

Doctrine and Covenants Theology, Eastern Orthodox Terminology

Seeking Clarity about Theosis/Deification

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My guess is that many, many of us have had a shared experience: the feeling of frustration that comes when you do not feel like you have adequately conveyed to a conversation partner one of your deeply held religious convictions. This feeling, it seems, is something different than experiencing honest *disagreement* with someone over religious beliefs. Somehow that disagreement does not feel as frustrating as the inability to clearly express the belief in the first place. I have often felt that kind of frustration when interfaith conversations have turned to Latter-day Saint beliefs about exaltation—humans' potential to become gods. In theological circles, this belief is often termed *theosis*, or *deification*.¹

Theosis, for Latter-day Saints, lines up well with the idea of “fulness” in one of Joseph Smith’s most remarkable revelations, now contained in section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship,

and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness . . . and be glorified in me as I am in the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:19–20).

But section 93 is not alone among Doctrine and Covenants passages in pointing readers in the direction of deification. Sections 76, 84, 88, and 132 all proclaim a similar witness that the ultimate end of the saving work of Jesus Christ is an invitation to share fully in the divine life, to experience theosis. Theosis, simply put, is at the heart of the Latter-day Saint plan of salvation.

It almost goes without saying, though, that while many Latter-day Saints find theosis to be ennobling and awe-inspiring, many other Christians find it to be off-putting and blasphemous. This was, after all, the titular heresy that fueled *The God Makers*, a polemical film produced in the 1980s by the group Ex-Mormons for Jesus. And even the recent musical *The Book of Mormon* takes some similar satirical shots about Latter-day Saints who, in a future glorified state, expect to become gods on their own planets.²

This is where the aforementioned kind of frustration can set in. For Latter-day Saints, *The God Makers* and *The Book of Mormon* musical feel off-target in their representations of Latter-day Saint theosis. Polemics and satire aside, what still feels off is the impression that becoming like God for Latter-day Saints implies replacing God or supplanting him or existing independently of him. What often seems most difficult to convey is that Latter-day Saints affirm, perhaps counterintuitively, both the doctrine’s boldness and breathtaking scope on the one hand, and its simultaneous call for humility and tentativeness on the other—and in that spirit, this paper is more interested in addressing misunderstandings than in dismissing disagreements. This is where the Doctrine and Covenants can be helpful. To cut to the chase, the key point to be made on this score is that the Doctrine and Covenants is emphatic (as is subsequent related commentary by Latter-day Saint prophets) that theosis for Latter-day Saints does *not* mean a supplanting of God or a detachment from

God or an existence independent of God. Theosis, as understood by Latter-day Saints, is an act of divine grace.

Analogies can often be helpful when coming at concepts that are difficult to communicate in and of themselves—and it is painfully apparent to Latter-day Saints that theosis is a concept that is difficult to communicate. This paper therefore proposes that a comparative lens can be helpful in bringing things into proper focus. There is a potential benefit in turning first, by analogy, to another Christian tradition—Eastern Orthodoxy—that has also felt itself maligned and misunderstood for its beliefs about theosis. Taking this analogy as our starting point might then imbue some key Doctrine and Covenants passages with new significance—and might help Latter-day Saints find “the right words,” as Richard Bushman has put it, to “express [our] faith,” to “make [ourselves] intelligible to . . . listeners.”³

A Comparative Analogy: Eastern Orthodoxy, Essence, and Energies

The analogy makes the most sense when we first appreciate how Eastern Orthodox Christians see themselves as distinct from their Western Christian counterparts. The East-West split in Christianity was already well underway, in terms of philosophical approach and theological emphasis and even language (Greek in the East, Latin in the West), long before the ecclesiastical split of 1054, when reciprocal excommunications irredeemably widened the growing rift between Rome and Constantinople. Eminent Orthodox scholar and bishop Kallistos Ware has characterized that difference in mindset this way: Eastern Christians today think of Roman Catholics and Protestants as “two sides of the same coin”⁴—and Orthodoxy, in that view, is a different coin altogether. One key distinguishing feature in Eastern Christianity has been the Orthodox emphasis on theosis, which has been “like a continuous golden thread running throughout the centuries of Orthodoxy’s ancient theological tapestry.”⁵

