

LORENZO SNOW'S COUPLET:  
“AS MAN NOW IS, GOD ONCE WAS;  
AS GOD NOW IS, MAN MAY BE”:  
“NO FUNCTIONING PLACE IN  
PRESENT-DAY MORMON DOCTRINE?”  
A RESPONSE TO RICHARD MOUW

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*Man may become as God himself! Let those who disagree howl  
as they may!*

Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie<sup>1</sup>

I. RICHARD MOUW'S TABERNACLE APOLOGY

During his appearance with Ravi Zacharias in the Mormon Tabernacle on November 14, 2004, Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw apologized on behalf of evangelicals for “bearing false witness” against Mormons. When challenged about his remarks, Mouw sent out an e-mail identifying places where he felt evangelicals had misrepresented Mormon teaching. Among these was the claim that “Mormonism teaches that God was once a human being like us, and we can become gods just like God is now,”<sup>2</sup> a belief, Mouw goes on to assure us, that has “no functioning place in present-day Mormon doctrine.” As anyone familiar with Mormonism will immediately recognize, Mouw's words allude to the famous couplet coined by the fifth LDS Church President Lorenzo Snow:

As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be.<sup>3</sup>

Is Mouw correct in saying that the teaching contained in this couplet no longer has any functioning place in present-day Mormonism? In trying to answer this question, we must begin by looking at where Snow's couplet came from and why it caught on as an important summary of the Mormon doctrinal system.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Life Beyond* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1986) 152. The comment is made immediately after a poem by Lorenzo Snow that includes the famous couplet discussed in the present article.

<sup>2</sup> Soon after the Tabernacle event, the internet was flooded with copies of Mouw's response to criticisms. The version I use is one sent to me upon request by Fred Messick, Associate Vice President of Public Affairs at Fuller Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Often incorrectly quoted: “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become.”

## II. THE ORIGINS OF SNOW'S COUPLET

In May 1836 Lorenzo Snow visited Kirtland, Ohio, where his sister Eliza R. Snow had moved the previous year after converting to Mormonism. At a blessing meeting in the Kirtland Temple, Snow met Joseph Smith Sr. (the father of the Mormon Prophet) who predicted that he would soon be converted to the LDS faith. Smith Sr. went on to make the astonishing prediction that afterward Snow would "become as great as you can possibly wish—EVEN AS GREAT AS GOD."<sup>4</sup> Snow was baptized two weeks later.

Snow was unable to make anything of this remarkable prediction until shortly before embarking on a mission to England in the spring of 1840. He reports that one day as he sat listening to Elder H. G. Sherwood's explanation of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16),

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 noonday, with wonder and astonishment, the pathway of God and man. I formed the following couplet which expresses the revelation, as it was shown me, and explains Father Smith's dark saying to me at a blessing meeting in the Kirtland Temple, prior to my baptism, as previously mentioned in my first interview with the Patriarch.

As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.<sup>5</sup>

At first Snow did not share his couplet with anyone besides his sister Eliza, and Brigham Young, with whom he served in England. But in January of 1843, after returning from his mission, Snow mentioned it to the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said to him: "Brother Snow, that is true gospel doctrine, and it is a revelation from God to you."<sup>6</sup>

## III. THE COUPLET AND THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH

1. *The King Follett Discourse.* On 7 April 1844 Joseph Smith provided public confirmation to the theology of Snow's couplet in the famous King Follett Discourse. This is clearly seen in the following excerpts:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . 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. . . . It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself . . . 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, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace

<sup>4</sup> Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1884) 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 46. This text provides a curious setting since the parable teaches almost the exact opposite of what was revealed to Snow.

<sup>6</sup> LeRoi C. Snow, "Devotion to Divine Inspiration," *Improvement Era* (June 1919) 656.

to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.<sup>7</sup>

The relation between the Prophet's teaching here and his own revelation did not escape Lorenzo Snow's notice. According to LeRoi C. Snow, Lorenzo Snow, in his own copy of the *Times and Seasons*, "which I now have . . . drew more particular attention, with his own indelible pencil, to this part of the Prophet's King Follett sermon than to any other reference in all the six volumes."<sup>8</sup>

As the King Follett Discourse unfolds, it becomes clear that the Prophet Joseph Smith expected his followers to treat what he was saying there with utmost seriousness. Earlier, he had identified as the object of the sermon "to find out the character of the only wise and true God, and what kind of a being he is." "But if I fail to do it," he went on to say, "it becomes my duty to renounce all further pretensions to revelations and inspirations, or to be a prophet; and I should be like the rest of the world—a false teacher."<sup>9</sup> Yet after this he goes on to sound a note of confidence, even applying language used of Jesus to himself: "I will prove that the world is wrong, by showing what God is . . . for I speak as one having authority" (see Matt 7:29).<sup>10</sup>

