



Knowledge of Eternal Man has come to us through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith.  
Such insight is precious and profound, soul satisfying, and spiritually elevating.

# Joseph Smith and the Recovery of “Eternal Man”

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Truman Madsen has been a hero of mine for many years, stretching back half a century to when I was serving in the Eastern States Mission. Several of his talks to the New England missionaries and members made their way into our mission. Truman had a way of blending seamlessly his academic training in philosophy and religion and his spiritual knowledge and conviction. He paid a significant price to learn by study and also by faith (D&C 88:118), and it was that concentrated and consecrated effort that allowed him, like his Master, to teach as one having authority (Matthew 7:29; compare John 7:46).

One of the first books I took from my father’s bookshelf and read following my mission was *Eternal Man*. It stirred my soul and sent my mind reeling, and I began at that early date to appreciate that Mormonism was able to hold its own amid the great religions of the world, that it was more than capable of withstanding rigorous study and scrutiny. I absconded with the better part

of Dad's library when I left Louisiana (for some reason, he wasn't bothered by that) and transferred to BYU, and one of my most precious possessions was that book, which I now try to read at least once a year.

### **The Loss of the Knowledge of God and Man**

Consider or reconsider the following rather bold, even stunning remark by the Prophet Joseph Smith: "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."<sup>1</sup> Hence if somehow, by some unfortunate means, people begin to misconstrue God, they never really grasp what man is. (I will use the word *man* hereafter almost exclusively to refer to humankind, both male and female.) Truman Madsen himself pointed out that "To the extent that this teaching"—that is, the true nature of man—"has been blurred or dismissed, many imponderables and paradoxes have arisen in theological anthropology."<sup>2</sup> Some of these we will now consider.

In the centuries following the Savior's ascension into heaven, the deaths of his Twelve Apostles, and the loss of the keys of the priesthood within the Church of Jesus Christ, questions arose and debates ensued regarding many theological points, particularly the nature of God and the Godhead. Issues that received attention included: What is the relationship between the Father and the Son? Was Christ a "created" being, or was he coeternal with the Father? Is Christ subordinate to the Father, or is he of equal might and power and glory? Who or what is the Holy Spirit, and does that Spirit proceed from God the Father, from God the Son, or from both? Are there three divine Beings, two Gods, or one God?

In an effort to satisfy the accusations of Jews who denounced the notion of three members of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) as polytheistic and at the same time incorporate ancient but appealing Greek philosophical concepts of an all-powerful moving force in the universe,<sup>3</sup> the Christian Church began to redefine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They adopted a strict monotheism, a belief that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons but ontologically one Being; an absolute distinction between mind and created things and the inferiority of created things; the total transcendence of Deity, existing outside time and space; God as incomprehensible and unknowable; the Almighty as incorporeal, without body, parts, or passions; and the immutability of God, a belief that he never changes. In short, centuries of debate on the nature of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit took place at Nicaea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381), Ephesus (AD

431), and Chalcedon (AD 451), resulting in creedal statements that eventually became the walk and talk of Christian doctrine.

What was the result doctrinally? One Christian scholar observed that “the classical theological tradition became misguided when under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy; it defined God’s perfection in static, timeless terms. All change was considered an imperfection and thus not applicable to God.”<sup>4</sup> Or as one group of evangelical Christian scholars has written, “The inevitable encounter between biblical and classical thought in the early church generated many significant insights and helped Christianity evangelize pagan thought and culture. Along with the good, however, came a certain theological virus that infected the Christian doctrine of God, making it ill and creating the sorts of problems mentioned above. The virus so permeates Christian theology [today] that some have come to take the illness for granted, attributing it to divine mystery, while others remain unaware of the infection altogether.”<sup>5</sup>