The boldness of Orthodox teachings on theosis—even, and especially, *contemporary* teachings—has been a source of surprise for a number of Western Christian commentators. Since Western and Eastern Christianity grew up largely apart from each other, it has only been in the last few decades that Christians in the West (Latter-day Saints included) have discovered/rediscovered both modern Orthodox thought and the writings of early Christian fathers on theosis—and on this point Latter-day Saint and Protestant and Roman Catholic authors have been, at turns, fascinated with, and startled by, Orthodoxy. Many Western Christian authors start their treatises on deification by relating anecdotes about just how “very strange indeed” Orthodox formulations of deification “[sound] to our ears,” to use Daniel Clendenin’s phrase.⁶ Patristics scholar Norman Russell has commented wryly that “it is becoming less necessary in the English-speaking world to apologize for the doctrine of deification. At one time it was regarded as highly esoteric, if it was admitted to be Christian at all.”⁷ A typical case comes in the preface of David Litwa’s 2013 book *Becoming Divine*. Litwa describes a (Protestant) seminary colleague’s reaction when the colleague first read Litwa’s manuscript, with its frequent quotations from Orthodox writers who spoke of humans becoming gods. The colleague circled passage after passage in red pen and scribbled in the margins with question marks and exclamation points. “What does this *mean*?” his colleague repeatedly asked.⁸

Not so for Latter-day Saints. These statements do not sound foreign; they sound like home. Here are two brief snapshots that illustrate that sentiment.

In my classes at Brigham Young University, I have sometimes put the following quotation on the screen and then asked my students to guess who said it: “*We are each destined to become a god, to be like God himself. . . to become just like God, a true God.*” BYU students do not even hesitate to offer guesses like Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, or another leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They are always taken aback, however, when they

find out that it actually comes from the writings of twentieth-century Greek Orthodox theologian Cristoforos Stavropoulos.⁹

A second snapshot: A couple of years ago, a very articulate Orthodox priest who had relatively little exposure to the Latter-day Saint tradition lectured to BYU's religion faculty on Orthodox beliefs about humans and their potential. In the audience that day was an evangelical Christian pastor who had participated in a number of Latter-day Saint/evangelical interfaith dialogues. When the Orthodox priest finished his lecture, the first comment came from the evangelical pastor. He said, "You sound like my Mormon friends." The look on the faces of *both* the pastor and the priest spoke volumes—neither quite expected what they had just experienced.¹⁰

Simply put, surprise is a common reaction when it comes to conversations about theosis—and, indeed, in both of these examples surprise was a central element, although for different reasons. For Latter-day Saints, encountering Orthodox writings on theosis brings the pleasant surprise of the familiar: "We didn't know other Christians spoke this way!" For many other Western Christians, though, encountering Orthodox writings on theosis brings the surprise of the *unfamiliar*, and even the suspect: "We didn't know other Christians spoke this way!"

So, it is probably only natural that Latter-day Saints get excited when they read Orthodox authors on this topic.¹¹ It is akin to going to watch your national team play at another national team's stadium—you are always relieved to discover a large contingent of your team's supporters walking in at the same time, even if they come from another city. When it comes to defending theosis, the worldwide Orthodox community is just such a large contingent, several hundred million strong. But it is more than a "safety in numbers" issue. While there are a number of areas in which Latter-day Saints and Eastern Orthodox differ in their understanding of theosis, the similarities may also provide Latter-day Saints a sense of theological legitimacy. Latter-day Saint views of deification developed independently of Eastern Orthodoxy; Joseph Smith and his successors (like many

patristic writers) wove this doctrinal tapestry with threads of biblical phrases, again and again. But when Latter-day Saints discover that this ancient Eastern church tradition, this self-described guardian of the apostolic faith, has “deification” as the “chief idea of . . . all of [its] theology,” it provides a sense of affirmation. It lends credence to the idea that deification is a legitimate way to understand the biblical witness of salvation.¹²

But, of course, not everyone has agreed that this *is* a legitimate way to understand the biblical witness of salvation. Over the centuries of Christian history, Eastern theologians and mystics have been denounced as heretics or as pantheists or as polytheists for their beliefs in theosis.¹³ It is in his defense against just such charges that one key fourteenth-century Orthodox thinker, Gregory Palamas, presented the ideas that form the key component of the analogy at hand.

Palamas highlighted two categories that are crucial to Orthodoxy’s theosis theology: divine essence and divine energies. In his usage, *divine essence* signifies that aspect or quality or nature of godhood which deified humans will never adopt or assume, and *divine energies* signifies that aspect or quality of godhood in which deified humans can fully participate.