He thus imposes on his listeners the conclusion they must draw if he turns out to be wrong about what he says about God in the King Follett Discourse. They are to consider him a "false teacher," and approve of his renouncing "all further pretensions to revelations and inspirations, or to be a prophet." Another way of saying this is that if by any defensible standard, Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, then the King Follett Discourse is the product of prophetic inspiration. The comfortable option of continuing to consider Smith a true prophet and the King Follett Discourse mere speculation is not an option Smith himself was willing to leave open.

*2. Joseph Smith's last public discourse.* In his last public sermon, given on 16 June 1844, Joseph Smith again turns to the subject of the history of God. This time he offers what he felt sure was biblical support for the idea that God the Father had a father. He found it in the language of the King James Version's translation of Rev 1:6: "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father . . . [italics added]," in accordance with which, he says, there clearly exists "a God above the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup>

Smith was incorrect in seeing this as the true implication of the passage, a better translation being "unto his [Jesus'] God and Father" (see, e.g., NIV). This he seemed to have recognized more than a decade earlier when he had,

<sup>7</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (comp. Joseph Fielding Smith; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1976) 345–47.

<sup>8</sup> The reference to "this part" refers to the context in which the first of the above three quotations appeared.

<sup>9</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 344.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 345.

<sup>11</sup> *Millennial Star* 24:108.

under the guidance of inspiration, corrected this same passage in his Inspired Version of the Bible. This version was produced in the early 1830s and rendered the phrase “unto God, his Father.” In the present sermon, however, he declares the KJV rendering “altogether correct in the translation.”<sup>12</sup> Thus we find the teaching of Lorenzo Snow’s couplet being confirmed in final discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

#### IV. THE ONGOING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COUPLET IN SNOW’S CAREER

Throughout his life Snow continued to stress the centrality of the teaching of the couplet. In a discourse published in 1894 he described it “as a star continually before me.”<sup>13</sup> There was never any question for Snow of it having arisen from the realm of speculation on his part. It came to him as a “vision, which was just as clear as the sun ever shone.”<sup>14</sup> In 1892 he included it in a poem, part of which reads as follows:

This royal path has long been trod  
By righteous men, each now a God:  
  
As Abra’m, Isaac, Jacob, too,  
First babes, then men—to gods they grew.  
As man now is, our God once was;  
As now God is, so man may be,—  
Which doth unfold man’s destiny.<sup>15</sup>

Nor did the couplet cease to represent a central element in Snow’s teaching after he was set apart as the fifth president of the LDS Church on September 13, 1898. Indeed, he re-emphasized it in the strongest possible terms in a sermon preached only five days later, when, speaking on “the highest glory to which it is possible for man to attain,” Snow said:

<sup>12</sup> Some editions of the sermon punctuate in such a way as to avoid Joseph’s having meant that God the Father had a Father by placing a comma after *above* so that it has Joseph saying instead: “. . . there being a God above[,] the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (e.g. JS-H 6:474). There is no indication in the original manuscript of the sermon suggesting the inclusion of a comma (see *The Words of Joseph Smith* [2d rev. ed./1st computer ed.; comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1996] 379 [Gospelink CD-Rom]), nor is the sense it gives borne out in the rest of the sermon. Quite the contrary, the idea that God the Father had a father is explicitly endorsed at other places in the sermon:

If Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and John discovered that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, had a Father, you may suppose that *he* had a Father also. Where was there ever a son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? Whenever did a tree or anything spring into existence without a progenitor? . . . Hence if Jesus had a Father, can we not also believe that *he* had a Father also? (*Millennial Star* 24:109–10)

<sup>13</sup> *Millennial Star* 54:770 (Dec. 3, 1894). This sermon, which was originally preached on 5 October 1894, is reprinted in *Collected Discourses* (5 vols.; comp. and ed. Brian H. Stuy; Woodland Hills, UT: B. H. S. Publishers, 1987–92) 4.159–63. The statement quoted here is on p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 772, and *Collected Discourses* 4.162.

<sup>15</sup> LeRoi C. Snow, “Devotion to Divine Inspiration” 660.

