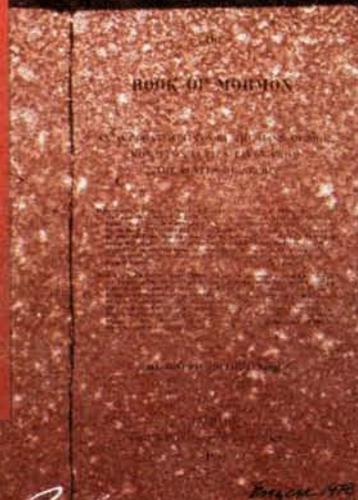
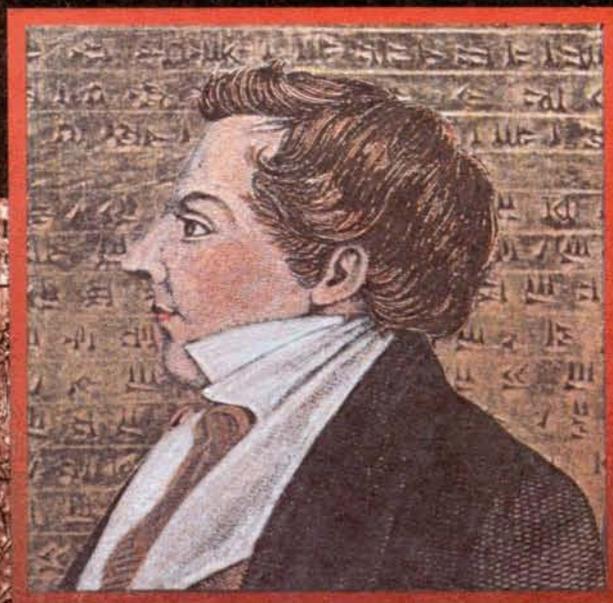


GRACE AND WORKS IN MARTIN LUTHER AND JOSEPH SMITH

Dr. John Dillenberger



Joseph Smith Jr.

Martin Luther was the most radical exponent of grace not without works, and Joseph Smith, one of the most radical exponents of works not without grace. Both are fascinating prophetic figures. Both set in motion currents of belief that had dramatic historical consequences. Both were robust in disposition and makeup, and in the light of their faith, fearless—the one escaping death several times, the other eventually martyred for the faith.

Luther challenged the dominant theological and ecclesiastical forces of his time by claiming that the ancient heritage was on his side. He looked to the word of God disclosed through scripture, interpreted in the church, as the constant source of continuity. What was new was also that which had already been perceived. Joseph Smith confronted the sectarianism of his time with fresh visions, new scripture and a church at once new, and yet based on archetypes more ancient than those claimed by established Christian churches. Through revelation Joseph Smith was led to new realities and perceptions independent of their historic props, given credibility in their own right.

For the early Christian, church episcopacy, scripture and philosophy served to test the spirits, opinions and directions. In Luther's time, the papal episcopal office and philosophy stood in the way. The logic of scripture was his only recourse. For Joseph Smith, also finding all around him inadequate, new revelation led to a religious vision related to the historic Christian community, but built on foundations considerably different, including a new scripture.

Luther's world was not noted for optimism in the powers of humanity. Renaissance currents were just beginning to enter the life of the Church. That, contrary to many of his contemporaries, Luther stressed the vitalities of humanity is usually overlooked. But he considered human vitalities powerless—not in the sense of the absence of power, but in the incapacity to overcome the alienation between humanity and God. Indeed, no theologian in the history of the Church has been more rigorous at this point than Luther, for he effectively forestalled ideas emphasizing humanity's role in accepting grace or being so transformed by it that the resultant powers were solely and properly directed to God and neighbor. Not infrequently Luther used language very derogatory of humanity before God, like being nothing but dung. Nevertheless, his rhetoric must be understood not in metaphysical terms, but in his experiential conviction that no part of humanity escapes alienation from God—body, spirit, will, reason, religious experience. For Luther humanity was grander than most of his contemporaries believed, but bound to itself in opposition to God, a self from which the self could not deliver itself.

Luther's great contribution was the recovery of the Biblical meaning of the righteousness of God. Generally the medieval church defined the righteousness of God

as the demanding justice of God; for the mature Luther, by contrast, the righteousness of God was fundamentally the mercy of God. In so far as the medieval view interpreted the righteousness of God as God's demanding justice, the fundamental problem was how humanity could stand before such a God.