To explore the utility of these categories for Latter-day Saints, we first must understand how they figure into Orthodoxy. These are not categories that are easily defined, especially since Orthodox theology often takes an apophatic (or a negative theology) approach to such questions, acknowledging what *cannot* be said about, or attributed to, God more often than what *can* definitively be said. (Latter-day Saint thought typically moves in the opposite direction—and that is often what causes discomfort for other Christians. More on that later.)

Orthodox teachings about theosis start from the place of God’s “otherness,” and that “otherness” calls for a sacred respect of mystery and transcendence. In Orthodox belief (as in traditional Catholic and Protestant belief), the three persons of the Trinity are wholly distinct from creation. That is, their shared nature or essence is

“uncreatedness.” There is an unbridgeable gap—a gap of being or ontology—between Creator and creature. No matter how fully divinized all saved humans become, humans will never cross that gap of essence. God alone will be the Uncreated Other; humans will always be essentially different. Christos Yannaras explains the Orthodox understanding that “schematically: God is a Nature and three Persons; man is a nature and ‘innumerable’ persons. God is consubstantial and in three hypostases, man is consubstantial and in innumerable hypostases.”¹⁴ Essence could thus be characterized as that nature which, for the Trinity, is divinity, and that nature which, for humans, is humanity.¹⁵

But Orthodox writers are repeatedly emphatic that saved humans can enjoy *all* of the divine *energies*—the attributes and activities of godliness—so much so that one Orthodox writer spoke of deified humans being “equal” with God!¹⁶ That is a succinct summation, in the Orthodox view, of the remarkable degree to which humans can be invited to participate in the divine life.

Orthodox Christians treat these terms—*essence* and *energies*—with a sophistication and a precision that are not found in Latter-day Saint thought; the terms themselves are not even part of Latter-day Saint discourse—and crucially, Latter-day Saints do *not* hold that God is wholly Other in terms of essence or nature. What I want to suggest, however, is that there is an explanatory utility in these two Orthodox categories for bringing clarity to questions about Latter-day Saint doctrine on deification—what that doctrine is, and what it is *not*. That is, there may be more—practically, functionally—to this essence/energies distinction in Latter-day Saint thinking than meets the eye. This distinction seems especially clear in a number of key passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that emphasize that Latter-day Saints, like Orthodox Christians, believe theosis comes by the grace of Jesus Christ—and *only* by grace. In other words, in the Doctrine and Covenants’s framing of this, there will *always* be a uniqueness about God, even when humans are deified. God and his Son, Jesus Christ, are doing the “making equal”—God is the deifier.

And that vision of things can change everything about how we view Jesus Christ as Savior and how we view our relationship to him and his Father.

All of the foregoing prompts a key question, an inescapable question: to what extent do Latter-day Saints and Orthodox Christians mean the same things when they talk about human deification? That is obviously a big question—one that generates different responses based on whom you ask. Most of the responses from outside observers have been dismissive of the viability of such comparisons.¹⁷ Generally speaking, the argument goes, Latter-day Saint conceptions of the nature of God are so radically different as to make Latter-day Saint ideas of deification also radically different. Latter-day Saints, the sense is, believe humans will become what God *is*. While not downplaying the radical difference in beliefs about the nature of God in the two traditions, I think it is worth revisiting that second assumption about becoming what God *is*. The opening line of Norman Russell’s seminal book on deification in the writings of early church fathers seems apt here: “All the earlier patristic writers who refer to deification, although sometimes conscious of the boldness of their language, took it for granted that their readers understood what they meant.”¹⁸ If Latter-day Saints have likewise taken it for granted that others will understand what they mean when they speak of deification, *The Book of Mormon* musical or *The God Makers* film are jarring reminders that such is not always the case.

It seems that too many comparative conversations about Latter-day Saint and Eastern Orthodox teachings on theosis start and stop at the level of the “divine essence,” with reference to Parley P. Pratt’s formulation, or some variation of it, that God, humans, and angels are of the same species.¹⁹ For many Christians (and for some Latter-day Saints), the rhetorical question becomes, ‘What else is there to talk about?’ But the conversations should not stop there, because the richness of the Doctrine and Covenants on this topic challenges easy assumptions and easy dismissals. What I would propose is that despite crucial differences in their theological starting points, both

Orthodox Christians and Latter-day Saints are doing something similar in asserting that a robust view of theosis does not, of necessity, diminish the grandeur of God.

