



INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH
GOSPEL TRUTHS MINISTRIES

August 27, 1997

Office of the First Presidency
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
50 East North Temple Street
Salt Lake City, UT 84150

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am inquiring about a statement attributed to President Gordon B. Hinckley in the August 4, 1997 issue of *Time* magazine.

In response to *Time's* question as to whether or not it is a teaching of the the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that "God that Father was once a man," President Hinckley is quoted as replying, "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." (page 56)

Would you please confirm for me whether or not in this statement President Hinckley was accurately quoted? The Institute for Religious Research and Gospel Truths Ministries is frequently asked about the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It would be most helpful to know whether this statement is reliable.

Sincerely,

Luke P. Wilson
Executive Director

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THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
OFFICE OF THE FIRST PRESIDENCY
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH 84150

September 3, 1997

Luke P. Wilson, Executive Director
Institute for Religious Research and
Gospel Truths Ministries
1340 Monroe Avenue, N.W.
Grand Rapids, MI 49505

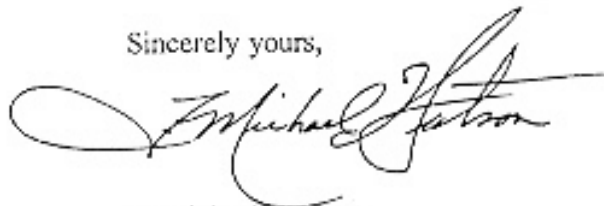
Dear Mr. Wilson:

I have been asked to acknowledge your letter of August 27, 1997, with regard to statements reported as made by President Gordon B. Hinckley on the topic of eternal progression in the August 4, 1997, issue of *Time* magazine.

The quotation you reference was taken out of context. The statement was made in response to a question about the actual circumstances and background surrounding remarks given during the funeral services of a man named King Follett, not the doctrine of exaltation and the blessings that await those who will inherit the celestial kingdom.

The Brethren appreciate your interest in this matter and have asked me to extend their best wishes to you.

Sincerely yours,



F. Michael Watson
Secretary to the First Presidency



INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH
GOSPEL TRUTHS MINISTRIES

September 9, 1997

David Van Biema
Time Magazine
Time & Life Building
Rockefeller Center
New York, NY 10020

Dear Mr. Van Biema:

I am writing to seek clarification regarding a quotation attributed to Gordon B. Hinckley in your cover article on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Day Saints in the August 4, 1997 issue of *Time*.

In response to your question as to whether or not it is a teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that "God that Father was once a man," President Hinckley is quoted as replying, "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." (page 56)

Because successive Presidents of the LDS Church, going back to Joseph Smith in 1844, have clearly taught that God was once a man who progressed to become God, I found President Hinckley's answer to your question remarkable. I wrote the Office of the First Presidency to seek clarification, and received a letter stating that President Hinckley was quoted out of context (see enclosed correspondence).

Would you be so kind as to tell me whether you accept as accurate the explanation offered to me in the letter from F. Michael Watson of the Office of the First Presidency, namely, that you quoted President Hinckley out of context.

For your information, I have enclosed several items of documentation relevant to the historic Latter-day Saint teaching that God was once a man who progressed to godhood.

Sincerely,

Luke P. Wilson
Executive Director

Enclosures

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ALVIN RUCKER, PH.D.
TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

RECEIVED SEP 24 1997

RICHARD N. OSTLING

Dear Mr. Watson:

Here's the transcript of my
question and President
Hitchcock's response to me.

This came just after a long
discussion on whether
men can become gods
which the President affirmed.

You can judge Mr. Watson's
"out of context" assertion
for yourself.

Best,



TIME

TIME & LIFE BUILDING ROCKEFELLER CENTER NEW YORK, NY 10020

very bright and wonderful concept.

Q: In the Godly nature, would it be a possibility for women as well as men then?

A: Oh, I think so. As companions to their husbands. They, can't conceive a king without a queen.

Q: Just another related question that comes up is the statements in the King Follet discourse by the ~~Prophet~~ Prophet

A: Yeah?

Q: ...about that, God the Father was once a man as we were. This is something that Christian writers are always addressing. Is this the teaching of the church today, that God the Father was once a man like we are?

A: I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it. I haven't heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don't know. I don't know all the circumstances under which that statement was made. I understand the philosophical background behind it. But I don't know I about it and I don't know that others know I about it.

