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Introduction

Joseph Smith apparently wanted to set his followers straight when he proclaimed the following at the Mormon Church's General Conference in April, 1844:

I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. **I will refute that idea**, and take away the veil, so that you may see. ... **It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God and to know...that he was once a man like us....** ("King Follett Discourse," *Journal of Discourses* 6:3-4, also in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345-346, and *History of the Church*, vol. 6, 305-307, emphasis added)

Subsequent Mormon leaders have been just as clear, like General Authority Milton R. Hunter, who wrote:

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 that through which we are now passing (*The Gospel Through the Ages*, 1945, p 104).

But recently I've noticed changes — changes in what Mormon Missionaries teach investigators, changes in Mormon teaching manuals, changes in what Mormon people say about their own Church's doctrine.

Ask the Missionaries

What is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) teaching its members about who God is and what He is like? Does it teach non-members anything different? To find out I called two different Mormon missionary residences in my city. At the first number Elder Fieldcrest¹ answered the phone. He was cordial and very willing to answer my questions on the nature of God. I asked two:

The first was, "Has God always been God, complete with all attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience?" His answer was "Yes. God has always been God."

My next question was equally straightforward: "Was God once a man like us?" His immediate answer was "No." When I asked does the Mormon Church teach that God was once a man, he said "No." He went on to say that there is no specific teaching on that. God does have a body of flesh and bones, but he was never a man like us.

Two hours later I received a call back from the other missionary residence where I had left a message. This time I talked with Sister Sansburg. I asked her the same two questions. To the question "Has God always been God?" there was a pause and then "No. God was once a man." I then asked, "So does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teach that God was once man like us?" To which, after a slightly longer pause, she answered "Yes."

"It is a 'Mormon' truism that is current among us and we all accept it, that as man is God once was and as God is man may become." (Melvin J. Ballard – *Mormon Apostle General Conf. address, April 6, 1921*)

Q: ... Don't Mormons believe that God was once a man?

A. Hinckley: "I wouldn't say that. ... That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don't know very much about."

(Interview -Mormon Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1997)

Two Mormon missionaries, trained at the same Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, working in the same city, but they gave two very different answers to these important questions on the nature of God. What's happening? I believe it is the result of a deliberate attempt on the part of Mormon leaders to cloak certain teachings that are disturbing to non-members and investigators of the Church. Teachings like:

- *God the Father has not always been God, but was once a man like us*
- *God had to “progress” to his current status of godhood*
- *Men (but only Mormon men) can progress to be Gods like Heavenly Father*

During the course of my conversation with Sister Sansburg I found out she had been raised Mormon. I assumed this was why she so openly and candidly spoke about God having been a man. I was wrong. Instead she told me she had assumed all her life God had always been God, but it was only while she was on her mission that she learned God was once a man who had progressed to Godhood. It was a “deep doctrine” (her words) that she learned from fellow missionaries during private discussions. She made it clear that as Mormon missionaries they never teach this doctrine to investigators, nor was it ever taught to the missionaries during her missionary training.

The evidence indicates that in recent years the Mormon Church has become aware that the non-LDS public is uncomfortable and even offended with its long-standing doctrinal teaching that God the Father was once a man like us. It would appear that this and related teachings, ie. men can progress to become Gods, is a hindrance to the growth of the Mormon Church, and has led to the deliberate withholding of this information from nonmembers and even its own missionaries. How important is this issue? To answer that question this article will look at three related areas:

- How important is a correct understanding of the nature of God?
- Has the teaching that *God was once a man like us* been a core or central doctrine of the Mormon Church historically speaking?
- What evidence indicates that the Mormon church will neither repudiate this doctrine, nor openly admit it or teach it to non-members?

I will conclude the article with some recommendations on how Christians can more effectively approach Mormon people in light of this information.

Does it Matter What You Believe?

Having a truly biblical understanding of the nature of God, knowing who He has revealed himself to be, is at the heart of what it means to be an evangelical Christian. For those who accept the authority of the Bible, it is not only important that we be restored to a right *relationship* with God, but that we are in relationship with the *right* God – the One True God who has disclosed himself in the Bible. This is underscored in passages like Isaiah 45:18, 21:

I am the Lord and there is no other ... there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to **me** and be saved all you ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other.

Turn to the wrong God, or a man-made god and you miss out on salvation, for authentic faith requires knowledge of the true Gospel and the One True God.

Consider Acts 4:24 where upon the release of Peter and John from jail, the people raise their voices together in prayer to God, “Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and everything in them.” Prior to that Peter and John said “Salvation is found in none other” (Acts 4:12).