A Doctrine and Covenants Cosmology: Light and Intelligence

What can the Doctrine and Covenants teach us about this notion of a “divine essence” analog in Latter-day Saint cosmology? In Gregory Palamas’s hands, this “essence” formulation reminds readers that no matter how complete deification will be—how completely divinized humans will eventually become—there is something about God that will always be essentially different. The contention here is that the Doctrine and Covenants makes an analogous point.

Before getting to that point, though, it is worth repeating that I do not make this argument to downplay the real differences between the Latter-day Saint belief system and that of historic, traditional, creedal Christianity. Latter-day Saints hold to a conception of a corporeal Godhead wherein each person of the Trinity is a tangible personage, a discrete and material individual who nevertheless is infinitely united in purpose and thought with the other persons of the Trinity. Latter-day Saints also reject creation *ex nihilo*. On one level, Latter-day Saints can agree with other Christians that God is uncreated, but they also believe that in some way so *too* are humans, that some kernel of human existence (referred to broadly as intelligence) is coeternal with God—and thus God is *not* wholly Other. Indeed, the May 1833 revelation to Joseph Smith that is now Doctrine and Covenants 93 contains these startling lines: “Ye were also in the beginning with the Father. . . . Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . The elements are eternal” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:23, 29, 33). This is one of the remarkable contributions of the Doctrine and Covenants—it presents a radically new cosmology.

One of Joseph Smith's most moving extrapolations of the implications of this doctrine of coeternality came in his King Follett sermon, wherein he envisioned God this way:

I might with boldness proclaim from the housetops that God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. God himself could not create himself.

Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement.

The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with Himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits.

This is good doctrine. It tastes good. I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you.²⁰

This *is* a wholly distinct cosmology, and we must not downplay that difference between Latter-day Saint and Orthodox Christian conceptions of God and the universe. But if that is where the conversation stops, misunderstandings about what Latter-day Saints believe about human deification will persist. This radical "Christian version of materialism," as Stephen Webb called it, has to be part of every discussion about the place deification holds in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²¹ But one by-product of this Latter-day Saint anthropology is that it can obscure the God/human gap that *is* present in Latter-day Saint theology. That gap, of course, is not as wide, not as absolute, as the ontological gap that is the starting point

for Christian Trinitarian thinking, but in Latter-day Saint theology there is nevertheless an emphasis on a gap (especially in Latter-day Saint theology of the past few decades)—perhaps to a degree that many would find surprising.

One way to approach this is to draw from expansive Doctrine and Covenants passages about intelligence, about light. Divine light, we learn, “fill[s] the immensity of space,” it “is the law by which all things are governed,” and it “giveth life to all things” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:12–13). We also learn about the universal accessibility of light—“the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world” as an initial extension of divine grace, an initial gift (Doctrine and Covenants 84:46). Then, “he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light—and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24). The concept of *light*, with all of its Doctrine and Covenants synonyms—*truth, glory, intelligence, law, the word of the Lord, Spirit* (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:45; 93:36–37)—becomes a beautiful way of thinking ultimately about the aim, the telos, of the Atonement of Jesus Christ: “And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:67).²² That phrase—“comprehendeth all things”—also appears just two dozen verses earlier in describing “him who sitteth upon the throne and governeth and executeth all things. *He* comprehendeth all things . . . and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:40–41; emphasis added). The parallel phrasings are no accident. What they indicate—what the whole of the Doctrine and Covenants indicates—is that the “why” of the Atonement of Jesus Christ is, ultimately, theosis, deification, becoming like God.

That same revelation, Doctrine and Covenants 88, puts the matter in these remarkable terms in a context of eschatological and soteriological culmination: “And again, another angel shall sound his

trump, which is the seventh angel, saying: It is finished; it is finished! The Lamb of God hath overcome and trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God. And then shall the angels be crowned with the glory of his might, and the saints shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and *be made equal with him*" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:106–7; emphasis added). Being “made equal” with the Lamb of God is the point. The Atonement of Jesus Christ makes little sense in the cosmology of the Doctrine and Covenants without that admittedly breathtaking end in mind.

