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JUSTIFICATION, THEOSIS, AND GRACE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN, LUTHERAN, AND MORMON DISCOURSE

Grant Underwood

Although few would dispute that human salvation is a central concern of all branches of Christianity, exactly what salvation entails and how it is to be brought about has been a matter of considerable debate for nearly two thousand years. Drawing on that debate, this presentation examines the cluster of ideas that came to be labeled “justification” and how it relates to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of “theosis” or “theopoesis,” Greek terms typically translated as “deification” or “divinization.”¹ Particular attention is paid to the thought of Martin Luther in this regard, and throughout a comparative eye is kept on Mormonism.

I divide the presentation into four sections. First, as background, I touch briefly on ideas about justification and theosis found in the New Testament and in patristic thought.² In the second section, we leap from leading church “father” St. Augustine in the early 400s A.D. to the erstwhile Augustinian monk Martin Luther in the 1500s, where we engage the major re-evaluation by Finnish Luther scholars of Luther’s doctrine of justification and its harmonies with Orthodox teachings on theosis. Third, we turn explicitly to Mormonism for a comparative look at its own views on deification. And finally, we com-

¹ *Theosis* is a neologism of Gregory of Nazianzus that he first employed in 365. “Although *theosis* is the usual term by which deification came to be known among the Byzantines, it did not prove immediately popular. It was not taken up again until Dionysius the Areopagite used it in the late fifth century, and only became fully assimilated with Maximus the Confessor in the seventh.” Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215.

² Patristics or patrology are terms that derive from the Latin word for “father,” and are common designations for the writings of influential Christian theologians from the early centuries A.D. These theologians are often referred to honorifically as the “Church Fathers.”

pare Mormon and Christian ideas about the relationship between human nature, divine grace, and righteous behavior (or works), important issues that undergird conceptions of justification and deification. prehensive treatment of the topics considered in these four sections could easily fill a small volume. In the short compass of a single presentation, therefore, coverage will necessarily be introductory and suggestive.

Because to one degree or another all Christian theology is tethered to the Bible, we begin with a few observations about New Testament teachings on salvation. The “good news” about what God has done for humanity in and through Jesus Christ is so extensive and rich that the New Testament authors struggled to articulate it. The apostle Paul, who had the most to say on the matter, was compelled to employ a variety of images in his attempt to convey the grandeur of the divine grace manifest in the person and work of Christ. Redemption, reconciliation, justification, birth, adoption, creation, citizenship, sealing, grafting, even salvation itself, were all metaphors from everyday life with recognized non-religious meanings that only over time acquired precise theological definition and elaborate exposition in that subdivision of Christian theology known as soteriology, the study of salvation.³

Justification, for instance, is a legal metaphor that refers to acquittal and conveys the image of expunging a record of debt or criminal guilt. The parallel with divine forgiveness of sins is obvious. Different than in modern, everyday English where justification means an explanation or reason for something, biblically, justification and its cognates “just” and “justice” translate Hebrew and Greek roots having to do with “righteousness.” Thus, for Paul and later Christian commentators justification is about how and in what sense humans can be considered, or can become, righteous. To capture in modern English the proper religious meaning of justification, we would have to invent an awkward term like “righteous-ification.”

³ The information in this and the subsequent paragraph is drawn from James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). See especially 317–389.

The reality in the first centuries after Christ was that neither in the Latin-speaking West nor in the Greek-speaking East did the early church fathers “choose to express their soteriological convictions in terms of the concept of justification.” They preferred other biblical metaphors and images to describe the initiation and continuation of one’s life in Christ. “The few occasions upon which a specific discussion of justification can be found almost always involve no interpretation of the matter other than a mere paraphrase of a Pauline statement. ... Justification was simply not a theological issue in the pre-Augustinian tradition.”⁴ Nor, we might add, has it been in the Mormon tradition. Its one appearance in Latter-day Saint (LDS) scripture is in the Church’s foundational “Articles and Covenants,” where it is affirmed but not explained: “and we know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true.”⁵ Today, few Mormons can give a satisfactory definition of the term, though when it is explained to them in current LDS terms, they readily resonate with its constituent ideas.

For the Christian West, that is, for the Roman Catholic Church, justification began its rise to prominence through the writings of Augustine, the theologian-bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33. Krister Stendahl observed, “it has always been a puzzling fact that Paul meant so relatively little for the thinking of the church during the first 350 years of its history. To be sure, he is honored and quoted, but, in the theological perspective of the west, it seems that Paul’s great insight into justification by faith was forgotten.” Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Greeks* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 83.