The redefinition of *God* that had been formalized and codified through Christian councils created quite naturally a very different view of *man*. Christian theologian Emil Brunner spoke of the divide between God and man: “There is no greater sense of distance than that which lies in the words Creator-Creation. Now this is the first and fundamental thing which can be said about man: He is a creature, and as such he is separated by an abyss from the Divine manner of being. The greatest dissimilarity between two things which we can express at all—more dissimilar than light and darkness, death and life, good and evil—is that between the Creator and that which is created.”<sup>6</sup>

It is only natural for those who believe that God and humanity are basically of a different substance and thus a different race, to also believe that God is a totally unattached and uncreated being, to conclude that there was a time when only God existed and thus that the Creation had to be *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. For there to be anything in the universe to which God would turn or upon which he would rely in constructing the worlds, for example, is to suggest the unthinkable—that element was as eternal as he was, which notion theologians could never even entertain. Unfortunately, as Karen Armstrong pointed out, the adoption of such doctrine “represented a fundamental change in the Christian understanding of the world.” This doctrinal view “tore the universe [and the children of God] away from God,” she said,

“thus transforming the inhabitants of planet earth into “an entirely different nature than the substance of the living God.”<sup>7</sup>

Accompanying a belief in an *ex nihilo* creation was another teaching that arose in the early Christian centuries that broadened and deepened the God-man chasm. This was the doctrine of Human Depravity. It postulates that as a result of the rebellion and Fall of our first parents, the human family inherits genetically the sin of Adam and Eve and a nature so bent, so warped, that humans do not really have the capacity on their own to choose the right or do good. This tenet, still fundamental to much of Christendom, was elaborated and codified by Augustine and then resurrected by Luther and Calvin and other leaders of the Reformation as one of the fundamentals of the faith.

That distance between Deity and humanity certainly persisted, and perhaps even expanded, by Joseph Smith’s day. My friend and colleague Richard J. Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary observed the following:

While Joseph [Smith] and Mary Baker Eddy espoused very different—indeed opposing—metaphysical systems, with Joseph arguing for a thorough-going physicalism and the founder of Christian Science insisting on a thorough-going mentalism—they each were motivated by a desire to reduce the distance between God and human beings. . . .

These two reduce-the-distance theologies emerged in an environment shaped significantly by the high Calvinism of New England Puritanism. I think it can be plausibly—and rightly, from an orthodox Christian perspective—argued that New England theology, which stressed the legitimate *metaphysical* distance between God and his human creatures, nonetheless at the same time fostered an unhealthy *spiritual* distance between the Calvinist deity and his human subjects.<sup>8</sup>

You will recall that young Joseph found himself unable to find either comfort or clarity through a study of the Bible, given the various competing interpretations of the biblical text. Richard Bushman has offered the following perceptive assessment of the challenge Joseph faced:

At some level, Joseph’s revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry. For all their learning and their eloquence, *the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant.* It was a record of revelations, and *the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived.* In the process, the power of the book was lost. . . . It was the power thereof that Joseph and the other visionaries of his time sought to recover. Not getting it from the ministry, they looked for it themselves.

Bushman continues:

To me, that is Joseph Smith’s significance for our time. He stood on the contested ground where the Enlightenment and Christianity confronted one another, and his life posed the question, Do you believe God speaks? Joseph was swept aside, of course, in the rush of ensuing intellectual battles and was disregarded by the champions of both great systems, but his mission was to hold out for the reality of divine revelation and establish one small outpost where that principle survived. Joseph’s revelatory principle is not a single revelation serving for all time, as the Christians of his day believed regarding the incarnation of Christ, nor a mild sort of inspiration seeping into the minds of all good people, but specific, ongoing directions from God to his people. At a time when the origins of Christianity were under assault by the forces of Enlightenment rationality, Joseph Smith returned modern Christianity to its origins in revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Thankfully, the Almighty did not intend for things to remain in a spiritually disrupted condition, for he provided a medicine for the malady. Among other things, Joseph Smith was charged to restore a correct knowledge of God and man. To assist humanity in accomplishing this near-impossible task, God had been about the business of orchestrating things in preparation for that revolution we call the Restoration. This marvelous work and a wonder was not to take place without immense and intricate preparation by divine Providence. People would be in place. Concepts and points of view would be in the air. Hearts would be open to a new revelation in an unprecedented manner. Nothing was to be left to chance.