LDS people who are theologically inclined would agree. Mormon General Authority, Bruce R. McConkie, stated clearly and emphatically:

There is no salvation in worshiping a false god—neither a cow; nor a crocodile; nor a cedar post; nor

even a spirit essence, without body, parts, or passions, that fills the immensity of space. (Bruce R. McConkie, "The Caravan Moves On," *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 82, emphasis added)

Yet many Mormons appear to have little concern for how accurate their or another person's concept of God is. That is because within Mormonism, one's concept of God is increasingly less important to one's identity, acceptance or significance within the Mormon culture or community. One's personal understanding of the nature of God beyond the fact that He is personal and our Father in Heaven, seems of lessening significance within the theological and social system of Mormonism. I must note here, however, that the Mormon Church does continue to emphasize that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones.

What has happened to the teaching that God was once a man like us? Was it ever really an important doctrine, or was it simply, as Elder Fieldcrest explained, an idea held by some early Mormons, but never specifically taught?

History of the Teaching – LDS Leaders Speak

Joseph Smith, revered as the founding prophet of the Mormon Church, first publicly taught that "God himself was once as we are now" and that men would have "*to learn how to be Gods*" in 1844. He did so toward the end of his life and heralded it as both a distinctive doctrine of Mormonism and a departure from the previously accepted truth about God the Father. According to Joseph Smith, to know for a certainty the character of God was "the first principle of the Gospel," leaving little doubt as to its importance and centrality. It should be no surprise then, that subsequent Mormon leaders have consistently taught and affirmed this teaching up until recent years. What follows are quotes from Mormon leaders.

Joseph Smith – Prophet, President

*God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted Man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens. That is the great secret... ...I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. ... ***It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God and to know...that he was once a man like us.... Here, then, is eternal life - to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you...*** ("King Follett Discourse," *Journal of Discourses* 6:3-4, also in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345-346, and *History of the Church*, vol. 6, 305-307, emphasis added)*

Following Joseph's death, several leaders vied for the right to lead the church. Among the issues that divided them, beside their competing claims to be Joseph's legitimate successor, were Joseph's secret teaching and practice of polygamy and Joseph's recently introduced concept that God had not always been God, but was once a man. Eventually, a sizable number of Latter day Saints, including Joseph's widow Emma, joined together in following Joseph's oldest living son, Joseph Smith III. This movement, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, broke with all the doctrinal innovations of the Nauvoo period, rejecting as unbiblical, polygamy, plurality of Gods, the elaborate Masonic-based temple ceremonies introduced to help men progress to being Gods, as well as the Book of Abraham.

The great majority of Mormons, however, united under the leadership of Brigham Young, who at Joseph's death was head of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Young embraced Joseph's teachings on plural wives, plurality of Gods, and temple ordinances leading to godhood and continued to promote these among the Latter-day Saints he led west.

Brigham Young – Prophet, 2nd President

He [God] is our Father - the Father of our spirits, and was once a man in mortal flesh as we

are, and is now an exalted being. (*Journal of Discourses* 7:333)

The Lord created you and me for the purpose of becoming Gods like himself. (*Journal of Discourses* 3:93)

George Q. Cannon – First Presidency

Well, who was His [Jesus'] father? Why God was His father; and who was God's father? Why God had a father like you and I have. ...

Heavenly Father once a mortal man. Every child knows that its earthly father had a father, and its grandfather had a father, and so on back as far as they can be traced; it can believe also that if it lives to become a man or a woman, it will also have children.

The Prophet Joseph teaches us that our Heavenly Father was once a man and dwelt on an earth like we do upon this one and that He has gone on from step to step, from one degree of glory and exaltation to another, until He now rules and governs. (George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, selected, arranged, and edited by Jerrel L. Newquist [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987], 101.)

Elder Melvin J. Ballard – Apostle

"It is a 'Mormon' truism that is current among us and we all accept it, that as man is God once was and as God is man may become." (General Conference address, April 6, 1921)

Milton R. Hunter – General Authority

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 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. (*The Gospel Through the Ages*, 1945, p 104).

In June, 1840, Lorenzo Snow formulated the following the famous couplet: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become." This doctrine, when first announced by the Prophet and later restated by Elder Snow, was astounding to Christendom, since the teachers as well as the laity had long ago ceased to regard man as being of such magnitude. Even today it is still a doctrine understood primarily by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (*The Gospel Through the Ages*, 1945, p 105-106).

Hunter supports his affirmation that Mormon prophets have continuously taught this sublime truth by citing such LDS leaders Joseph F. Smith, Orson Hyde and Daniel H. Wells.

