

Condescension and Fullness

LDS Christology in Conversation
with Historic Christianity

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Latter-day Saints share with the rest of the Christian world an abiding conviction that the Son of God was divine in the preexistence.¹ They do not, however, share the common Christian belief that he was always so. They believe that he progressed to godhood. Put another way, he was not born or begotten divine. Rather he had to develop the embryonic divinity within him the same as all God's other spirit children. And, here, of course, is another distinctive Mormon doctrine—that literally “we are the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29) and that Christ was literally “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). Latter-day Saints view the human family as the “many begotten” spirit children of God and Christ as the Only Begotten by the Father in the flesh. Although firstborn among many brethren, Christ commenced his preexistent life as a spirit son of God on the same footing as all his spirit brothers and sisters—with the need and opportunity to develop his divine potential. Because of this

different view, historic Christianity and Mormonism frequently misunderstand and talk past each other rather than engage in beneficial conversation about our respective beliefs. As will be discussed in this chapter, LDS similarities and differences with historic Christianity can be seen in our respective views of Christ's preexistence, his condescension, his mortal nature, the degree to which he progressed on earth, and how he obtained a fullness of the glory of the Father.

Christ in the Preexistence

To be sure, the Son's development of his divine potential was far more rapid than that of God's other spirit children. He alone advanced to godhood in the preexistence. In part, this was a function of his special position as "Firstborn" (D&C 93:21; Colossians 1:15). Just as not all children of the same parents are equally intelligent, so LDS scripture notes: "These two facts do exist, that [where] there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; . . . [and the Son is] more intelligent than they all" (Abraham 3:19). But his "natural" endowments still had to be cultivated. "By obedience, by righteousness, through faith, over long ages and eons," observed Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve from 1972 to 1985, the Firstborn "advanced and progressed until he became like unto God in power, in might, in dominion, and in intelligence." This "ranked him as a God, as the Lord Omnipotent, while yet in his pre-existent state. As such he became, under the Father, the Creator of this earth and of worlds without number."²

Still, LDS authorities have not been uniform in their suggestions as to *how* the Firstborn became like the Father. For instance, noted thinker and LDS apostle James Talmage (1862–1933) believed that at the appropriate point in the Son's preexistent progress, he was "invested with the powers and rank of Godship."³ Laying aside the unusual choice of "godship" for godhead/godhood, the verb *invest* is suggestive. It literally means "to clothe"; in other words, "to endue with

attributes, qualities, or a character"; "to install in an office or rank."⁴ George Q. Morris (1874–1962), a member of the Twelve from 1954 to 1962, taught in the LDS general conference that the Father "elevated" the Son to the "position" of "the Godhead . . . by divine investiture."⁵ To the question of whether the preexistent Son of God was divine by nature or by grace, the Mormon answer appears to be "both."⁶

Given the lack of much clear, authoritative LDS teaching about how the firstborn son of God became God the Son, it is not surprising that nearly everything said about the preexistent Son focuses on his fully divine status. In harmony with the opening lines of the Gospel of John (John 1:1–3), Latter-day Saints extol the Son's virtual equality with the Father. Yet they also agree with those Eastern fathers who, while acknowledging the full deity of the Son and the Spirit, nonetheless accord ontological priority to the Father as the *source* of the divinity of the other two members of the Godhead.⁷ In short, the Father is the greatest of the three equally divine persons.⁸ The LDS position is similar to that of Origen of Alexandria (c. AD 184–254), an early Greek father, whose description of the Father "as greater than the Son does not refer to any difference of divinity, power, wisdom, or truth [but] to the Father's unique role and character within the Trinity."⁹

This is apparent when Latter-day Saints celebrate the preexistent Son's role as creator of all things both in heaven and on earth. In addition to citing the usual biblical texts that proclaim this reality, such as John 1:3 or Colossians 1:16, they invoke various Book of Mormon passages that refer to Christ as "the Father of heaven and of earth," and sometimes "the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth."¹⁰ The latter characterization of Christ as "eternal" Father of heaven and earth is explained from the vantage point of Mormonism's nonphilosophical use of the term *eternal*. In 1916 the First Presidency explained Christ's title in this way: "Since His creations are of eternal *quality*, He is very properly called the Eternal Father of heaven and earth."¹¹ In LDS theology, the one exception to the Son's role as Creator is that he is *not* the creator of human souls, the other spirit children of the Father. Again, the First Presidency is unambiguous

on this point: “Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them. He is The Son, as they are sons or daughters of Elohim.”¹²

Christ’s Incarnation and Condescension

From the early centuries of Christianity, Christ’s mortal birth has been known as the “incarnation,” a word derived from Latin *incarnāre* that means “becoming flesh” or “investiture or embodiment in flesh.” The term has obvious resonance with the famous passage in the Gospel of John: “And the Word was made [became] flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). For most Christians, how an invisible, immaterial, incorporeal, uncreated Being could encase itself in visible, material, corporeal, created human flesh is a divine “mystery.” The early church father Origen wrote that “of the whole number of miracles and marvels attributed to [Christ], there is one which . . . the weakness of mortal understanding can find no way to grasp or to compass. I mean the fact that . . . the very Logos [Word] of the Father . . . in whom all things visible and invisible were created . . . must be believed to have entered a woman’s womb, to have been born as a small child, and to have squalled in the manner of crying children.”¹³

While both Latter-day Saints and other Christians sometimes refer to the incarnation as the “condescension” of God,¹⁴ the term has particular resonance for Latter-day Saints because of the term’s use in a critical passage in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 11:16).¹⁵ Nevertheless, with his teaching that we are all children of God, Joseph Smith dissolved not only the great ontological divide between Creator and creature but also between the Savior and the saved. As a result, Latter-day Saints almost never refer to the Son taking on “human *nature*” in the incarnation, as is common in other Christologies. Rather, they speak of him taking a human *body*, one that resembles in physical appearance his preexistent spirit body, much as all spirits who come to earth for a mortal experience.

