

As God Is Man May Be?

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By Bill McKeever

Although it is not found in any of Mormonism's Standard Works, an expression that precisely defines the LDS teaching that men can become Gods was coined by fifth LDS President Lorenzo Snow. In June of 1840, Snow declared, "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become." Besides correctly illustrating the Latter-day Saint teaching that God was once a mere mortal man, this couplet also declares that man has the potential to become God. According to LDS theology, eternal life is synonymous with exaltation and godhood. In the words of LDS Apostle Bruce McConkie, "Thus those who gain eternal life receive exaltation. . . They are gods." (*Mormon Doctrine*, pg. 237).

On page 115 of his book titled *The Gospel Through the Ages*, LDS Seventy Milton R. Hunter wrote, "No prophet of record gave more complete and forceful explanations of the doctrine that men may become Gods than did the American Prophet." If eventual Godhood was such a common teaching among early Christians (as Mormons insist), why do we have to go to Joseph Smith to find out about it? If there was indeed a cover-up, it was surely one of unbelievable magnitude.

Though some Mormons may argue that godhood is not a teaching peculiar to Mormonism, history proves that it indeed was and is. Both the *Journal of Discourses (JOD)* and the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith (TPJS)* record that, on April 6, 1844, LDS Church founder Joseph Smith preached to a congregation of 20,000 saying, "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" (*JOD* 6:4; *TPJS* p.346). Brigham Young, the second prophet and president of the Mormon Church, delivered a message in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on August 8, 1852, in which he affirmed this teaching when he said, "The Lord created you and me for the purpose of becoming Gods like Himself" (*JOD* 3:93).

Biblical Denial

Despite the strong emphasis on this notion that man can someday attain the attributes of deity, one would be hard-pressed to find a biblical basis for this teaching. Isaiah 43:10 makes it clear that no man, Mormon included, will ever attain godhood for it says, "I am He; before Me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after Me."

Regardless of what Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders have said about men earning the right of godhood, the fact remains that the God of the Bible, who is all knowing, says

He knows of no other Gods (Isaiah 44:8). Surely this should prove that no mortal has ever attained godhood; not Joseph Smith, not Brigham Young, no one!

The God of the Bible adamantly declares that He is the first and the last. From eternity past to eternity future, there will never be a true God besides the one God as presented in the Bible (Isaiah 45:5).

Mormon Rebuttal

Mormons will often use verses such as John 10:34 to counter these biblical truths. Here Jesus stands at the famous "porch of Solomon" and responds to the blindness of the religious leaders of his day. He rebukes their unbelief by quoting from Psalm 82:6 which reads, "I have said, Ye are gods." Some Mormons have interpreted this to mean Jesus Himself said that men could one day attain the level of deity. The problem with such an interpretation is that Jesus does not say, "Ye can become Gods." The text reads, "Ye are Gods." Not even Mormons believe that they are Gods right now. At best they are what many LDS leaders have called, "gods in embryo" (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. 286). Successfully interpreting this passage lies in figuring out what the word "gods" means. Fortunately, we can discover this by the Bible itself.

When Psalm 82 is examined, it is not hard to see that this short psalm of Asaph is actually a word of rebuke. While Mormons are quick to quote verse six, they fail to include verse seven which states that the gods of verse six "shall die like men." If gods can die, then eternal life, as defined by Mormonism, is not very eternal.

Scholars generally believe that the gods of Psalm 82 are nothing more than men who, by God's sovereign design, are chosen to rule over other men. In fact, the word "Elohim," used in verse six, is often translated "judges" in the Old Testament. An example of this can be found in Exodus 21:6 where it reads, "Then his master shall bring him unto the judges [Elohim] ..." Another example is Exodus 22:8 which reads, "If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges ..." Again, the Hebrew Elohim is used.

No doubt many Latter-day Saints will look upon this interpretation with suspicion. Should that be the case, it may help to cite one of Mormonism's most respected scholars, Apostle James Talmage. In his book *Jesus The Christ*, Talmage agreed that Jesus was referring to divinely appointed judges when he wrote, "Divinely Appointed Judges Called 'gods.' In Psalm 82:6, judges invested by divine appointment are called 'gods.' To this the Savior referred in His reply to the Jews in Solomon's Porch. Judges so authorized officiated as the representatives of God and are honored by the exalted title 'gods'" (p. 465).

Some Latter-day Saints have used I John 3:2 to support the Mormon claim that men can become Gods. This passage reads, "Beloved, now are ye the sons of God, and it doeth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him." Mormons insist that to be "like Him" means they will have all of the attributes of God Himself. If that is so, does that mean a Mormon will someday become omnipotent? To have more than one omnipotent being defies the very meaning of the word. Furthermore, to draw such a conclusion once again ignores the many passages of the Bible which declare the existence of only one God.

