

# One Eternal God

The Latter-day Saint Doctrine  
of the Father and the Son

*Robert L. Millet*

**T**he work of the salvation of souls is a work in which each member of the Godhead is intimately involved and to which they are eternally committed. Elohim, who is God the Eternal Father; Jesus Christ, who is the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh; and the Holy Ghost, who is the representative and witness of the Father and the Son—these three are perfectly united and forevermore linked in bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of the children of God (Moses 1:39). The highest of eternal rewards in the world to come—exaltation in the celestial kingdom—comes only to those who worship the Father and the Son and have enjoyed the revelations and cleansing powers of the Holy Ghost.

This volume represents a study of the life and divine ministry of the Son of God, as taught in the New Testament. As Latter-day Saints, we also rejoice in the fact that the restored gospel provides vital insights into the relationship of the first two members of the

Godhead, as well as the Savior's central role in the plan of salvation. These Restoration truths are essential for properly understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ and will serve as an important interpretive framework as the contributions in this volume examine how he is presented in the various writings of the New Testament.

## The Relationship of the Father and the Son

Few passages in the New Testament have touched my heart more than the gentle invitation from Jesus to “come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30). Four centuries later the last great Nephite prophet-editor expanded upon this glorious truth. Moroni brought the Book of Mormon to a close by inviting its readers to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32). There it is: the eternal mission of the Church of Jesus Christ (compare D&C 20:59), the invitation to all humankind to come unto the Holy Messiah and enjoy perfection—wholeness, maturity, or spiritual completion in him.

While postapostolic Christianity endlessly debated the nature and relationship of the Father and the Son, the Prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844) declared simply: “I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit; and *these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.*”<sup>1</sup> The New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, clearly teaches that Jesus the Son is subordinate to God the Father. This is also the doctrine taught in the scriptures of the Restoration. Those scriptures teach the following:

- ✦ God the Father is greater than Christ (John 14:28).
- ✦ There is only one that is good, that is, the Father (Matthew 19:16–17).
- ✦ Jesus came to do the will of the Father in all things (John 6:38; 3 Nephi 27:13–14).
- ✦ The gospel or glad tidings is the “gospel of God,” meaning the Father (Romans 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8; 1 Peter 4:17).
- ✦ The Father sent the Son to atone for all of humanity (John 3:16; 2 Nephi 2:8).
- ✦ Jesus came in his Father’s name (John 5:43).
- ✦ The Father sanctified the Son (John 10:36).
- ✦ Jesus had power given to him by the Father to redeem earth’s inhabitants from their sins (Helaman 5:11).
- ✦ The Father “raised [the Son] up from the dead, and gave him glory; that [our] faith and hope might be in God” (1 Peter 1:21).
- ✦ God the Father will also raise us from the dead (2 Corinthians 4:14).
- ✦ The Father, through the Son, is reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18–20; 2 Nephi 10:24).
- ✦ Christ is our Advocate and Intercessor, the Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5–6; D&C 45:3–5).
- ✦ God was in Christ, manifesting himself to the world (Hebrews 1:3; John 14:9).
- ✦ Christ’s doctrine is not his, but the Father’s (John 7:16).
- ✦ Jesus works through the power of the Father (John 5:26, 57; Helaman 5:10–11).
- ✦ The Holy Ghost proceeds forth from the Father (John 15:26).
- ✦ We are born again by the power of God the Father (1 Peter 1:3).
- ✦ We are made perfect by the Father (Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 5:10).

- ✦ The Father sends the “earnest of the Spirit,” the Holy Spirit of Promise, to certify to us that we are on course to inherit eternal life (2 Corinthians 1:21–22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13–14).
- ✦ The Father has committed all judgment to the Son (John 3:35; 5:21–22, 26–27; 2 Nephi 9:41).
- ✦ Christ loves, serves, and worships the Father (John 20:17).
- ✦ Christ worked out his own salvation by worshipping the Father; all men and women must do the same (D&C 93:12–13, 16–17, 19–20).
- ✦ Christ is the revealer of and the Way to the Father (Luke 10:22; John 14:6).
- ✦ Christ glorifies the Father (John 17:1, 4).