Joseph Fielding Smith – Prophet, 10th President

God is an exalted man. Some people are troubled over the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith ... that our Father in heaven at one time passed through a life and death and is an exalted man... (*Doctrines of Salvation* 1:10, 1954)

Bruce R. McConkie - Apostle

...God...is a personal Being, a holy and exalted man... (*Mormon Doctrine*, 1966 edition p. 250)

Other Mormons Speak

While the following quotes are not from LDS spiritual leadership, they indicate that some Mormon apologists and academics acknowledge this Mormon teaching on the nature of God.

Michael Fordham (Mormon apologist)

Everything Latter-day Saints teach about God is in agreement with the rest of the Christian world, *with the exception of His nature* (Mormon apologist Michael W. Fordham, “Does Gordon B. Hinckley Understand Mormon Doctrine?” (<http://www.fairlds.org/apol/misc/mis09.html> emphasis added).

Robert L. Millet (Professor, Brigham Young University)

Knowing what we know concerning God our Father — that he is a personal being; that he has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as our own; that he is an exalted and glorified being; *that he was once a man and dwelt on an earth* - and knowing that this knowledge was had by many of the ancients, should we be surprised to find legends and myths throughout the cultures of the earth concerning gods who have divine power but human attributes and passions? (BYU Professor Robert L. Millet, “The Eternal Gospel,” *Ensign*, July 1996, pg.53 emphasis added)²

Books and Periodicals

Achieving a Celestial Marriage, 1976, p. 129. GOD WAS ONCE A MORTAL MAN (1-2) He lived on an Earth like Our Own. “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret.”

Temple Preparation Seminar Discussions, 1978, p. 8. Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God.” (Joseph F. Smith, John R Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, *Messages of the First Presidency*, James R. Clark, ed., Bookcraft, 4:203, 205-6.)

Gospel Principles, 1978, p. 6. What Kind of Being is God? The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all the 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...” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345). God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones. Inside his tangible body is an eternal spirit (see D&C 130:22)

Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (published by the church as an official lesson manual 1997 [text “approved 10/95”], p. 29):

President Brigham Young taught ... that God the Father was once a man on another planet who 'passed the ordeals we are now passing through...

Presidents of the Church, Student Manual, Religion 345, chapter 5, “Lorenzo Snow,” copyright 2003, p. 88.

[Subhead] He Received a Revelation About Man’s Divine Potential

... the Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon me—the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I saw as clear as the sun at noon-day, with wonder and astonishment, the

pathway of God and man. I formed the following couplet which expresses the revelation, as it was shown me ... *As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.*

Note this famous couplet is heralded as a “revelation” from God given to the 5th President and Prophet of the Mormon Church.³

***Ensign* magazine, January 2006** (an official publication of the Mormon Church)

In an article titled “The Nature of the Godhead” LDS Apostle Elder Dallin Oaks is quoted:

The Prophet Joseph Smith once taught: “It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, ... that he was once a man like us ...” (*Ensign*, January 2006, p. 51).⁴

This sampling, though brief, is enough to demonstrate that key teachings like the following are core doctrines:

- God the Father was once a man like us
- God progressed to Godhood, and that
- Men likewise can evolve into Gods

These concepts have been consistently taught since the days of Joseph Smith. These teachings not only define the Mormon Church’s beliefs on the nature of God, but also render the Mormon belief system decidedly non-Christian. In fact, in this area, Mormonism is as different from historic Christianity as other recognized non-Christian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Because most people with a Judeao-Christian background recognize the non-Christian nature of these beliefs, there is an immediate tension created when the Mormon Church introduces these unbiblical, unChristian teachings and at the same time claims to be a *Christian* Church, indeed, the *only* Christian Church.

Keep the Investigators Comfortable

I suggest that this increasing tension has been a catalyst for an increasingly dishonest portrayal of Mormon beliefs to the public in general and to potential converts more specifically. In an attempt to minimize the tension and keep investigators comfortable while they learn about the Mormon Church, Mormon leaders have omitted disturbing, non-Christian teachings from their official manuals, public discourses, missionary training, pageants and temple open houses and both official and unofficial websites. Even the current Mormon President has been less than forthright in public interviews on this subject.

1. Books and Manuals

Gospel Principles is a teaching manual of the Mormon Church, published continuously in various editions since 1978. This 47 chapter manual is studied, in a Sunday School class format, chapter by chapter throughout the year to teach the fundamentals of the LDS faith to new members and investigators. This section will highlight some of the changes made to various editions that are relevant to the subject of this paper and suggest why these are significant.