Conclusion

To Mormons who think they will someday become Gods of their own realms, we ask, "Did you make the heavens and the earth?" If not, consider the following passages from Jeremiah 10:10, 11:

But the Lord is the true God, He is the living God, and an everlasting king: at His wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation. Thus shall ye say unto them, The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these heavens.

If the Lord is the only true God then will you be a false god? If He is the only living God, will you be a dead God? If you hope to become a God but did not make the heavens and the earth, according to the above passages, you can expect to perish. It may be argued that this verse refers to pagan idols. However that may be, let us not forget Psalm 96:5, which says that God considers all the gods of the nations as idols, whether they are hewn from wood, or stone, or "exalted" through good works. All will perish.

Even if Godhood was a biblical possibility, obtaining it according to Mormonism would be in and of itself an impossible feat. According to Bruce McConkie, ". . . only those who obey the fulness of the gospel law will inherit eternal life" (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 237). It would be safe to say that most Mormons do not even know what the "fulness of gospel law" includes, much less obey it.

The possibility of man becoming divine is a man-made promise that the true God will not honor. It was His plan that we become His children by faith in Jesus Christ, to live with Him throughout eternity as His people (not fellow Gods). In and of ourselves we can do nothing to earn our way into His presence. That debt was paid by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself. Because our good works on their own are like filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6), it is imperative that we forsake any such hope of self-exaltation and Godhood and trust in Christ alone for the eternally true salvation that only He can give. Only then will you be able to rejoice at the sight of the new heaven and new earth and hear:

"... a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and He shall be their God." Rev. 21:3

Does Lorenzo Snow's famous couplet no longer have a functioning place in LDS theology?

By Bill McKeever

"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."

— Elder Melvin J. Ballard

General Conference, April 1921

"From President Snow's understanding of the teachings of the Prophet on this doctrinal point, he coined the familiar couplet: 'As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become.' This teaching is peculiar to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ."

Marion Romney (1st Presidency)

General Conference, October 1964

"The Lorenzo Snow couplet expresses a true statement: 'As man is, God once was; and as God is, man may become.'"

Seventy Bruce C. Hafen

The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences, 1989, p.133

"This process known as eternal progression is succinctly expressed in the LDS aphorism, 'As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become.'"

Encyclopedia of Mormonism 4:1474

For much of its history, the LDS Church has defended and taught the concept that God was once a man and that faithful Mormon men have the capacity to become Gods. This teaching was capsulated in what has become popularly known as the "Lorenzo Snow couplet."

Lorenzo Snow joined the LDS Church in 1836 at the age of 21. He was ordained an apostle in 1849. When Wilford Woodruff died in 1898, he became Mormonism's fifth president. Snow claims that his couplet came to him by revelation just prior to leaving on a mission to England in 1840. When Snow returned from his mission three years later, he spoke to Joseph Smith about what he felt God had revealed to him. Joseph Smith's reply was, "*Brother Snow, that is a true gospel doctrine, and it is a revelation from God to you*" (LeRoi C. Snow, "Devotion to a Divine Inspiration," *Improvement Era*, June 1919, p.656).

Smith himself would teach this concept in his famous King Follett discourse given in 1844; since that time, LDS leaders have alluded to *"this true gospel doctrine"* in numerous conference messages, books, and periodicals.

November 14, 2004

In November of 2004, Christian apologist/philosopher Ravi Zacharias addressed a packed house in the Mormon Tabernacle. To have a Christian of Zacharias' caliber speak in such a venue was certainly unusual; however, due to a controversial apology made by Dr. Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary in California, much of what Dr. Zacharias had to say has been pushed into the background.

Dr. Mouw's short speech preceded Zacharias, but it will be long remembered for the way it impugned the integrity of Christian pastors and ministries who make a concerted effort to bring the gospel to the Mormon people. In his remarks he apologized for the way evangelicals have borne *"false witness"* when it comes to the teachings of the LDS Church. He added, *"We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to ask you what you believe."*

Much could be said about Dr. Mouw's use of a stereotype to apologize for a stereotype, but in keeping with the title of this article, I would like to address a comment Dr. Mouw made when he was asked to clarify his statement. In doing so Dr. Mouw wrote, *"I have received emails in the past few days where evangelicals have said that Mormonism teaches that God was once a human being like us, and we can become gods just like God now is. Mormon leaders have specifically stated that such a teaching, while stated by past leaders, is something they don't understand and has no functioning place in present day Mormon doctrine."*

Dr. Mouw offered no evidence from LDS leaders to support his claim. Considering how often LDS leaders have taunted on this subject, it seems nonsensical to insist that they are confused about what Lorenzo Snow or Joseph Smith meant.