These scriptural passages affirm that the Son was and is subordinate to the Father. We obviously could now take the time—which we will not—to consider all the passages that state that the Father and the Son are one; that Christ received a fullness of the glory and power of the Father in the resurrection;<sup>3</sup> and that Jesus possesses in perfection every divine quality, attribute, or endowment, just as his Father does. The point to be made here is that there is in fact a hierarchy among the members of the Godhead.

“Our Father in heaven . . . is the Father of all spirits,” wrote President John Taylor, “and who, with Jesus Christ, his first begotten Son, and the Holy Ghost, are one in power, one in dominion, and one in glory, *constituting the first presidency of this system, and this eternity.*”<sup>3</sup> Of that royal presidency, the Prophet Joseph Smith explained that it is “the province of the Father to preside as the Chief or President, Jesus as the Mediator, and the Holy Ghost as the Testator or Witness.”<sup>4</sup> Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985), a prolific author and member of the Twelve from 1972 to 1985, put it this way: “In the ultimate and final sense of the word, there is only one true and living God. He is the Father, the Almighty Elohim, the Supreme Being, the Creator

and Ruler of the universe. . . . Christ is God; he alone is the Savior. The Holy Ghost is God; he is one with the Father and the Son. But these two are the second and third members of the Godhead. The Father is God above all, and is, in fact, the God of the Son.”<sup>5</sup> The early brethren were taught in the School of the Elders that “God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; who is omnipotent, omnipresent [by means of his Holy Spirit], and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life; and that in him every good gift and every good principle dwell; that he is the Father of lights; in him the principle of faith dwells independently, and *he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings center for life and salvation.*”<sup>6</sup>

The plan of salvation is the Father’s plan. It is the *gospel of God* (Romans 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8; 1 Peter 4:17). It became known as the gospel of Jesus Christ as Jehovah became the chief proponent, advocate, and expositor of that gospel (Mosiah 4:4). “In that great concourse of spirit intelligences,” Elder James E. Talmage (1862–1933), a member of the Twelve and the author of the classic *Jesus the Christ*, explained, “the Father’s plan whereby His children would be advanced to their second estate, was submitted and doubtless discussed. The opportunity so placed within the reach of the spirits who were to be privileged to take bodies upon the earth was so transcendently glorious that those heavenly multitudes burst forth into song and shouted for joy” (Job 38:7).<sup>7</sup> It was then that Jehovah the Firstborn meekly consecrated himself to the Father’s plan of salvation and said simply, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:1–2). This simple phrase speaks volumes; it confirms that the plan of salvation was the plan of the Father, that Elohim was the originator and designer of the plan, and that it had been taught and discussed with the spirit children of God for who knows how long. And as it was long before Christ came to earth, so it was as he completed his earthly mission. From the cruel cross of Calvary, “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, saying,

Father, it is finished, *thy will is done*, yielded up the ghost” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 26:54; emphasis added).

In the apostle Paul’s glorious defense of the resurrection, he states that every person comes forth from the dead “in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming” (1 Corinthians 15:23). He then went on to explain that the Savior will eventually deliver up the kingdom to the Father and thereby “put all enemies under his feet. . . . But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest [clear, plain, evident] that he [God the Father] is excepted.” And now note what follows: “And when all things shall be subdued unto him [the Father], *then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all*” (1 Corinthians 15:24–25, 27–28; emphasis added).