### **The Knowledge of God Restored**

The First Vision in the spring of 1820 is essentially the beginning of the revelation of God to man in this final dispensation. Brother Joseph learned that the Father and the Son were separate and distinct personages, separate Gods, and thus that the creedal statements concerning a triune Deity were incorrect. While Unitarians believed that the first and second members of the Godhead were distinct beings, most Christians subscribed to the doctrine of the Trinity. Only eleven days before his death, the Prophet stated: “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>10</sup>

From the Prophet Joseph, we learn that God is more than a word, an essence, a force, a law, or the Great First Cause; he has form, shape, an image, a likeness. He is a he; he has gender. We are uncertain what the young prophet learned at the time of the First Vision relative to the corporeality or physical nature of God the Father. Joseph certainly may have been taught or



recognized that God has a physical body at that time, but he did not say so. On the other hand, note the following from Joseph Smith's new translation of Genesis, now in the sixth chapter of Moses (November–December 1830): “In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; *in the image of his own body, male and female, created he them*, and blessed them.” (Moses 6:8–9; emphasis added.)

The doctrine of divine embodiment is inextricably linked to such doctrines as the immortality of the soul, the Incarnation of Christ, the literal resurrection, eternal marriage, and the continuation of the family unit into eternity. We are given to understand from Brother Joseph and his successors that in his corporeal or physical nature, God can be in only one place at a time. His divine nature is such, however, that his glory, his power, and his influence, meaning his Holy Spirit or what we call the Light of Christ, fills the immensity of space and is the means by which he is omnipresent and through which law and light and life are extended to us (see D&C 88:6–13).

Joseph Smith certainly did not believe that God's physical body limited the Father in his divine capacity or detracted one wit from his infinite holiness, any more than Christ's resurrected body did so (see Luke 24; John 20–21). The risen Lord said of himself, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). “In LDS theology,” Truman Madsen noted, “the physical body is not the muffling and imprisoning of the spirit. The body is the spirit's enhancement. It is an instrument of redemption; and the instrument itself is to be redeemed.”<sup>11</sup> “In Joseph's view,” Richard Bushman pointed out, “making God corporeal did not reduce Him: Joseph had little sense of the flesh being base. In contrast to conventional theologies, Joseph saw embodiment as a glorious aspect of human existence.”<sup>12</sup> Research by Professor David Paulsen of the BYU Philosophy Department demonstrates that God's corporeality was taught in the early Christian Church into the fourth and fifth centuries, before being lost to the knowledge of the people.<sup>13</sup>

I have been very interested in the work of scholars outside our own faith who have dared to explore the notion of God having a physical body. James L. Kugel, professor emeritus of Hebrew literature at Harvard, has written that some scholars' “most basic assumptions about God,” including the idea “that he has no body but exists everywhere simultaneously,” are not “articulated in the most ancient parts of the Bible.” In time, the God who spoke to Moses directly “became an embarrassment to later theologians. It is, they said, really the great, universal God” who is “omniscient and omnipresent

and utterly unphysical.” He asks, “Indeed, does not the eventual emergence of Christianity—in particular Nicene Christianity, with its doctrine of the Trinity—likewise represent in its own way an attempt to fill the gap left by the God of Old?”<sup>14</sup>

Christian theologian Clark Pinnock has written that if we “are to take biblical metaphors seriously, is God in some way embodied? Critics will be quick to say that although there are expressions of this idea in the Bible, they are not to be taken literally. But *I do not believe that the idea is as foreign to the Bible’s view of God as we have assumed. In tradition, God is thought to function primarily as a disembodied spirit but this is scarcely a biblical idea. . . .* Having a body is certainly not a negative thing [since] it makes it possible for us to be agents. Perhaps God’s agency would be easier to envisage if He were in some way corporeal. Add to that the fact that in the theophanies of the Old Testament God encounters humans in the form of a man. . . . Add to that that God took on a body in the incarnation and Christ has taken that body with Him into glory. It seems to me that the Bible does not think of God as formless.”<sup>15</sup>

