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# Toward a Mormon Christology

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## Are we disciples to the Christ of history or the Christ of the creeds?

By Keith E. Norman

One of the most strident and historically persistent charges against Mormonism has been that it is not a valid Christian religion at all. Curiously, this assertion is based upon Mormon theology (doctrine of God) and anthropology (doctrine of man) rather than upon Mormon Christology (doctrine of Christ). The reason for this may lie in the comparatively little attention scholars both inside and outside the LDS church have given to the Mormon belief in Christ, his person and work. In fact, the term *Christology* itself is a foreign one to most members. In spite of this, Mormons insist that theirs is neither the church of Mormon nor of Joseph Smith but is in reality as well as in name the church of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps an important reason for the neglect of Christology among Mormons, apart from the general absence of theological endeavors among the Saints, is that the early Mormon scriptures give the overwhelming impression of traditional Christian orthodoxy. The Book of Mormon intentionally reads like a commentary on the New Testament, and the Doctrine and Covenants posits explicit revelations by the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus, who appears indistinguishable from the Father. Indeed, Mosiah 15:1-5 has seemed quite compatible with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity: "God himself shall come down among the children, and shall redeem his people. . . . because he dwelleth in the flesh he shall be called the Son of God . . . being the Father and the Son. . . . they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and earth." Similarly, the title page of the Book of Mormon calls Jesus "the ETERNAL GOD." (Cf. 2 Ne. 26:12; Ether 3:13, 4:12, Morm. 9:12.)

However, to take these canonical writings as the last word would be to betray the Mormon principle of continuing, progressive revelation. It was only later, from about 1832, that Joseph Smith moved Mormonism beyond the somewhat loose doctrinal boundaries of mainstream

American Christianity. This development, which has been extensively studied of late, included not only theology proper, but also such distinctive and esoteric doctrines as the three degrees of glory, preexistence, celestial marriage (polygamy), the endowment, and work for the dead. This shift away from orthodox Christian theology has significant implications for the Mormon doctrine of Christ, which as yet have gone largely unrecognized. A review of the historical development of Christology illuminates the extent to which we have been unknowingly influenced by traditional and often questionable assumptions. Such an awareness should help us move to a more coherent Christology: an understanding of who Jesus is, what he did for us, our relationship to him, and the place of this Christology in the overall Mormon belief system. Furthermore, our distinctive Mormon Christology, although heretical by orthodox Christian standards, accords remarkably well with many of the results of modern biblical and historical scholarship.

### THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTOLOGY

The origins of Christology are lost in the New Testament prehistory and thus the subject of considerable debate among theologians and historians. However, the *meaning* of Jesus is important, if not always central, to almost every book in the New Testament. This does not mean that the early Church's concerns were the same as ours. As Oscar Cullman points out in his study of New Testament Christological titles, the authors are primarily concerned with the functional meaning of Christological descriptions such as "Lord," "Son of Man," and "Son of God," rather than his ultimate metaphysical identity, or *ontology*, which came to occupy later theologians (*Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. N. Hall, pp. 3f).

Perhaps the most debated question in modern New Testament scholarship concerns the question of the so-called "historical Jesus": what did

**In spite of our radical theology, we have often been influenced by questionable assumptions.**

Jesus actually do and say during his lifetime, and how did he understand his own person and ministry? The earliest New Testament writings, the epistles of Paul, date from nearly twenty years after Christ's death, and their author never knew Jesus during his mortal life. The Gospels were written decades later, probably between about 70-90 C.E., and there is serious doubt that any of the evangelists (the authors of the canonical Gospels) knew Jesus directly either. They reproduced Jesus' words as passed down through oral tradition and probably collections of sayings such as those found in the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas.

Furthermore, the Gospels are not, in fact, biographies in the modern sense, but proclamations, reflecting the early Church's preaching. Norman Perrin represents a broad scholarly consensus when he writes:

*The gospel form was created to serve the purpose of the early Church, but historical reminiscence was not one of these purposes. So for example, when we read an account of Jesus giving instruction to his disciples, we are not hearing the voice of the earthly Jesus addressing Galilean disciples in a Palestinian situation but that of the risen Lord addressing Christian missionaries in a Hellenistic world. (Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus, pp. 15f.)*

While this view may support the Mormon contention of the need for continuing revelation, it is frustrating for those who would like a more documentary version of the life of Jesus.