***Gospel Principles*, 1978**

Chapter 1, p. 6

What Kind of Being is God? The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all the 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..." (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345). God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones. Inside his tangible body is an eternal spirit (see D&C 130:22)

In chapter one the class is introduced to the idea that God is a glorified man. However, the quote from Joseph Smith that is used, ellipses out the section of Joseph's sermon that says God was once a man like us. This is not covered until the final chapter, chapter 47.

Chapter 47, pp. 289-290, 293

What is Exaltation? Exaltation is eternal life, the kind of life that God lives. He lives in great glory. He is perfect. He possesses all knowledge and all wisdom. He is the father of spirit children. He is a creator. *We can become Gods* like our Heavenly Father. This is exaltation. (GP, 289-290, emphasis added)

This is the way our Heavenly Father became a God. Joseph Smith taught, "It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God ... he was once a man like us; ... God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345-46, emphasis added).

When the *Gospel Principles* manual is used in the Gospel Essentials Sunday School class, this final chapter of the book is covered about a year after the start of the class, meaning those in the class have been members of the LDS church for nearly a year or more, and have likely developed strong social and emotional connections to the Church.⁵ Two key teachings that were skirted or avoided at the beginning of the class are now presented clearly. First, men can become Gods – capital G – like Heavenly Father, this is what it means to achieve exaltation. Second, we are simply repeating an already established process, doing what God the Father has already done before us. This is the doctrine of *eternal progression*. Men become Gods, who are then able to create other men who in turn can also progress to become Gods, who repeat the process indefinitely. Up through the 1980s the Mormon Church taught these doctrines in clear, unmistakable terms. The 1981 and 1988 editions of *Gospel Principles*, while undergoing some format changes (smaller size, new cover design, adding an index) introduced no textual changes I'm aware of.

Criticism and falling convert ratios

However, by the late 1980s, among other things, the Mormon Church was receiving increasing scrutiny and criticism for its non-Christian and non-biblical teaching that there were many Gods, God the Father was once a man like us, and men could eventually become Gods, like God the Father. Whether there is a direct correlation or not, it is noteworthy that the Mormon Church had its highest ratio of converts baptized to full-time missionaries in 1989 (8.0 converts per missionary), only to fall steadily through 1992 to a 13-year low of 6.0 converts per missionary. It was in 1992 that the Mormon Church introduced its first significant textual revisions to *Gospel Principles* (approved for publication 11/91).⁶

Significant Changes

Gospel Principles, 1992

Chapter 1, p. 9

No change from previous editions. The Joseph Smith quote is still in place.

Chapter 47, p. 302, 305

What is Exaltation? Exaltation is eternal life, the kind of life that God lives. He lives in great glory. He is perfect. He possesses all knowledge and all wisdom. He is the Father of

spirit children. He is a creator. We can become Gods like our Heavenly Father. This is exaltation. (GP, 302)

This is the way our Heavenly Father became a God. Joseph Smith taught, “It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God ... he was once a man like us; ... God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 345-46).

Though small, both these changes remove key words and de-emphasize multiplicity of Gods and men becoming Gods.

Gospel Principles, 1997

Chapter 1, p. 9

What Kind of Being is God? The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all the 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...” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345). God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones. Inside his tangible body is an eternal spirit (see D&C 130:22)

In this edition the paragraph above with the Joseph Smith quote is removed entirely. In its place is the following:

Because we are made in his image (see Moses 6:9), we know that God has a body that looks like ours. His eternal spirit is housed in a tangible body of flesh and bones (see D&C 130:22). God’s body, however is perfected and glorified, with a glory beyond all description. (GP, p. 9)

Since 1997, those using this manual are not even exposed to the resource *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* until they reach the end of the book. And when it is discussed, the references to being “Gods” like Heavenly Father have been removed since 1992.

Chapter 47, p. 302, 305 (No additional changes from 1992 edition)

Another LDS Church manual that has been edited, perhaps to avoid drawing attention to the teaching that God was once a man like us, is ***Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: JOSEPH F. SMITH***, published in 1998.

On page 337 of this LDS Church manual introducing members to the teachings of the Church’s 6th President on the idea of becoming “like” God is the following:

...We must become like [God]; peradventure to sit upon thrones, to have dominion, power, and eternal increase. God designed this in the beginning. ... This is the object of our existence in the world.

What is omitted by the ellipsis? Here is quote as it appears in an earlier Mormon Church-published book, ***Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith***, Deseret Book Co., 1939, p. 63, with the significant portion of the ellipsed material in bold.