Q: While we're choosing the topic, temple worship is a

MEN MAY BECOME GODS

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

It is our purpose in this chapter to show that since mortal beings are the spirit children of Heavenly Parents, as pointed out in the last chapter, the ultimate possibility is for some of them to become exalted to Godhood. After presenting the doctrine as revealed by God to the holy prophets and proclaimed by the scriptures, we shall follow it as it appears somewhat universally in the pagan religions.

GOD AN EXALTED BEING

The Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that God the Eternal Father is an exalted being. "In the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ, a righteous Judge."¹ Mormon prophets have continuously taught the sublime truth that God the Eternal Father was once a mortal man who passed through a school of earth life similar to that through which we are now passing. He became God—an exalted being—through obedience to the same eternal Gospel truths that we are given opportunity today to obey.

For the purpose of giving a clear understanding of the teachings of the latter-day prophets, we shall quote some of their statements. President Joseph F. Smith declared that "God himself is an exalted man, perfected, enthroned and supreme."² Elder Orson Hyde, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, said: "Remember that God our Heavenly Father was perhaps once a child, and mortal like we are, and rose step by step in the scale of progress, in the school of advancement; has moved forward and over-

¹ *Words of Wisdom*.

² Joseph F. Smith, John B. Winder, *Autobiography of Joseph F. Smith*, vol. 15, p. 81.

come until He has arrived at the point where He now is."³ And Daniel H. Wells concluded: "God is a being of agency and He has passed along the path He wishes us to tread, and has attained to His exaltation just as He wishes us to attain to ours."⁴ But probably the most forceful and explicit statement declaring God to be an exalted man was made by the Prophet Joseph Smith. To quote:

God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make Himself visible—I say, if you were to see Him today, you would see Him like a man in form—like yourselves—in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image, and likeness of God, and received instruction from and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and converses with another. . . .

It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us, yea, that God Himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did.⁵

MEN MAY BECOME GODS

As early as February 16, 1832, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith the sublime truth that "*men may become gods*." Among many other important truths revealed to Joseph and Sidney Rigdon that day, God showed them a vision of the three degrees of glory and explained to them who should be assigned to each degree. In speaking of those who should inhabit the celestial world, the Lord said:

They are they who are the church of the first-born. They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—they are they who are Priests and Kings who have received of his fullness, and of his glory; And are Priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son; Wherefore, as it is written *they are Gods*, even the sons of God. . . . These shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ for ever and ever.⁶

In June, 1840, Lorenzo Snow formulated the following famous couplet: "*As man is, God once was; as God is,*

³ Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 1, p. 124.

⁴ Daniel H. Wells, *Millennial Star*, vol. 25, p. 719.

⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 20-240.
Doctrine and Covenants 13:3-29; *Moses* 6:1-65.

raised to the highest degree of glory to share the powers and privileges of God, to sit on his throne and reign in eternity (see D&C 76:1-119; 88:22-23; cf. Rev. 1:6; 3:21). To be exalted is to become like God (see DEIFICATION).

Faithful Latter-day Saints receive in the LDS temples the ordinances and knowledge necessary for celestial exaltation. One part of these sacred rites is called the temple ENDOWMENT because it constitutes a major part of the overwhelming gift extended to humanity through the atonement of Christ. Another temple ordinance is the SEALING of husbands and wives, parents and children into families that will endure for time and for eternity. The celestial kingdom will consist of God's heavenly family linked together in love as husbands and wives, parents and children, and brothers and sisters forever. As single individuals, human beings may be saved in lesser degrees of glory, but only families can be exalted.

Not everyone has had the opportunity in mortal life to hear the gospel of Christ and receive all the ordinances of exaltation. Latter-day Saints teach that God has provided for all to hear the gospel so they can accept or reject its blessings. Those who do not have that opportunity in mortality will receive it in the spirit world. The New Testament teaches that Jesus himself visited the spirit world after his death on the cross and preached to the spirits there: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison" (1 Pet. 3:18-19). The purpose of his preaching ministry to the spirits is revealed in the next chapter: "For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" (1 Pet. 4:6). This doctrine has been amplified and explained in latter-day revelation (D&C 137, 138; see SALVATION FOR THE DEAD).

Other areas in which the views of the Latter-day Saints differ noticeably from those of the contemporary religious world are the concepts of TIME AND ETERNITY, the LIGHT OF CHRIST, the GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST, the positive estimate of the CREATION and of the physical EARTH, the eternal necessity of ORDINANCES, the centrality of the ABRAHAMIC COVENANT for modern Christians, and

the concept of heaven as a CELESTIAL KINGDOM located upon this renewed and glorified earth.