Being “Made Equal”

A crucial cross-reference must be made here. An earlier revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 76) used this same “made equal” language: “They who dwell in his [God the Father’s] presence are the church of the Firstborn; . . . and he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:94–95). Significantly, God is doing the *making* equal. This is the humility mentioned earlier that the Doctrine and Covenants calls for. Despite all the expansiveness about human potential, the language of the Doctrine and Covenants strongly implies a *qualitative* distinction—perpetually so—between God and deified humanity. It is a distinction of dependence. We must remember that this same revelation, Doctrine and Covenants 76, one of Joseph Smith’s earliest revelations on deification, declares that saved and exalted humans “are gods,” yes, “even the sons of God,” but also that “all things are theirs, . . . and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:58–59). That order signals something important about relationship, about indebtedness, about reliance.

It is telling to see how this scriptural passage was used in an early twentieth-century joint statement of the Church’s First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The statement, called “The

Father and the Son” and issued by Joseph F. Smith and his fellow apostles in 1916, reminded Latter-day Saints that

those who have been born unto God through obedience to the gospel may by valiant devotion to righteousness obtain exaltation and even reach the status of godhood. Of such we read: “Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God” (D&C 76:58; compare D&C 132:20, and contrast D&C 132:17 in same section; see also D&C 132:37). Yet though they be gods, *they are still subject to Jesus Christ as their Father in this exalted relationship*; and so we read in the paragraph following the above quotation: “And they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (D&C 76:59).²³

The assertion that “gods”—deified humans—will *still* be “*subject to Jesus Christ*” is a point that must not be overlooked and one that echoes ideas in Joseph Smith’s revelations.

A similar signal came through clearly in a 1984 general conference address by Elder Boyd K. Packer—and it is apparent that he was mindful of all of the controversy that swirled around Latter-day Saint claims about exaltation as he said this: “The Father *is* the one true God. *This* thing is certain: no one will ever ascend above Him; no one will ever replace Him. *Nor will anything ever change the relationship that we, His literal offspring, have with Him.* He is Elohim, the Father. He is God. Of him there is only one. We revere our Father and our God; we *worship* Him.”²⁴

One proposal here is that it is in this very emphasis on God’s fatherhood and on Jesus Christ’s saving role that the essence/energies distinction might have the most relevance (and resonance) in Latter-day Saint doctrine. Latter-day Saints, of course, take very literally the words of Jesus when he told Mary that God was “[his] Father, and your Father,” or of Paul, who called God the “Father of all” (John 20:17; Ephesians 4:6). Again, admittedly, Latter-day Saint views of that literal parent-child relationship depart from classical theism’s Creator-creature formulation in ways that make many other

Christians uncomfortable. But for Latter-day Saints, this parent-child relationship is the very reason that each person has the potential for deification; put another way, it is because we are children of God that we can be joint-heirs with Christ (see Romans 8:16–18).²⁵ Thus, while this “literal offspring” idea might offend traditional Christian sensibilities, for Latter-day Saints God’s *enduring* fatherhood and supremacy and Jesus Christ’s *enduring* salvific role resonate with the Orthodox understanding that humans become “gods by grace”—and with the understanding that there is something persistently unique about God. It is thus worth highlighting the words “no one will ever” in Elder Packer’s statement.

In the mid-1990s, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley sounded a note from this same refrain, explaining “that this lofty concept [of deification/exaltation] in no way diminishes God the Eternal Father. He is the Almighty. He is the Creator and Governor of the universe. He is the greatest of all *and will always be so*. But just as any earthly father wishes for his sons and daughters every success in life, so I believe our Father in Heaven wishes for his children that they might *approach* him in stature and stand beside him resplendent in godly strength and wisdom.”²⁶ President Hinckley’s language seems compatible with another analogy here.

Think of a hyperbola, a curve that infinitely approaches an asymptote or boundary line but never crosses it. For all intents and purposes, the curve—as it is projected toward infinity—is practically equal to the asymptote; yet there will *always* be a difference. By its very mathematical definition, the asymptote and hyperbolic curve cannot be identical. President Hinckley’s “*approach* him in stature” formulation suggests that using this metaphor of a hyperbola and its asymptotes as a way to view deification—a metaphor present in other Christian systems—does *not* do injustice to Latter-day Saint beliefs. Of course, the crux here is in defining the asymptote line, that axis—God—that is infinitely approached by the curve—deified humans—but never crossed. For Orthodox Christians, the asymptote is the divine essence: God will “fulfill the mystical act of man’s

theosis,” Panagiotēs Chrestou wrote, “by making man like himself *in all ways* except the divine essence.”²⁷ Words that might approximate or point at the divine essence in Orthodoxy—words like eternal Uncreatedness or eternal Otherness—are not part of the vocabulary of Latter-day Saints. But engaging Latter-day Saint thinking in that same definition exercise can be productive in proposing words to capture what is, in Latter-day Saint understanding, God’s perpetual, defining distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* his children—perhaps words like eternal Worshipability, eternal Fatherhood, eternal Supremacy, eternal Irreplaceability. This is the conceptual utility of the essence/energies terminology in comparative conversations like this one—conversations that try to get at just what Latter-day Saints mean when they say humans can become gods, and perhaps more significantly, what they do *not* mean.

