, Mormons can be Christians! But it is not believing false, unbiblical doctrines that gives a person the right to be called a redeemed child of God.

Whether true or false, Robinson says, Christians have believed in **self-deification**. So Mormons should not be excluded from Christianity because of this doctrine. Robinson writes:

Early Christian saints and theologians, later Greek Orthodoxy, modern Protestant evangelists, and even C. S. Lewis have all professed their belief in a doctrine of deification. The scriptures themselves talk of many "gods" and use the term **god** in a limited sense for beings other than the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost If scripture can use the term gods for non-ultimate beings; if the early Church could, if Christ himself could, then Latter-day Saints cannot conceivably be accused of being outside the Christian tradition for using the same term in the same way (70).

For Robinson's argument to hold, Mormons must use the term "gods" in the same way as the Christians mentioned. But this is not the case. Robinson states the assumption behind the Mormon concept: "It is indisputable that Latter-day Saints believe....the famous couplet of Lorenzo Snow, fifth President of the LDS church, [which] states:

'As man now is, God once was;
As God now is, man may be'" (60).

Mormon apostle and theologian Bruce R. McConkie explains the frame of reference for this affirmation -- the Mormon doctrine of **eternal progression**:

In the full sense, eternal progression is enjoyed only by those who receive exaltation. Exalted persons gain the fulness of the Father; they have all power, all knowledge, and all wisdom; they gain a fulness of truth, becoming one with the Father. . . . Those who gain exaltation, having thus enjoyed the fulness of eternal progression, become like God.[5]

Both Mormon and Christian writers seem sometimes to confuse being like God **in some respects** with **becoming** god. Christians may compare a person with God in holiness, mercy, or love, but they should never affirm that a person **is** God, or even **a** god.

If Mormons were using the word "gods" to mean beings with power over others in a nonultimate sense, as of Satan, the god of

this world (2 Cor. 4:4), or of judges, as Jesus (John 10:34) and the Psalmist did (Ps. 82:6), there would be little difficulty. But the couplet of President Snow and the LDS doctrine of eternal progression have God evolving in the past as we are now. This is different than the Bible's references to nonultimate gods.

Nor is anything comparable to the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression found in the church fathers. A statement from Irenaeus is typical -- it may sound like it supports the Mormon view on the surface, but in reality it does not: "If the Word became a man, it was so men may become gods." In context, Irenaeus (like other church fathers) meant that regenerate sinners can become like God **in some respects**. We can become holy and loving as God is holy and loving. Irenaeus did not affirm that we can become gods through an eternal progression or evolution. He did not affirm that God was once as we are now.

Athanasius wrote, "He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God." The Mormon view makes Christ a man who became divine; Athanasius teaches that Christ was God who became man once-for-all. "For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, though belonging to **The Word Who is above all**, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all" (emphasis added).[6] For Athanasius all else is temporary, but "He Who remains is God and very Son of God, the sole-begotten Word." [7] We must conclude that the Western church fathers are misunderstood if they are alleged to teach an eternal progression to literal godhood.

If Mormons want to teach early Christian doctrine they will follow Augustine in making a radical distinction between the Creator and the creation. They will affirm with Paul in Romans 1:25 that worship and service of the creature is sin.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church a greater emphasis is placed on deification, but it remains distinct from the Mormon doctrine. The Eastern Orthodox emphasize renewal in the image and likeness of God in sharing His communicable attributes such as knowledge

(Col. 3:10), righteousness, and true holiness (Eph. 4:24). But an Orthodox writer explains: "This does not mean that human beings are able to become God in his essence. But it does mean that they can become 'gods' by grace even as they remain creatures of a human nature." [8] Thus, Eastern writers deny that humans can become equal with God as He is now. And there is no suggestion that God was ever as we are. There is a difference between being like God in some respects (communicable attributes) and being God **by nature**.

The Westminster Dictionary of Christianity says that deification is an Eastern Orthodox doctrine that we become like God by participation in divine virtues such as mercy and love or by sharing in divine energies. But we do not participate in God's very essence, which remains totally mysterious and inaccessible. Mormons who claim that we become gods in essence find no support for this in the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification.