In addition to all the usual soteriological reasons for the Son becoming incarnate, Latter-day Saints add a personal one. Because of their rather unique belief in a corporeal God, the premortal Christ needed to acquire and deify a physical body like his Father. Though the preexistent Christ was God the Son, the Creator of the universe, he did not then possess a divine, physical body. That acquisition required incarnation, resurrection, and glorification. Furthermore, because of the LDS conception of earth life as a spiritual probation, Jehovah, like all God's spirit children, had to be "tested" in a human environment rife with sin and in a body subject to the genetic influences of the fall. LDS scripture quotes God speaking these words with reference to his spirit children: "We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; And they who keep their first estate [obey divine law in the preexistence] shall be added upon [come to earth and acquire a physical body]; . . . and they who keep their second estate [earth life] shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever" (Abraham 3:24–26). Mormon theology expresses no doubt that Christ would "pass" the test, but it also stresses that his earthly "probation" was no sham. Beset by genuine temptation, the Son of God did not succumb; he was sinless (Hebrews 4:15).

Latter-day Saints also share with other Christians the standard understanding that the incarnation enabled Christ to experience the full range of the human condition. In addition to quoting related biblical verses about the purposes of the Son's "humiliation," Latter-day Saints today are fond of quoting this passage from the Book of Mormon: "And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; . . . and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, *according to the flesh*, that he may know *according to the flesh* how to succor his people according to their infirmities. Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth *according to the flesh* that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot

out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance” (Alma 7:11–13).¹⁶ Such reflection on the purposes and accomplishments of the incarnation inevitably raises the central christological question about how the earthly Christ was both human *and* divine. Historically, this has been described as the problem of the “two natures,” and efforts to understand it spanned the early centuries. Even the famed “Definition of the Faith” set forth in AD 451 at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon did not solve the problem. Debate would continue to the end of the patristic period and beyond.

The early church fathers regarded a complete human nature as including a mind/soul as well as a body. Therefore, they believed that in the incarnation the Son took on *both* a human body *and* a human soul. Because the idea of two souls—the premortal Son’s and the one created for the body in Mary’s womb—was problematic to some, it was not uncommon in the early centuries to reason that the divine Son or Logos supplied the rational soul for the man Jesus. Although they often held different positions in the great theological debates of their day, figures as diverse as Arius (AD 256–336), Athanasius (c. AD 296–373), and Apollinaris of Laodicea (died AD 382) agreed in their characterization of Jesus Christ as the Son/Logos clothed in flesh. Such a “Logos-flesh” Christology stands in contrast to the ultimately orthodox “Logos-human” Christology, which held that in Jesus the Logos inhabited a full man, complete with his own rational soul. In the twentieth century, Logos-flesh Christology has sometimes been labeled “space-suit Christology.” Just as an astronaut dons “an elaborate space-suit which enables him to live and act in a new, unfamiliar environment, so the *Logos* put on a body which enabled him to behave as a human being among human beings.”¹⁷ This is similar to the Mormon view that Jesus’s physical body was merely the earthly “tabernacle” or “temple” for the Firstborn’s preexistent soul/spirit.

In seeking to establish his position that the Logos fulfills the role of, indeed takes the place of, the human mind in Jesus, Apollinaris, who was eager to emphasize Christ’s divinity, raised the objection that the idea of a “joint tenancy” of a divine soul *and* a human soul in

Jesus would result in incompatibility. “Either the Logos would simply dominate the human soul and thus destroy the freedom by which it was human, or the human soul would be an independent center of initiative and Jesus would be, in effect, schizophrenic.”¹⁸ The persistent rebuttal to Apollinarian Logos-flesh Christology was the idea that whatever the Son did not assume (as in a human soul), he could not redeem. Later, Maximus the Confessor (c. AD 580–662), a Greek monk and theologian from Constantinople, explained that at times Christ exercised the divine will he brought with him from eternity and at other times he acted through the human will that was part of the complete human nature he assumed in the incarnation.