Concluding Caveats

Two additional caveats seem important. Recent Latter-day Saint leaders and official publications seem to be recommending more caution and circumspection to Church members when describing just what we know about the look and shape of a deified life. For one example of how this tentativeness has been manifest in Church publications, consider the changes in successive editions of the *Gospel Principles* manual in that book’s chapter 47, “Exaltation.” In editions prior to the 2009 edition, this is the wording for “What Is Exaltation?”: “If we prove faithful to the Lord, we will live in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom of heaven. We will become exalted, just like our Heavenly Father. . . . Those who receive exaltation . . . will have their righteous family members with them and will be able to have spirit children also. These spirit children will have the same relationship to them as we do to our Heavenly Father.” However, in the 2009 edition, this is the parallel passage under “What Is Exaltation?”: “If we prove faithful to the Lord, we will live in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom of heaven. We will become exalted, to live with our

Heavenly Father in eternal families. . . . Those who receive exaltation . . . will be united eternally with their righteous family members and will be able to have eternal increase.” Notice the absence of the specific language of “*just like* our Heavenly Father” or “same relationship” in the 2009 edition.²⁸

This tentativeness on the precise *meaning* of human deification, though, does not mean that Latter-day Saints are pulling back from enthusiastic embrace of the *idea* of human deification. Not at all. In a January 2020 devotional address at Brigham Young University, Elder Ronald A. Rasband said, “You have the capacity to become gods and goddesses in a realm . . . that promises light and goodness and peace everlasting.”²⁹ With the straightforwardness of statements like that, what should we make, then, of the tentativeness on display above?

For one thing, it does seem that Church leaders and members have sensed the need to contextualize and qualify their statements about theosis, given all of the potential for misunderstanding discussed earlier. A key example of this kind of contextualization and qualification is an officially produced Church Gospel Topics essay called “Becoming Like God.” That essay includes long passages of Joseph Smith’s crowning King Follett sermon and references to early Christian luminaries like Clement, Basil, and Dyonisius, as well as a discussion of Church President Lorenzo Snow’s oft-cited couplet: “As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be.” The essay then says, “Little has been revealed about the first half of this [Lorenzo Snow’s] couplet, and consequently little is taught. When asked about this topic, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told a reporter in 1997, ‘That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about.’ When asked about the belief in humans’ divine potential, President Hinckley responded, ‘Well, as God is, man may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly.’”³⁰

In other words, it seems that Latter-day Saints are now trying to convey something of their own apophatic approach to this. We are saying, Here is what exaltation does *not* mean about God or about

us: in the spirit of Elder Packer and President Hinckley, no one will ascend above him; he will always be our God and our Father; Jesus Christ will always be our Savior.

The second caveat is that this is not only a recent phenomenon, even if the tone and the emphasis in these statements do reflect recent paradigm shifts. And that is why attention to the Doctrine and Covenants on this point is crucial. While Latter-day Saints and their leaders have often felt free in the past to speculate about the wonders of eternity, the “asymptotic” view of the God/human relationship in Latter-day Saint thought has been simultaneously present from the beginning, even if it has not always been foregrounded in Latter-day Saint discourse. A point that must be emphasized—and strongly so—is that the clearest exposition in Latter-day Saint scripture of just how expansive the Church’s view of deified humans *is* comes in Doctrine and Covenants 132, the revelation about the eternal nature of marriage. This section (and the previous one) highlights that deification is ultimately possible only for married couples; as President Russell M. Nelson has said, “Exaltation is a family matter.”³¹ Here’s what that seminal revelation teaches: sacramentally married couples who hold to their covenants “shall . . . be gods, because they have no end; . . . then shall they be gods, because they have all power” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:20). And yet, after all of that expansiveness, there still is this statement only four verses later: “This is eternal lives—to know the *only* wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:24; emphasis added). There remains a distinction—the deification of humans does not change the appropriateness of referring to God the Father as the “*only* wise and true God.”