The late Dr. Stephen Webb, a Roman Catholic scholar and previous Truman Madsen lecturer, pointed out that “far from being nothing, matter, for the [Latter-day] Saints, is the very stuff of the divine. . . . Joseph Smith rejected the philosophical move, stretching all the way back to Plato, of dividing the world into immaterial and material substances.” Webb observed that William Tyndale “was just as controversial [in his day] as Smith was in his. Tyndale wanted to get the Bible into the hands of everyday believers, while Smith wanted to open the ears of ordinary people to divine revelation. Reformers like Tyndale broke the Catholic Church’s political and religious power in Europe and let loose a host of social changes that they could not have anticipated and were not able to control.” Webb then poses this rather fascinating question: “Could it be that Smith, who had virtually no formal education, put in motion ideas that will overthrow the consensus of Western theological immaterialism?”<sup>16</sup>

I cite these scholars and religious thinkers who are not of the LDS faith, not because Mormons seek or require some kind of academic imprimatur to hold to such doctrine, but to demonstrate that a theological concept revealed to the Prophet in the formative years of Mormonism may not be as strange or radical as many traditional Christians make it out to be.



The Saints may have been teaching and discussing God's physical body as early as 1835–36. Professor Milton Backman brought to light many years ago a description of Mormonism by a Protestant clergyman in Ohio. Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had for four years lived among the Saints in Kirtland, published the following in the 11 August 1836 *Ohio Observer* regarding the beliefs of the Mormons: "They contend that the God worshipped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god. *They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts*; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself."<sup>17</sup>

The earliest reference in a sermon by Joseph Smith to the corporeality of God now in our possession seems to be 5 January 1841. On that occasion, William Clayton recorded the Prophet as saying: "That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones."<sup>18</sup> Six weeks later, "Joseph said concerning the Godhead [that] it was not as many imagined—three heads and but one body; he said the three were separate bodies."<sup>19</sup> On 9 March 1841 he declared that "the Son had a tabernacle and so had the Father."<sup>20</sup> Finally, it was on 2 April 1843 in Ramus, Illinois, that Brother Joseph delivered instructions on the matter that are the basis for D&C 130:22–23: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost . . . is a personage of Spirit."<sup>21</sup>

### **Mortal or Fallen Man**

I have been asked a question many times through the years by persons of other faiths: "What is the LDS concept of the nature of man?" It seems that what they want to know is this: Do we believe men and women are basically good or basically evil? I generally respond with a question of my own: "To which man do you have reference—do you have reference to fallen or mortal man or are you speaking of eternal man?" Let me explain my response.

How would Joseph Smith have learned about humanity—whether men and women are depraved or divine? It seems to me that his first serious entry into theological anthropology—the nature of humanity—would have come through his exposure to the teachings of Book of Mormon prophets. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery would have learned through the translation of the golden plates that because Adam and Eve transgressed by partaking of the forbidden fruit, they were cast from the Garden of Eden and from the

presence of the Lord; they experienced spiritual death. The result was blood, sweat, toil, opposition, bodily decay, and finally, physical death. Even though the Fall was a vital part of the great plan of the Eternal God—as much a fore-ordained act as Christ’s intercession—our state, including our relationship to and contact with God, changed dramatically. Even though the Book of Mormon presents what is often called a “fortunate fall”—that Adam fell that men might be (2 Nephi 2:25)—the prophets within that record proclaim fearlessly that all humanity are “in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever will be save they should rely on this Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:5–6). Again, the coming of the Redeemer presupposes the need for redemption.