LDS thought has never seriously engaged the possibility of two souls, two wills, or two independent subjects or “principles of action” in the single Christ. Mormon nominalism assumes that two wills, as concrete realities, require two persons. Thus, Latter-day Saints interpret the various New Testament passages in which Christ distinguishes his will from the Father’s as proof that the Father and Son are two, separate, volitional beings, not as manifestations of Christ having within him two separate wills—one human and one divine—as would ultimately become the orthodox “two wills” position known as *dyothelitism*.¹⁹ Despite Mormonism’s simpler understanding that Christ had a single will, there is widespread acknowledgment among Latter-day Saints that Christ was both human and divine. How Mormons have conceived that interplay in the incarnate Lord differs from many early church fathers, in large part due to the different metaphysical assumptions undergirding their respective Christologies. Since Christ really only has one nature, Mormons do not talk of the Son taking his divine nature with him to earth and conjoining it to a human nature that first materializes in Mary’s womb. Instead, they see Christ’s preexistent spiritually corporeal body entering his physically corporeal body. Nor do Latter-day Saints feel the need exegetically to tag every expression or action of Jesus as either divine or human. While they do not disavow that the human and the divine coexist in Christ, their metaphysics do not compel them to constantly parse the

divine-human grammar. B. H. Roberts (1857–1933), a member of the First Council of the Seventy from 1888 until his death, remarked, “I deplore those [theological] refinements which try to tell us about the humanity of Jesus being separate from the divinity of Jesus. He Himself made no such distinctions. He was divine, spirit and body, and spirit and body was exalted to the throne of His Father, and sits there now with all the powers of the Godhead residing in Him bodily, an immortal, glorified, exalted man!”²⁰

Kenosis and the Veil

Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972), a long-time member of the Council of the Twelve and president of the LDS Church from 1970 to 1972, declared, “Our Savior was a God before he was born into this world, and he brought with him that same status when he came here. He was as much a God when he was born into the world as he was before. But as far as this life is concerned it appears that he had to start just as all other children do and gain his knowledge line upon line.”²¹ It is with this final “but” that Mormon thought moves toward what Christian theologians call “kenoticism.” Kenoticism is derived from Philippians 2:6–8, where the verb *kenōō* (“to empty”) is used in what is considered an early christological hymn to depict the way in which the divine, preexistent Son “in the form of God” took on “the form of a servant” as a human being. Theologically stated, kenoticism encompasses “views of the Incarnation which state that the Word somehow empties himself of—or abstains from the use of all the powers of—one or more of his divine attributes, either functionally or ontologically.”²² Such views have circulated in Christian theology in one form or another since the days of the second-century bishop and apologist Irenaeus (died c. AD 202), who remarked that one aspect of the incarnation was that “the Logos became quiescent so that [Christ] could be tempted and be dishonored and be crucified and die.”²³

Kenotically oriented Christologies vary in how and to what degree they see the Son having relinquished his divine characteristics in the

incarnation. Did the Son/Logos turn over to the Father his divine powers or merely turn them off during his earthly sojourn? For some church fathers, either way was unacceptable because withholding the exercise of divine attributes involved change in the divine nature, something neo-Platonic purists could not allow. In Greek philosophy, there was no such thing as partial divinity or growth in divinity. Divinity by definition was complete, perfect, static, and unchangeable, from everlasting to everlasting. Hence the position adopted by the ecumenical council at Chalcedon in AD 451 that the Word's divine nature in Jesus could not be changed or affected by "going along for the ride" with the human nature's experience of temptation, suffering, ignorance, or other human experiences. This led to the complicated christological effort to cordon off the Son's divinity from every ordinary human behavior or expression depicted in the Gospels.

LDS Christology, on the other hand, is noteworthy for rarely attempting to parse the human and the divine in Jesus. Furthermore, in what would have been scandalous to thinkers steeped in Hellenistic philosophy, Mormons understand divinity not as something static and immutable but as something like charity, which can be cultivated, deepened, and increased. At spirit birth, all God's offspring, including Christ, received an embryonic divine nature susceptible to growth and development, as well as stagnation and diminishment. Rather than two categorically different natures, there is only a single nature encompassing a vast range of development. In one sense, then, *human* can be used descriptively rather than ontologically to depict that which tends to one end of a single developmental continuum and *divine* as that which looks to the other end. To be sure, the developmental distance between infinite God and finite earthlings may be, as one scholar put it, the difference between Einstein and a mollusk,²⁴ but Latter-day Saints do not view the difference as metaphysical, nor do they restrict the possibility of deification to the Son alone.

Thus Mormons do not bifurcate Christ's development, even analytically. Speaking of the trajectory toward divinity, "I, John, saw that [Christ] received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for

grace; And he received not of the fulness at first, *but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness*; And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first" (D&C 93:12–14).²⁵ Elder McConkie considered this passage in the Doctrine and Covenants the best "account known of the mortal progression and achievements of Him who was God before the world was." It shows that "even a God receives not of the fulness of the Father at the first. Even he must be subject to the vicissitudes and trials of mortality; even he must be tried and tested to the full; even he must overcome the world."²⁶ Another LDS apostle, Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931), put it this way: "By constantly growing in grace and godliness, living from day to day by every word that proceeded forth from the mouth of God, He gradually became entitled to the steadily increasing possession of the Holy Spirit, till finally 'it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell' [Col 1:19]."²⁷

Because historically Mormon doctrine has not known the word *kenosis*, it has described the LDS version of the Son's incarnational "emptying" as a "veiling." For instance, Elder Talmage noted, "Over His mind had fallen the veil of forgetfulness common to all who are born to earth, by which the remembrance of primeval existence is shut off."²⁸ As a result, his divine omniscience was mitigated. "When Jesus lay in the manger, a helpless infant," remarked Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901), Church president from 1898 to 1901, "He knew not that He was the Son of God, and that formerly He created the earth. When the edict of Herod was issued, He knew nothing of it."²⁹ The notion of "the veil" received early exposition among Latter-day Saints. Brigham Young (1801–1877), second president of the Church, explained it this way: "The greatest good that could be produced by the all wise Conductor of the universe to His creature, man, was to do just as He has done—bring him forth on the face of the earth, drawing a veil [*sic*] before his eyes. He has caused us to forget every thing we once knew before our spirits entered within this veil [*sic*] of flesh. . . . This is right; were it different, where would be the trial of our faith?"³⁰