I recognize that at first glance, the sense that in Latter-day Saint theology the God-human relationship is one based on a difference of *degree* rather than a difference of *kind* will simply be a nonstarter for some. However, what should not be missed is that this difference in degree is so apparently profound that it will never cease to exist.

What is at stake here seems to be the worshipability or worship-worthiness of God in the Latter-day Saint theological worldview. Can using Orthodox/Palamite distinctions about essence and energies help in assessing that? Can this be profitably employed to emphasize that Latter-day Saints—like Orthodox Christians—do not believe that they will become the *same* as God, if *sameness* is meant to imply that they will ever exist independently of him and his deifying grace, even though they—like Orthodox Christians—talk about being “made equal with him” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:107)? Importantly, God—whom Joseph Smith addressed in a canonized 1836 prayer, as the “Almighty,” who “[sits] enthroned, with . . . an infinity of fullness” (Doctrine and Covenants 109:77)—is always the one doing the *making* equal. For Latter-day Saints, God’s enduring fatherhood and supremacy imply a resonance with the Orthodox understanding that humans become “gods by grace”—and only by grace.

But Orthodox writers before and since Gregory Palamas remind their readers that we should not *undersell* just how remarkable it is to participate in God’s energies. They use language like this: “man’s main pursuit and ultimate destiny is to become *equal* to God”; humans become “as much a real god as Christ became a real man” (Panagiotes Chrestou); “the *fullness of God* is stamped upon man yet without man thereby being dissolved into God” (Dumitru Stăniloae); “deification is more than the achievement of moral excellence. It is a supernatural gift that transforms both mind and body, making divinity visible” (Norman Russell, paraphrasing Gregory Palamas).³² Likewise, the most recent (2009) *Gospel Principles* manual still affirms, in precisely the same language as did earlier editions of the manual, that exalted humans “will have everything that our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have—all power, glory, dominion, and knowledge (see D&C 132:19–20).”³³ These are words that carry strong resonance with a “divine energies” paradigm.

In that same vein, then, when reading the Doctrine and Covenants with an eye to passages about deification/theosis, two things stand out: from the first years of the Restoration, there is in the

revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants a repeated witness that the Savior's atoning grace can make us like him and his Father; and from the first years of the Restoration, there is in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants a repeated witness that we cannot do this on our own—we will always be eternally indebted to the deifying power inherent in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the Savior "whom [the only true and wise God] hath sent" to make all of this possible (Doctrine and Covenants 132:24). This is but one more reason for all of us to sing with deep sincerity, "I stand all amazed."³⁴

Notes

1. I am grateful to organizers of panels at meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the International Orthodox Theological Association for opportunities to present versions of this essay.
2. Interestingly, the public attention generated by *The Book of Mormon* musical seems to be one of the prompts behind the "Mormonism 101: FAQ" news release that appears on the Newsroom site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed at <https://news-my.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormonism-101#C13>. For the purposes of this current essay, it is especially noteworthy to see how the Church's writers handled two related questions: "Do Latter-day Saints believe they can become 'gods'?" and "Do Latter-day Saints believe that they will 'get their own planet'?" The responses to both questions draw on biblical language and are very circumspect in tone in a way that seems consonant with other statements by twenty-first century Latter-day Saint leaders—discussed below in the essay—on the issue of exaltation/theosis. Here are those responses: "Do Latter-day Saints believe they can become 'gods'? Latter-day Saints believe that God wants us to become like Him. But this teaching is often misrepresented by those who caricature the faith. The Latter-day Saint belief is no different than the biblical teaching, which states, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together' (Romans

8:16–17). Through following Christ’s teachings, Latter-day Saints believe all people can become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).” “Do Latter-day Saints believe that they will ‘get their own planet’? No. This idea is not taught in Latter-day Saint scripture, nor is it a doctrine of the Church. This misunderstanding stems from speculative comments unreflective of scriptural doctrine. Mormons believe that we are all sons and daughters of God and that all of us have the potential to grow during and after this life to become like our Heavenly Father (see Romans 8:16–17). The Church does not and has never purported to fully understand the specifics of Christ’s statement that ‘in my Father’s house are many mansions’ (John 14:2).”