⁵ Articles and Covenants is found in the canonical volume known simply as the Doctrine and Covenants. First issued in 1835, the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams & Co), or D&C as it is often referred to by Mormons, has gone through numerous editions. A handful of revelations were added after 1835 and the numbering of D&C Sections and verses has been modified over the years. The citations in this article are from the most recent (1981) LDS edition. In this instance, the quoted line is from D&C 20:30.

Augustine found the term useful because of its linguistic potential to convey what he believed to be the dual aspects of justification—that it both imputed and imparted righteousness to the Christian believer. The idea of imputed or ascribed righteousness preserved the secular, judicial connotations of justification and evoked the image of humans receiving a “not guilty” verdict in the court of God’s justice whereby their sins are forgiven. In this sense, justification is, as expressed in the title of a recent volume on the subject, “the amnesty of grace.”⁶ In the elegant imagery of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians (Col 2:14), justification is Christ “blotting out the handwriting ... that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (KJV). By imputing Christ’s righteousness to believers, God does not say that believers themselves are righteous, but that the demands of justice have been satisfied by Christ so that Christians are viewed by God as if they were righteous. Theologians call this aspect of justification “forensic,” a word derived from the Latin “foro,” or forum, which anciently was the Roman public square or marketplace where judicial action might take place.

For Augustine, though, justification was more than merely a forensic act in which the believer’s sins were, so to speak, erased from the heavenly ledgers. Augustine understood justification to entail genuine moral and spiritual regeneration.⁷ Just as a pardoned criminal may have had no change of heart and may have the same disposition to commit the crime over again, the need still exists for an inner transformation of the forgiven sinner. Thus, for Augustine and Western Christian theology for a millennium afterward, justification included what Protestant Reformers would later call “sanctification,” the Spirit-driven process of purging pardoned Christians of fallen nature’s sinful inclinations and

⁶ The phrase is Sharon Ringe’s translation of Elsa Tamez’s book title *Contra Toda Condena*. See Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. Sharon Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁷ Augustine liked to imagine that etymologically *iustificare* was a combination of *justum* (just/righteous) and *facere*, (to make righteous).

imparting a habit of inner holiness. As the thirteenth-century theologian John of La Rochelle reasoned, if justification “places nothing within them, [then] there has been no change on their part.” What Catholics believed resulted from this placing of divine grace within newborn Christians was created or habitual grace, something actually inside them, that was part of them, that over time effected not merely a change in their status before God but a real change in their nature.⁸ In contrast with the forensic dimension, this was known as the “effective” aspect of justification.

In the Protestant Reformation, though not so much at Luther’s instigation as we shall see, effective justification came to be known as sanctification and was separated logically and sequentially from forensic justification.⁹ Thereafter, the term justification was reserved solely for the forensic crediting of Christ’s righteousness to individual sinners. Sanctification was understood to refer to the subsequent and ongoing process of restoring to humans the *imago dei*, the moral, spiritual image of God, that had been lost in the Fall. Mormons inherited this justification-sanctification distinction from the Reformation. Though notionally separate, the two concepts were viewed as a complementary pair that could not be separated in describing the full work of salvation. The process of sanctification, however it relates to justification, is akin to what Eastern Orthodoxy intends with its teaching of theosis or deification. John McGuckin, professor of Byzantine Christian Studies at Columbia University, defines theosis simply as “the process of the sanctification of Christians whereby they become progressively conformed

⁸ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 68, 48.

⁹ The renowned nineteenth-century German scholar Albrecht Ritschl remarked that one could “search in vain to find any theologian of the Middle Ages” who made a “deliberate distinction between justification and regeneration.” Ritschl, *Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh, 1872), 90–91. Alister McGrath adds: “The notional distinction that came to emerge in the sixteenth century between *iustificatio* and *regeneratio* (or *sanctification*) provides one of the best ways of distinguishing between Catholic and Protestant understandings of justification, marking the Reformers’ discontinuity with the earlier western theological tradition.” McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 71.

to God.”¹⁰ Church fathers in the Greek East found a number of supporting images and metaphors for theosis—union with God, adopted sonship, similitude, transformation.