Young's contemporary and fellow apostle Orson Pratt (1811–1881) emphasized a full kenosis of divinity: "All that great and mighty power he possessed, and the great and superior wisdom that was in his bosom, . . . vanished from him as he entered into the infant tabernacle. He was obliged to begin down at the lowest principles of knowledge, and ascend upward by degrees, receiving grace for grace, truth for truth, knowledge for knowledge, until he was filled with all the fulness of the Father, and was capable of ruling, governing, and controlling all things."³¹ Joseph Fielding Smith corrected a Church member who wondered if from the outset the veil was "thinner" for Christ, if he was "given more knowledge about his pre-existence as an infant and youth than any other mortal." Smith's answer was: "The Savior was like any other child in the matter of knowledge of his pre-existence."³² On another occasion, he added, "Without a doubt, Jesus came into the world subject to the same condition as was required of each of us—he forgot everything, and he had to grow from grace to grace. His forgetting, or having his former knowledge taken away, would be requisite just as it is in the case of each of us, to complete the present temporal existence."³³

Kenoticism and Progression

The kenotic idea that the premortal Christ had set aside his previous divinity opens up the prospect of progression for the mortal Jesus, an idea that seems implicit in Luke's bridging statement following the boy's experience in the temple when twelve years old: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Joseph Smith also emended the end of Matthew 2 in his New Translation to similarly propose that Jesus progressed in his childhood.³⁴ Mormons and other Christians who embrace a kenotic Christology and who place the incarnate Son of Man at essentially the same beginning point with the rest of humankind find this doctrine homiletically useful because it provides humanity with a model for spiritual growth. Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–250),

a theologian from the great catechetical school of Alexandria, wrote, “The Word of God [i.e. Jesus] became man, so that you may learn from man how man may become God.”³⁵ Prominent modern evangelical John G. Stackhouse, in a quotation that bears quotation in full, sees a doctrine of kenosis as particularly critical to this:

What can we possibly learn about how to live a life of obedience to God, of dependence upon God, and of cooperation with God from a God-man who switches on his divine power-pack whenever he needs to negotiate a difficult situation? To truly serve as an example to us, Jesus has to be like us, seeking to do the will of his Father in heaven and relying moment by moment on the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit. But how can God possibly be tempted, even if he somehow joins humanity to himself, if he retains his divine powers? Kenotic Christology helps here as well, for in positing a Jesus who could not simply “turn on” his divinity like a lamp to banish sin, this theology upholds a truly useful example for us of a man who did not yield, ever, to sin.³⁶

A similar idea is present in Restoration scripture and LDS teaching generally, enabling Latter-day Saints to draw inspiration from the fact that a fully human Jesus had to pursue the same path to glory they do.³⁷ Asked Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), sixth president of the Church, “If Jesus, the Son of God, and the Father of the heavens and the earth in which we dwell, received not a fulness at the first, but increased in faith, knowledge, understanding and grace until he received a fulness, is it not possible for all men who are born of women to receive little by little, line upon line, precept upon precept, until they shall receive a fulness, as he has received a fulness, and be exalted with him in the presence of the Father?”³⁸ A stanza from a popular Mormon hymn proclaims, “He marked the path and led the way, And every point defines; To light and life and endless day Where God’s full presence shines.”³⁹ Elder McConkie added that Christ is “the Prototype, the Pattern, the Type, and the Model of salvation.

He is the great Exemplar. He came to earth and worked out his own salvation by worshipping the Father so that all men—as his brethren in the spirit and as his fellow mortals in mortality—could pattern their lives after his and become themselves joint-heirs of God and inheritors with the Son of the fulness of the glory of the Father.”⁴⁰

Although expressed in a Mormon idiom, such views have resonance with certain strands of christological thinking from both the ancient Antiochene and Alexandrian perspectives. Antiochene fathers were anxious that their affirmation that Christ was indwelt by the divine Logos in no way detracted from seeing his earth life and path to godliness as fully human, similar to that of other human beings. Theodore of Antioch (c. AD 350–428), the bishop of Mopsuestia who championed the Antiochene school, wrote that “in the period before the cross [Jesus] was being given free room because of the necessity to achieve virtue on our behalf by his own [human] will” even though “he was being stirred on by the Word.” Like any human, “he received the cooperative help of God the Word proportionate to his own native will,” and in ultimately achieving “the highest peak of virtue,” he “provided a type of that life for us also, becoming a path to that goal for us.”⁴¹