Dr. Mouw instead solicited the help of BYU professors Robert Millet and Stephen Robinson in his defense: *"Bob Millet has made the same point to many of us, and Stephen Robinson insisted, in the book he co-authored with Craig Blomberg, that this is not an official Mormon teaching, even though it can be found in non-canonical Mormon writings."* If Dr. Mouw is accurately relating what he was told, then we must ask why Dr. Millet would make such a comment when he himself supported Lorenzo Snow's couplet in a July 1996 *Ensign* article titled, *"The Eternal Gospel."*

On page 53 Dr. Millet wrote, *"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?"

It should also be pointed out that in the book Dr. Mouw mentions above (*How Wide the Divide?*); co-author Stephen Robinson does not at all discount the significance of Snow's couplet. In fact he calls this teaching "normative" in LDS thought. On page 87 of *How Wide the Divide* he wrote, "...it is the official teaching of the LDS Church that God the Father has a physical body (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22). The belief that God the Father was once a human being rests mainly on two technically uncanonized sources (sermons of Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow) which have, however, in effect become normative."

Notice that Dr. Robinson fully acknowledges that this was taught by both Smith and Snow. Why in the world should it matter if the teachings are "uncanonized" if they are, in fact, normative in Mormon thought? To downplay the teaching's significance with such a game of semantics seems like an incredible display of intellectual dishonesty.

On page 91 of *How Wide the Divide*, Dr. Robinson goes on to state, "*Nothing I say here should be interpreted as denying the importance for Mormonism of God's corporality and God's nature as an exalted man. Neither am I denying the importance of LDS belief that we humans are literally God's children and can become what God is. These are lynchpins in LDS theology.*"

Consider also that the July 1982 edition of *Ensign*, Elder Gerald Lund (now serving as an LDS Seventy) stated, "*It is clear that the teaching of President Lorenzo Snow is both acceptable and accepted doctrine in the Church today*" ("*I have a question,*" *Ensign*, p.38)" To my knowledge this statement has never been rescinded by the First Presidency.

Notice carefully the word "*doctrine*" in the above quote. Mormon apologists love to hide behind the phrase "*official doctrine,*" but as I have said more than once, none of them can come up with a definition of "official doctrine" that has been used consistently throughout LDS Church history. Like it or not, many LDS leaders with much more authority than a BYU professor have referred to this teaching as doctrine — this includes Joseph Smith!

Ask, don't tell

Dr. Mouw accuses evangelicals of telling Mormons what they believe rather than asking them. While I am sure some Christians have unfortunately approached Mormons in that manner, I don't think it is wise to elevate a Mormon's unique and personal views to the level of LDS leaders.

For instance, Dr. Mouw claims he was told by Robert Millet that Lorenzo Snow's couplet has no functioning place in present-day Mormonism. I contacted the LDS Church public relations department and asked if Dr. Millet *"was expressing an official church position."* It wasn't a trick question, but I did ask with the hope that I would get an *"official"* answer. On November 30, 2004, I received the following from LDS spokesman Dale Bills: *"Dr. Millet does not speak for the Church. Church doctrine is established by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles."*

While he made it clear that Dr. Millet has no authority to speak for the church (no surprise here), he really didn't clarify whether or not the couplet was still considered a part of the LDS faith.

Since my question wasn't really answered, I sent a follow up email on December 2nd. In this post I wrote, *"Mr. Bills, Thank you for your reply. May I then conclude that Lorenzo's Snow's couplet still has a vital role in LDS teaching?"*

After patiently waiting a month and a half for a response, I sent another post on January 17, 2005. Once again I asked Mr. Bills if the Snow couplet was a functional teaching in the LDS Church. As of this writing, he has not seen fit to reply. I found his silence quite baffling. Why can't the LDS Church PR department answer a simple yes or no question? After all, the January 2005 issue of the *Ensign* magazine had no problem supporting at least half of Snow's couplet in an article titled, "Created in the Image of God, Male and Female." On pages 48-49 it stated, *"The Prophet Joseph Smith taught of a much simpler and more sensible relationship: God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens."*

Conclusion

Much can be deduced from all of this. First of all, it is a mistake to assume that BYU professors are always a good source for correct interpretations of LDS teaching. Many times they are, but it is not uncommon to find such individuals being out of doctrinal harmony with the church that pays their salaries.

Second, since lay members in the LDS Church do not speak for the church, it is wrong for Christians to criticize fellow Christians who understand this concept better than they do.

Third, sometimes asking our Mormon friends for answers to our questions doesn't always yield an accurate answer. Sometimes, as in the case with Dale Bills, it yields virtually no answer.

In the summer of 2004 I was doing research for a couple of articles I was asked to write for two magazines. I went to church headquarters to see if I might have an audience with

a church spokesman "*whom I could quote.*" At first this didn't seem to be a problem, but when I called back to confirm I was met with a lack of enthusiasm. Despite the fact that I demonstrated to them that I was a published author and that my request was legitimate, my request was ignored.

As Mr. Bills has correctly pointed out, only the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve have the authority to establish LDS doctrine. However, when those who speak authoritatively for the church refuse to do so, they only increase the suspicion many outsiders have for their church.