In other words we must become like him; peradventure to sit upon thrones, to have dominion, power, and eternal increase. God designed this in the beginning. We are the

children of God. He is an eternal being, without beginning of days or end of years. He always was, he is, he always will be. **We are precisely in the same condition and under the same circumstances that God our heavenly Father was when he was passing through this, or similar ordeal.**

Thus, while the 1939 book containing the teachings of President Joseph F. Smith made it clear that God the Father once shared a condition that is the same as ours today, current Mormon Church leaders omitted his clear teaching from the modern manual.

2. Mormon Pageants and Temple Open Houses

The Mormon Church produces a number of pageants that celebrate its unique history and tell the story of Mormonism with dramatic reenactments featuring casts of hundreds of performers. Yet, seldom, if ever, do these lavish performances provide accurate information on Joseph Smith's distinctive teachings on God being a man like us and men becoming Gods. Here are a couple of examples.

Mormon Miracle Pageant – Manti, Utah

The Mormon Miracle Pageant, performed each June on the grounds of the Manti Temple in Manti, Utah, attracted 77,500 visitors during 8 days of performances in 2006. However, while the performance featured a lengthy segment on the life, teaching and death of Joseph Smith, there was no mention of Joseph's "God was once a man like us" teaching.⁷

Nauvoo Pageant: a Tribute to Joseph Smith – Nauvoo, Illinois

Similarly, *Nauvoo Pageant: a Tribute to Joseph Smith*, which in 2005 replaced the *City of Joseph* pageant in Nauvoo, Illinois, omitted key material from one of its side performances – the King Follett Discourse. According to a ministry colleague, Sharon Lindbloom ([Mormon Coffee blog](#)), who attended the pageant both last year and this year (2006), an actor portraying Joseph Smith recited excerpts from this historic sermon delivered at the LDS Church's 1844 April General Conference. However, in contrast to the previous year, the 2006 version of the presentation was noticeably sanitized. Gone were all the references to God was once a man like us and the need for men to need to learn to become Gods themselves, the same as all other Gods before them had done.⁸

Mormon Temple Open Houses

I have attended over 12 Mormon Temple open houses on three different continents in the last 6 years and at each one the unique Mormon teachings on God, men and role of Mormon temples in helping men become Gods were omitted. Furthermore, on multiple occasions when I had opportunity after the tour to ask questions in a public context with other people standing around and listening, the Mormon missionaries, Mormon leaders and Mormon tour guides I spoke to nearly always denied the existence of many of these doctrines, accusing me of inventing lies to discredit the Mormon Church. They persisted in these denials until I produced an official Mormon manual and began to document my point. Then the denials often turned to strong affirmations and a defense of the teaching that had been denied moments earlier.

A recent web article records similar incidents of deliberate deception by LDS Church representatives at the August 2006 open house of the Sacramento, California Mormon Temple.⁹

3. LDS Online materials

The Mormon Church provides extensive material on its website [www.mormon.org](#) on the subject of who is God and what is he like, and yet in page after page of material there is no mention of God once being a man like us, there is no mention of exaltation to godhood, there is no mention of God being a mortal man, who lived on his own earth and progressed to becoming a God, nor that man is supposed to follow a plan of eternal progression and also eventually become a God. A person could not come to know that

Mormon prophets, apostles and leaders taught consistently and repeatedly as a key doctrine, up until at least the 1960's and 70's, that God the Father was once a man like us. For the investigator and general public, that information is not readily available.

Also online, from the July 2006 *Ensign*, is an intriguing statement by the current Prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley in his First Presidency Message, "In These Three I Believe."

I recall reading a tract some years ago written by a critic, an enemy of the Church whose desire was to undermine the faith of the weak and the unknowing. The tract repeated fallacies that had been parroted for a century and more. It purported to set forth what you and I, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, believe.

Without wishing to argue with any of our friends of other faiths, many of whom I know and for whom I have the highest regard, I take this opportunity to set forth my position on this most important of all theological subjects.

I believe without equivocation or reservation in God the Eternal Father. He is my Father, the Father of my spirit, and the Father of the spirits of all men. He is the great Creator, the Ruler of the universe. He directed the Creation of this earth on which we live. In His image man was created. He is personal. He is real. He is individual. He has "a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" (D&C 130:22). (<http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,2043-1-3470-1,00.html>, or *Ensign*, July 2006, p. 3).

It is unfortunate that President Hinckley did not identify for his audience the "fallacies that had been parroted for a century and more" and thus set the record straight. Nevertheless, in this public discourse, specifically designed to articulate his beliefs, and by extension the beliefs of the Mormon Church, President Hinckley omitted any mention of God being man, progressing to Godhood, or having a goddess wife. President Hinckley has also avoided such disturbing Mormon teachings in various media interviews, which we will examine next.