In his Messiah series, Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated: “Jesus’ Father is greater than he! Are they not one? Do they not both possess all power, all wisdom, all knowledge, all truth? Have they not both gained all godly attributes in their fullness and perfection? Verily, yes, for the revelations so announce and the Prophet [Joseph Smith] so taught. And yet our Lord’s Father is greater than he, greater in kingdoms and dominions, greater in principalities and exaltations. One does and shall rule over the other everlastingly. Though Jesus is himself God, he is also the Son of God, and as such the Father is his God as he is ours.”<sup>8</sup>

Speaking as it were in the language of Jesus, the Prophet Joseph asked: “What did Jesus do? why I do the things I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence. I saw my Father work out his kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom I shall present it to my Father, so that he obtains kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt his glory, so that Jesus treads in his tracks to inherit what God did before.”<sup>9</sup> Or, as Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857), one of the original members of this dispensation’s Quorum of the Twelve, wrote: “The difference between Jesus Christ and his Father is this: one is subordinate to the other and does nothing of himself independently of the Father, but does all

things in the name and by the authority of the Father, being of the same mind in all things.”<sup>10</sup>

## Recovering the Father

When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus responded, “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?” (John 14:9) Yet while we come to know the Father through the Son, without a proper understanding of their relationship, postapostolic Christianity has arguably lost a clear understanding of both. For the most part, the great christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries were concerned with the nature of Christ and his relationship to the Father, but there was less discussion of the Father himself.

This is especially tragic, given that one of the major thrusts of the Lord Jesus Christ, as he taught in both the Old World and the New, was to reveal and make known the Father. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the Twelve since 1994, taught that “in all that Jesus came to say and do, including and especially in His atoning suffering and sacrifice, *He was showing us who and what God our Eternal Father is like, how completely devoted He is to His children in every age and nation. In word and in deed Jesus was trying to reveal and make personal to us the true nature of His Father, our Father in Heaven.*” Elder Holland went on to explain how many Christians

feel distant from the Father, even estranged from Him, if they believe in Him at all. And if they do believe, many moderns say they might feel comfortable in the arms of Jesus, but they are uneasy contemplating the stern encounter of God. . . . Jesus did not come to improve God’s view of man nearly so much as He came to *improve man’s view of God* and to plead with them to love their Heavenly Father as He has always and will always love them. The plan of God, the power of God,

the holiness of God, yes, even the anger and the judgment of God they had occasion to understand. But the love of God, the profound depth of His devotion to His children, they still did not fully know—until Christ came.<sup>11</sup>

The Savior himself was extremely clear regarding the order of prayer: we are to pray to God the Father, in the name of Christ the Son (see John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23–24, 26; 3 Nephi 18:19, 23, 30; 19:6–8; D&C 14:8; Moses 7:59). Those prayers are most focused and spiritually effectual when we do so by the power of the Holy Ghost. To say that we are to pray to our Father in heaven in the name of the Son is *not* to say that our prayers somehow go *through* Christ. No, the scriptures speak otherwise. Christ is our Mediator with the Father, our Intercessor in the courts of glory, but we pray directly to God our Father. The mighty prophet Enoch, some three thousand years before Christ came to earth, was commanded to pray to the Father in the name of the Only Begotten Son. “Forasmuch as thou art God, and I know thee, and thou hast sworn unto me, and commanded me that *I should ask in the name of thine Only Begotten*; thou hast made me, and given unto me a right to thy throne, and not of myself, but through thine own grace” (Moses 7:59; emphasis added).

Why did Jesus need to pray? To begin with, during his mortal ministry he set aside much of the power and glory he had enjoyed before he came into the world (John 17:5). Paul, perhaps quoting an even earlier Christian hymn, wrote that Jesus “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:7–8). Other translations render the above passage as “*emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave” (New American Bible; emphasis added; see also New Revised Standard Version). By choice Jesus did not turn the stones to bread, although he certainly possessed the power to do so (Luke 4:3–4). By choice Jesus did not cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and anticipate divine



deliverance, although he had the power to do so (Luke 4:9–12). By choice our Lord did not call down legions of angels to deliver him in the Garden of Gethsemane, although he indeed possessed the power to do so (Matthew 26:51–54). And by choice the Master of ocean and earth and skies did not come down from the cross and bring an end to the pain and suffering, the ignominy and irony of his crucifixion and death, although the power to do just that was within his grasp (Matthew 27:39–40; Luke 23:39).