The medieval church did not believe that humanity could do this by its own righteousness. Rather, humanity hoped to stand before the righteousness of God by virtue of a combination of serious intentions, righteous works whose imperfections are met by grace, and the sacramental realities. It was a combination of grace and of the best acts of humanity.

In Luther, the righteousness of God is no longer seen as just a demanding justice, but as the grace which transforms and makes humanity righteous. The righteousness of God is no longer encountered in terms of a transaction in which satisfaction is made to God. Human activity no longer has any part in the ultimate determination of human destiny. Grace alone enables humanity to stand before the righteousness of God.

This general view was shared to some extent by figures who represent the Augustinian tradition in the Middle Ages. But Luther gave it a more classical and evangelical expression. Grace alone is decisive, though now in an entirely new way. The crucial difference is that the emphasis is no longer on God's grace enabling humanity to be righteous. God's grace, which is righteousness, is shown in His treating humanity as righteous whatever the state of its life. Acceptability is imputed to humanity: righteousness is ascribed. Humanity now stands before God in the light of grace alone. That righteousness of life and human activity, so important in other contexts, are irrelevant here.

Grace which transforms and makes humanity righteous

This understanding gave birth to the Reformation in its radical character. On its basis, the medieval sacramental understanding was challenged at its best. Gone was any idea that humanity's relation to a righteous God depended on works and the infusion of actual righteousness. In its place stood grace alone.

Hence, for Luther, good works are not determinative; they follow from faith as the day follows night, as good fruit comes from a good tree. Where there are no works, there is no faith. But the temptation of the believer is to look at the works done in faith and reinstitute works and merit as a new form of slavery in the very citadel of the freedom of the Gospel. For Luther, the very looking at one's works spoils them. Genuine works point to God, not to Self. This is why Luther can declare that, apart from faith, all works are nothing but "truly wicked and damnable sins." Confronted by God, humanity cannot depend on a combination of works and faith, or faith and works, but only on faith not without works, or of faith active in love. The Christian is to love and to struggle, to be a Christ to neighbors, and above all to trust God.

In light of God's imputation of righteousness, humanity is totally sainted; aside from this, the actuality is totally sinful. Humanity is at once saint and sinner.

DR. JOHN DILLENBERGER, President of the Hartford Theological Seminary, has taught historical theology at Union Theological Seminary, Princeton, Columbia, Harvard, Drew, San Francisco Theological Seminary, and served as dean and president of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He is editor of Doubleday's *Martin Luther* and *John Calvin*, and author of several other books. "Martin Luther and Joseph Smith on Grace and Works" is taken from Dr. Dillenberger's address at BYU's recent religious studies symposium.

The setting and theology of Joseph Smith are so different as to make comparison with Luther virtually impossible. Yet if one accepts the notion that the angle from which the vision emerges may be as important as the vision itself, Luther's and Smith's accents may be seen in a more congenial relationship.

For Joseph Smith, the vitalities of life have meaning for human affairs and humanity's destiny. Indeed, the two form a unity. The fall of Adam and the necessity of atonement and grace are central in the Book of Mormon, and in the writings of Joseph Smith. But their settings and configurations are distinctive. That for Luther no part of humanity escapes the burden of the fall has fateful consequences; for Joseph Smith the fall has led to the necessity of God's redeeming work, but it has not essentially affected human powers; rather it has sanctified them in terms of destiny to the point that as with the Church Fathers, though for different reasons, the fall had good consequences.

For Joseph Smith, the fall affects all of humanity, but not all of any human being. As intelligences and spirits, we are as given or eternal as God or the given matter formed in creation. The consequences of the fall are physical: we suffer a bodily death—though we will be restored to our bodies, glorified indeed; and we are called upon to live in our bodies as if we were in heaven, that future state in which our spirits will dominate our bodily existence. It is as if the fall put spirit on trial, not in itself, but in terms of its relation to and dominance over the body. In this sense there is a haunting similarity to Swedenborgianism.

More fundamentally, it explains the simultaneous puritanical view of the sins of the body and the glorification of the body in spiritual expression. No religious tradition is more harsh in flaunting the moral sexual code than Mormonism. No religion is more positive about the body as indeed a joyous temple. That some of us may not look that positively upon Mormonism's particular spiritual expression in bodily incarnation should not blind us to the fact that bodily existence is seldom seen religiously in more positive terms.