4. Public Statements of the Current Prophet – Gordon B Hinckley

Don Lattin, religion editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, interviewed President Hinckley on April 13, 1997. Please keep in mind this comes less than a year after the *Ensign* article by BYU professor Robert Millet that stated, "Knowing what we know concerning God our Father -- ... that he was once a man and dwelt on an earth."

Don Lattin (religion editor, interviewing Gordon B. Hinckley, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1997, p 3/Z1)

Q: There are some significant differences in your beliefs [and other Christian churches]. For instance, don't Mormons believe that God was once a man?

Hinckley: *I wouldn't say that. There was a little couplet coined, "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become." Now that's more of a couplet than anything else. That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don't know very much about. [emphasis added]*

Q: So you're saying the church is still struggling to understand this?

Hinckley: *Well, as God is, men may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly. We believe that the glory of God is intelligence and whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the Resurrection. ... that's one thing that's different. Modern revelation. We believe all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, we believe he has yet to reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.*

In another interview, later that same year, we find President Hinckley claiming to be ignorant of whether the church really teaches that God was once a man.

Gordon B. Hinckley, Time Magazine, quote, Aug 4, 1997:

On whether his church still holds that God the Father was once a man,

[Hinckley] sounded uncertain, '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.'

Luke Wilson, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Research, wrote the LDS Church about this, querying the office of the First Presidency as to whether Hinckley had been accurately quoted to say "I don't know a lot about it." The reply he received from the LDS Church was clear, "The quotation you reference was taken out of context."

He then wrote to TIME magazine asking them to reply to the Mormon Church's allegation they had quoted President Hinckley out of context. TIME made it clear they stood by their story, and asked the interviewing reporter to reply to Wilson. Richard Ostling replied and provided a transcript of his conversation with President Hinckley which follows:

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

Hinckley: 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?

Hinckley: 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 a lot about it and I don't know that others know a lot about it. [emphasis added]

*It appears clear President Hinckley wishes to avoid this aspect of Mormon doctrine and is willing to feign ignorance of his own church's teaching to do so.¹⁰ For a complete report on the relevant exchange of correspondence, please see the article **Dodging and Dissembling Prophet?** (<http://www.irr.org/mit/hinckley.html>)*

5. Training Missionaries to Proselytize under False Pretenses

From the previously mentioned interviews with Mormon Missionaries and conversations I've had with representatives of the Mormon Church on this subject, it would seem safe to conclude that Mormon Missionaries are not being taught that God was once a man like us. Subsequently, they cannot teach these things to investigators and they can legitimately claim ignorance of such teachings when confronted with this material while on their mission. Mormon leaders practically insure their missionaries are misrepresenting Mormon Church doctrines to potential converts.

Directly related to this is the omission of the section on Eternal Progression in the new Mormon missionary training manual – Preach my Gospel. In the previous materials used by the Mormon Missionaries in their house-to-house work, the fourth discussion was devoted to the topic of Eternal Progression. Eternal progression is not listed in the index of the new manual, and to my knowledge, is never discussed. The term does appear on page 59 with a list of "Other Terms That May Need Further

Definition for Those you Teach.” Within the manual the terms exaltation and eternal life are both explained as “living with God forever in eternal families” (Preach my Gospel, pp. 53, 70). This is amplified in a list of “Key Definitions” which for exaltation has:

Exaltation: Eternal life in God’s presence; to become like our Father in Heaven and live in His presence. The greatest of all the gifts of God. Exaltation comes through the Atonement of Christ and through obedience to all the laws and ordinances of the gospel. (Preach my Gospel, p. 58)

There is no mention of God being a man like us, or men progressing to Godhood.

The result of Mormon leaders failing to disclose these disturbing doctrines, not teaching them to their own Missionaries, and the Mormon President’s public denials, is that many members of the Mormon Church may not know about these doctrines, or may likewise deny them. What should characterize our response to these issues?

How Can We Approach Mormons?

1. Approach them with awareness and affirmation

Be aware that fewer and fewer Mormons hold to or are even aware of the doctrine that God was once a man like us and that men can become Gods. Exercise caution and do not assume or accuse the Mormon of believing these things; there is a good chance they don’t. If a Mormon says, “I believe there is only one God, I believe that God has always been God,” affirm that belief, reinforce that is what the Bible teaches and therefore it is also what we believe. Take the time when appropriate to rehearse the biblical passages in Isaiah 44-46 and Deuteronomy 4:6 that teach this.

