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A Discussion of Lecture 5: The Supreme Power over All Things: The Doctrine of Godhead in the Lectures on Faith

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The Supreme Power over All Things: The Doctrine of the Godhead in the Lectures on Faith

Robert L. Millet

Not long before his death, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote the following concerning the fifth Lecture on Faith:

Using the holy scriptures as the recorded source of the knowledge of God, knowing what the Lord has revealed to them of old in visions and by the power of the Spirit, and writing as guided by that same Spirit, Joseph Smith and the early brethren of this dispensation prepared a creedal statement on the Godhead. It is without question the most excellent summary of revealed and eternal truth relative to the Godhead that is now extant in mortal language. In it is set forth the mystery of Godliness; that is, it sets forth the personalities, missions, and ministries of those holy beings who comprise the supreme presidency of the universe. To spiritually illiterate persons, it may seem hard and confusing; to those whose souls are aflame with heavenly light, it is a nearly perfect summary of those things which must be believed to gain salvation (*A New Witness* 72).

After many years of concentrated study of the Lectures on Faith, and particularly Lecture 5, I have come to appreciate Elder McConkie's assessment; I believe the doctrines taught therein to be true and the concepts presented—though difficult and in some cases seemingly at odds with more traditional discussions of God

and the Godhead—to be deep, penetrating, and, when fully grasped, soul inspiring. I believe them to be in harmony with other doctrines found in the standard works and the teachings of living apostles and prophets.

Because the Prophet was not at liberty to reveal all he knew, we are under solemn obligation to read, study, teach, and take seriously that which God *did* see fit to make known to the Latter-day Saints through him. Because Joseph Smith was given the mind of Deity, and because he was given the unique power and authorization of “expounding all scriptures” (see D&C 24:5, 9) unto the people of this dispensation, it is both fitting and proper that as we search and prayerfully consider matters pertaining to the Godhead, we give solemn and ponderous thought to insights provided by “the choice seer” of the last days.

God and the Godhead: Some Preliminary Observations

The nature of God—his character and attributes and perfections—has been treated at length by others in this symposium. I would like here to simply draw attention to a few matters which have some doctrinal bearing on a more detailed discussion of the Godhead.

First of all, it is important to note that there is no distinction made in the lectures between faith in God the Father and faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. This is as it should be, for faith in one is faith in the other. “Christ and his Father are one,” wrote Elder McConkie.

They possess the same powers, are of the same character, embody the same attributes, and stand as beacons to all others with reference to the same eternal perfections. The words and acts of one are the words and acts of the other. The Father was in Christ manifesting himself to the world. Hence, faith in the Son is faith in the Father. And as Christ is the way to the Father, faith centers in him and in his redeeming sacrifice and goes thereby to the Father, who is the Creator (*A New Witness* 185).

Secondly, a careful study of all of the lectures reveals a profoundly deep concept of God. These teachings relative to God—despite some claims to the contrary—are neither primitive nor Protestant. We are made privy to a divine Being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent:¹ he has all power, all knowledge, and is, by the power of his Spirit, everywhere present. At the same time, we are given insights into a Being who can be approached, a God who communicates freely with his people and reveals himself to those who, like Enoch, the brother of Jared, and Moses, seek after him with diligence and faithfulness (see LF 2:55). Most profoundly, we come face to face with the reality later taught in the King Follett Sermon—that men and women can mature spiritually to the point where they can become even as their exalted Sire (see LF 5:2-3; 7:8-9, 16). As indicated, these lectures are not primitive: they contain doctrinal pronouncements and allusions which would normally be associated with the mature Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. These lectures are not Protestant: indeed, we learn of a truly infinite Being—a totally independent Being (see LF 2:2) who possesses every godly attribute in perfection (see LF 3:12-24; 4:3-16, 19; 5:1). But in no way do we encounter the utterly transcendent Deity of the creeds. God’s infinity does not preclude either his immediacy or his intimacy.