We learn that although God forgave our first parents their transgression, although there is no “original sin” entailed upon Adam and Eve’s children, and although “the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:54), that is not the whole story. To concede that we are not accountable for or condemned by the Fall of Adam is not to say that we are unaffected by it. No, we do not believe, with Augustine or the Reformers, in the moral depravity of humanity; that human beings, because of intrinsic or genetic carnality, do not even have the power to choose good over evil; or that children are born in sin.

Yet the Book of Mormon prophets knew very well that “since man had fallen, he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance” (Alma 22:14). President Brigham Young, who declared that everything he had learned about the restored gospel he learned from Joseph Smith, taught: “It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us, so that we may escape from this world into the celestial kingdom.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Eternal Man**

Now let’s point ourselves in a different direction. Joseph Smith learned also by revelation that man is an eternal being. Of man’s divine capabilities, Joseph noted: “We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and

the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin.”<sup>23</sup>

The doctrine of the premortal existence of man comes surprisingly early in the Prophet Joseph’s ministry. It appears that the first mention of such an idea within the restored gospel is found in the Book of Mormon, in the 13th chapter of Alma. Here we read of men being prepared and ordained (we would say foreordained) to the priesthood “from the foundation of the world” (Alma 13:3–4). Orson Pratt indicated, however, that this passage in the Book of Mormon simply didn’t register with him, and that it was not until he encountered the Prophet’s inspired translation of the early chapters of Genesis (what we now have as the Book of Moses) that he could recognize the doctrine.<sup>24</sup> This may have been the case with Joseph Smith, as well.

Between June and October 1830, the Bible translators (Joseph and Oliver) made their way deliberately through those early chapters of the Bible until they came to the end of the Creation of the heavens and the earth. Then these words appear in the new translation: “*I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth. For I, the Lord God, had not caused it to rain upon the face of the earth. And I, the Lord God, had created all the children of men; and not yet a man to till the ground; for in heaven created I them; and there was not yet flesh upon the earth, neither in the water, neither in the air*” (JST, Genesis 2:4–6; Moses 3:4–5; emphasis added). Soon thereafter we read in the inspired translation of the Council in Heaven wherein Jehovah was chosen to be the Savior and Redeemer, the chief proponent and advocate of the Father’s plan of salvation, while Lucifer’s nefarious and amendatory offer was refused, and he and his minions were cast down to earth (JST, Genesis 3:1–5; Moses 4:1–4).<sup>25</sup>

Within a matter of weeks, a revelation spoke of a much larger group in the council, that “*a third part of the hosts of heaven turned [Lucifer] away from me because of their agency; and they were thrust down, and thus came the devil and his angels*” (D&C 29:36–37; emphasis added). Then, within three months, Joseph and the Saints learned via the Bible translation that God “called upon Adam by his own voice, saying: I am God; I made the world, and *men before they were in the flesh*” (JST, Genesis 6:52; Moses 6:51; emphasis added).

In section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants (6 May 1833), we read the following: “And now, verily I say unto you, *I was in the beginning with the Father, and am the Firstborn*; and all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same, and are the church of the Firstborn” (D&C

93:21–22; emphasis added). Herein is contained the scriptural basis for the Latter-day Saint belief that Jehovah was the firstborn spirit child of the Father, a teaching alluded to in the New Testament (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15). An official proclamation in 1909 affirmed: “Jesus . . . is the firstborn among all the sons of God—the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. . . . [W]e, like Him, are in the image of God.”<sup>26</sup>

Section 93 continues: “*Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth. . . . Man was in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be*” (D&C 93:23, 29; emphasis added). Clearly there is something within the human being—call it intelligence or ego or some primal essence—that has always lived—indeed, had no beginning. Most Christians wrap their minds around the fact that we will continue to live after this mortal life comes to an end, that there is in fact a post-death immortality of the soul, that because Jesus rose from the tomb, so will each and every one of us (1 Corinthians 15:21–22). What Jesus made possible for each of earth’s inhabitants is the inseparable union of body and spirit that comes with the resurrection. In other words, we know that even if the resurrection did not take place, we would continue to live forever, for we are beings who are without beginning or end.<sup>27</sup>