That exalted position was made manifest to me at a very early day. I had a direct revelation of this. It was most perfect and complete. If there ever was a thing revealed to man perfectly, clearly, so that there could be no doubt or dubiety, this was revealed to me, and it came in these words: "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."<sup>16</sup>

About three months before his death, which occurred on 10 October 1901, Snow again affirmed the truth of the couplet in the following words:

That fulfilled Father Smith's declaration. Nothing was ever revealed more distinctly than that was to me. Of course, now that it is so well known it may not appear such a wonderful manifestation, but when I received it, the knowledge was marvelous to me.<sup>17</sup>

#### V. THE COUPLET IN RECENT TIMES

Mouw's assertion concerning the teaching of Lorenzo's Snow's couplet is remarkable given the fact that (for most of this writer's lifetime, at least) it has fallen into the category of things Mormons know even if they know nothing else about their faith. The Osmond Brothers even included a song that alluded to this teaching called *Before the Beginning* on their 1973 album *The Plan*.<sup>18</sup>

If by "no functioning place" Mouw means that the couplet is no longer taught or mentioned in official and semi-official Mormon publications, then he is again incorrect. On that level all one needs to do is flip through the pages of the LDS Church's official weekly newspaper, the *LDS Church News*, in order to find examples of the couplet being taught. The September 13, 1997 issue, for example, included this quotation from Albert E. Brown: "Temple Marriage is not just another form of church wedding; it is a divine covenant with the Lord that if we are faithful to the end, we may become as God now is."<sup>19</sup> This passage not only quotes the couplet, it also clearly explains its continuing functioning place as a lynch-pin doctrine of the LDS Church relating to Temple Marriage. That LDS children continue to be taught the couplet can be seen in the nifty "President Lorenzo Snow Crossword," included in

<sup>16</sup> "Unchangable Love of God" (Sept. 18, 1898) in *Collected Discourses* 5.453.

<sup>17</sup> The clipping "The Grand Destiny of Man," is a sermon by Lorenzo Snow delivered on July 14, 1901 (*Journal History* [July 20, 1901] 4). See also LeRoi C. Snow, "Devotion to Divine Inspiration" 661 and *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* (comp. Clyde J. Williams; Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1984) 2. For further examples where Snow refers to the couplet during his tenure as fifth president of the LDS Church see the entry for Wednesday, June 12, 1901, in *A Ministry of Meetings: The Apostolic Diaries of Rudger Clawson* (Significant Mormon Diaries Series 6; ed. Stan Larson; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books & Smith Research Associates, 1993) 281–82, and "Notable Reunion of Weber Stake," *Deseret News* (June 15, 1901) 1, reproduced in *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* 1.

<sup>18</sup> In the beginning/We'd be living as we would be/He once was/To look at him, to look at me/And think someday like him I'll be/What more?/Ever since we came to be/With the plan, we learned to see/We control infinity/What more?/What more?

<sup>19</sup> "Quote from the Past," in the "This Week in Church History," section of *Church News* (Sept. 13, 1997) 2. The quote comes from a 1948 general conference address. For other examples from the 1990s see *Church News* (May 22, 1993) 9 and *Church News* (April 23, 1994) 16.

the March 2002 “Funstuff” section of the LDS Church’s official Children’s magazine *Friend*, where we read as the clue for 10 across:

He wrote as a couplet (two lines of verse) a revelation that he had and that the Prophet Joseph Smith said was true: *As man \_\_\_\_\_ is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.*<sup>20</sup>

The correct answer filling in the blank is “now.” Notice in this case that the couplet is presented to Mormon children not merely as a “revelation” from God, but also as one that Joseph Smith himself had declared to be true. So again, how can Mouw be correct when he accuses Christians of bearing false witness when they say Mormons teach the couplet?

In defense of his remark Mouw appeals to a number of specific sources, including BYU professors Robert L. Millet and Stephen E. Robinson, as well as the 1997 book *Mormon America* by Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling. Mouw further states that “a number of LDS writers have been formulating the ‘becoming God’ theme in terms that are common in Eastern Orthodoxy.” We must now examine these sources.

1. *Robert L. Millet.* Robert L. Millet is a popular LDS writer and scholar toward whom many evangelicals in Utah and elsewhere look as the voice of a new Mormonism. This voice stands at the front of a concerted effort to drag the LDS Church, kicking and screaming if necessary, to a place much closer to traditional Christianity, though Millet himself firmly denies having any such intentions.<sup>21</sup> Millet, it will be recalled, is one of the authors whose startling affirmation of the teaching of the couplet is at the head of this article.