One of the more common images, and one that recent Finnish Luther scholars argue has profound resonance in the thought of Martin Luther, is “participation in the divine nature,” a phrase originating in 2 Peter 1:4. This passage is interpreted to mean that Christians “participate” or share in the divine nature of the Spirit of Christ that dwells in them. As a result, they, too, can be said to be divine. This also is how most church fathers construed the famous declaration in Ps 82:6, “ye are gods.” Christians were gods by association, as is clearly implied in the Greek word *koinonia* used in 2 Peter 1:4 which elsewhere is typically translated “communion” or “fellowship.” This sense of communal participation in the divine nature is often missed by modern users of the King James Bible because it renders *koinonia* in 2 Peter as “partakers.” Given the evolution of the English language, today “partakers” conveys more of an idea of individualist acquisition than was intended in the original Greek.

As the patristic discussion of how Christians participate in the divine nature developed, it became far richer than seeing participation as merely basking associatively in God’s reflected glory. The church fathers found a key in the Incarnation. By becoming flesh, Christ took on fallen, sinful human nature, our human nature, precisely so he could purify and divinize it. As the fourth-century Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa expressed it in his Catechetical Oration, when the second person of the Godhead became flesh, divinity “was transfused throughout our nature, so that our nature, by virtue of this transfusion, might itself become divine.” Theologians have dubbed this concept the “exchange formula” and many of the early fathers from Irenaeus to Athanasius taught it in words like “God became man so man could become god.”

¹⁰ McGuckin, “The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians,” 95.

Such expressions have surprised and impressed Mormons, who, without fully understanding them, have occasionally lifted them out of context and held them up as proof that early Christians taught LDS doctrine. Yet Athanasius's couplet should not be equated with Lorenzo Snow's "as god now is, man may become." The "exchange" signifies an exchange of characteristics and attributes, not a change in being or substance. Humans remain humans and God continues to be God. Christians, whether in the Greek East or Latin West, consistently upheld what they considered the unbreachable wall separating God and human beings, expressed as the ontological opposites of Creator and creature, divinity and humanity, infinite and finite, self-existent and contingent.

At this point, we turn to Martin Luther's theology of justification and explore its compatibility with the idea of participation in the divine nature. In doing so, we enlist a major, recent revision in how Luther's theology should be understood. Led by Tuomo Mannermaa and his colleagues at the University of Helsinki, a new perspective on Luther emerged in the 1970s. Mannermaa traces the genesis of this new perspective to an ecumenical dialogue that took place between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church. "At the very beginning of our studies," recalls Mannermaa, "we came to the conclusion that Luther's idea of the presence of Christ in faith could form a basis for the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue. The indwelling of Christ as grasped in the Lutheran tradition implies a real participation in God, and it corresponds in a special way to the Orthodox doctrine of participation in God, namely the doctrine of theosis."¹¹

What from a Lutheran perspective makes the Finnish Luther research so radical is that it demonstrates that unlike later Lutheranism Luther himself did not disentangle the sanctifying and transformative effects of the *inhabitatio Christi* (the indwelling of Christ) from the forensic aspect of justification. Luther rejects the idea that Christ

¹¹ Mannermaa, "Why is Luther so Fascinating?" in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

“grants righteousness and [yet] remains absent himself.”¹² The Finnish scholarship gives fresh emphasis to the importance of the resurrected Christ in Luther’s thought. Traditional Lutheranism has emphasized Luther’s “theology of the cross” which sees the crucifixion as the culmination of Christ’s atoning work. Mannermaa and his colleagues, however, have demonstrated that for Luther justification required both cross and resurrection. The crucifixion may have conquered sin and made possible the forensic dimension of justification, but the resurrection made possible the indwelling of Christ which leads to human participation in the divine nature. Luther sometimes referred to the forgiveness of sins as God’s *gratia* (grace or favor) and his indwelling presence as his *donum* (gift). *Gratia* was Christ working outside us; *donum* was Christ inwardly present in faith. Both, however, were the work of Christ and both were part of justification.

Luther put it this way in a 1525 sermon: “We are filled with God, and he pours into us all gifts and grace and we are filled with his Spirit so that it makes us [righteous]. . . his life lives in us, his blessedness makes us blessed, and his love awakens love in us. In short, he fills us in order that everything that he is and everything he can do might be in us in all its fullness, and work powerfully, so that we might become completely divine—not having only a small part of God, or merely some parts of him, but having all his fullness ... so that all you say, all you think and everywhere you go—in sum: that your whole life be completely divine.”¹³ This was Luther’s gloss on Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” In technical theological terms, Luther espoused what is called the *communicatio idiomatum*, the sharing of properties or attributes. “Because [Christ] lives in me,” wrote Luther, “whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ’s;

¹² *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, 368, as cited in Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating,” 19.