This revelation to Joseph Smith adds, however, a unique and profound insight into the Christian concept of immortality, a perspective that is singularly Latter-day Saint—namely, that we have been, are, and will forevermore be immortal persons. As Truman put it, “Man as a self had a beginningless beginning. He has never been identified wholly with any other being. Nor is he a product of nothing.”<sup>28</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith continued to turn the key of knowledge and pull back the veil concerning the eternal nature of men and women in his King Follett Discourse, delivered in Nauvoo on 7 April 1844. In speaking of “the mind of man—the immortal spirit,” the Prophet said:

Where did it come from? All learned men and doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning; but it is not so: *the very idea lessens man in my estimation. . . . I am dwelling on the immortality of the spirit of man. Is it logical to say that the intelligence of spirits is immortal, and yet that it had a beginning? The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end.* That is good logic. That which has a beginning may have an end.<sup>29</sup>

In short, Brother Joseph taught that this property, called by philosophers *aseity*, or necessary self-existence, is an innate characteristic of both Deity and humanity.

Joseph responded to the universally accepted Christian notion of an *ex nihilo* creation by declaring that the Hebrew word translated as “create” really means “to organize,” implying that Deity drew upon already existing matter. He taught, “We infer that God had materials to organize from—chaos, chaotic matter. Element had an existence from the time he [God] had. The pure principles of element are principles that never can be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed.”<sup>30</sup>

Truman trumpeted the distinctive LDS perspective on who we are and what we may become in these words: “What the Eternal Father wants for you and with you is the fullness of your possibilities. And those possibilities are infinite. He did not simply make you from nothing into a worm; he adopted and begat you into his likeness in order to share his nature. And he sent his Firstborn Son to exemplify just how glorious that nature can be—even in mortality. That is our witness.”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

About thirty years ago, I stepped outside my front door to retrieve the newspaper. As I bent down, I noticed also a small plastic bag containing a paperback book. I opened the package, noticed the title, and sensed what kind of book it was. After reading the first page I recognized it as an anti-Mormon publication that, I later learned, was distributed to about five thousand LDS homes that morning. It was written by an ex-Mormon, now a Protestant pastor, to invite Mormons to save themselves from deception and leave The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as soon as possible, as well as to warn other unwary persons of the evils of this cultish clan. During the next few days, I browsed the book, stopping occasionally to read carefully certain sections that appeared particularly interesting.

I settled on one segment in which the author was attempting to prepare readers for the coming of the Mormon missionaries to their door. He warned them to be certain not to listen to anything these young people had to say, and certainly not to allow them into their home. If, however, the missionaries were somehow able to mischievously make their way into the readers’ living rooms, he said, the missionaries would deliver their message and prevail upon the readers to pray about it. The author said, essentially: “This you must

not do. Do not get on your knees and do not pray.” He then explained why. Because our natures are so corrupted with evil, our minds so polluted with sin, and our feelings so twisted and scarred by satanic influences, there are three things men and women can never trust in determining the truthfulness of a religious claim: We cannot trust our *thoughts*. We cannot trust our *feelings*. And we cannot trust our *prayers*. If we do, we will be deceived! There is only one thing in this life that we can trust, he hastened to add: we *can* trust the Holy Bible.

I did smile for a few seconds but then found myself filled with sadness. How tragic. How terribly unfortunate for a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ to discourage anyone from thinking, feeling, and praying about matters of eternal import. It reminded me of what Nephi had taught—that God always encourages his children to pray, while it is the evil spirit that “teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray” (2 Nephi 32:8). I also shook my head, almost in disbelief, wondering how a person could possibly trust the Bible and its teachings if he or she could not think, feel, or pray without fear of deception! I also had a shiver run down my spine as I reflected on a poignant remark of Joseph Smith: “None but fools will trifle with the souls of men.”<sup>32</sup>

Less than two months before his martyrdom, Joseph the Seer remarked concerning the work he had set in motion: “I calculate to be one of the instruments of setting up the kingdom of [God foreseen by] Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.”<sup>33</sup> Bold? Certainly. Audacious? Perhaps, at least in the minds of many. Indeed, the work of the Restoration *was* destined to be revolutionary in every way.