This does not mean that the Gospels are useless in recovering the authentic teaching of the earthly Jesus, however. Earlier in this century, biblical scholarship developed "form criticism," a critical methodology that analyzes the individual units—stories and sayings—of the synoptic Gospels in order to determine how these may have been shaped by the Christian community in oral transmission up to the time they were written down. The objective of form criticism was to reconstruct more closely the original teachings of Jesus. Although the results of form criticism proved to be somewhat meager, they did contribute to the consensus that Jesus did not establish a cultus centered on himself. For instance, Jesus took pains to point out that it was the faith of the one who asked that effected the healing, rather than his own miraculous powers (e.g., Mark 10:54; Matt. 9:22, 29; Luke 17:19). He rejected the description of himself as "good," insisting "there is none good but one, God" (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). "Jesus' legacy to mankind," writes Don Cupitt, "is rather an urgent appeal to each of us to acknowledge above all else the reality of God" and his rule (in *Christ, Faith, and History*, pp. 142f.). In Jesus' own words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 5:17). Furthermore, Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34 quoting Ps. 22:1), combined with his agonized prayer for a reprieve in Gethsemane

and the disciples' early despondency following his death, indicate that he himself did not understand his death as a vicarious atoning sacrifice.

Christianity did not begin proclaiming the passion of Jesus, his suffering and death, but his resurrection, impelled by the endowment of the Spirit at Pentecost. The conviction that "he is risen!" precipitated a momentous change in the perspective of his followers. Whereas Jesus preached the kingdom, the Church preached Jesus; the proclaimer became the proclaimed. Reports of the early post-resurrection preaching in Acts point to a community experiencing redemption and reconciliation and attempting to convey and rationalize what they had experienced. Jesus, according to Peter's sermon, is "a man approved by God" to inaugurate the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days (Acts 2:22). God, by raising him up from the dead, has vindicated him and "adopted" him as his own Son (Acts 2:22-36; cf. 3:13-26; Rom. 1:3-4).

There is no mention of divine stature or redemption of others in these accounts. Indeed, the leading disciples continued to worship in the temple, the locus of atonement for sins in Judaism. The early Palestinian Church's Christology saw Jesus as the eschatological Mosaic prophet-servant (promised in Deut. 18:15-19) who had fulfilled the vocation of errant Israel: "What Israel was meant to be in relation to God, Israel had failed to be; but Jesus had succeeded. Faithful at every point in the wilderness temptation; utterly one with the Father's will, as his own Son, his first born; obedient even to the length of death." (C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, pp. 151f.) In fact, the early Church was more concerned with what Jesus was to become than what he had been. He was soon to return as the triumphant Son of Man, the supreme representative of the nation portrayed in Daniel 7, who was to judge the nations and inaugurate the rule of God or at least "restore again the kingdom to Israel." (Acts 1:6-7).

However, as the movement spread outside Palestine into the larger Hellenistic culture and the return of Christ was increasingly delayed, important shifts in Christology occurred. This is especially evident in Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, whose Christology is among the most "advanced" or developed in the New Testament despite the comparatively early dates of his letters. Whereas Jesus tends to be described by other New Testament writers as an exalted individual, somewhat in angelic terms, Paul describes him in "personal but supra-individual" terms, something of a corporate personality (Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, p. 107). Christians live "in Christ" (e.g., Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17), who is the new Adam, the prototype of a new creation (1 Cor. 15:22, 45-49; Gal. 6:15).

In spite of this apparent development, it is hard to construct a consistent picture of Christ even from the undoubtedly authentic epistles of Paul,

and attempts to trace a development in his Christological thought do not easily follow a simple chronology. References to protology, or pre-existent glory (as in 1 Cor. 8:6 and 10:4), are followed by the two-level sonship description in Romans 1:3-4: Jesus was descended from David according to the flesh but declared Son of God in power according to the Spirit. There is a famous passage in Philippians which seems to presume a highly developed protology: Jesus, "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." But this is combined with an exaltation statement implying that Jesus "earned" his place alongside God by his humble obedience and submission unto death. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (2:6-9; RSV).

It was also Paul who most developed the interpretation of Jesus' death as an expiatory, atoning sacrifice to redeem others (Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7, 2 Cor. 5:21). This was apparently done as a missionary tool since the concept made perfect sense to Hellenist Romans accustomed to propitiating the offended god. Paul's great genius as a proselytizer lay in his adapting his message to his audience (1 Cor. 9:19-22; 10:33).

The synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, although they postdate Paul, seem to take a step or two backward with respect to their Christology. In part this is due to the fact that Paul had written almost exclusively of the risen Lord who was already exalted in heaven whereas the evangelists described his mortal ministry, albeit with sharpened hindsight. But the synoptics also tended to be more oriented to Jewish Christianity in contrast to Paul's gentile audience. Mark's message that Jesus is the "Son of God" was not intended as a claim to transcendental status, since he used the term as a synonym for Messiah (Christ, the Anointed One) as Mark 14:61-62 clearly shows. Matthew and Luke expanded upon this Christology with their birth narratives, which stretched the boundaries of Jesus' election to Sonship by beginning at the conception rather than at the baptism (as does Mark), or at the resurrection and ascension (as with the early preaching in Acts).

John's Gospel not only makes a giant Christological leap beyond the synoptics, but even goes further than Paul. Except for the passion narrative, John shares little material with the other Gospels, and his Christology is radically different. Whether or not he knew of the birth stories, he tops them with a highly developed protology. By appropriating Jewish Wisdom speculation, John proclaims Jesus as the fleshly incarnation of the preexistent *Logos*, the Word or rational expression of the Father (John 1:1-14; cf. Heb. 1:1-3). He was sent from God and manifests his glory among men during his life—"he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9, 1:14). His crucifixion was in actuality an exaltation; he was

"lifted up" to glory on the cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32). From the scholarly point of view, John is the least valuable of the Gospels for information about the historical Jesus, since it consistently projects the attributes and words of the glorified, resurrected Lord back onto his mortal ministry. One prominent New Testament scholar, Ernst Kaesemann, has made a strong case for John's Gospel as a docetic document, meaning that Jesus only *seemed* to be mortal and suffer on the cross; in reality, as those with spiritual perception could see, he was untouched by fleshly limitations (*The Testament of Jesus*, chap. 2).

Later New Testament writings continue to develop Christological themes in different ways. James, with a strong bias toward Jewish piety, virtually ignores Christology. Hebrews emphasizes the obsolescence of the Old Testament requirements as fulfilled by Jesus, the once-and-for-all high priest and sacrifice.

Carefully analyzed, what the New Testament attests to above all is the variety of Christologies in the early Church. Some saw him as the eschatological prophet, others as the divine wonder worker, others as the embodiment of Wisdom, and still others as the sacrificial Lamb of God. The multiplicity of ways of describing Christ's redemptive work and the many titles given to him indicate that in the primitive Church there was no one standard, given, or normative Christology as a starting point, but rather a number of competing Christologies. Although Christians ever since have attempted to harmonize these disparate conceptions of Christ, a long history of doctrinal controversy over the person and work of Christ has ensued.

#### THE PATRISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTOLOGY

Probably the most crucial step in the development of Christology was the transfer of the gospel through missionary work from Palestinian-Jewish culture to the gentile world of Hellenistic Rome, instigated by Paul. The focus was changed from the function of the Messiah to the nature of Sonship, which reflected the concerns of Greek philosophy rather than biblical piety. Although the history of this development cannot be detailed here, it is important to understand the crucial steps taken in the definition of Christian orthodoxy during the first centuries of Christianity. That legacy is still with us, both culturally and religiously, and the genesis of Mormonism did not take place in a vacuum, as our eclectic doctrine attests.

The central point here, however, is that the full consideration of Christology followed and indeed grew out of discussions surrounding the Trinity. Until the fourth century the relation of Christ the Son to God the Father was the primary controversy. The dilemma was that God had been defined in Greek philosophical terms as an infinite and eternal being, nonmaterial and incapable of division, change, or passions. In con-

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trast, anything created, including every human being, was material, limited, changeable, and therefore subject to corruption. But where does Christ fit in? Christians had come to worship him as God, and this left them on the horns of a theological dilemma. Either they were abandoning monotheism in speaking of two Gods, or they were saying that the infinite and unchangeable was born, suffered, and died. Neither extreme was logically defensible, and both were strongly rejected as heresy. The most common way out, up to the Council of Nicaea in 325, was some form of subordinationism: Jesus was God, but only secondarily and derivatively. Although this accorded well with the biblical data and could even be fit into a Neoplatonic hierarchy-of-being scheme, as its implications were worked out it was rejected for soteriological reasons.