By setting aside the fullness of power and glory that he possessed, he was able to know mortality in its fullness, to know by experience what it felt like to be hungry, thirsty, tired, snubbed, ridiculed, excluded; in short, he chose to endure the throes and toils of this estate so he might then be in a position to succor his people (Alma 7:11–13; D&C 62:1). Thus when he felt the need for reassurance, he prayed to his Father in Heaven. When he needed answers or perspective, he prayed. When he needed the sacred sustaining influence of the Father in his darkest hours, he prayed earnestly (Luke 22:44). Because of the Spirit, which conveys the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:16),<sup>12</sup> he was in the Father, as the Father was in him. They were one (John 10:30; 14:10; 17:21–23; D&C 50:43), and by his praying and through his example, he showed us how we could be one with them.

Then what of the risen Lord among the Nephites? Why would Jesus, now a glorified, immortal, and resurrected Being, now possessing and manifesting the fullness of the glory and power of the Father (Matthew 28:18; D&C 93:16), spend so much of his time among the Nephites on his knees in prayer? Was there some truth he did not know, some godly attribute he did not possess, some energy or strength he lacked? Was there some approval of the Father, some encouragement or permission he needed? I rather think not. The descendants of Lehi might have cried out *Emmanuel*, “God is with us.” Jesus prayed frequently as an example to the saints and to all men and women of the need to communicate with God—often, regularly, consistently, intensely, reverently. Building on these truths, we therefore ask further whether there are not other purposes of prayer, both

in time and in eternity. Jesus prayed to the Father because he loved the Father and because it was a reverential way of speaking to his Father, who is forever worthy of the reverence of his children. Jesus prayed to the Father because *they enjoyed communion*.

Finally, we ask: Do we worship the Holy Ghost? Do we pray to him? It is true that he is the third member of the Godhead, the messenger and representative of the Father and Son, and the one who bears witness of both. He is one with the Father and the Son and possesses all the qualities and attributes that they do. There is evidence in holy writ that the Holy Ghost is God (Acts 5:3, 4, 9), but to my knowledge there is no scripture or prophetic statement that encourages us or even suggests that we should worship him or pray to him. Many of our more conservative Protestant brothers and sisters (for example, Pentecostals) occasionally pray to or “in” the Holy Spirit, but this is not a part of the restored gospel.

### “Becoming” the Children of God

Jesus Christ “came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, *to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name*” (John 1:11–12; emphasis added). We find that same language used by the Savior in our own dispensation. He declared that “as many as receive me, to them will I give power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on my name” (D&C 11:30; compare 34:1, 3). We might ask: What does it mean to say that if we accept the Savior we will be given *power to become* the sons and daughters of God? Aren’t we already his spirit children? Isn’t he the Father of our spirits? And of course the answer is yes; God is the Father of our spirits (Numbers 16:22; 27:16; Hebrews 12:9).

The verses cited above, however, speak of those persons who accept Jesus Christ and his gospel *being given the power to become* the children of God. What power is this? It is the power of redemption, the power of regeneration, the power of the Lord’s atonement, the power

that derives from the gospel of Jesus Christ, the “power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). To say this another way, those who come unto Christ by covenant and through ordinances become the sons and daughters of God *by adoption*. They are adopted into the royal family of God. Or as King Benjamin pointed out, they become the children of Christ (Mosiah 5:7; compare 27:23–26). This is essentially the testimony that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon bore in the Vision of the Glories, when they attested that by and through Christ “the worlds are and were created, and *the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God*” (D&C 76:24; emphasis added). It is thus the power not just to regain a lost former position but to inherit, through Christ, a new exalted status.