Alexandrian scholars, many of whom were inclined toward asceticism and often rejected the physical in favor of the spiritual, arrived at a similar position, notwithstanding their distinctive Christology. As incarnate “Son of man,” Jesus practiced *askēsis* (lit., “training,” “exercise”; root of “asceticism”). In so doing, he became the *archegos* (“leader/pioneer”) of [our] salvation (Hebrews 2:10), the lead climber who “marked the path and led the way.” For the Alexandrian theologian-ascetic Origen, the eventual “union of the divine and human natures for all Christians depends on the moral progress that makes one worthy of such union . . . by imitation of [Christ’s] virtue.”⁴² All of this implied the possibility of growth and development in Christ’s life. The Alexandrian presbyter Arius (AD 256–336) asserted that the incarnate Son experienced *prokopē*, a word variously translated as “advancement,” “improvement,” or “progress.” Such ideas,

however, clashed with strongly held notions of the immutability of the Logos. If Christ “received what he possessed as a reward for his choices,” argued Athanasius, if he “obtained it as a result of his virtue and *prokopē*, then he might reasonably be called ‘Son’ and ‘God’ [but] he is not ‘true God’ [the creedal phrase was that the Son was ‘true God of true God’].”⁴³ Regarding Philippians 2:9 (“God also hath highly exalted him”), Eusebius of Emesa (c. AD 300–360), a Greek theologian and a student of the more famous Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 260–339), rejected the Arian interpretation that the Son was exalted as a “reward for his obedience,” stating that Christ was “not somebody who was promoted to being God because of his behavior.”⁴⁴

It is one thing to affirm Christ’s kenosis and his subsequent *prokopē*; it is another to explain them. Although Latter-day Saints have no official doctrine on these matters, some Church leaders have made suggestive comments.⁴⁵ B. H. Roberts described Christ’s *prokopē* in part as “the awakening of the Son of God in his earth-life to the consciousness of the really great powers he possessed. . . . He knew not at first whence He came, nor the dignity of His station in heaven. It was only by degrees that He felt the Spirit working within Him and gradually unfolding the sublime idea that He was peculiarly and pre-eminently the Son of God in very deed.”⁴⁶ In this view, Christ’s advancement was a process of overcoming his veil-induced forgetfulness and regaining full consciousness of his divine identity, attributes, and powers.⁴⁷ Initially, then, it was more a concealment than a kenosis of his divinity. In the words of Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901), fifth president of the Church, “He grew up to manhood, and during His progress it was revealed unto Him who He was, and for what purpose He was in the world. The glory and power He possessed before He came into the world [were] made known unto Him.”⁴⁸

Similarly, other kenotic Christologies claim “that core divine attributes still remain, or else are initially latent but gradually come to consciousness.”⁴⁹ What is known as “functional kenoticism” posits that the divine traits were always present in Jesus Christ but inaccessible until gradually unlocked—or perhaps unveiled—by the Father.

“Ontological kenoticism,” on the other hand, holds that Christ simply did not possess certain divine properties (e.g., omniscience or omnipotence) during his mortal sojourn. Thus, he could not have wielded them even if he desired to do so. One version of this theory differentiates between the Son’s essential properties and his accidental/contingent properties and suggests that only the latter were relinquished during mortality. At times, the LDS emphasis on Christ’s humanity is so strong and the emphasis on his needing to grow in grace so robust that it reads like a version of ontological kenoticism, although not one that makes a metaphysical distinction between essential and accidental divine attributes. LDS thought shies away from declaring that Christ’s preexistent divinity gave him “a leg up” on human experience.

At the same time, there is also a strand of Mormon thought that emphasizes the “partially full cup” in Christ and acknowledges real difference. “He shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, *even more than man can suffer*, except it be unto death,” states one Book of Mormon passage (Mosiah 3:7). Elder Talmage describes Christ’s earthly experience in this way: “His advancement was from one grace to another, not from gracelessness to grace; from good to greater good, not from evil to good; from favor with God to greater favor, not from estrangement because of sin to reconciliation through repentance and propitiation.” Although “Jesus was all that a boy should be,” his “development was unretarded by the dragging weight of sin; He loved and obeyed the truth and therefore was free.”⁵⁰ Christ was peccable (capable of sinning) but lived a sinless life. Although classical Christology tended to add *impeccability* to his sinlessness, Charles Hodge (1797–1878), the famed nineteenth-century champion of Reformed orthodoxy at the Princeton Theological Seminary, reasoned in ways that resonate with Mormon thinking: “If He was a true man He must have been capable of sinning. That He did not sin under the greatest provocation . . . is held up to us as an example. Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of his person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then

his temptation was unreal and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with his people.”⁵¹ The First Presidency’s official Doctrinal Exposition on the Father and the Son in 1916 summarized Jesus’s distinctiveness in this fashion: “Let it not be forgotten, that He is essentially greater than any and all others, by reason (1) of His seniority as the oldest or firstborn [among preexistent souls/spirits]; (2) of His unique status in the flesh as the offspring of a mortal mother and of an immortal, or resurrected and glorified, Father; (3) of His selection and foreordination as the one and only Redeemer and Savior of the race; and (4) of His transcendent sinlessness.”⁵²

The Mormon sense of Christ’s distinctiveness began with Joseph Smith, who asked rhetorically, “Why was [Christ] perfect? Because he was the son of God, and had the fulness of the Spirit, and greater power than any man.”⁵³ By the mid-twentieth century, reflection on Christ’s nature had progressed to the point that Elder McConkie could write: “In his study and in the learning process he was guided from on high in a way that none other has ever been. Being without sin—being clean and pure and spotless—he was entitled to the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit. . . . Of the Lord Jesus the scripture says: ‘God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him’ (John 3:34).” McConkie discusses the impact of the preexistence and the veil drawn at birth in such a way that the veil is hardly to be understood as an intellectual “iron curtain.” Christ’s earthly knowledge “came to him quickly and easily because he was building—as is the case with all men—upon the foundations laid in preexistence. He brought with him from that eternal world the talents and capacities, the inclinations to conform and obey, and the ability to recognize truth that he had there acquired. . . . Jesus, when yet a child had spiritual talents that no other man in a hundred lifetimes could obtain.”⁵⁴