Soteriology is the doctrine of salvation. The Christian tradition had strongly affirmed that salvation meant deification: Christ was made man that we might be made god. The leading exponent of deification in the fourth century was Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria and champion of Nicene orthodoxy. He insisted that in order for humans to be exalted to the status of divinity, to be truly saved, a fully divine Savior was needed. Christ the Son must be God eternally, by nature, not by adoption or merit, in order to deify us. Thus the "creed" adopted by the Council of Nicaea affirmed that the Son was "homoousious," meaning of one substance or of identical nature, with the Father. Christ was not a creature, someone who came into being at a point in time, but "very God from very God."

Athanasius devoted his stormy ecclesiastical career to the defense of this formula, which prevailed only after the political might of the empire was fully committed to its enforcement. In 381 the Council of Constantinople officially added the Holy Spirit to the Trinity: There was one eternal God in three persons. How this could be remained a mystery despite the attempts of the Church's best minds to explain it.

But the trinitarian "solution" in fact raised more questions than it answered, particularly concerning Christology. If Jesus was fully God, infinite, and impassible, what could it mean that he had taken on flesh and suffered? Was he really even a human being? As one partisan in the dispute put it, "God is not in a cradle two or three months old." In fact, "the Nicene faith made the Christological problem insoluble." Alexandrian theology had made Christ *too* divine, "at the cost of denying the full reality of [the] incarnation." (G. W. H. Lampe in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 134, 121.) The description of the union of God and man in Christ by the successors to Athanasius implied that the humanity was swallowed up in his divinity, so that in effect Jesus had to fake limitations by pulling punches in order to experience a kind of pseudomortality. Gregory of Nyssa described the atonement of

Christ as accomplished by an illusion which tricked Satan: the mortal flesh was the bait which deceived him into thinking he was killing just another person tainted with sin. Underneath that fleshly cloak, though, was in fact the spotless and powerful Logos which snared the devil and stripped him of his power. (This has been dubbed the "fishhook theory of redemption.") (Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, chap. 24.) In opposition to the Alexandrian view of the essential union of the divine and human in Christ, the theologians at Antioch maintained a strict separation of the Logos from the human nature of Jesus in order to stress the full humanity of the Savior and his kinship with us on the one hand and to safeguard the ultimate transcendence of the divine being on the other.

In the course of the debate, various solutions were suggested and rejected as heretical. Apollinaris, carrying Athanasius' Christology to its logical conclusion, put the Logos in total control replacing the human soul in Jesus. Not only would this have precluded free will in the Savior, but as Gregory of Nazianzus insisted, "what has not been assumed remains unhealed." For deification to be complete, the entire human being—body, mind, soul, and spirit—had to be joined to deity. For Cyril of Alexandria, there was only one incarnate nature in the union of the Logos and Jesus, so that the deity was the subject of the full human experience. In answer to Nestorius' objections that the two natures must remain separate, since it was blasphemy to suppose that one of the Trinity could undergo change and suffering, Cyril replied that "Christ suffered impassibly." (Cited in Lampe in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 126.)

As with the earlier dispute about Christ's relation to God, a settlement concerning his relation to humanity was again reached when the emperor Marcion intervened to call another "ecumenical" council at Chalcedon, near Constantinople, in 451. The Christological formula adopted there, vague enough to be inconclusive and give both sides some comfort, became the second anchor of classic orthodoxy. It defined Christ as one Son, perfect in deity and humanity, truly God and truly man, of one substance (*homoousious*) with both God and man. The two natures were combined without confusion into one "person" (Greek *prosopon*), which neatly reversed the trinitarian formula of one nature in three *prosopa*. Thus orthodox Christology insists that Christ is fully God: infinite, eternal, and indistinguishable in essence from the Father and that in Jesus God has, through the Incarnation, united himself with a particular man who thus became the representative and prototype of a renewed and perfected humanity.