Mouw credits Millet directly as a source for his claim that the teaching of the couplet is something current Mormon leaders “don’t understand” and that it “has no functioning place in present day Mormon doctrine.”<sup>22</sup> Following up on Mouw’s remarks I wrote to Millet asking him whether he really said the things Mouw credited him with saying. His answer was as follows:

What I explained to Richard Mouw is that the related doctrines of “God was once a man,” and “Man may become as God,” though a part of our doctrinal literature and certainly accepted as truth by Latter-day Saints, are not a part of what might be called central, saving doctrine. President Hinckley, more than once, stated that he did not know much about the doctrine and didn’t know anyone that did. They are not discussed liberally at general conference, nor do we know much beyond the fact that Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow taught them.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hilary Hendricks, “President Lorenzo Snow Crossword,” *Friend* (March 2002) 23.

<sup>21</sup> As he did, for example, in response to a question of mine. I wrote: “I often hear from Evangelicals who look upon you as the voice of a new kind of Mormonism that is in the process of turning its back on the old teachings and aiming to become more mainstream traditional Christian” (e-mail to Millet, Nov. 25, 2004). Millet responded that, “Notwithstanding the repeated suggestion that Latter-day Saints are seeking to move into the mainstream of traditional Christianity, we are not” (e-mail from Bob Millet, Nov. 30, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> “Bob Millet has made the same point to many of us.”

<sup>23</sup> E-mail from Bob Millet, Nov. 30, 2004.

Millet does not go as far as Mouw, who asserts that Mormons do not teach the couplet. Millet says that Mormons regard the teaching of the couplet as true but not central. He does so on the basis of a general reference to public statements by current LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley.

2. *Gordon B. Hinckley's public expressions of agnosticism concerning Snow's Couplet.* The statements Millet alludes to both took place in 1997 and have since become well known to critics of the LDS Church. Richard Ostling in his *TIME Magazine*, *PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* interview, asked President Hinckley whether "God the Father was once a man as we are." Hinckley's answer was: "I don't know that we teach it . . . I haven't heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse."<sup>24</sup> Again in an interview with Don Lattin appearing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in April 1997, Lattin asked Hinckley: "[D]on't Mormons believe that God was once a man?" Hinckley replied: "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."<sup>25</sup>

Richard and Joan Ostling noted how shortly after his public remarks, before an "in-house, all-Mormon audience . . . at General Conference, Hinckley talked about media depictions of the church and, in an apparently pointed reference to those interviews, 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.'<sup>26</sup>

Millet seems to speak of these public statements as if they were official statements of current LDS thinking on the subject. There are three reasons we should not go along with him on this. First, when Luke Wilson, director of the Institute for Religious Research, questioned the First Presidency<sup>27</sup> about the accuracy of the quotation of Hinckley in *TIME Magazine*, F. Michael Watson, Secretary to the First Presidency, responded: "The quotation you reference was taken out of context."<sup>28</sup> By the First Presidency's own account, therefore, Hinckley's public remarks in the *TIME Magazine*, *PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* interview, at least, should not be taken as representative of Hinckley's true position, much less the official teaching of the LDS Church on the matter.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) 422.

<sup>25</sup> Don Lattin, "Gordon B. Hinckley, 'President, Prophet, Seer and Revelator' of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sits at the Top of One of the World's Fastest-Growing Religions," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Sunday, April 13, 1997). See now <http://spires.net/media/chronicle1.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America* 296.

<sup>27</sup> The current First Presidency consists of the Mormon prophet Gordon B. Hinckley, his first counselor, Thomas S. Monson, and his second counselor, James E. Faust.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 421.

<sup>29</sup> This despite the fact that the Ostlings have since proven that Hinckley's remarks were not in fact taken out of context, that Watson's accusation was in fact false (see Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America* 421–22).

Second, there is evidence that Hinckley, who is regularly referred to as the PR Prophet, was being intentionally vague before non-Mormon audiences, perhaps hoping to make Mormonism appear more mainstream Christian. Thus in an interview on Australian television with David Ransom that was aired on 9 November 1997, Hinckley similarly hedged on another foundational Mormon teaching, only to back down when challenged:

*RB:* And God has a wife?

*GBH:* I don't know, but I suppose so. As we have a Father I assume we have a mother.

*RB:* I understood your teachings said that God has a wife?