3. Richard Lyman Bushman, “Finding the Right Words: Speaking Faith in Secular Times,” in *To Be Learned Is Good: Essays on Faith and Scholarship in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman, Kathleen Flake, and Jed Woodworth (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 299, 302.
4. Timothy (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new and rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 2.
5. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 120.
6. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 119.
7. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), vii.
8. See the preface to M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013). Litwa’s book also has a really thoughtful chapter on Latter-day Saint deification.
9. Cristoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 184.
10. I mentioned these examples and some of the implications discussed in the essay below in J. B. Haws, “Guest Opinion: Latter-day Saints and the Politics of Human Potential,” *Deseret News*, 31 January 2019, <https://deseret.com/2019/1/31/20664640/guest-opinion-latter-day-saints-and-the-politics-of-human-potential>.

11. See, for example, David L. Paulsen and Hal R. Boyd, *Are Christians Mormon?* (New York: Routledge, 2017), especially chapter 5, “Deification”; Jordan Vajda, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: A Comparative Analysis of Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002); Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 60–65, 68, 70; J. B. Haws, “Defenders of the Doctrine of Deification,” in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 70–98.
12. S. L. Epinanic, as cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 10.
13. See, for example, Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 308.
14. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 59.
15. See Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 27; Haws, “Defenders of the Doctrine of Deification,” 77.
16. Panagiotes Chrestou, *Partakers of God: Patriarch Athenagoras Memorial Lectures* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984), 23.
17. See, for example, Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 307–14; see also Craig J. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 100–102, as well as 209n12, and 212nn17 and 18.
18. See Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1.
19. See Parley P. Pratt, *The Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 33.
20. This excerpt from the King Follett sermon comes from a version published in the April 1971 *Ensign*, accessible online at <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon>. For access to four foundational accounts that became sources for the text of the sermon, as well as the first published amalgamation of those sources in the 15 August

- 1844 edition of the Nauvoo newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, see <https://josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-king-follett-sermon>.
21. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 34.
 22. See an important essay along these lines by Jacob Morgan: “The Divine-Infusion Theory: Rethinking the Atonement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 57–81.
 23. “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles” was originally published in the Church’s periodical, *Improvement Era*, August 1916, 934–42; it was reprinted in the Church’s *Ensign*, April 2002, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/04/the-father-and-the-son>; emphasis added.
 24. Boyd K. Packer, “The Pattern of Our Parentage,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 69. In his address, Elder Packer also noted that “so-called Christians, with the help of clergymen, belittle in most unchristian ways our teaching that we are the literal sons and daughters of God. . . . This doctrine [exaltation] is not at variance with the scriptures. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why some Christians reject it, because it introduces the possibility that man may achieve Godhood. . . . There are those who mock our beliefs in the most uncharitable ways.”
 25. For a helpful discussion about two directions of thought in Latter-day Saint theology about how this parent-child relationship is established between God and humans—either by “spirit birth” or by “spirit adoption”—see Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156–63. Givens calls “the impossibility of establishing with certainty Smith’s position on spirit birth as opposed to spirit adoption . . . one of the many points of indeterminacy in the Mormon past.” But he also notes that the implications for human potential seem to be the same in either scenario since both possibilities are fixed on the belief that God and humans are somehow coeternal, in that “God is not a creator who fashions humans for his own purposes, as much as a guide and heavenly mentor who shepherds a pre-existing intelligence toward its highest potential, or endows spirit matter with the form and conditions conducive to that end:

- full emulation of a perfect Father and participation in a celestial community” (163).
26. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Don’t Drop the Ball,” *Ensign*, November 1994, 48; emphasis added.
 27. Chrestou, *Partakers of God*, 53; emphasis added.
 28. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1995, 1997), 302; the parallel passage in the 2009 edition of *Gospel Principles* is on page 277.
 29. Elder Ronald A. Rasband, “Free to Choose,” BYU Devotional Address, January 21, 2020, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ronald-a-rasband/free-to-choose/>.
 30. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Becoming like God,” Gospel Topics Essay, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/becoming-like-god>.
 31. Russell M. Nelson, “Salvation and Exaltation,” *Ensign*, May 2008.
 32. Chrestou, *Partakers of God*, 23, 51; Dumitru Stăniloae, “Image, Likeness, and Deification in the Human Person,” trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer, *Communio* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 73; Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 306.
 33. *Gospel Principles* (2009), 277.
 34. Charles H. Gabriel, “I Stand All Amazed,” in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no.193.