#### **THE NEED TO UPDATE**

Although Chalcedon may have been the best possible accommodation for its time and culture, it did not really solve the conceptual problems

that occupied theologians for so long. Don Cupitt points out several remaining problems in his essay, "The Christ of Christendom": First, the union of humanity and divinity at Jesus' conception make his earthly struggles and suffering somewhat irrelevant, since docetism, the view that Jesus only *seemed* vulnerable to human frailties, cannot be entirely avoided. Second, free will is meaningless for Jesus. The divine will, which is incapable of sin, virtually smothers the human will. Third, the worship of Christ may be divorced from worship of God the Father, instead of the worship of God through Christ. Too, if Mary is literally the "Mother of God," Mariology can hardly be resisted. And finally, a pagan notion of an anthropomorphic deity is inevitable in popular religion. (In *The Myth of God Incarnate*, pp. 142f.) Such objections have led in many corners to call for reevaluation of Christology among modern theologians. Indeed, noting these problems, J. A. T. Robinson had described the impression of Jesus given by the Chalcedonian definition as some kind of hybrid, like a centaur, "an unnatural conjunction of two strange species" (in *Christ, Faith, and History*, p. 39).

The move to update Christology, however, stems from the critical concern for coming to terms with the historical Jesus as well as the recognition of the paradoxes in orthodox theology. "If that tradition," writes Cupitt of Jesus' own teachings, "were to be taken seriously, Chalcedon and later dogmatic systems derived from it would have to be abandoned in favor of a fresh start" (*The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 141). Although theologians generally retain their orthodox assumptions about the nature of God, honesty about the human and cultural limitations of Jesus exhibited in the historical record precludes the view that he was God walking around in human disguise or the Son of God in an ontological sense, that is, in the way defined by the doctrine of the Trinity. As John Hick asserts, our increasing knowledge of Christian origins "involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:21) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conceptions of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us" (*The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. ix). But does such a view throw out the baby with the bath?

#### **MORMONISM AND CHRISTOLOGY**

When viewed against this background, it becomes apparent that Mormonism has an important contribution to make in the area of Christology though we are scarcely even aware of it. The radical departure of Joseph Smith from Christian orthodoxy with respect to the natures of both God and humanity virtually eradicates the Christological dilemmas. By asserting that humankind itself is ultimately the same species

as God—eternal, uncreated and unlimited in capacity—there is no longer any need to bridge the ontological gulf between them. It is no paradox for Mormonism to say that Jesus was both fully human and divine since divinity means perfected, fully mature humanity.

Furthermore, the specifics of the "Christ myth" which bother so many contemporary theologians are generally not serious problems for Mormon theology. Mormonism takes the notion of the preexistence of Jesus, which scholars tend to ascribe to influence from non-Hebrew sources, one giant step further: not only Jesus but all humanity is eternally existent. Within traditional orthodoxy, the Virgin Birth appears to require an act of magical epiphany. Mormons can speak of Christ's conception as a natural event and as a virgin birth only by mortal standards. Embarrassing texts that indicate that Jesus increased in knowledge, "learned" obedience, did not know when the Second Coming would be, and was capable of temptation, anger, weeping, fear, suffering, death, and even abandonment by God pose no dilemma for Mormonism. Jesus was a man, the pioneer and prototype of our salvation and exaltation. "He received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness" (D&C 93:13). There is no danger here of docetism, of only going through the motions of mortality for appearance's sake. Jesus' experiences were as real, even more intense than our own. Because it firmly subordinates the Son to the Father, Mormonism, although theoretically polytheistic, may be described as a practical or functional monotheism.

Although Mormons, in defense of their right to be called Christian, often like to insist on their Christological orthodoxy, there are nonetheless certain very important heresies from traditional Christianity evident among Latter-day Saint belief and practice directly related to our distinct view of Christ. These are not limited to the theology of separate and material members of the Godhead and the understanding of full salvation as deification. Equally significant is the radical rejection of free grace (or at least its restriction to the resurrection of all mankind) and the focus on individual merit. Although Mormons certainly have no corner on preaching free will and individual responsibility, few other Christians are quite so insistent on this point, and perhaps even fewer can reconcile it with their overall theological system. It is interesting to note that the least Christocentric book in the New Testament, James, is a favorite with Mormons because of its emphasis on practical morality and good works. Luther, in contrast, would just as soon have excluded it altogether from the canon. Evangelical Christians have been criticized from various quarters for having only one answer, Jesus Christ, no matter what the question. But this is quite consistent with their trinitarian theological

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assumptions. If Christ is God, and God is the omnipotent infinite Being of their creeds, what need is there for further discussion? By way of contrast, it is impossible to understand the Mormon rejection of original sin and the almost existential insistence on free will apart from Mormonism's unique Christology. Furthermore, in contrast to the Catholic mass or Protestant celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Mormon "sacrament," although repeated weekly, is not so much a commemoration of Christ's death as it is a renewal of baptismal covenants. The emphasis on ethical striving is entirely consistent with the subordination of Christology to anthropology, the doctrine of man: for Mormons, the crucial question is not ontology, the nature of being, but discipleship. Mormons are striving not to transcend their creaturehood, but to perfect their humanity.