For Joseph Smith, the fall does not essentially affect the spirit. That central essence, primordial and eternal, is not affected at its core. Nevertheless, the redemption

of humanity in its totality, in bodily humanity, is dependent upon the atonement, that loving, suffering act of God in His Son Jesus. That act and love are the reality we must accept and act out in our lives. Without it there is no hope; in the light of it, we, as did God and Christ, can face all things.

Joseph Smith, a martyr himself, did not take a Pollyanna stance toward the human scene. The evil with which we wrestle is real. But the power inherent in humanity is that of accepting such grace, incorporating it in our lives, and living in the light of that empowering grace. Such work would have no possibility without grace. It is the conjunction of our abilities and powers and the reality of grace that enables. The appropriation and expression of grace in deeds of life and in sacramental ordinances for ourselves and others comprises the God-intended life. It means that the correlation between this world and the next is genuine; that there is no radical disjunction.

No religion is more positive about the body

The temple life is already the direct paradigm of heaven itself. Our empowered lives live already in the life to come, where the foretaste of the fulfillment needs extension rather than transformation. The vision of Joseph Smith is the heavenly life already manifest in this worldly existence.

Both Martin Luther and Joseph Smith were obviously conditioned by the cultural ethos and perceptions of the time. Their visions, while not caused or determined by the culture, were certainly filtered by it, and, in turn, transfigured the created ingredients. That is why it does not seem to me to be too helpful to try to understand Mormonism as the product of the liberal movement, of the enlightenment, etc. One could as easily make the case that it is similar in its sanctification strain to Methodism, or in its sacramental ordinances to Catholicism. The elements of truth in such parallels or connections are but a shadow compared to the more fulsome vision.



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One final comparison may be made between Luther and Joseph Smith. Both dealt with scriptural translations, with a freedom to place accents in the light and logic of faith, became grace or faith *alone*, long before *sola scriptura*.

In contrast, Joseph Smith, in his Inspired Version, recast Romans 7 to show that Paul was carnal under the law but spiritual under Christ. The traditional version reads, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me." Joseph Smith's version is rendered: "For we know that the commandment is spiritual; but when I was under the law, I was yet carnal, sold under sin. But now I am spiritual; for that which I am commanded to do, I do; and that which I am commanded not to allow, I allow not." That certainly solves the problem which has plagued critics, by using a theological position to influence a translation.

Mormonism is a new and ancient religion

A harmonization between Paul, or Luther's interpretation of Paul, and Joseph Smith is not possible. Yet both Luther and Joseph Smith may have something to say to the respective traditions which they represent. Luther saw that the people of faith still had the residuals of sin within them, that therefore their trust was in a gracious God beyond all they did or were. Could Mormonism be given to see that there may be more ambiguity in its religious lives than it knows, that it is troubling to see that its spirituality is on the side of a tainted status quo? Joseph Smith knew that the vitalities of life belong to faith, that this life and its religious arena

are one and positive, even in the face of death. Such a healthy regard for creation and its future stands over against all Protestant spiritualities that denigrate the body. The puritanical streak within Mormonism is not essential to its theory, and perhaps it has kept it from making the contribution it might make.

Let us accept that Mormonism, as other religions, is based on revelatory experiences. But visions and revelatory events occur in contexts, with colorations unique to them. Delineations of such contexts do not provide explanations, but may provide illumination. My own historical hunch, based on some evidence, is that historically Mormonism belonged to an English type of Christianity, as compared with the Continental, north or south of the Alps. English Christianity, even in its reformed form, differs markedly from its Continental cousins. Theologically, the religion of Israel and of Christ, seen in positive relation to each other by John Calvin on the Continent, took the form of a culture formed by religious perceptions, as contrasted with the forming of a total society, analagous to Israel, in England. From the medieval Lollards to the Puritans the identification with Israel, the creation of a new Israel, the identification of the land and people with Israel, have been constant; and no Continental would have thought of himself or herself in that way. The impossibility of creating such a society in England led, of course, to New England, the real new Israel. The Puritan experiment in New England was more successful in its ethos than its theology, which increasingly divided and fragmented the very society it was intending, in analogy to Israel, to create.

It was the Mormons who founded and made a society in genuine analogy to Israel. The religious-social experiment which was frustrated in London, abortive in Boston, happened in Salt Lake. The New Testament message, supplemented by fresh revelations, was given form in a society analogous to the religious and social intermixture known as Israel.

Mormonism is a new and ancient religion, once banking everything on the newness its revelation, more lately buttressing in an increasing crescendo its credibility by the wealth of ancient, historical analogies and allusions.