If asked to describe the nature of humanity, the Christian world generally, particularly its more conservative branches, will do so in terms of Fallen Man, the person desperately in need of divine grace and pardoning mercy. As I have tried to point out, we are not totally in disagreement with our brothers and sisters of other faiths on this matter; the Fall of Adam and Eve was very real and takes a measured toll on us physically and spiritually. Joseph Smith did, however, confront and denounce the concept of human depravity if that means that men and women do not even have the power to choose good, or, by extension, cannot trust their thoughts, feelings, and prayers. The scriptures of the Restoration teach otherwise (2 Nephi 2:16, 26–27; Helaman 14:30; D&C 68:27–28). Through the intercession of the Messiah, fallen men and



women become *redeemed* men and women. The Fall and man's fallen state are necessary ingredients in the plan of God the Father. In the words of Elder Orson F. Whitney, "The fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression's highway."<sup>34</sup> The Fall opens the way for the Atonement, and as C. S. Lewis observed wisely, redeemed humanity will rise far higher than unfallen humanity.<sup>35</sup>

Knowledge of Eternal Man has come to us through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Such insight is precious and profound, soul satisfying, and spiritually elevating. And yes, it is, without question, revolutionary. Our late friend and colleague Rodney Turner, never one hesitant to speak his mind, wrote the following some years ago:

To know what God is, is to know what man is—and what he may become. The loss of this knowledge goes far to explain the present plight of humanity. *Man, like water, cannot rise higher than his beginnings.* If an ever-increasing number of men and women are choosing to wallow in the mire of carnality, we must not forget that they are taught that the human race was spawned in mire. *We have little desire to reach for the stars if we do not believe that we came from the stars.* That we did is the message of the restored gospel. This is why The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints testifies that—where the valiant are concerned—*the origin of man is the destiny of man.*<sup>36</sup>

Why would we dare take any other course, given that, according to the Bible, we have been created in the very image and likeness of Deity? In speaking of the image and likeness of God, our beloved friend Truman Madsen declared, "One can ascribe to the children of God more than rationality and creativity. In an embryonic state, other divine attributes and powers inhere in human nature. *We are theomorphic.*" Further, and by logical extension, "The ultimate intent and meaning of Christ's life and death is *theosis*: the universal transformation of the whole of human nature and the whole of the human family."<sup>37</sup> In short, in this mortal condition, our second estate, we are, as set forth in the Hebrew text of Psalms 8:4–6, "a little lower than the Gods."

Our discussion tonight is not at all about lowering a high and holy God to the level of lowly and languishing humanity. It is about worshipping a Being with whom we can identify; one who may be known, understood, and approached; one with body, parts, and passions; one who, like his Beloved Son, may be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15). If it is, as Jesus prayed, life eternal to know God, to know Jesus Christ (John 17:3), how disappointing to find that the wonders and ways of the Godhead have been shrouded in mystery, never to be understood. Nor is our conversation

tonight about identifying and worshipping the god that resides within each of us, as some mistakenly believe; rather, it is very much about having a correct view of the character and attributes of God, which then automatically opens the door to understanding *man's* nobility and potentiality.