#### REMAINING QUESTIONS

Several crucial questions relating to Mormon Christology, however, remain unresolved. Two of these bear mention. The first concerns how we relate to the Savior in worship, prayer, and communication. Despite the advantage of our theology in developing a close relationship with God as a literal and even tangible father, we tend to maintain a certain distance from him as the being we worship. We are of the same race, but God is usually thought of as having attained a state of progression immeasurably beyond ours. Our mediator with the Father is Jesus Christ, who in our historical memory and on our own planet passed through this step of mortality and testing. But exactly what does this mean? A clearer Christology could help dispel some of the confusion that seems to plague our pulpits and classrooms on this issue. In a recent widely promulgated BYU devotional address, Elder Bruce R. McConkie warned against the gospel fad of striving to develop a personal relationship with Christ. "We worship the Father and him only and no one else," he insisted. "We do not worship the Son and we do not worship the Holy Ghost." This admonition is consistent with the Mormon view of Christ as subordinate to God in a hierarchical "presidency." It would be more appropriate to relate to Jesus as the older brother we proclaim him to be: a sympathetic, experienced mentor, tolerant of our growing pains because he has been there and knows that with careful, loving guidance we will outgrow this stage too. But in the same speech Elder McConkie seems to lapse into the neoorthodoxy which has become increasingly prevalent among Mormon leaders and educators in recent years:

*Thus there are, in the Eternal Godhead, three persons—God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the Testator. These three are one—one God if you will—in purposes, in powers, and in perfections. . . . Those who truly love the Lord and who worship the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Spirit,*

*according to the approved patterns, maintain a reverential barrier between themselves and all members of the Godhead. (Brigham Young University 1981-82 Fireside and Devotional Speeches, pp. 98, 103.)*

Is this just semantic confusion, or is it that the right hand really doesn't know what the left is doing?

A second unresolved issue is related and is bound to touch sensitive nerves. As yet there is no definitive doctrine of the Atonement in Mormonism, although there has been no shortage of attempts to expound on it. Very few of these, however, have managed to do so in a manner which would demonstrate an awareness of the distinct tenets of Mormonism; they are for the most part derivative from traditional Christianity.

Nevertheless, there are scriptural clues pointing the way to a distinctive understanding of the Atonement which will do justice to Mormon Christology. When the Book of Mormon prophet Enos prays for the redemption of others, he is told that they must earn it on their own merits (Enos 9-10). This does not accord well with the view that Christ's atoning sacrifice somehow transfers his merit to us. The Book of Mormon also contains a different perspective on the purpose and mission of Christ's mortal experience: he had to go through what we do in order to "know how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:11-12). That is, Jesus also needed to come to earth to develop the attributes of godliness, which must be gained firsthand. This points to Jesus as the prototype of empathetic love who can teach and inspire us to emulation of his self-sacrifice for our brothers and sisters.

Jesus is like us in every point. He suffers what we suffer; he understands what we are going through. Emphasis on the love manifested in Jesus' suffering and death for us provides a point of contact between Protestant grace and Mormon Christology, which paradoxically involves their disparate views on the nature of man. Classical Protestant-Augustinian anthropology sees man as a creature of a lower order of being who is powerless to escape from his sinful condition. In this view, we require an act of unmerited love on God's initiative to redeem us and lift us up to a state of grace, worthy to be adopted as children of God. Mormons, on the other hand, begin with the assumption that we are children of God by nature. The knowledge that we are loved for our own intrinsic being, demonstrated above all by the mission and atonement of Christ, the supreme manifestation of God's grace, gives us the sense of self-worth needed to enable us to love in turn and empowers us to grow up to the measure of the stature of Christ.

Thus, for Mormons vicarious suffering for sins does not so much "pay" for our misdeeds (mercy, after all, cannot rob justice), as it does lead the real sinner to humility and reformation.