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ALMA P. BURTON

LDS DOCTRINE COMPARED WITH OTHER CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

As biblical scholar W. D. Davies once pointed out, LDS doctrine can be described as biblical Christianity separated from hellenized Christianity, a conjunction of first-century Judaism and Christianity. Latter-day Saints accept the BIBLE and its apostolic teachings as God's word, but reject many later interpretations of the Bible that express Greek philosophical concerns—they accept John and Paul but reject Augustine. For example, Latter-day Saints accept both the threeness of God and the oneness of God as biblical teachings. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three divine personages who together constitute one GODHEAD. But Mormons reject the attempts of postbiblical, nonapostolic Christianity to define how the oneness and the threeness of God are related. They accept the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, but reject the philosophical doctrine of the Trinity as defined at the Council of Nicaea and later. In short, Latter-day Saints reject the AUTHORITY and conclusions of theologians and philosophers to define or interpret what the Bible, apostles, or prophets have not. They accept biblical Christianity, but not its extension in extrabiblical CREEDS and traditions.

To those Christians who have welded the Bible to its later interpretation and cannot separate Plato and Augustine from Peter and Paul, and cannot think of "true" Christianity in first-century categories, LDS doctrine may seem iconoclastic in separating biblical texts from their later "traditional" interpretation. Nevertheless, Latter-day Saints feel that New Testament Saints would have

been just as uncomfortable with the philosophical creeds of later Christianity as they themselves are.

LDS rejection of much postbiblical Christianity is based on belief in an ancient APOSTASY that is both predicted and chronicled in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Thes. 2:1-5; 3 Jn. 9-10). Apostolic authority ceased just after the New Testament period, and without apostolic leadership and authority the Church was soon overwhelmed by alien intellectual and cultural pressures. The simple affirmations of biblical faith were turned into the complex propositions of THEOLOGY. Though subsequent churches were still "Christian," in the LDS view they no longer possessed the *fulness* of the GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST or apostolic authority. Latter-day Saints would agree with Catholics and "high church" Protestants that apostolic authority is essential in the true church but would also agree with other Protestants that apostolic authority was lacking in medieval orthodoxy. A close parallel is presented by Protestant rejection of Roman Catholic claims to binding apostolic authority. While Latter-day Saints trace the Apostasy to roughly the second century and reject subsequent orthodoxy, most Protestants would place it somewhere nearer the fifteenth century and then reject subsequent Catholicism.

Protestants who denied the necessity of apostolic succession, or who did not believe its links were severed by the Reformation, generally held that the fulness of the gospel could be achieved by reforming the Roman Church. Latter-day Saints, who insist on the necessity of apostolic succession but believe its links were severed early, see a reformation as inadequate for recovering the fulness of the gospel and reestablishing original Christianity. Only a total restoration of apostolic doctrines and authority could reestablish the pure Christianity of the first century. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sees itself as constituting this Restoration.

LDS rejection of hellenistic philosophy in matters of doctrine accounts for many characteristic differences between Latter-day Saints and other Christians. For example, Latter-day Saints reject the Platonic spirit-matter dichotomy, which holds that spirit and matter are opposed and inimical to each other. They believe instead that spirit is refined matter and that both spirit and matter are eternal, being neither created nor destroyed. The Prophet Joseph SMITH taught that "there is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is mat-

ter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes" (D&C 131:7).

Thus, for Latter-day Saints there is no ultimate incompatibility between spirit and matter or between the spiritual and the physical realms. In LDS theology, the physical elements are coeternal with God. The idea that physical matter is transitory, corrupt, or incompatible with spiritual or eternal life is rejected. Latter-day Saints usually define "spiritual" as "infused with spirit" rather than as "nonphysical." This unitary understanding of spirit and matter allows them to accept the Father and the Son as the concrete, anthropomorphic beings represented in scripture and reject the definition of God as the abstract, "totally other" non-being of philosophical theology. For Latter-day Saints, God exists in the normal sense in association with time and space, rather than in the abstract Platonic sense of beyond time and space. The traditional disparagement of matter and of the physical state of being is not well grounded biblically, and Latter-day Saints believe it is a product of hellenistic thought. They also think the concept of a God "without body, parts or passions" dismisses too much of the biblical data or allegorizes it excessively.

Since Mormons believe that the elements are eternal, it follows that they deny the *ex nihilo* creation. Rather, the universe was created (organized) out of preexisting elements that God organized by imposing physical laws. The Prophet Joseph Smith also taught that intelligence is also eternal and uncreated: "The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end . . . Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle" (PPJS, pp. 353-54).