Let's now end where we began. Joseph Smith declared, “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.”<sup>38</sup> President Brigham Young simply turned things about and pointed out that “to know and understand ourselves and our own being is to know and understand God and His being.”<sup>39</sup> Or, as Truman Madsen put it so beautifully, “One begins mortality with the veil drawn, but slowly he is moved to penetrate the veil within himself. He is, in time, led to seek the ‘holy of holies’ within the temple of his own being.”<sup>40</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell commented on those poignant encounters with forever: “Brothers and sisters, in some of those precious and personal moments of deep discovery, there will be a sudden surge of recognition of an immortal insight, a doctrinal *déjà vu*. We will sometimes experience a flash from the mirror of memory that beckons us forward toward a far horizon.”<sup>41</sup>

These things are true. They matter. They are not merely the product of clever or whimsical theological explorations. They mark the path to understanding the God we worship and the Redeemer we seek to emulate, which is the path to life eternal (John 17:3). When received humbly and gratefully, these teachings are liberating and exhilarating. They point us to an infinite past and a never-ending future. In understanding and accepting them, we begin to turn the pages of our book of eternal possibilities. **RE**

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## Notes

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 40; cited hereafter as *Joseph Smith*.
2. Truman G. Madsen, “The Latter-day Saint View of Human Nature,” in *On Human Nature: The Jerusalem Center Symposium*, ed. Truman G. Madsen, David Noel Freedman, and Pam Fox Kuhlken (Ann Arbor, MI: Pryor Pettengill Publishers, 2004), 95.
3. The Christian slide toward Hellenization was what could be described as syncretism, a union or reconciliation of otherwise opposing perspectives. From another angle, some Greeks saw in the growing Christian movement evidence of a providential hand, a divinely orchestrated expansion of the divine. I am indebted to Professor Thomas Wayment for this helpful insight.
4. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 17.
5. Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 9–10.

6. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 90, cited in Keith Norman, "Ex Nihilo: The Development of the Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 294.
7. Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 2010), 105.
8. Richard J. Mouw, "The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing," presentation delivered at the November 2006 AAR/SBL meetings in Washington, DC, manuscript, 9–10; in *Joseph Smith: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195.
9. Richard Bushman, "A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 167–68; emphasis added; see also Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth, eds., *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 274.
10. *Joseph Smith*, 41–42.
11. Madsen, "The Latter-day Saint View of Human Nature," 100–101.
12. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 420.
13. See David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (1990): 105–16; David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 7–94.
14. James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xi–xii, 5–6, 61, 195; see also 81, 104–6, 134–35.
15. Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 33–34.
16. Stephen Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81–82. For a comprehensive treatment of divine embodiment, see also Stephen Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), specifically chapter 9, which investigates the teachings of the Latter-day Saints.
17. Milton V. Backman Jr., "Truman Coe's 1836 Description of Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 347, 354; emphasis added.
18. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 60.
19. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 63.
20. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 64.
21. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 173.
22. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 11:301.
23. *Joseph Smith*, 210–11.
24. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:249.
25. It is noteworthy that there is no mention in this account of any of the children of God being in attendance at this council other than Jehovah and Lucifer. We learn this detail from the account in the Book of Abraham (3:22–28).
26. "The Origin of Man," by the First Presidency of the Church, November 1909, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:203.

27. To be sure, if there were no resurrection there would be no Atonement, no forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Thus, each of us would be forever unclean and unworthy and, as Jacob taught, eternal captives of the devil (2 Nephi 9:8–9; compare 1 Corinthians 15:12–17).

28. Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 24.

29. *Joseph Smith*, 209–10; emphasis added. Matthew L. Davis heard a sermon by the Prophet in which the latter said, “I believe that God is eternal, that he had no beginning, and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end. I believe that the soul is eternal and had no beginning; it can have no end.” Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 33; punctuation corrected.

30. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 359; punctuation corrected.

31. Truman G. Madsen, *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 5–6.

32. Dean C. Jessee, comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 436.

33. *Joseph Smith*, 512.

34. Forace Green, comp., *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.

35. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 162.

36. Rodney Turner, “The Visions of Moses,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume 2: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 45; emphasis added.

37. Madsen, “The Latter-day Saint View of Human Nature,” 104, 107; emphasis added.

38. *Joseph Smith*, 40.

39. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:312.

40. Madsen, *Eternal Man*, 20.

41. Neal A. Maxwell, “Meeting the Challenges of Today,” *1978 BYU Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), 156.