Such talk of Christ’s extraordinariness, however, is not intended to diminish his genuine humanity or what he accomplished as a mortal man. In the words of current LDS apostle Jeffrey Holland, “Christ’s final triumph and ultimate assumption of godly powers on

the right hand of his Father came *not* because he had a divine parent (although that was essential to the victory over death) and *not* because he was given heavenly authority from the beginning (although that was essential to his divine power) but ultimately because he was, in his own mortal probation, perfectly obedient, perfectly submissive, perfectly loyal to the principle that the spiritual in his life must rule over the physical. That was at the heart of his triumph, and that is a lesson for every accountable man, woman, and child who ever lives. It is a lesson [of] spirit over flesh; discipline over temptation; devotion over inclination; ‘the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father’ [Mosiah 15:7].”⁵⁵

Obtaining the Fullness of the Father

The LDS affirmation that the incarnate Christ progressed to the point of receiving the “fullness of the Father” raises the question of what Latter-day Saints think Jesus did not possess at first. Was it, for instance, a fullness of the knowledge of what it was like to be human? This is suggested in the Book of Mormon declaration “Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh” paired with the previous statement “that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:13, 12). Additional clues are found in Doctrine and Covenants 93, which notes: “He received a fulness of truth, yea, even of all truth” (D&C 93:26); John bore record “that he received a fulness of the glory of the Father; And he received all power, both in heaven and on earth” (93:16–17); and “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (93:36). The LDS understanding of the veil applies to these important concepts and qualities of intelligence, light, truth, channeling Mormon understandings of kenosis along cognitive lines. Apostle Albert Bowen (1875–1953) commented on D&C 93 in these words: “That is to say, when Jesus had attained to, or had received, a fulness of truth, He also received a fulness of glory for the two are one.”⁵⁶

Some Mormon thinkers, though, have felt that Christ's growth from grace to grace entailed more. Bruce Hafen, an emeritus member of the Seventy, has reasoned, "His experience shows us also that being free from sin is not quite the same as attaining divine perfection. Jesus lived without sin or blemish, which qualified him in that aspect to perform the Atonement for all mankind. . . . Yet Christ tasted of a central purpose of mortality by learning and growing through his earthly experience, even though he was without sin." As Hafen noted elsewhere, Christ's "life was sinless; hence, he received grace not to compensate for his sins, but to empower his personal growth."⁵⁷

Mormon theologians also vary as to *when* they understand Christ to have received the divine fullness. Those who downplay a sense of kenosis in favor of affirming the divine nature of the incarnate Christ—that is, those who emphasize what the Son brought with him to earth life as a result of preexistent attainments or who focus on the impact of being sired by God the Father—tend to interpret a text like Colossians 2:9 ("in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily") as in some sense true from birth. Representative readings include "this plainly means that Jesus was *like* his Father in his person and in the attributes of his soul," or "Father in heaven was revealed and made manifest in the person of His Son Jesus Christ," or "he received of the fullness of the Father; that is, a fullness of his glory, his power, and dominion, hence Jesus *represented* God in his completeness—'in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily' (Col. 2:9)."⁵⁸ Yet, when Christ's kenosis and humanity are emphasized, the principle that he "continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness" (D&C 93:13) tends to be understood as not being fulfilled until his glorification. Elder B. H. Roberts's statement is typical: "not until after his resurrection" was "he able to come to his disciples and say: 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth'" because only then did he receive "all the plenary power of the Godhead."⁵⁹ Another strand of LDS thought that parallels some early "adoptionist" Christologies focuses on D&C 93:14–17 to suggest when Christ received the fullness:

He was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first. And I, John, bear record, and lo, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove, and sat upon him, and there came a voice out of heaven saying: This is my beloved Son. And I, John, bear record that he received a fulness of the glory of the Father. And he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him. (93:14–17)

To Orson Pratt, this passage “informs us of the period when this fulness was granted.”⁶⁰

Like other Christians, Latter-day Saints have grappled with the significance and complexity of how Jesus was the Christ—the divine Son of God who shared so much with the Father and was in a real way one with him and yet retained his uniqueness and individual experience. While sharing many of the same conceptions, if not always the same terminology, Restoration scripture and teaching nonetheless have provided distinct ways of understanding Christ’s role as the Firstborn, his incarnation, his progression, and his final obtaining of a fullness. This provides Latter-day Saints with a different view of how Jesus of Nazareth was both God and man, and LDS understanding of Jesus’s obtaining the fullness of the Father gives us a new way of responding to Jesus’s declaration, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

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Notes

1. I am using the term *preexistence* in this paper since it is the standard usage in Christian theological literature in English. I am aware that Latter-day Saint usage has replaced that term with *premortality* or *premortal life*.

2. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Christs," *Ensign*, November 1982, 32; *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 121. Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004), a member of the Twelve from 1981 to 2004, offered this interpretation of the previously quoted statement from Abraham 3:19 that the premortal Christ was "more intelligent than they all": "In *intelligence and performance*, He far surpasses the individual *and the composite capacities and achievements of all who have lived, live now, and will yet live!*" Maxwell, "O, Divine Redeemer," *Ensign*, November 1981, 8. Still, because so little is said in LDS scripture or official dogmatic pronouncement about the nature of the preexistence or progress in that realm, several points about the Son's preexistent divinity remain unclear. Did he over time simply develop his essential but embryonic divine traits to a point of full divinity such that his love became perfect, his knowledge omniscient, his powers omnipotent? Or was divinity eventually conferred upon him as a reward for his obedient and loving fidelity to the Father? McConkie's remarks suggest the former.
3. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), 10. He refers elsewhere to "His divine investiture" (517). This is not to be confused with repeated references to his "inherent Godship" (602, 626) or his "inherent" power to perform miracles (130, 145, 249, 316, 318, 418), which refer to Christ's incarnate condition, where both divinity and humanity constitute his two "inherent natures."
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "invest."
5. George Q. Morris, in Conference Report, October 1956, 46.
6. Though little is known for certain, it may be that embryonic divinity was developed to mature fruition through both personal effort and gracious assistance from a loving Father, a Father who eventually invested his Firstborn with the divine powers and authority necessary to function as Creator and Redeemer. In philosophical language, whatever the precise relationship between developed "essence" and conferred "accident" in the Son's progress to divinity and membership in the Godhead, the LDS view of divinity diverges significantly from traditional assumptions about its static and immutable nature.

7. The Greek tradition of viewing the Father as the origin of the Trinity and the source of its communion, particularly as articulated by the Cappadocian fathers, is discussed by the influential Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas in his *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997). Previously, Origen was known for teaching that “the Father is the source of the divinity that he communicates to the Son in his eternal and continuous generation and to the Spirit.” Henri Crouzel and Emanuela Prinzivalli, “Origen,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Bernardino and Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 2:982.
8. Stephen E. Robinson, “God the Father,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:48–50.
9. Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 26.
10. “Father of heaven and of earth” in 2 Nephi 25:12; Mosiah 3:8; Helaman 14:12. “Eternal Father of heaven and of earth” in Alma 11:39; Mosiah 15:4; Mormon 6:22.
11. “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by The First Presidency and The Twelve,” *Improvement Era*, August 1916, 935; emphasis added.
12. “Father and the Son,” 942.
13. *On First Principles*, 2.6.2. Cited in Richard A. Norris, *Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 74–75. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes the incarnation as “the mystery of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity’s becoming man, the mystery of Jesus Christ’s being God and man, the mystery of His being the God-Man” (7:373).
14. See, for instance, Thomas Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 46; and K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). In LDS scripture, the phrase “condescension of God” appears in the Book of Mormon at 1 Nephi 11:16, 26. It has been regularly referenced and discussed by LDS apostles and prophets. As just one example, Church president Gordon B. Hinckley quoted the passage and remarked, “I suppose none of us can fully understand that—how the great Jehovah should come among men.” Gordon B. Hinckley, “Be Not Faithless,” *Ensign*, April 1989, 4.

15. Latter-day Saints speak of the incarnation as occurring in the “meridian of time”—the high noon of human history. In this they concur with reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), who wrote that because Christ lived for all other humans as their representative before God, his life is at once “the center, beginning, and end of all the times of all the lifetimes of all men.” *Church Dogmatics* III/2: 440, as cited in Robert Dale Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 67.
16. One twentieth-century commentary on the Book of Mormon included this explanation: “The Savior of all mankind condescended to things of lower estate that He might be filled with compassion for the sinner, and help for them that have no other Helper save it be Him.” George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, edited and arranged by Philip C. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955–1961), 3:133.
17. R. P. C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 448.
18. Norris, *Christological Controversy*, 22. In modern terms, Jesus is not to be understood as analogous to the Sméagol/Gollum character of *The Lord of the Rings*.
19. Not only have no authoritative LDS Church pronouncements been made on this matter, but virtually no General Authorities have addressed the topic in any setting. Even among LDS religious educators, commentary is rare. One BYU religion professor, however, is on record as embracing the idea of two wills in Christ. In the 1980s, Rodney Turner wrote that “begotten of an immortal Father and a mortal mother, Jesus possessed *two natures* (one divine, one human) and, therefore, *two wills* (that of the Father, and that of the Son). He could manifest either nature ‘at will.’ . . . The atonement required the subjection and sacrifice of the fleshly will of the ‘Son’ to the spiritual will of the ‘Father.’ . . . The *Son* willed to let the cup pass; the *Father* willed that it should be drunk to its dregs. . . . In a sense, it was not the Son *as* Son, but the Father *in* the Son who atoned. That is, Jesus not only did the will of his Father *in heaven*, but the will of the Father *in himself*.” Rodney Turner, “Two Prophets: Abinadi and Alma,” in *Studies*