*GBH:* Yes. Well we . . . Yes we have a mother in heaven. We believe so. We're sons and daughters of God.<sup>30</sup>

The doctrine that God has a wife is very frequently and openly taught in official LDS Church publications. It is declared in the widely publicized "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," issued by the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of the LDS Church in September 1995, that:

ALL HUMAN BEINGS—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.<sup>31</sup>

We see this teaching fleshed out in the model dialogue between a father and his ten-year-old son Dean, in the *Parent's Guide* published and currently used by the LDS Church:

"Who made our bodies first of all?"

"Heavenly Father" was the prompt answer.

"That's right, son. Heavenly Father made Adam and Eve. Who do they look like?"

"Heavenly Father and Jesus, and I guess our heavenly mother too," said the now attentive boy.

"Well, we really don't know much about our heavenly mother, but we can expect that Eve looked like her and Adam looked like Heavenly Father."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> David Ransom, "Compass, Interview with President Gordon B. Hinckley," ABCTV (ABC=Australian Broadcasting Corporation). Accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/interv/hinckley.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," first published in the November 1995 issue of *Ensign* and often since. Quoted here from *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders, Part A* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000) x. See further the chapter "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" in *Eternal Marriage Student Manual: Religion 234 and 235* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001) 83–110.

<sup>32</sup> *The Parent's Guide* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985) 31. It is common in LDS publications to find "Heavenly Father" (caps) but "heavenly mother" (no caps).

Hymn number 292 in the current LDS hymnal, *O My Father*, emphasizes this doctrine in the words: “When I lay this mortal body by, Father, Mother may I meet you in your royal courts on high?” In the context the author, Eliza R. Snow, was not speaking of her earthly parents, but of the heavenly Father and Mother. This same hymn is included in the selection of hymns in the standard LDS Church published introductory book on Mormonism, *Gospel Principles*.<sup>33</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley knows it and refers to it in a discussion on whether the practice of some Mormons of praying to the Mother in heaven is acceptable: “It has been said that the Prophet Joseph Smith made no correction to what Sister Snow had written. Therefore, we have a Mother in heaven.”<sup>34</sup> So when Hinckley began his answer to the question about the wife of God with, “I don’t know, but I assume . . .” he was interjecting a note of doubt that we do not find when he speaks of the doctrine before believing Mormons.

Third, we should not look to the context of interviews with outsiders to find Hinckley’s most authoritative explanations of Mormon doctrine. Such settings are not always entirely friendly, so we should not be surprised to find Hinckley somewhat more guarded than when he is before more accepting audiences. Hinckley himself has remarked that interviews with the public media are “always a worrisome undertaking because one never knows what will be asked.”<sup>35</sup> They seem, he goes on to say, to “know how to ask questions that come at you like a javelin. It is not exactly an enjoyable experience.”

Does Hinckley know very much about the teaching of the couplet? The best answer seems to be the one he gave the faithful at the October 1997 general conference: he understands it “thoroughly.” But for some reason he wanted to play down its significance before non-Mormon audiences. Consistent with such a conclusion is the fact that Hinckley is familiar with the King Follett Discourse and refers to it as “an important doctrinal document in the theology of the Church.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, the *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, published in the same year as the public statements we have been discussing, contains explicit teaching on the couplet:

The whole design of the gospel is to lead us, onward and upward to greater achievement, even, eventually, to godhood. This great possibility was enunciated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the King Follett sermon . . . and emphasized by President Lorenzo Snow. It is this grand and incomparable concept: *As God now is, man may become!*<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted, however, that even though Hinckley is discussing Snow’s couplet, he is not focusing on the first part, the part about God having once

<sup>33</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997) 350–51.

<sup>34</sup> *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1997) 256–57. The remark originally appeared in the article “Daughters of God,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1991) 100.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Thing was Not Done in a Corner,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1996) 48.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, “Nauvoo’s Holy Temple,” *Ensign* (Sept. 1994) 62. I am indebted to Sandra Tanner and Steve Lee for calling my attention to this reference.

<sup>37</sup> *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* 179. This remark was derived from Gordon B. Hinckley, “Don’t Drop the Ball,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1994) 48.

been a man. This is consistent with what Hinckley said in the *San Francisco Chronicle* interview. After Hinckley had said that the couplet contained “some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about,” Don Lattin came back with: “So you’re saying the church is still struggling to understand this?” Hinckley replied: “Well, as God is, man 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. Knowledge, learning, is an eternal thing.”<sup>38</sup>

This raises an interesting question: Is it possible that Hinckley and the present LDS Church are trying to play down the first half of Snow’s couplet while continuing to emphasize the second? Is there a trend toward avoiding discussion of God’s history as a man, while at the same time continuing to affirm our future as Gods? If such a trend is underway, it should not be hard to detect, because the content of official church publications is strictly monitored by the so-called Correlation Committee, which oversees the content of LDS Church publications.