¹³ Combined translation from WA 17 I, 438, 14–28 and Simo Peura, “What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation,” 92; and Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 45.

nevertheless, it is mine as well, by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit.”¹⁴

In addition to the long recognized Christological concerns of Luther, Finnish scholarship has highlighted what it calls Luther’s “pneumatological orientations,” that is, Luther’s appreciation of the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in the justification-divinization process. When Luther speaks of the “indwelling Christ” or “participating in Christ,” it is with the clear understanding that it is “the indwelling Spirit [that] establish[es] and maintain[s] the risen Christ and the believer in a living union.”¹⁵ The Holy Spirit preserves believers in this union “until we are, as Luther states, ‘perfectly pure and holy people, full of goodness and righteousness, completely freed from sin, death, and all evil, living in new, immortal, and glorified bodies.’” In other words, explains Simo Peura, “the work of the Holy Spirit continues throughout our whole life until death, when we become totally transformed into Christ and thus possess within us the complete form of Christ.”¹⁶ “Union with” or “participation in” Christ may not be part of the Mormon vocabulary, but Latter-day Saints do speak of enjoying the “companionship of” the Holy Ghost and understand such *koinonia* as the principal means of bringing holiness to the human soul.

“The participation of the believer in Christ,” remarks Mannermaa colleague Sammeli Juntunen in explaining Luther’s position, is “something so ‘ontologically intense’ that the actions which Christ works in a Christian can be considered the actions of the Christian himself.”¹⁷ Understood in this fashion, such actions or good works allow no room for human self-righteousness or pride. The Christian “always stays spiritually nihil ex se (nothing outside himself),” writes Juntunen, “having esse gratiae (a state of grace) only when and insofar

¹⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, cited in Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 40.

¹⁵ Markku Antola as cited in Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, 65.

¹⁶ Peura, “What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Justification,” 91.

¹⁷ Juntunen, “Luther and Metaphysics,” 155–156.

as he or she participates in Christ ”¹⁸ This is a crucial point in Luther’s theology. Godly attributes are not detachable qualities that “cling to the human heart apart from Christ.”¹⁹ Deification is about community, not autonomy. If he is not present, we are not righteous. We may live moral, upright lives on our own, but in God’s eyes this is not salvifically meritorious righteousness. This only exists in Christ and in us only through our participation in Him.

Here I think the internet can serve as a helpful analogy. Christ’s divinity, his righteousness, his godly attributes are like the incomprehensibly powerful internet. As long as we are connected to the internet, all its wonders become available to us, we share in its power and benefits. We become infinitely knowledgeable, but not independently so. Similarly, when through justification we become Christ’s and enter into union with him, we participate in his righteousness, we become partakers of the divine nature, but we are still human. And while by this connection, this union, we can truly be said to be gods, it is not in the sense that we personally, independently, have become gods. We are not new internets, as it were, rivals to the world wide web. Such is beyond us. No matter how much we download from the internet or how often we use it, there will always be a vast qualitative difference between what Google or God knows and what we know. Similarly, no matter how responsive we are to the indwelling Christ or how much his infusion of *caritas*, the pure love of Christ, creates certain habits of grace within us, we are still improved human beings at best, not new and separate deities. The created can never become the Uncreated. It is a matter of participation not possession, community not autonomy. For Christians like Luther who begin with the presupposition of an unbridgeable gap between humanity and divinity, deification must always remain a metaphor.

Mormons, of course, have a dramatically different ontology. Late in his life, Joseph Smith explicitly began to bridge the ontological

¹⁸ Ibid, 153.