The Father: A Personage of Spirit

“There are two personages,” Joseph Smith explained, “who constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power

¹I should distinguish here between an LDS view of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, and that held by many in Catholicism or Protestantism. We do not believe in the utterly transcendent Being of the creeds, nor do we subscribe to the notion of a creation *ex nihilo*. God has all power but works within established parameters. “Whatever His wisdom indicates as necessary to be done God can and will do. The means through which He operates may not be of infinite capacity in themselves, but they are directed by an infinite power. A rational conception of His omnipotence is power to do all that He may will to do” (Talmage 44). Latter-day Saints attest to God’s corporeality and thus his inability to be, in person at least, everywhere at the same time. He is able, however, through his holy Spirit (also called the Light of Christ) to be in and through all things.

over all things, by whom all things were created and made. . . . They are the Father and the Son” (LF 5:2). The Father and the Son are indeed the central members of the heavenly hierarchy, but as the Prophet later observed in the same lecture, the Holy Spirit is also a vital part of this eternal presidency. “These three are one,” he stated; “or, in other words, these three constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created and made. And these three constitute the Godhead and are one” (LF 5:2).

Again quoting from the Prophet: “They are the Father and the Son: *the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power, possessing all perfection and fulness. The Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, is a personage of tabernacle*” (LF 5:2; emphasis added). This is a perplexing passage, perhaps one of the two most enigmatic passages of Lecture 5,² a segment of the lecture which seems to have resulted in confusion on the part of members and may have contributed eventually to the deletion of the Lectures on Faith from the Doctrine and Covenants in 1921. The problem lies in the fact that the Prophet appears to be teaching that God the Father is a “personage of spirit” while Jesus is “a personage of tabernacle.” The latter proposition is, of course, no problem. It is the notion of the Father as a personage of spirit which is unsettling. Let us consider some possible explanations for this statement.

We cannot avoid the possible conclusion that Joseph Smith simply did not understand the corporeal or physical nature of God at the time the Lectures on Faith were delivered in the winter of 1834-35. His knowledge of things—like that of all men and women—was often incremental, and his development in understanding was thereby accomplished in “line upon line” fashion. When he left the grove of trees in 1820, Joseph Smith, Jr. did not have the doctrinal grasp or spiritual maturity that he would have when he died a martyr’s death in Carthage some 24 years later.

²The other troublesome passage deals with the role of the Holy Spirit as the “mind” of the other two members of the Godhead (LF 5:2), and will be discussed below.

As a result of the First Vision, Joseph knew that the heavens were no longer sealed; that Satan was more than myth or metaphor; and that the Father and Son were separate and distinct personages. There is no mention in any of his known accounts of the First Vision of the fact that God has a body of flesh and bones (Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* 155-67). The earliest reference in a sermon by Joseph Smith on the corporeality of God 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" (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith* 60; hereafter *Words*).³ 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" (*Words* 63). On 9 March 1841 he spoke of the ministries of Jesus as the Mediator and the Holy Ghost as the witness or Testator. He then declared that "the Son had a Tabernacle and so had the Father" (*Words* 64). Finally, it was on 2 April 1843 in Ramus, Illinois that Joseph the Prophet delivered instructions on this matter which 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" (see *Words* 173).

A second possibility is that Joseph Smith did indeed understand that God has a body but that the passage in Lecture 5 under consideration has simply been misunderstood. If so, what could the phrase mean? To begin with, we should note that the complete expression is not "a personage of spirit," but rather "a personage of *spirit, glory, and power*." This may well be intended more as a description of God's divine nature—a statement regarding his exalted and glorified status—than of his physical being. The word "spirit," as used for example in Moses 1, is a synonym for glory or power: his Spirit is his glory. Thus the account indicates that after a marvelous vision "the *presence* of God withdrew from

³Quotations from *Words of Joseph Smith* have been modernized and corrected in this article.

Moses, that his *glory* was not upon Moses” (v 9). When Satan came tempting and taunting, the Lawgiver found that he was still possessed of sufficient spiritual power and discernment to distinguish between the true God of glory and the “god of this world” (v 20; see also 2 Cor 4:4). “Blessed be the name of my God,” Moses exulted, “for *his Spirit* hath not altogether withdrawn from me” (Moses 1:15; emphasis added). To speak of the spirit, glory, and power of the Father is to speak of his greatness, of his omnipotence, of his majesty. Thus it is that later in this lecture the Prophet says, “The Father and the Son possess the same mind, the same wisdom, glory, power, and fulness—filling all in all. *The Son, being filled with the fulness of the mind, glory, and power, or in other words, the spirit, glory, and power, of the Father, possesses all knowledge and glory*” (LF 5:2; emphasis added). Please note that the phrase “spirit, glory, and power” is used here to describe that which makes the Son one with the Father—the attributes of Godhood. Note the equation of spirit with *light* in the following verse from the Doctrine and Covenants: “For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (D&C 84:45).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie has suggested that the phrase “a personage of spirit” has reference to God’s *spiritual* nature—the fact that he is a resurrected and immortal being and as such is not subject to death, ie, a spiritual body. “They are the two personages who came to Joseph Smith in the spring of 1820”; he also wrote:

They are exalted men. Each is a personage of spirit; each is a personage of tabernacle. Both of them have bodies, tangible bodies of flesh and bones. They are resurrected beings. Words, with their finite connotations, cannot fully describe them. A personage of tabernacle, as here used, is one whose body and spirit are inseparably connected and for whom there can be no death. A personage of spirit, as here used and as distinguished from the spirit children of the Father, is a resurrected personage. Resurrected bodies, as contrasted with mortal bodies, are in fact spiritual bodies (*A New Witness* 72-73; see also Penrose 12-13; 1 Cor 15:44; D&C 88:27; Alma 11:45).

It is interesting to read the catechism following Lecture 5. In response to the question, “What is the Father?” the answer is given: “He is a personage of glory and of power.” Note the rather obvious omission of any reference to the Father as *a personage of spirit*. I suggest that there is no reference to his being a personage of spirit because to say such is repetitious; we have already established that he is a personage of power and glory, which in the mind of Joseph Smith is the same as saying that he is a personage of spirit. It is also worth noting in the catechism that in the scriptures cited to establish the Father as a personage of power and glory, all of them speak of his attributes and his exaltation. Noticeably absent is John 4:24—the one passage from the Bible that might have been used to establish clearly that God is a spirit. “God is a spirit,” the King James Version has Jesus explaining, “and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” But of course Joseph Smith would not cite this passage from the King James Bible, since he had previously learned by revelation—some time between November 1831 and 16 February 1832 (Matthews 96)—that this verse was a mis-translation. The inspired translation reads as follows: “And the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him. For unto such hath God promised his Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth” (JST John 4:25-26). One cannot help but wonder whether the inspired revision did not have some impact on the Prophet’s thought regarding the nature of God; that is to say, if he did not know of the corporeality of God at the time of the First Vision, did he know it by the time he had translated these verses in John?⁴

I am indebted to my colleague Professor Milton Backman for bringing to light an important document—a description of

⁴At an even earlier date (Nov-Dec 1830), the Prophet’s inspired revision of Genesis resulted in the following scripture: “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, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created, and became living souls, in the land, upon the footstool of God” (JST Gen 6:9; emphasis added; see also Moses 6:8-9).

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 regarding the Mormons in the 11 August 1836 *Ohio Observer*: “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” (Backman, “Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism” 347, 354; emphasis added). If a non-Mormon had observed as early as 1836 that the Latter-day Saints were teaching that God has a body, it is certainly not inconceivable that such things were known by Joseph Smith a year or so earlier at the time of the School of the Elders. It is interesting to note in D&C 93:33 the Lord states that “man is spirit.” This would appear to be a reference to man’s eternal nature, and certainly not an allusion to his physical person. Perhaps the phrase “personage of spirit” also has reference to God as a being who is from everlasting to everlasting.

The Son: A Personage of Tabernacle

Jesus Christ the Son is described in Lecture 5 as having been “in the bosom of the Father . . . a personage of tabernacle, made or fashioned like unto man, being in the form and likeness of man, or rather man was formed after his likeness and in his image. He is also the express image and likeness of the personage of the Father, possessing all the fulness of the Father, or the same fulness with the Father” (LF 5:2). The section of this lecture dealing with Christ is a statement of the Incarnation, a reaffirmation of what the Book of Mormon prophets knew as “the condescension of God” (see 1 Nephi 11; Mosiah 3:1-11; 7:26-28). He who had been in the bosom of the Father—who had been the Lord God Omnipotent, the Holy One of Israel and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—came to earth; he chose to “descend

from his throne divine” (*Hymns* 193) to accomplish his mission of mercy. The Son is called a “personage of tabernacle” here because his assignment on earth pertained to the redemption and regeneration of the flesh. Thus Elohim is designated as the Father, a being of spirit, glory, and power, while Jesus Christ is called the Son, “because of the flesh” (LF 5:2). These words are in harmony with the doctrines of the condescension of God in the Book of Mormon. Abinadi thus prophesied that because Jesus the Messiah would dwell “in the flesh he shall be called the Son of God” (Mosiah 15:2). King Limhi explained to Ammon concerning Abinadi:

And because he said unto them that Christ was the God, the Father of all things, and said that he should take upon him the image of man, and it should be the image after which man was created in the beginning; or, in other words, he said that man was created after the image of God, and that God should come down among the children of men, and take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth—and now, because he said this, they did put him to death (Mosiah 7:27-28).