Now, we need to be careful that the Mormon is not using the same terminology and changing the definitions (this will be addressed in the next section), but it is possible for a member of the Mormon Church, especially if they are a new convert, to be unaware of, or to have rejected these particularly egregious and unbiblical aspects of Mormon teachings. When this is the case we need to encourage them to continue this movement away from false Mormon teaching. It is also possible the Mormon has retained biblical teachings about God he received earlier in his spiritual experience before being proselytized into the LDS Church. When this is the case, we need to affirm biblically correct beliefs, and help them see how such beliefs are irreconcilably different from official Mormon doctrine.

2. Challenge them with boldness and truth

If there is reason to believe the Mormon is not being honest in what he or she is affirming, if they are sharing terms but changing definitions, we need to gently, but boldly challenge them with this, and continue to ask them questions until what they truly believe comes out. We can be frank, without being contentious, abrasive, arrogant or mean. The key is persistent questioning that demonstrates you want to know what the Mormon truly believes and has been taught by his leaders. It will take boldness to do this, for if a Mormon affirms belief in the trinity, salvation by grace alone, Jesus as my Savior, there is only one God etc., it is not wise to accept unquestioningly their affirmations.

I saw this firsthand several years ago when some Mormon Missionaries visited our office. One young man, at that point within months of completing his two-year mission, asked me point blank, “Why don’t you accept us as Christians? We believe in salvation by grace alone too.” Surprised he would make such an affirmation I replied, “Are you saying that both of us can equally have eternal life in the presence of Heavenly Father through faith alone in Jesus Christ?” “Yes,” he replied, “that’s what we believe.” Being yet skeptical of his affirmation, I decided to phrase the question differently. “So, if you are a member of the Mormon Church, a faithful, temple-worthy Mormon who is married for time and eternity in the temple, and I, on the other hand, never become a Mormon but continue to put my faith and trust in Jesus Christ and live in obedience to him, trusting in God’s grace alone to save me, when we die, will we both end up in the same place?” As he replied, he looked both offended and surprised,

"No, of course not. You can't make it to the celestial kingdom if you never join the church." "Ah then," I said, "you don't really believe in eternal life through faith alone, you need to do your part to ultimately be considered worthy of Heavenly Father's presence. That's what makes us different, and part of the reason why I cannot accept the Mormon Church as a Christian Church."

I've had similar conversations since then, underscoring the need to be cautious and bold when a Mormon claims to believe "just like we do." But boldness in and of itself is not enough.

3. Respond with compassion and care

As we are dealing with Mormons and are able to present material like this that is now being avoided or covered up, we should also clearly articulate how it continues to be an important, integral part of Mormon theology.¹¹ The Mormon Church affirms that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones. Well, how did he get that body of flesh and bones? The reason God the Father has a body of flesh and bones is because he was once a man just like us and worked his way to godhood. At one point he was not God, he was a mortal man, a man who lived, and died, according to some Mormon sources.¹²

And yet, as we talk about these beliefs we need to be compassionate and caring. The Mormon person needs to know that we value them as a person first, and consider their membership in the Mormon Church secondary. Apologetics is a tool we use to reach certain people who need to hear the gospel – we use it to open minds and hearts so the truth can get in and transform their lives. So what we learn about Mormonism, what we understand about the doctrinal system, what we discover about the changes, the errors, the cover-up, the lack of integrity – all that should simply be a tool that lets us more effectively and more compassionately reach out to these people. We should never use our knowledge as a sword with which to cut them to ribbons – that should never be our goal. In our ministry to Mormons, compassion and care needs to be predominant, and if at any point what we are feeling is "I just want to nail this person to the wall, I want to show them up, I'm so sick of the deception," then it is probably a good time to stop the conversation because the Mormon will sense that attitude in you. However, if what is coming from you is a compassion and concern, a genuine care for who they are and a desire for their salvation in Jesus solely through the unmerited grace of God, they will also sense that and it will have as much impact as the information you are sharing.

Conclusion

Whether deliberately or unwittingly, Mormons on a regular basis fail to disclose Church teachings that are disturbing and most clearly place them outside the Christian tradition. Beneath the affable, families-are-forever, wholesome image, lies a disturbing pattern of cover-up, distortion and misrepresentation. This is all the more troubling because those in various leadership positions apparently feel justified in engaging in this deception. From the 50,000+ missionaries going door to door around the world, to Mormon President Gordon B. Hinckley's interaction with the media, doctrines that have distinguished and uniquely defined the Mormon religion are omitted, ignored or denied. When I asked one pair of Mormon missionaries if when they went door to door they clearly presented their unique teachings about God being a man who progressed to godhood and was married with a wife in heaven, they replied, "Of course we do not tell people that. If we told people about that stuff they would never let us in to talk to them." When I followed up with, "Don't you think that is a bit deceptive?", they amiably replied, "No we have to give them milk before meat."