¹⁹ Luther, Lectures on Galatians, cited in Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 29.

gap between God and humanity by teaching that God, angels, and humans are all basically the same class of being, the same "race," so to speak, except at vastly different points in their evolution. God was once human and humans can become gods. This was one of Joseph's most distinctive doctrines, one that is virtually without parallel in Christendom, East or West. In contrast to standard Christian thought, Mormons do not believe God created the universe, they believe he is part of it, and is bound by its laws, which, over time, he learned and mastered until he achieved perfect control over all the forces of the universe. At some point in the distant past, God chose to act in a way that made such progress possible for countless other beings. It was then that he created (Joseph Smith preferred the word "organized") the spirits or souls that would eventually animate the human population. How he did so is not explained in Mormon thought, but the process is referred to using the mortal metaphor of "birth." Thus, this primordial generation of souls is known as the spirit birth of humanity. Because birth carries connotations of genetic transference and replication, the image has given rise to the popular Mormon expression that people are "gods in embryo." This pre-mortal spirit birth constituted future humans as literal children of God with the potential to "grow up" and become like their divine Parent. Thus, humans belong not only to the same genus, but to the same family as God.²⁰

In addition to abolishing the Creator-creature divide, the Mormon doctrine of deification differs from other Christian conceptualizations of divinization in two other important ways. One pertains to purpose, the other to timetable, and both are interrelated. For most Christians, the purpose of God's salvific work is to prepare human creatures to enter his presence and behold his glory. This is known as

²⁰ The most historically nuanced discussion of the emergence of the idea of a pre-mortal "birth" of human spirits is Craig Harrell "Preexistence in Mormon Thought, 1828-1844," *BYU Studies*. Blake Ostler offers a more philosophical and theological engagement with the idea in *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*.

the “beatific vision.”²¹ The trajectory of earth-life divinization leads to “glorification,” what Luther described to as the complete purification and sanctification of faithful Christians at the resurrection that prepares them to thereafter enjoy the beatific vision for eternity. For Mormons, on the other hand, deification entails much more than becoming sufficiently holy to enter God’s presence and praise his name forever. Deification is about God’s literal children progressing to the point that they are able to do the very things their divine Parent does. Rather than becoming God’s awe-filled audience forever, Mormons expect that God’s deified children will become his active, albeit subordinate, collaborators in cosmic endeavors, partners in the family business, so to speak. But this will not happen at the resurrection. Rather, it will require a vast amount of grace-empowered, post-mortal development over eons of time to enable them to reach that point.

Of course, it would be possible to theorize that God could miraculously and instantly confer the requisite knowledge and power on his resurrected children, but Mormon appreciation for the value of doing one’s part is projected into the afterlife and privileges that long and gradual process of learning and development Latter-day Saints call “eternal progression.” From the LDS standpoint, compared to the relatively little progress accomplished in mortality, deification should be seen as primarily an afterlife phenomenon. Joseph Smith was only stating the obvious when he remarked that the knowledge necessary for exaltation or deification was “not all to be comprehended in this world.”²² Indeed, it would “take a long time after the grave to understand the whole” of it.²³

²¹ In one of Luther’s “table talks,” he expressed his musings about eternal life in heaven as “a life without change ... without anything to do. ‘But I think,’ he suggested, ‘we will have enough to do with God. Accordingly [the apostle] Philip put it well when he said, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.’ This will be our very dear preoccupation.” Cited in McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: a History*, 148.

²² This statement is from Joseph Smith’s famous 7 April 1844 funeral sermon for church elder King Follett. In almost identical words, it was recorded by

The expectation of a lengthy period of substantive post-mortal progress toward godhood means that most Latter-day Saints have the same humility about the vast qualitative distance between themselves and God in this life that other Christians do. They tend to view the prospect of even far-off deification as something almost incomprehensible given their current, limited level of god-likeness. Certainly no Mormon prophet or apostle is on record as saying that either he himself or anyone else has climbed the ladder of godliness to the point that here in mortality they are a mere rung away from being crowned gods. Moreover, when deification is discussed in LDS church circles today it sometimes lacks its nineteenth-century focus on exercising cosmic power or ruling over an innumerable posterity on worlds the deified themselves have created. Rather, the stress is on the mortal sojourn and what it means, or should mean, in the here and now to be a child of God. Becoming like God rather than becoming a god seems to be the more common emphasis.

Teenage Mormon girls, for instance, affirm in their weekly gatherings that they are literal daughters of a Heavenly Father from whom they have “inherited divine qualities” which they promise to “strive to develop.” Class discussion is not usually directed toward some distant prospect of morphing into goddesses, but rather toward how, with the help of the Holy Spirit, godly virtues can be cultivated in this life. Where it will all lead in the next life is only vaguely understood and rarely discussed. Given how difficult it is, in any case, for finite mortals to truly understand much about an infinite God, it is unlikely that during their mortal sojourn Latter-day Saints will ever have a very profound comprehension of what it might mean for humans to grow into godhood. Thus, although between Mormons and other Christians the ontological assumptions pertaining to theosis are significantly different,

three separate note taking scribes: Willard Richards, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton. See *Words of Joseph Smith*, 341, 350, 358.