The language of Lecture 5 regarding the relationship of the Father to the Son is also highly reminiscent of the language of the 93rd section of the Doctrine and Covenants. In this revelation, for example, Christ explained that he is called “the Father because [Elohim] gave me of his fulness, and *the Son because I was in the world and made flesh my tabernacle*, and dwelt among the sons of men” (D&C 93:4; emphasis added). Further, in regard to the divine indwelling relationship that exists between the Father and the Son—the manner in which in the resurrection the fulness of the glory of the Father came to be centered in the Son—the revelation continues with an excerpt from the record of John. It is stated that Christ was called the Son of God “because he received not of the fulness at the first,” but that in the resurrection “he received a fulness of the glory of the Father; and he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him” (D&C 93:14, 16-17).

The divine Sonship of Christ—the fact that Jesus possessed the powers of immortality while he dwelt in the flesh—is also

affirmed in Lecture 5. Jesus “descended in suffering below that which man can suffer; or, in other words, he suffered greater sufferings and was exposed to more powerful contradictions than any man can be” (LF 5:2). The conclusion: Jesus of Nazareth was more than man, for the full act of propitiation required a God (see Mosiah 3:7, 9; Alma 34:11). Our Lord is “he that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth” (D&C 88:6). In the words of Paul, “he that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things” (Eph 4:10). How is it that Christ “was exposed to more powerful contradictions than any man can be”? Simply stated, the ministry of Messiah was a life filled with irony. During the hours of atonement, for example, he who had remained sinless became, as it were, the great sinner. In the language of Paul, God the Father “made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21). To the Galatian Saints, Paul taught that “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). He who deserved least of all to suffer suffered the most—more than mortal mind can fathom. He who had brought life—the more abundant life (John 10:10)—subjected himself to the powers of death and darkness.

Notwithstanding all the sufferings and the infinite opposition faced by the Infinite One, the Prophet testified that the Savior “kept the law of God and remained without sin, showing thereby that it is in the power of man to keep the law and remain also without sin. And also that by him a righteous judgment might come upon all flesh, that all who walk not in the law of God may justly be condemned by the law and have no excuse for their sins” (LF 5:2). Jesus never took a backward step nor a moral detour. He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15; see also 1 Peter 2:22). As the Sinless One, he is thus the perfect Prototype (see LF 7:9), the standard against which all others are judged. The standard of perfection is fixed. It is in place. It is irrevocable. Because God himself is the embodiment of “truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fulness,

from everlasting to everlasting” (D&C 109:77), he could not expect less from his children. What is possible, however, is not always probable. Though the standard is set and the example a matter of history, the Prophet recognized that ultimate perfection is a matter toward which men and women reach even beyond this life (*Words* 345, 358). “Where is the man that is free from vanity?” Joseph Smith asked on a subsequent occasion. “None ever were perfect but Jesus,” he taught, “and why was he perfect? because he was the Son of God, and had the fulness of the Spirit, and greater power than any man” (*Words* 72). Similarly, Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared in an address at Brigham Young University:

We have to become perfect to be saved in the celestial kingdom. But nobody becomes perfect in this life. Only the Lord Jesus attained that state, and he had an advantage that none of us has. He was the Son of God, and he came into this life with a spiritual capacity and a talent and an inheritance that exceeded beyond all comprehension what any of the rest of us was born with. Our revelations say that he was like unto God in the premortal life and he was, under the Father, the creator of worlds without number. That Holy Being was the Holy One of Israel anciently and he was the Sinless One in mortality. He lived a perfect life, and he set an ideal example. This shows that we can strive and go forward toward that goal, but no other mortal—not the greatest prophets nor the mightiest apostles nor any of the righteous saints of any of the ages—has ever been perfect, but we must become perfect to gain a celestial inheritance. As it is with being born again, and as it is with sanctifying our souls, so becoming perfect in Christ is a process (“Jesus Christ and Him Crucified” 399-400).

Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). To the Nephites he said: “I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live” (3 Nephi 15:9).

The Holy Spirit: The Mind of the Father and Son

Though the Prophet began the fifth lecture by stating that the Father and Son were the supreme power over all things, he also observed that the Holy Spirit is the third member of the eternal presidency and that these three—the Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit—“constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created and made. And these three constitute the Godhead and are one” (LF 5:2). It is true, as some have pointed out, that the Prophet did not refer in Lecture 5 to the Holy Spirit as a *personage*. Some have further suggested that this doctrine was not clarified until the administration of President Joseph F. Smith (Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine” 25-26; also *Mormonism in Transition* 272-306). As we will discuss later, what Joseph Smith knew and taught and what the Saints understood may be two different matters. One of the earliest references to the personage status of the Holy Spirit in the documents now available to us is from a sermon delivered some six years later, on 9 March 1841, a portion of which I cited earlier. In speaking of the separate and severable functions of the members of the Godhead, Joseph Smith explained that “the Son had a tabernacle and so had the Father, but the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit without tabernacle” (*Words* 64). The most famous statement in Latter-day Saint theology regarding the mission of the Spirit is that recorded by Willard Richards in Ramus, Illinois:

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. And a person cannot have the personage of the Holy Ghost in his heart. He may receive the gift of the Holy Ghost; it may descend upon him but not tarry with him (*Words* 173).

On 11 June 1843 Wilford Woodruff recorded the following remarks by the Prophet:

There is much said concerning God the Godhead. And the scripture says there are Gods many and Lords many. The teachers of the day say that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God and that they are all in one body and one God. Jesus says or prays that those that the Father had given him out of the world might be made one in us as we are one, but if they were to be stuffed into one person that would make a great God. If I were to testify that the world was wrong on this point it would be true. Peter says that Jesus Christ sat on the right hand of God. *Any person that has seen the heavens opened knows that there are three personages in the heavens holding the keys of power* (*Words* 214; emphasis added).

Finally, perhaps the most explicit statement as to the role and mission of the Holy Ghost is recorded by George Laub. According to Brother Laub, Joseph Smith taught on 16 June 1844 that God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost are separate persons but that they “all agree in one or the self same thing. But the Holy Ghost is yet a spiritual body and waiting to take to himself a body as the Savior did, or as God did, or the Gods before them took bodies” (*Words* 382).

The matter in Lecture 5 is complicated somewhat by the unusual manner in which the Prophet describes the work of the Spirit. Jesus Christ is said to have “received a fulness of the glory of the Father, *possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit* that bears record of the Father and the Son” (LF 5:2; emphasis added). Not only is the Holy Spirit not accorded personage status in this reference, but he seems to be relegated to some type of mystical connecting link between the other two members of the Godhead. The Son is said to be “filled with the fulness of the *mind*, glory, and power, or in other words, the *spirit*, glory, and power, of the Father.” The Son is “filled with the fulness of the *mind* of the Father, or . . . the *Spirit* of the Father, which Spirit is shed forth upon all who believe on his name and keep his commandments” (LF 5:2; emphasis added). It appears to me that the difficulty here is heightened by the lack of distinction between what we would call the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Joseph Smith is speaking in the broadest of terms and simply refers to the Holy Spirit as the mind of God. “It is true,” stated President Charles W. Penrose, “that the Holy Spirit conveys the mind of God; that is, I am speaking now of this universal spirit which is the life and the light of all things, which is in and through and round about all things, and God says he made the world by the power of that spirit. That is his agent; but the personage, the Comforter, which Jesus Christ said he would send when he went away, that was a personage of the Trinity” (Penrose 16). Elder Bruce R. McConkie likewise wrote that the Savior

possesses the same mind with the Father, knowing and believing and speaking and doing as though he were the Father. This mind is

theirs by the power of the Holy Ghost. That is, the Holy Ghost, who is a personage of spirit (a spirit man!), using the light of Christ, can give the same mind to all men, whether mortal or immortal. The saints who are true and faithful in all things have, as Paul said, “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), which means also that they have the mind of the Father (*A New Witness* 75).