One thing is certain, Mormon leaders have not repudiated Joseph Smith's non-biblical teachings on the nature of God and continue to promote them, albeit selectively. This means the Mormon Church continues to hold to doctrines that make it decidedly non-Christian, while hiding these teachings from investigators, new members and even its own missionaries. This calls for boldness as we expose the disingenuousness of Mormon leaders, and discernment and gentle forthrightness as we draw Mormon people into truth, authenticity and spiritual worthiness through a restored relationship with the one true, immutable, 'from everlasting to everlasting' God.

Notes

¹ Missionary names changed to protect their identities.

² In his 2005 book, *A Different Jesus* (Wm B. Eerdmans, p. 145), Millet stated “God is an exalted man”. This continues to make it difficult to sustain the notion that either Millet personally, or the Mormon Church corporately, are moving away from Mormonism’s non-biblical and unchristian definition of God.

³ Just as interesting is the date that Lorenzo Snow claimed to have received this revelation – in the spring of 1840. This is four years before Joseph gave the King Follett discourse (April 1844) which was not published until August of that same year. Snow said he shared his revelatory experience with Joseph Smith in 1843 in a confidential interview and received as a reply from Joseph Smith, “Brother Snow, that is true gospel doctrine, and it is a revelation from God to you.” (*Presidents of the Church*, 2003, p. 88). So, did Joseph influence Snow or did Snow influence Joseph? According to Snow, the idea was first planted in his head before he was a Mormon convert in 1836, when Joseph’s father, Joseph Smith, Sr. told him “you will become as great as you can possibly wish – even as great as God, and you cannot wish to be greater” (*Improvement Era*, June 1919, p. 654. Cited in *Pres. of the Church*, p. 88).

⁴ This article has no author and appears to be recycled from the May 1995 *Ensign* article by Mormon Apostle Elder Dallin Oaks, entitled “Apostasy and Restoration.”

⁵ The class structure and schedule was explained to me by a Mormon friend who is currently a bishop and has taught the class himself.

⁶ In addition to the changes noted in the body of this article, another significant change to chapter 47 was the deletion of the following summary statement regarding the requirements for exaltation: “In other words, each person must endure in faithfulness, keeping all the Lord’s commandments until the end of his life on earth.” [emphasis added]. This change is consistent with increased promotion of the “folk” doctrine that assures Mormons they don’t need perfection in this life but will have millions of years if necessary to complete the perfection process after they die. While this is a popular and widely held belief among Mormon people, there is no support for this concept in any Mormon Scripture, in fact the exact opposite is taught.

⁷ For attendance figures and other official info see: <http://www.mormonmiracle.org/information.html>. I attended the performance on June 15, 2006 and noted the lack of reference to the unique Mormon doctrines of God as once a man like us, men becoming Gods, God having a wife. The pageant also mocked the various Christian denominations of Joseph’s day, and omitted, among other things, Joseph using a gun to defend himself during the Carthage jail scene.

⁸ For Sharon’s report and commentary see <http://mormoncoffee.blogspot.com/2006/08/new-and-improved-king-follett.html>.

⁹ See for example, http://sacredorsecret.com/temples_tours_truth.htm, and Saturday, August 19, 2006 “The good, the bad, and the ugly” blog here: <http://www.evidenceministries.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁰ President Hinckley’s artful dodges became readily apparent a short time later when he addressed an all-Mormon audience at their semi-annual General Conference. In what the Ostlings see as a pointed reference to those interviews, Hinckley assured his listeners, “None of you need worry because you read something that was incompletely reported. You need not worry that I do not understand some matters of doctrine.” He added, “I think I understand them thoroughly.” The Ostlings note that the audience laughed understandingly. (Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*, Harper San Francisco, 1999, p. 296)

¹¹ Some within the Christian community suggest these changes indicate the Mormon Church is rethinking its doctrines and moving toward more biblical teaching on the nature of God. I find it difficult to sustain this position in the face of recent *Ensign* articles and LDS Church manuals that I’ve cited that continue to promote the God was once a man doctrine to the general membership.

¹² See Achieving a Celestial Marriage, p. 132, which states, “As shown in this chapter, our Father in heaven was once a man as we are now, capable of physical death.”