²³ This is how Wilford Woodruff recorded Joseph’s words at the 7 April 1844 funeral sermon. See *Words of Joseph Smith*, 345. Clerk William Clayton reported them as it “will be a great while before you learn the last” (*Words of Joseph Smith*, 358).

and their views regarding its time frame and end result vary dramatically, interpretations of the process involved during the span of one's mortal existence are closer.

In the final chapter of our analysis, it remains to explore the dynamic driving that sanctifying, deifying process. Mormons view it as a synergistic balance between divine grace and human effort. The apostle Paul encouraged the Philippians: "work out your own salvation," but he did so with the clear acknowledgment in the very next verse that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do" (Philip 2:12-13). We humans may be what the medieval Scholastics called the "efficient cause" of righteous behavior, that is, the immediate agent in bringing it about, but at every step of the way from spiritual rebirth onward, an empowering, facilitating, gracious God is the real cause.

Nonetheless, throughout much of Mormon history, there has been a tendency to stress the human contribution. This seems to be the result of several factors. First and foremost is the stunning potency of the idea that human spirits are God's literal children, endowed with seeds of divinity. This elevated anthropology has been reinforced by the way in which the practical demands of colonization and community-building in the second half of the nineteenth century infused Mormon preaching on spiritual growth with a pragmatic, "can-do" quality. Moreover, an early revelation counseled the Saints to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for," the revelation affirmed, "the power is in them." (D&C 58:27-28). This emphasis was so entrenched in Mormon discourse by the twentieth century that the astute Catholic sociologist of religion Thomas O'Dea, who did field work among the Mormons in the 1950s, was prompted to observe that "Mormonism has elaborated an American theology of self-deification through effort, an active transcendentalism of achievement."²⁴

While over the years Latter-day Saints have clearly and consistently urged human effort, the other side of the divine-human synergy has not been entirely forgotten. One early revelation described the

²⁴ O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 154.

process of inheriting God's fullness as receiving "grace [upon] grace" (D&C 93:20).²⁵ And in one of Joseph Smith's most famous sermons on the matter, he is reported to have declared, "You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves ... the same as all Gods have done; by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit ... enthroned in everlasting power."²⁶ The invocation of grace in such passages is a reminder that even "gods in embryo" cannot progress alone. They need grace as well as race.

Part of the challenge in properly evaluating Mormon theology is that grace, for a variety of reasons, is not the Mormon term-of-choice for acknowledging God's gratuitous blessings and assistance in life. Still, most Mormons willingly acknowledge God's crucial role using other words. They may quote the Book of Mormon prophet who said, "I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak, but I will glory in the Lord ... for in his strength I can do all things" (Alma 26:12, 16). They may speak of God's "tender mercies." They may acknowledge "promptings" from the Holy Ghost. They may testify of divine aid in overcoming personal weaknesses and perennial temptations. In such ways, they often publicly credit God's goodness in their monthly Testimony Meetings. In short, when pressed, few Latter-day Saints deny that real progress toward godliness is the result of divine grace, even though they rarely employ the term. They might even concur with Augustine's famous remark that on Judgment day, "when God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts."²⁷ And yet for pastoral and

²⁵ The text actually reads "grace for grace" as in KJV John 1:16, which it is clearly echoing. Other modern English translations such as the NRSV render it "grace upon grace." Noteworthy is the fact that a year before dictating this revelation, when Joseph was revising this part of the John, he reworded the phrase to read "immortality and eternal life, through his grace." See *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible*, 443.

²⁶ "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5 (Aug 15, 1844), 614. This published version of the Prophet's speech represents an amalgamation of notes taken by William Clayton and Thomas Bullock.

²⁷ "et cum Deus coronat merita nostra nihil aliud coronet quam munera sua." Epistola 194, Caput 5, 19, *Patrologia Latinum Database*. This statement is repeated in the Roman Missal—Prefatio I de Sanctis.

practical reasons, Mormon teachers choose to dwell on the human role. Singing the praises of one's amazing fishing pole or celebrating the wonder of a stream full of trout does not put fish on the dinner table. The downside of such a "do-your-part" emphasis is that acknowledgment and adulation of God's grace sometimes takes a back seat to exhortations toward Christian striving.