It would not be difficult to suppose that at the time the Lectures on Faith were delivered the Prophet Joseph Smith had not yet learned of the personage status of the Holy Ghost and thus made no doctrinal distinction between the Spirit’s person and powers. There is, however, one major difficulty with drawing the conclusion that the personage status of the Holy Ghost was not taught until after the turn of this century—Joseph Smith himself made a statement just eleven days before his death that disproves such a proposition. “I have always [taught],” Thomas Bullock quoted Joseph Smith as saying, “in all congregations when I have preached, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached fifteen years. I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father. The Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and or spirit, and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods” (*Words* 378). Rather than contradicting the Prophet—rather than concluding that Joseph did not preach something when he said he had—I choose to believe, with Elders Penrose and McConkie, that Joseph Smith did know the difference even though that difference is not clear in the records we have. Or it may have been that he thought it unnecessary to make that distinction every time he spoke because he had made it before. As we shall discuss shortly, there was, no doubt, a significant chasm between what the Prophet knew and what the Saints knew, as well as between what the Prophet knew and what he taught.

Becoming Heirs of the Heavenly Kingdom

In Lecture 5 Joseph Smith lifted our vision of man’s eternal possibilities. Simply stated, he taught at this early date that man

may become even as God. He instructed the School of the Elders that the Saints “who keep [the Lord’s] commandments shall grow from grace to grace and become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. They will possess the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness, even the express image of him who fills all in all, being filled with the fulness of his glory and becoming one in him, even as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one” (LF 5:2). We see reflected once again the doctrine of D&C 93, wherein Christ’s pathway to Godhood is laid out, and the Saints are taught *how* to worship and *what* to worship. The essence of true worship is emulation, the imitation of the works and labors of Christ (McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* 568-69). Just as their prototype received divine assistance from the Father as he gave of himself to his fellow men (ie, he received “grace for grace”); just as Christ “received not of the fulness” of the glory of the Father at the first, but “continued from grace to grace”—grew line upon line, developed from one level of spiritual grace to a higher; and just as Christ received in the resurrection the fulness of the Father, so may all men and women follow such a path and grow in spiritual graces until they inherit all that the Father has (see D&C 93:12-20).

To say that men may possess “the same mind” as God, that they may be “transformed into [his] same image or likeness,” or that they may partake “of the fulness of the Father and the Son through the Spirit” (LF 5:2, 3), is to say that men may come unto God in more than metaphorical fashion. To be a “joint-heir with Christ” is to be a co-inheritor with him, to possess on equal standing with the Holder of the birthright.⁵ Elder McConkie has stressed that the fifth Lecture on Faith teaches “that we, as fallible, weak, mortal men—subject to all the ills, difficulties, and vicissitudes of life—have power to advance and progress and become

⁵ Thus those who are entitled to membership in the “Church of the Firstborn” are not simply those who are members of the Lord’s earthly church, but rather those who with Christ become joint-heirs to all the Father has; they are entitled to all of the blessings of the Firstborn and thus inherit them as though they were the firstborn. As such they are not just sons and daughters of Jesus Christ but sons and daughters of God, meaning the Father (see McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* 2:471-75; see also D&C 76:58).

like our exalted and eternal Father and his beloved Son.” It thus sets forth “the same doctrine that concludes, ‘As God now is, man may become.’ This thing was announced, in principle, in the School of the Prophets and did not have to wait for a King Follett sermon, although, I suppose, the Saints did not fully grasp what was involved in this language initially” (McConkie, “The Lord God of Joseph Smith” 5). “Here then is Eternal life,” the Prophet would teach at the theological peak of his ministry,

to know the only wise and true God. You have got to learn how to be a God yourself and to be a king and priest to God, [the] same as all have done, by going from a small capacity to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection, and sit in everlasting power as they who have gone before. . . . How consoling to the mourner when they are called to part with a wife, mother, father, daughter, relative, to know that although the earthly tabernacle shall be dissolved that they shall be heirs of God and joint-heirs of Jesus Christ, to inherit the same power . . . the same as those who are gone before” (*Words* 350).