When the Lamanites were brought face to face with the suffering and death they were inflicting on the innocent people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi through the latter's refusal to justify them by fighting back, many of them were brought to their senses, repented, and joined the pacifists (Alma 24). Likewise, when we confront Christ innocently suffering for *our* wickedness, our hearts are softened and we resolve to change our ways. And isn't reformation what redemption is all about? The Mormon God is not the stern judge demanding payment for each meticulously recorded evil deed, but the loving if often heart-broken Father who only wants us to recognize our potential and to learn and grow from our mistakes. We cannot become like God by letting someone else take responsibility for our actions, only by developing the qualities of godliness in ourselves. President Kimball's emphasis on the need for individual suffering in penance sounds at odds with the traditional view of the Atonement, but is quite consistent with Mormonism's distinctive soteriology. Personal actions have personal consequences. Christ's role is not to let us off the hook, but to show us that it is possible to achieve holiness, to become perfect as God is perfect, to demonstrate how to do it, and to motivate us to follow his example. One of our fellow men has overcome every obstacle, including guilt and estrangement, and realized the full potential of our divine humanity. Knowing this truth makes us free to do likewise.

Admittedly, this approach to Christology is not new in Christian thought, nor does such a redefinition and liberalization of the doctrine provide all the answers. It will be a disappointment to the scholastics among us who seek some great cosmic necessity for a vicarious expiatory sacrifice for sin. But I believe there are more pressing concerns. For instance, theologians in our own day generally reject such "myths" as hell, the devil, verbal inspiration, Virgin Birth, physical resurrection, and even divine providence. Theology today, writes Juergen Moltmann, has toned down soteriology; it "loses its cosmological breadth and ontological depth and is sought in the context of man's existential problem" (*The Crucified God*, p. 93). Is Mormonism vulnerable to such sophisticated delusion? Or does our naturalism, as described by McMurrin, make us immune from a modernism which seems little removed from atheism? (*The Philosophical Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, p. 18.) If our resistance to contemporary skepticism is to be based on a literalistic and unitary reading of the scriptures as advocated by the so-called Mormon neoorthodox camp, then we will have to abandon our belief in continuing, progressive revelation and renounce our allowance for human error in holy writ—the very concepts which should help to insulate us from the ravages of higher criticism.

Another area open to critical examination is

our emphasis on Christ as Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. How, for instance, does this relate to our normal requirement to possess a resurrected physical body in order to be exalted to godhood? Another question: what would this subjective understanding of the Atonement mean about our literal, historical view of Adam and the Fall?

Of course, the foregoing questions by no means exhaust the list of issues which could be raised. My suggestions are certainly preliminary and need to be pursued in more detail and elaborated with great precision to determine their ultimate validity. But if we are to take Mormon doctrine seriously, it is important that we come to an understanding of Christ consistent with our distinct theology.

Should such a Christology push us to a stage *beyond* historical Christianity and justify our critics who charge us with heresy, so be it. Jan Shipps has argued that Mormonism is not so much a restoration of primitive Christianity as it is a new religious tradition standing in relation to Christianity as the early Christians did to Judaism (Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*). The dispensation of the fulness of times goes beyond its predecessors, even though it arises out of that stream of tradition. Brigham Young reported that when still in Kirtland, the Prophet Joseph had told him, "If I was to reveal to this people what the Lord revealed to me, there is not a man or woman who would stay with me" (*Journal of Discourses*, 9:294). In fact when he started to teach those revolutionary concepts, many of his friends turned on him and fanned the flames which destroyed him. The history of Mormon doctrine since Joseph's death betrays continued ambivalence to the radical direction he was taking. But if today even mainstream Christian theologians now question the value of orthodox Christological constructs, why should Mormons keep competing with their evangelical detractors in Christological superlatives just to convince others that we really are Christocentric? It would surely be more effective simply to decorate our necks and our steeples with crosses.

It may very well be that it is the orthodox and fundamentalist Christians who have abandoned the Christ of history in order to worship an image of God distorted by the Greek culture they thought they had converted. Shall we likewise opt for a theological accommodation to contemporary religious culture which will only demonstrate that we are carefully of the world and susceptible to the theories of men? To be disciples of the man Jesus who really was and to become joint-heirs with the Christ who is, we must have the courage and vision to face up to and build upon the greater light and knowledge given us in the latter days.

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**As  
yet there  
is no definitive  
doctrine of  
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in Mormon-  
ism.**