Robinson also claims that televangelists Paul Crouch, Robert Tilton, and Kenneth Copeland affirm deification. While it is true that these Word-Faith proponents speak of believers being "in the God class," they do not teach that "as man now is, God once was." In any case, Robinson does not strengthen his case by citing teachers who themselves are considered aberrant or heretical by many Christians.

Did C. S. Lewis support an LDS concept of deification? In **The Weight of Glory**, the imaginative writer uses figurative language to express the radical change in believers from the dullest and most uninteresting persons in this life to "gods" and "goddesses" in glory. [9] He must be understood metaphorically in view of his general defense of theism. Similarly, when in **Mere Christianity** he says we turn permanently into new little Christs sharing God's power, joy, knowledge, and eternity, [10] he is speaking in terms of our likeness to God being renewed. And in **The Screwtape Letters** his claim that God intends to fill heaven with "little replicas of himself" [11] refers to replicas in certain qualities, not to becoming literal gods. When writing with less literary license

Lewis refers to "the immeasurable difference not only between what He [God] is and what all other things are but between the very mode of His existence and theirs." [12]

The "eternal progression" doctrine of Snow and his fellow Mormon prophets is part and parcel of the evolutionary view of human stages and opportunities in eternal life -- from pre-existence through the spirit world, mortal life on earth, and into the heavenly telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kingdoms. At its highest level, the latter involves godhood for those loyal to the church in this life. None of the listed sources in their proper contexts support the doctrine **as Mormons hold it**. Hence, these sources are not examples of people called "Christian" who affirm self-deification in the Mormon sense.

THE GOOD NEWS OF JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Robinson claims that Mormons teach salvation by grace and not works, and so are well within the spectrum of views that are generally accepted as Christian. How can Mormons claim to teach salvation by grace alone? Robinson answers: "It is impossible to **earn** or **deserve** any of the blessings of God in any sense that leaves the individual unindebted to God's grace" (105). "We participate in our salvation as we attempt to keep the commandments of God, but we can never earn it ourselves or bring it to pass on our own merits, no matter how well we may think we are doing" (106). Robinson also holds that redemption is not of individual effort; one must be born again and so grace is an essential condition for salvation (106-7). As good as these statements sound, they do not uphold salvation by grace **alone**.

Bruce R. McConkie explains: "All men are saved by grace alone without any act on their part, meaning that they are resurrected and become immortal because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ." [13] In Mormon theology, all people are raised from the dead and become immortal through grace alone. But not many will be **exalted**. How can one achieve exaltation? "This is called salvation by grace coupled with obedience to the laws and ordinances of the

gospel."[14] Then, after ridiculing the idea of Christ's shed blood as the sole ground of forgiveness, McConkie adds: "Salvation in the kingdom of God is available because of the atoning blood of Christ. But it is received only on the condition of faith, repentance, baptism, and enduring to the end in keeping the commandments of God."[15]

Differences may be acknowledged among Christians on the general issue of grace and works, but there is little excuse for confusion regarding one's legal status before God's law. Justification, an essential element of the Good News, is only mentioned twice by Robinson and is neither defined nor affirmed.

Both grace and works are involved in the Christian experience, it is true, but they are exclusive of each other in relation to a sinner's moral and spiritual standing before God's law. Mormons tend to confuse the forensic (legal) and experiential categories. The divine Judge has found all people who depend on merit for their own acceptance with God falling short. In God's sight, a score of ninety-nine is not a passing grade.

Even the best Mormons are guilty before God, who knows their hearts. All Mormons trusting in their own works are now under the verdict of condemnation (Rom. 3:10-23). The only basis on which God can be just and accept any Mormon as righteous is the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 3:25-26). By adding works to faith, Mormons make justification a matter of merit, not grace. The principles of works and grace are mutually exclusive for acceptance before the moral Judge of the universe. "And if by grace, then it is no longer works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Rom. 11:6). The four laws of the Mormon gospel (faith, repentance, baptism, and commandment-keeping) involve works from beginning to end.