And, indeed, as we look at materials published by the LDS Church itself, as opposed to less official Mormon publishers, which regularly publish much less guarded statements,<sup>39</sup> we discover that this does appear to be a trend.

**3. *Our becoming Gods.*** There are regular and repeated references to our becoming Gods, even retaining the capital “G,” but increasingly few explicit statements about how God moved from being as we are now to his current

<sup>38</sup> Lattin, “Gordon B. Hinckley Interview,” online edition.

<sup>39</sup> In this we distinguish between materials actually published by the LDS Church and those published by popular Mormon publishers like Bookcraft, Covenant, or Deseret Book Company. In these publications much of what has always been said about traditional Mormon teaching continues unabated. See, for example, chapters 5 (“Do Latter-day Saints Believe that Men and Women Can Become Gods?”) and 6 (“What do Latter-day Saints Mean When They Say that God was Once a Man?”) in *Latter-day Saints: 10 Basic Issues* (ed. Robert L. Millet and Noel B. Reynolds; Provo, UT: Foundations for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998) 25–29, 31–33. See also Robert J. Matthews, “The Doctrine of the Atonement: The Revelation of the Gospel to Adam,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume 2: The Pearl of Great Price* (ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1998) 114–15 (Gospelink CD-ROM):

The plan of salvation is older than the earth and has not been added to or changed since that early time . . . Elder Orson Pratt expressed his understanding of the antiquity and unchangeableness of the plan as follows:

The dealing of God toward his children . . . is a pattern after which all other worlds are dealt with. The creation, fall and redemption of all future worlds with their inhabitants, will be upon the same general plan.

The Father of our spirits has only been doing what his progenitors did before him. . . . The same plan of redemption is carried out by which more ancient worlds have been redeemed.

The reason Elder Pratt’s statement makes doctrinal sense is because the plan of God is perfect, and perfection is unchanging. If the plan of redemption varied from time to time, from world to world, or person to person, men would be saved by different means, and salvation would have its bargain days. The “sameness” of the plan of salvation does not mean that every world is an exact monotonous and unimaginative copy of every other, or that there are the same number of inhabitants on each. It means that the same eternal principles, the same kind of mortality and the same kind of salvation are in effect wherever there are gods and devils and men.

exalted state. So, for example, in the 2001 John Taylor volume of the *Teachings of the Presidents of The Church* series, used in the regular weekly meetings at the Ward,<sup>40</sup> each human is called “a God in embryo” [capital “G”] who possesses “in an embryonic state, all the faculties and powers of a God. And when he shall be perfected, and have progressed to maturity, he will be like his Father—a God . . . As the horse, the ox, the sheep, and every living creature, including man, propagates its own species and perpetuates its own kind, so does God perpetuate his.”<sup>41</sup>

The February 2002 issue of the LDS Church magazine *Ensign* reprinted a 1909 First Presidency statement declaring that “the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage [i.e. the human being] is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God [capital ‘G’].”<sup>42</sup> And lest there be any doubt about the continuing authority of this First Presidency statement, we find in the “Making the Most of This Issue” section at the end of the same issue a teaser for it that asks: “Ever wonder about the Church’s official teaching on the creation of mankind and evolution?”<sup>43</sup>

The present edition of the widely used introductory manual *Gospel Principles* declares of those who “receive exaltation in the celestial kingdom” that “[t]hey will become gods” and “will have everything that our Heavenly Father and Jesus have—all power, glory, dominion, and knowledge.”<sup>44</sup>

4. *God’s history as a man who worshipped a more ancient deity.* Early editions of *Gospel Principles* (1978–88) said that “[o]ur spirits resemble our heavenly parents although they have resurrected bodies. We have inherited the potential to develop their divine qualities. If we choose to do so, we can become perfect as they are.”<sup>45</sup> Beginning with the 1992 edition, however, the phrase “although they have resurrected bodies” was dropped.<sup>46</sup>

Among the few explicit discussions of the history of God in recent times in official church publications were (1) the 1985 *Search These Commandments: Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide*; and (2) the LDS Institute (college-level) manual *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* (1992). In the former, we read under the heading “Our Father Advanced and Progressed Until He Became God”:

<sup>40</sup> The Mormon version of the local church.

<sup>41</sup> *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: John Taylor* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001) 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> First Presidency Statement, “The Origin of Man,” *Ensign* (Feb. 2002) 30. The same passage is reproduced in *The Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998) 337.