- in Scripture, Vol. 7: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 245.
20. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: The Canton Press, 1910), 3:188.
 21. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 1:32.
 22. Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122.
 23. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.3. Cited in Norris, *Christological Controversy*, 56.
 24. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 210.
 25. An influential Doctrine and Covenants commentary ventured that "grace for grace" is better rendered as "grace to grace" and that both phrases mean that "in His life, one grace was bestowed upon Him after another, until His measure was full." Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 591. This agrees with modern English translations of the John 1:16 ("grace for grace" in the KJV) where *charin anti charitos* is rendered "grace upon grace" (NRSV), "one blessing after another" (NIV), or "one gift replacing another" (NJB).
 26. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 548; McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 1:299.
 27. Orson F. Whitney, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ," in *Scrap Book of Mormon Literature*, ed. Ben E. Rich (Chicago, 1911), 2:500. Although affirming Christ's earthly progression, Joseph Smith reportedly had a very high view of what Jesus had already achieved *even before adolescence*: "When still a boy he had all the intelligence necessary to enable Him to rule and govern the kingdom of the Jews, and could reason with the wisest and most profound doctors of law and divinity, and make their theories and practice to appear like folly compared with the wisdom He possessed." *History of the Church*, 6:608; from instructions given by Joseph Smith on June 27, 1844, in Carthage Jail, Carthage, Illinois; reported by Cyrus H. Wheelock,

- in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 56. This statement is consistent with how Smith earlier modified Luke 2:46—"after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions"—to emphasize that the doctors "were hearing *him*, and asking *him* questions." Scott H. Faulring, Robert J. Matthews, and Kent P. Jackson, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2004), 372.
28. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 111. Similar language, with somewhat varying meanings, has been known throughout Christian history. The fifth-century *Tome of Leo*, for instance, paraphrases Philippians 2 in these words: "The Lord of the universe veiled his measureless majesty and took on a servant's form. The God who knew no suffering did not despise becoming a suffering man." Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:116.
 29. General conference address, April 1901, in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 279.
 30. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:352 (10 July 1853). Young's sentiments were echoed in the twentieth century by apostle-and-future-church-president Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:33.
 31. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:56.
 32. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:165.
 33. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:33.
 34. And it came to pass that Jesus grew up with his brethren, and waxed strong, and waited upon the Lord for the time of his ministry to come. And he served under his father, and he spake not as other men, neither could he be taught; for he needed not that any man should teach him (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:24–25); for the manuscript version, see Faulring et al., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible*, 239.
 35. *Protrepticus*, 1.8. Cited in Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67.

36. John G. Stackhouse Jr., "Jesus Christ," in *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151.
37. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Child, the Boy, the Man Few People Knew," *New Era*, December 1980, 7. *Doctrines of the Gospel Teacher Manual*, 10; *The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 25. Less authoritative but similar statements appear in other LDS sources.
38. Joseph F. Smith, 16 March 1902, *Gospel Doctrine* (1919), 83, cited in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 153. See also *Teachings: Joseph F. Smith*, 429, where similar remarks from a 1907 address are reproduced. Church president Wilford Woodruff made the same point. *Journal of Discourses*, 5:51 (22 March 1857); reproduced in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff*, 60.
39. Eliza R. Snow, "How Great the Wisdom and the Love," *Hymns*, no. 195.
40. Bruce R. McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 381.
41. *On the Incarnation*, as cited in Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds., *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 60, 61.
42. Beeley, *Unity of Christ*, 43–44.
43. Cited in Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 428. In a longer passage, Athanasius argues that scriptural statements about Christ's exaltation and *prokopē* apply to his human body, not to his indwelling divinity. This, as has been noted, is not a distinction Mormons make when discussing the earthly experience of Jesus Christ.
44. Cited in Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 390.
45. Orson Pratt put a unique spin on the Acts 8:33 recension of Isaiah 53:8—"In his humiliation his judgment was taken away"—to describe the veiling of Jesus: "What humiliation?" asked Pratt. "His descending from the presence of God his Father and descending below all things, his judgment was taken away, that is, his remembrance of things that were past, and that knowledge which, while in the presence of his Father, enabled him to

- make worlds, and he had to begin at the first principles of knowledge . . . [and grow] up from grace to grace, as the Scriptures say, from one degree to another, until he received a fullness from his Father." See *Journal of Discourses*, 15:245.
46. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 3:132–33.
 47. Plato argued that when the human soul learns, it recalls what it knew in the preterrestrial state. Aristotle criticized Plato for this idea.
 48. *Teachings: Lorenzo Snow*, 279.
 49. Brown, *Divine Humanity*, 21.
 50. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 111–12.
 51. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872), 2:457, cited in Oliver Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 123.
 52. "Father and the Son," 942.
 53. *Times and Seasons* 2 (June 1841): 430.
 54. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:369.
 55. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 193.
 56. *Improvement Era*, June 1935.
 57. Hafen, *Broken Heart*, 16, 165; "Beauty for Ashes," *Ensign*, April 1990, 11–12. The same point is made by Marion D. Hanks, "Behold the Man," *New Era*, December 1975, 38: "Though he was without blemish, yet he learned and grew."
 58. *Improvement Era*, November 1897; Penrose, "Whom Do Latter-day Saints Worship?," *Improvement Era*, June 1914; Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 216–17n; emphasis added.
 59. B. H. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era*, March 1907; Roberts, "Answer Given . . . Discourse Delivered in Salt Lake Tabernacle July 10, 1921," *Deseret News*, August 1921. See also McConkie, *New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 73.
 60. *Seer* 1 (August 1853): 120. President Ezra Taft Benson seems to have had a similar understanding. *Ensign*, September 1988. Bruce R. McConkie, however, sees a separation in time between verses 16 and 17: "This same John, looking forward to that day when Jesus would be raised in glorious

immortality to receive that—and more—which was his before the world was, testified: ‘And I, John, bear record that he received a fulness of the glory of the Father; And he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him’” (McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:430).