Justification pardons from the guilt and penalty of one's past and present sins, not just from Adamic guilt. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (John 3:18). "I tell you the truth," Jesus said, "whoever hears my word and believes him who has sent me has

eternal life and will not be condemned" (John 5:24). "I want you to know," Paul wrote, "that through [Jesus] the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified . . ." (Acts 13:38-39). "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

So long as Latter-day Saints ignore or ridicule justification, it is impossible to assure them that they have the perfect righteousness of Christ that comes from God as a gift (Rom. 10:3-4). Like Paul, Mormons need to consider their own law-keeping as rubbish in contrast to the perfect righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:8-9).

Being a Christian begins as sinners repent of their self-justification and trust the atonement of Christ alone for acquittal and a righteous moral status. Belief in Christ's Incarnation, death on the cross for our sins, and resurrection from the dead directs repentant believers personally to trust the living and exalted Christ of whom the gospel speaks.

Individual Mormons and Baptists are Christians **if** they believe Christianity's central message, the gospel; neither Mormons nor Baptists are Christians if they do not trust the Christ of the biblical gospel. With all this, an LDS leader, recently addressing my class, brought everything down to the test of a religion's fruit. The LDS faith has produced an impressive worldwide movement, but the question of the reliability of the one it trusts remains. In his classic book, **Christianity and Liberalism**, Machen summarizes the heart of the problem:

If the object is not really trustworthy then the faith is a false faith. It is perfectly true that such a false faith will often help a man. Things that are false will accomplish a great many useful things in the world. If I take a counterfeit coin and buy a dinner with it, the dinner is every bit as good as if the coin were a product of the mint. And what a very useful thing a dinner is! But just as I am on my way downtown to buy a dinner for a poor man, an expert tells me that my coin is a counterfeit. The

miserable, heartless theorizer! While he is going into his uninteresting, learned details about the primitive history of that coin, a poor man is dying for want of bread. So it is with faith. Faith is so very useful, they tell us, that we must not scrutinize its basis in truth. But the great trouble is, such an avoidance of scrutiny itself involves the destruction of faith. For faith is essentially dogmatic. Despite all you can do, you cannot remove the element of faith from it. Faith is the opinion that some person will do something for you. If that person really will do that thing for you, then the faith is true. If he will not do it, then the faith is false. In the latter case, not all the benefits in the world will make the faith true. Though it has transformed the world from darkness to light, though it has produced thousands of glorious healthy lives, it remains a pathological phenomena. It is false, and sooner or later it is sure to be found out.[16]

About the Author

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NOTES

1 Gordon R. Lewis, **Confronting the Cults** (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), 3.

2 **Ibid.**, 60; chapter 3 in booklet form, "The Bible, the Christian and the Latter-day Saints," 22.

3 The scriptural documentation is given in Gordon R. Lewis, **Decide for Yourself: A Theological Workbook** (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 41-45; and in Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, **Integrative Theology**, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987): 251-89.

4 B. B. Warfield, "Trinity," **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 5:3012.

5 Bruce R. McConkie, **Mormon Doctrine** (Salt Lake City: Brookcraft, 1966), 239.

6 Athanasius, **The Incarnation of the Word of God** (New York:

MacMillan, 1946), 35.

7 **Ibid.**, 95.

8 Vigen Guroian, "The Shape of Orthodox Ethics" **Epiphany Journal**, Fall 1991, 9.

9 C. S. Lewis, **The Weight of Glory**, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 18.

10 C. S. Lewis, **Mere Christianity** (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 153, cf. 164.

11 C. S. Lewis, **The Screwtape Letters**, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 38.

12 C. S. Lewis, **Miracles** (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 107.

13 Bruce R. McConkie, **What the Mormons Think of Christ** (n.p.: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.), 24.

14 **Ibid.**

15 **Ibid.** 9, 28.

16 J. Gresham Machen, **Christianity and Liberalism** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 142-43.

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