Again I am eager to affirm that the Lectures on Faith are not primitive; I do not see them as being out of harmony in any way with what Joseph the Prophet later taught; they are certainly not something beyond which he and the Church later evolved. All the Lectures on Faith, and Lecture 5 in particular, contain much that is meaty, much that requires pondering and prayer and comparison and contemplation. They “were given to the saints and not the world, to enable the apostles, elders, and righteous people of the kingdom to fulfill the same plea made by the prophets of old—‘Lord, Increase our faith’ ” (McConkie, “Lord, Increase Our Faith” 5).

The Knowledge of God: The Prophets and the People

“Brother Joseph,” observed Wilford Woodruff,

used a great many methods of testing the integrity of men; and he taught a great many things which, in consequence of tradition, required prayer, faith, and a testimony from the Lord, before they

could be believed by many of the Saints. His mind was opened by the visions of the Almighty, and the Lord taught him many things by vision and revelation that were never taught publicly in his days; for the people could not bear the flood of intelligence which God poured into his mind (*Journal of Discourses* 5:83-84; hereafter *JD*).

Five months before his death, Joseph Smith lamented that

there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all. How many will be able to abide a celestial law, and go through and receive their exaltation, I am unable to say, as many are called, but few are chosen (*History of the Church* 6:184-85; hereafter *HC*).

We simply are unable to gauge how much the Prophet knew—how much God had revealed to him personally—using only the basis of what the Saints knew. It would be a serious historical error to suppose that because the average member of the Church did not understand the nature of the Godhead—whether, for example, the Father had a corporeal body or whether the Holy Ghost was a personage—that Joseph the Prophet did not understand, and that the Lectures on Faith reflect that lack of understanding. This would also apply to some of the leaders of the Church, even some of the first Apostles. Because Parley P. Pratt failed to distinguish the Light of Christ from the personage of the Holy Ghost in his masterwork, *Key to the Science of Theology*,⁶ does not reflect one way or another on what Joseph Smith comprehended or what he intended in the School of the Elders. Few would argue against the proposition that Parley's

⁶See Alexander's discussion in *Mormonism in Transition* (280-81). See also Parley P. Pratt's *An Answer to Mr. William Hewitt's Tract Against the Latter-Day Saints*, wherein even Elder Pratt gives evidence that he was struggling to understand the corporeality of God the Father.

brother, Orson, was one of the great theological minds of this dispensation. And yet we find Orson Pratt, as late as 1855, still wondering about the personage status of the Holy Ghost (*JD* 2:337-38), when, in fact, Joseph Smith had revealed clearly, as early as 1841, that the Holy Ghost was a personage of spirit as has already been noted above. The fact that the people did not fully grasp the intricacies of the doctrines is totally unrelated to what their leader was able to grasp and thus is unrelated to what he taught and what he intended to be understood. We must not be guilty of setting bounds for God or his prophet-leaders, subscribing them on the basis of our present view of things.

Conclusion

In my view the Lectures on Faith have not received the positive attention they ought to have received by the Latter-day Saints. They were, in fact, acknowledged by the members in 1835 as the “doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints.” I find the doctrine and scope of the Lectures to be stimulating and the perspective to be harmonious with traditional theology of the 20th-century Church. Like the Book of Mormon, I find their contents to be profound, even though they come from an early period in the Church’s history. Truly “one of the flaws in the reasoning of some . . . is an over-reliance upon a linear view of history, an acceptance of the principle that phenomena evolve from previously existing circumstances. Such is certainly not the case in all situations; many events or movements”—and, without question, many doctrines—“[are] more revolutionary than evolutionary” (Millet 189). The Lectures on Faith are illustrative of this phenomenon: they come from a formative period of our history but make known truths which, when carefully studied and fully appreciated, would be considered a part of the mature Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo Church. Whether Joseph Smith himself literally wrote every word in Lecture 5 is immaterial to me; the Lectures were at least in part written by the Prophet and wholly

approved by him in preparation for their inclusion in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (*HC* 2:180).

“In my own judgment,” said President Joseph Fielding Smith, “these Lectures on Faith are of great value and should be studied. . . . They were not taken out of the Doctrine and Covenants because they contained false doctrine, and I consider them to be of extreme value in the study of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (194). Perhaps Elder McConkie voiced my own feelings best when he spoke of Lecture Five to a Brigham Young University audience in 1972. “In my judgment,” he said, “it is the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterance that now exists . . . in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is. It was written by the power of the Holy Ghost, by the spirit of inspiration. It is, in effect, eternal scripture; it is true” (“The Lord God of Joseph Smith” 4).

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