<sup>43</sup> “Making the Most of This Issue,” *Ensign* (Feb. 2002) 80.

<sup>44</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997) 302. Interestingly, a statement on the same page, which had read, “We can become Gods like our Heavenly Father” in earlier editions, was changed to, “We can become like our Heavenly Father” in the 1997 edition.

<sup>45</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978) 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992) 11.

- President Joseph Fielding Smith said: “*Our Father in heaven, according to the Prophet, had a Father, and since there has been a condition of this kind through all eternity, each Father had a Father*” (*Doctrines of Salvation* 2:42).
- President Joseph F. Smith taught: “I know that God is a being with body, parts and passions. . . . Man was born of woman; Christ, the Savior, was born of woman; and God, the Father was born of woman” (*Church News* [Sept. 19, 1936] 2).<sup>47</sup>

And the first paragraph of the introduction of the latter:

In the relationships of husband and wife and parent and child we begin to approach the divine calling of godhood. Our Heavenly Father and mother live in an exalted state because they achieved a celestial marriage. As we achieve a like marriage we shall become as they are and begin the creation of worlds for our own spirit children.<sup>48</sup>

For a long time the writer expected *Achieving a Celestial Marriage*, which continued to be used as an institute text for some years after Hinckley’s 1997 interviews, would be revised or replaced, because it stood nearly alone among LDS Church published materials in the blatant link it makes between our heavenly parents’ exaltation and our own. This finally happened in 2001 when it was replaced by a new manual that avoids such explicit descriptions of the mechanism underlying the first half of Snow’s couplet.<sup>49</sup>

All of this is not to say, however, that the teaching of the first half of Snow’s couplet has been abandoned or rejected. One needs only to read the reaffirmation of it in the new institute manual *Presidents of the Church* (2003) to know that the LDS Church still embraces both halves.<sup>50</sup> It would further seem an overstatement to say that the LDS Church is de-emphasizing the teaching of the first half of the couplet. What really appears to be happening is that the language used to express the teaching is being intentionally toned down: same teaching, different words used to describe it.

5. *Stephen E. Robinson, Mouw, and the “official” question.* Mouw also had said that “Stephen Robinson insisted, in the book he co-authored with Craig Blomberg, that this [i.e. the teaching of the couplet] is not an official Mormon teaching.” Robinson’s actual words in relation to Snow’s Couplet and the King Follett Discourse are as follows:

<sup>47</sup> *Search These Commandments: Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984) 152.

<sup>48</sup> *Achieving a Celestial Marriage: Student Manual* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Educational System, Department of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 1992) 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Eternal Marriage Student Manual* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> *Presidents of the Church Student Manual* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003). See especially under the heading “He Received a Revelation about Man’s Divine Potential” in the chapter on Lorenzo Snow (pp. 88–89).

Neither statement is scriptural or canonized in the technical sense, and neither has been explained or elucidated to the church in any official manner, but they are so widely accepted by Latter-day Saints that this technical point has become moot.<sup>51</sup>

Robinson actually admits that the teaching of the couplet is “so widely accepted by Latter-day Saints” that the technical question of its canonicity “has become moot.” This is not the point one would have naturally gathered from Mouw’s depiction of what Robinson had said.

Robinson’s statement that it has not been “explained or elucidated to the church in any official manner,” however, is simply false. The reality is that throughout the history of the LDS Church it has been almost continually “explained or elucidated” in every possible official manner, short of giving it its own page in LDS Scripture. In the February 1982 *Ensign*, the issue was raised in the “I Have a Question” column whether Snow’s couplet was “accepted as official doctrine of the church.” Gerald N. Lund responded by saying that “there has been no ‘official’ pronouncement by the First Presidency declaring that President Snow’s couplet is to be accepted as doctrine”—“[b]ut that is not a valid criteria for determining whether or not it *is* doctrine.”<sup>52</sup> The bottom line is that “it is clear that the teaching of President Snow is both acceptable and accepted doctrine in the Church today.”<sup>53</sup> Lund also quotes Joseph Fielding Smith’s 1971 remark that Snow’s couplet expressed a doctrine that “has of course been known to the prophets of all the ages.”