It was never intended, however, that men and women remain children forever, even children of Jesus Christ. After persons have received the appropriate formative ordinances (baptism and confirmation), have chosen to forsake evil, have begun to have dross and iniquity burned out of the souls as though by fire, have become alive to the things of the Spirit and thus been born again, they qualify to enter the house of the Lord. These higher ordinances give them “power to become the sons of God, meaning the Father. They thus become joint heirs [co-inheritors] with Christ who is [the Father’s] natural heir. *Those who are sons of God in this sense are the ones who become gods in the world to come (D&C 76:54–60). They have exaltation and godhood because the family unit continues in eternity.*”<sup>13</sup>

## Becoming One with the Father and the Son

In his moving Intercessory Prayer, offered shortly before Gethsemane and with a view to the wrenching ordeal of Calvary, Jesus pled, “For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; *That they all may be one*; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one in us*: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me (John 17:19–21; emphasis

added). This indeed is the intent and purpose of Christ's great atonement, that we can become one with him and one with our Eternal Father in Heaven.

As the children of God, we are charged to become like God, like his Son Jesus Christ. "But as he which hath called you is holy," the apostle Peter wrote, "so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15–16). Elder D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Twelve since 2008, taught: "If we yearn to dwell in Christ and have him dwell in us, then holiness is what we seek, in both body and spirit. We seek it in the temple, whereon is inscribed 'Holiness to the Lord.' We seek it in our marriages, families, and homes. We seek it each week as we delight in the Lord's holy day. We seek it even in the details of daily living: our speech, our dress, our thoughts."<sup>14</sup>

Another way of putting this is to say that we strive to be holy in the same way that the Father and the Son are holy and wholly united, so that we may be one with them as they are one—"united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption."<sup>15</sup> And we become one with them through obtaining and cultivating the Spirit of God. The early elders of this dispensation were blessed to learn that "all those who keep the commandments shall grow up from grace to grace, and become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ; *possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness, even the express image of him who fills all in all; being filled with the fullness of his glory, and become one in him, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one.*" Hence, through "the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, [we] are to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup>

To repeat, the work of redemption, the labor of salvation, is an endeavor undertaken by all three members of the Godhead—the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Witness or Testator.<sup>17</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, while three Beings and three Gods, are one

(John 10:30; 17:21; 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:27; 28:10; Mormon 7:7; D&C 20:28). As the essays in this volume explore the crucial, divine role of Jesus Christ in the Father's plan, the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Father and the Son reminds us that our Lord did not do it alone. Rather, he carried out his sacred assignment in harmony with the other members of the Godhead in a powerful example of selflessness and unity. Coming to know him is to come to know the Father, and this is done in and by the power of the Holy Ghost. The Savior's call to his Latter-day Saints is forever to "be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). Such is our opportunity and our great challenge, our glory or our condemnation.

ROBERT L. MILLET is professor emeritus of ancient scripture and a former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

## Notes

1. Address by Joseph Smith, 16 June 1844, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library; see also *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 41–42; emphasis added.
2. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:269.
3. John Taylor, "The Living God," *Times and Seasons*, 15 February 1845, 809.
4. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 42.
5. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 51.
6. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 10; emphasis added.
7. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 8; see also John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1892), 93. Note the

following from Elder Bruce R. McConkie: “Although we sometimes hear it said that there were two plans—Christ’s plan of freedom and agency, and Lucifer’s of slavery and compulsion—such teaching does not conform to the revealed word. Christ did not present a plan of redemption and salvation, nor did Lucifer present his own plan. There were not two plans up for consideration; there was only one; and that was the plan of the Father: originated, developed, presented, and put in force by him. Christ, however, made the plan his own by his willing obedience to its terms and provisions. . . . Always it is the Father’s plan; always the Son is the obedient co-worker.” Bruce R. McConkie, “Who Is the Author of the Plan of Salvation?” *Improvement Era*, May 1953, 322–23.

8. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4:79.
9. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1844, 614.
10. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 20–21; see also a statement by Joseph F. Smith, in *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:329.
11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Grandeur of God,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 70–72.
12. *Lectures on Faith*, 60.
13. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 2:474; see also “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by The First Presidency and The Twelve,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:29.
14. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Living Bread Which Came Down from Heaven,” *Ensign*, November 2017, 38.
15. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 40.
16. *Lectures on Faith*, 60–61.
17. *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 42.