Just as God organized preexisting matter to create the universe, so he organized preexisting intelligence to create the spirits that eventually became human beings. Consequently, Latter-day Saints do not view God as the *total* cause of what human beings are. Human intelligence is uncreated by God, and therefore independent of his control. Thus Mormons insist that human beings are free agents in the fullest sense, and deny both the doctrines of prevenient and irresistible grace, which make God's choice determinative for SALVATION or damnation. God will not coerce independent, self-existent wills. Though he desires the exaltation of all, and offers it equally to all, its achievement requires individual cooperation, a covenant relationship. In this way, LDS theology

escapes the classical dilemma of predestination and theodicy imposed by believing that God created all things from nothing and is therefore solely responsible for the final products. Their radical doctrine of individual free agency also allows the Latter-day Saints to deny the theory of human depravity. The fall of Adam did not totally incapacitate humans from doing any good thing—they remain able to choose and to perform either good or evil. Moreover, Latter-day Saints accept the concept of the “fortunate Fall” (*mea culpa*). The Fall was a necessary step in the progress of humanity: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25).

A positive view of the physical universe and of man also allows Latter-day Saints to anticipate a physical afterlife, the CELESTIAL KINGDOM, a community of physically resurrected beings transformed and perfected. Unlike many ancient church fathers, they do not long to escape the realm of the flesh, but rather to sanctify it. Hence, in the LDS view, even the physical relationships of FAMILY and MARRIAGE can continue in the eternities in a sanctified state. Thus there is little asceticism and no CELIBACY in LDS theology, which sees in both of these tendencies a denial of the goodness of God’s physical creation (Gen. 1:31); and LDS theology avoids the traditional disparagement of the human body and the contempt for human SEXUALITY that are largely due to the neoplatonism of late antiquity.

While common ground for Latter-day Saints and other Christians is an acceptance of the Bible and its teachings, issues of interpretation aside, Mormonism agrees with “high church” orthodoxy against conservative Protestantism on the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture. Though they accept the Bible, Latter-day Saints, like Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, for example, do not believe that the biblical text alone is sufficient for salvation. Biblical teaching, while true and accepted, has been imperfectly preserved and can be fully reconstituted only through supplemental REVELATION. This is not because New Testament Christianity was defective, but because New Testament Christianity is only partially preserved in the modern Bible. Those doctrines that were not preserved must be *restored*; consequently, Mormons deny both biblical inerrancy and sufficiency. Since the apostles and prophets of earliest Christianity received direct revelation from God (see, e.g., Acts 10:9–16, 28), Latter-day Saints believe that

any church claiming the fulness of the gospel must also enjoy this gift.

This crucial principle of continuing revelation is illustrated in the experience of the Prophet Joseph Smith, whose visions and revelations form the foundation of LDS doctrine. As the *magisterium* of the church is fundamental for Roman Catholics, and the scriptures are the *fontes* for Protestants, for Latter-day Saints the highest authority in religious matters is continuing revelation from God given through the living APOSTLES and prophets of his Church, beginning with Joseph Smith and continuing to the present leadership.

Latter-day Saints insist that both the CANON of SCRIPTURE and the structure of theology are always open-ended, and can always be added upon by God through revelation to his PROPHETS (A of F 9). Through this means they have received clarification of biblical doctrines that are disputed in other denominations, for example, Christ’s ministry to the dead in 1 Peter 3:18 and 4:6 (see D&C 128; 137; 138). Also through modern revelation Latter-day Saints have received some distinctive doctrines that are not explicitly found in the Bible. In these cases modern revelation has not rehabilitated a doctrine that is unclear, but has restored a doctrine that was entirely lost.

Latter-day Saints share with most Christians the conviction that salvation comes only through the ATONEMENT of Jesus Christ, which is representative, exemplary, and substitutionary in nature. Christ is the mediator of humanity to the Father instead of fallen Adam; he sets an example for humans to emulate; and he takes mankind’s place in suffering for sins.

Latter-day Saints are monophysite in their CHRISTOLOGY; that is, they believe Christ has only one nature, which is simultaneously both human and divine. This is possible because the human and the divine are not mutually exclusive categories in LDS thought, as in the duophysite christology of much orthodoxy. As Lorenzo SNOW said, “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be” (Snow, p. 46). Most Christians would agree with the first half of this couplet as applied to the person of Christ, but Latter-day Saints apply it also to the Father. The second half of the couplet is more orthodox in the denominational sense than either Protestants or Catholics, for Latter-day Saints share the ancient biblical doctrine of DEIFICATION (*apothecosis*) with Eastern Orthodoxy. Several of early Christianity’s theologians