

*From Joseph Smith to progressive theology, how LDS understanding of
God and the Godhead has changed.*

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MORMON DOCTRINE

By Thomas G. Alexander

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.¹

By examining particular beliefs at specific junctures in Church history, this essay explores how certain doctrines have in fact developed. I have made every effort to restate each doctrine as contemporaries most likely understood it, without superimposing later developments. This essay focuses on the period from 1830 to 1835, the initial era of Mormon doctrinal development, and on the period from 1893 through 1925, when much of current doctrine seems to have been systematized. Since a full exposition of all doctrines is impossible in a short paper, I have singled out the doctrines of God and man. Placing the development of these doctrines into historical context will also illuminate the appearance of so-called Mormon neo-orthodoxy (a term borrowed from twentieth-century Protestantism), which emphasizes particular ideas about the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man.²

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1830–1835

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Early critics primarily attacked Mormons for receiving new revelations and scripture, and for claiming authority, but not for Mormon doctrines, which were quite Protestant.

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*.³

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, Missouri (June 1832–July 1833), and *Kirtland, Ohio* (Dec. 1833–Sept. 1834). In October 1834, the *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Oct. 1834–Sept. 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* as virtually the only sources of these revelations until 1835. In that year, the Church published the Doctrine and Covenants, which included the Lectures on Faith and presented both revelation and doctrinal exposition.⁴

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.⁵ This evidence 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.

EARLY MORMON DOCTRINES OF GOD

Father and Son as one; Holy Ghost as mind of God.

THE Book of Mormon tended to define God as an absolute personage of spirit who, clothed in flesh, revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Abinadi's sermon to King Noah, Mosiah 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."⁶

On the doctrine of creation, these works assumed that God or Christ was the creator, but they did not address the question of *ex nihilo* creation. There is little evidence that Church doctrine either accepted or rejected the idea or that it specifically differentiated between Christ and God.⁷

Indeed, this distinction was probably considered unnecessary since the early discussions also supported trinitarian doctrine. Joseph Smith's 1832 account of the First Vision spoke of

only 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." Abinadi'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).⁸

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 that 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 was, 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 that Mormons generally use today to separate themselves from trinitarians.⁹

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.¹⁰

EARLY MORMON TEACHINGS OF MAN

"Man became sensual and devilish, and became fallen man."

IF the doctrines of the Godhead in the early Church were close to trinitarian doctrine, the teachings of man seemed quite close to Methodist Arminianism, which saw man as a creature of God but capable of sanctification. Passages in the Book of Mormon seemed to indicate that, in theological terms, man was "essentially and totally a creature of God."¹¹ Alma's commandments to Corianton in chapters 39 through 42 defined man as a creation of God who became "carnal, sensual, and devilish by nature" after the Fall (Alma 42:10). Man was in the hand of justice, and mercy from God was impossible



Much of the doctrine that early investigators found in Mormonism was similar to that of contemporary Protestant churches.

George Q. Cannon expressed his opinion that the Holy Ghost was in the image of the other members of the Godhead—a man in form and figure.

without the atonement of Christ. King Benjamin's discussion of creation, Adam's fall, and the Atonement in Mosiah chapters 2 through 4 viewed man and all creation as creatures of God (Mosiah 2:23–26; 4:9, 19, 21). Warren Cowdery's letter in the *Messenger and Advocate* argued that though "man is the more noble and intelligent part of this lower creation, to whom the other grades in the scale of being are subject, yet, the man is dependent on the great first cause and is constantly upheld by him, therefore justly amenable to him."¹²

The Book of Mormon included a form of the doctrine of original sin, defined as a "condition of sinfulness [attaching] as a quality or property to every person simply by virtue of his humanness." Though sinfulness inhered in humankind from the fall of Adam, according to early works, it applied to individual men only from the age of accountability and ability to repent, not from birth. Very young children were free from this sin, but every accountable person merited punishment.¹³ Lehi's discussion of the necessity of opposition in 2 Nephi 2, particularly verses 7 through 13, made such sinfulness a necessary part of God's plan, since the law, the Atonement, and righteousness—indeed the fulfillment of the purposes of the creation—were contingent upon man's sinfulness. An article in the *Evening and the Morning Star* supported this view by attributing

this seed of corruption to the depravity of nature. It attributeth the respect that we feel for virtue, to the remains of the image of God, in which we were formed, and which can never be entirely effaced. Because we were born in sin, the Gospel concludes that we ought to apply all our attentive endeavors to eradicate the seeds of corruption. And, because the image of the Creator is partly erased from our hearts, the gospel concludes that we ought to give ourselves wholly to the retracing of it, and so to answer the excellence of our extraction.¹⁴

These early Church works also exhibited a form of Christian Perfectionism, which held man capable of freely choosing to become perfect like God and Christ but which rejected irre-

sistible grace. The *Evening and Morning Star* said that "God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the more conspicuous are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, until he has overcome the evils of this life and lost every desire of sin; and like the ancients, arrives to that point of faith that he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with him." The Lectures on Faith argued that we can become perfect if we purify ourselves to become "holy as he is holy, and perfect as he is perfect," and thus like Christ.¹⁵ A similar sentiment was expressed in Moroni 10:32, which declares "that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ."

As Marvin Hill and Timothy Smith have argued, much of the doctrine that early investigators found in Mormonism was similar to that of 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 Apostles' Creed.¹⁶

Hence, on the doctrines of God and man, the position of the LDS church between 1830 and 1835 was probably closest to that of the Disciples of Christ and the Methodists, though differences existed. Alexander Campbell, for instance, objected to the use of the term "Trinity" but argued that "the Father is of none, neither begotten nor preceding; from the Father and the Son." Methodist teaching was more explicitly trinitarian than that of either the Disciples or the Mormons. All three groups believed in an absolute spiritual Father. Methodists, Disciples, and Mormons also believed to some degree in the perfectibility of man. As Alexander Campbell put it, "Perfection is . . . the glory and felicity of man. . . . There is a true, a real perfectibility of human character and of human nature, through the soul-redeeming mediation and holy spiritual influence of the great Philanthropist." Methodists believed that all "real Christians are so perfect as not to live in outward sin."¹⁷