The delicate balance between grace and works is sometimes portrayed by Mormons using the analogy of a ladder. Fallen humanity finds itself at the bottom of a deep pit with no way out. The atonement of Jesus Christ is the rescue ladder that is let down to deliver hapless humanity. But the ladder is not an escalator. Mormons decry "cheap grace," just as the famous twentieth-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who coined the phrase. In the LDS view, fallen humanity is not carried up the ladder. Believers still have to do the climbing themselves through repentance and righteous living. Yet, in the end, despite all their willingness to climb, if no ladder was provided, no escape from the pit would be possible. Thus, in the Book of Mormon, the grace of Christ's redemptive work is given primacy. This is how the relationship between grace and works is phrased: "By grace we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 52:23). Though this statement is sometimes taken out of context and interpreted differently, the best contextual reading understands "after all we can do" rhetorically rather than sequentially. Thus, rather than stressing human efforts and relegating to grace the role of merely making up the shortfall, as this passage is sometimes construed, in context the verse intends to glorify Christ's atonement by affirming that after "all we can do," in the sense of "after all is said and done," it is by the grace of God that we are saved.

Should there be an inclination to do so, Mormon scripture provides ample resources to expound the analogy of the ladder in ways that demonstrate considerable sympathy with the grace-appreciating spirit of mainstream Christianity. Such amplification would emphasize that literally each step of the way is made possible by God's grace. In the Book of Mormon, for instance, King Benjamin reminds his people: God is "preserving you from day to day by lending you breath ... and

even supporting you from one moment to another” (Mosiah 2:21). Not only did he provide each and every rung of the redemptive ladder in the first place, but gratuitously he bestows on humans the necessary physical strength, energy, and courage to take each step. This assistance can be understood both in the sense of what the Scholastics called “secondary causation” and as an additional grace, a special, enabling intervention almost like a divine tail wind or boost that helps lift the foot to the next step. Expanded thus, the analogy of the ladder is both consistent with LDS scripture and essentially equivalent to how most Christians see God’s grace functioning between initial spiritual rebirth and final glorification.

If Mormons have been misunderstood as denying the role of divine grace, they themselves have often misjudged the Protestant position on works. When Lutherans and others quote Ephesians 1:8–9 that humans are “saved by grace, not by works, lest any man boast,” Latter-day Saints tend to get defensive and hear a denigration of works rather than the intended affirmation of grace as the source of salvation. “Not by works” gets understood as “without works.” Yet, neither Luther nor any other mainstream Christian theologian ever espoused such a view. In his famous “Preface” to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in a statement that could have emanated from any thoughtful Mormon, Luther wrote: “O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works ... is an unbeliever.”²⁸ To be sure, Luther is quite concerned to teach that it is only by and through the grace of God that humans can perform truly good works because only grace can initiate them for the right reason and only grace can power their proper performance. Because Luther views such works as the natural fruit of one’s participation

²⁸ Cited in Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 101.

in Christ, he calls them *opera deificata* (divinized works).”²⁹ As such, they are an integral part of deification.

How then, at the close of our brief comparative journey, shall we summarize the soteriological similarities and differences encountered? Perhaps it can best be done by invoking the proverbial image of the half full/half empty cup. On the one hand, our comparative cup must be acknowledged to be half empty. Even this introductory review has revealed enough significant differences between the Mormon understanding of deification and that of any other Christian group that they can hardly be equated. Though at times the words may be similar, the tune, so to speak, is quite distinct. Yet, such genuine differences should not obscure the commonalities discovered. Because Mormons are as committed to the pursuit of godliness in this life as they are to achieving godhood in the next, their understanding of justification and sanctification, their views of theosis during mortality, shares much with other Christian soteriologies. Even with Luther’s monergistic emphasis on Christ dwelling in, and working righteousness through, faithful believers, synergistic Mormons have, as we seen, more points of contact than usually imagined. Too often overlooked are the rich resources in LDS thought for a robust theology of grace and a deep appreciation for the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In emphasizing the “half fullness” of the comparative cup, we can echo a common refrain from ecumenical dialogues of all sorts: let us celebrate the common ground we share without contorting or collapsing the significant differences that also exist between us. To build such bridges of mutual understanding while maintaining intellectual and institutional integrity is a useful endeavor in our global age and the very kind of comparative work that in the 21st century should characterize the burgeoning field of Mormon Studies.

²⁹ Cited in Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 46.