Here as well is an appropriate point for bringing up Mouw’s comment that the couplet is not “an official Mormon teaching.” The problem is that the LDS Church has never clearly defined a process by which its doctrines become “official.” For the rank-and-file Mormon the teaching set forth by the prophetic leadership at the semi-annual general conference is as official as it gets. In a way, everything the LDS Church teaches *now* is official *now*, but that may all change later, as it has in the past. Therefore everything the Church teaches is also at least potentially unofficial. The main thing the individual Mormon must do is to find out what is being taught now and believe it as God’s word for them. To the evangelical this process seems both dubious and strange, but the Mormon finds it easy to explain under the umbrella of progressive revelation. In the meantime, Mormon scholars quite appropriately speculate about how teachings become “official.” But at this stage their speculations cannot in any way be said to be official, and therefore it is quite inappropriate for them to try to insist that non-Mormon scholars must prove well-known Mormon doctrines to be official before they are allowed to speak

<sup>51</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997) 85.

<sup>52</sup> *Ensign* (Feb. 1982) 40. The reason Lund gives is this: “Generally, the First Presidency issues official doctrinal declarations when there is a general misunderstanding of the doctrine on the part of many people. Therefore, the Church teaches many principles which are accepted as doctrines but which the First Presidency has seen no need to declare in an official pronouncement.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

of them. Rather, non-Mormon scholars must evaluate the various theories of “official” in order to see which, if any, correspond to the actual way in which authority functions in the Mormon Church. Unfortunately, Robinson himself has set forth a very inadequate theory. According to him, there are three things that make a Mormon teaching official: (1) it is taught in the “standard works, the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price”;<sup>54</sup> (2) it appears in an “official statements of the First Presidency and/or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles”;<sup>55</sup> and (3) it is “sustained” by being voted on in general conference.<sup>56</sup>

Of the three criteria, only the second carries any real weight. Functionally, the reality approaches a situation in which the voice of the present leadership trumps all three. The LDS canon does not function for Mormons in the same way that the biblical canon functions for Christians. One of the reasons for this is that Joseph Smith’s theology changed rapidly and radically during the course of his career. As a result, the Book of Mormon contains teachings that are radically at odds with both current Mormon doctrine and the doctrine of the other books in the Mormon canon. For example, Book of Mormon Christology falls to the right of traditional trinitarianism in that it does not distinguish clearly between the divine persons, yet the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price falls to the left of traditional trinitarianism in that it abandons the unity of the Godhead in favor of a doctrine of plurality of Gods.<sup>57</sup> Because of this tension current Mormonism can only derive things from the Book of Mormon where it agrees with current LDS teaching. Where it does not agree, it must be artificially harmonized, as when new meanings are given to theological words Joseph Smith used in the Book of Mormon where he originally meant something quite different from current LDS understanding. For example, because the Book of Mormon speaks of God as “omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:5) and “knowing all things” (2 Nephi 9:20), Mormons are forced to own these words. Yet in doing so they must also radically redefine them, so that God’s omnipotence and omniscience do not interfere with the same attributes in all the Gods that went before (e.g. God the Father’s father) and that will come after (e.g. all the Gods in embryo that now dwell upon the earth).

So, for example, since the meaning of traditional theological terms has been redefined in Mormonism, Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie can write things such as the following, which are absurd from a historic Christian perspective:

<sup>54</sup> Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide* 73–74.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 208 n. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1991) 17: “No *new* doctrine is binding as the official doctrine of the Church unless it has been received by the President of the Church and until it has been sustained by the Church in general conference.” This is interesting also in light of Millet’s apparent willingness to accept as somehow authoritative the off-hand comments the President of the LDS Church makes in public interviews.

<sup>57</sup> See my online article “Joseph Smith’s Modalism: Sabellian Sequentialism or Swedenborgian Expansionism?” (2004) at <http://www.irr.org/mit/bom%2Dmodalism.html>.

Our Father's development and progression over an infinitely long period of time has brought him to a point at which he now presides as God Almighty, He is omnipotent, omniscient, and, by means of his Holy Spirit, omnipresent: he has all power, all knowledge, and is, through the Light of Christ, in and through all things.<sup>58</sup>

Does Mouw think that the LDS Church has adopted the traditional meanings of the uses of the "omnis" or other traditional terms in relation to God? If so, he is mistaken.<sup>59</sup>

Robinson's third criterion that a teaching has been "sustained" or voted upon in general conference also fails to describe accurately how teachings become official in the LDS Church. In the first place, votes taken at general conference sessions are invariably unanimous. Since *Ensign* began tracking this in the early 1970s there has never been a report of a non-unanimous vote at general conference. It is true that the reports for the October 1975 general conference and the general conferences from 1981 to 1983 do not mention whether the vote was unanimous and that therefore it may be that some "troublemaker" had voted against the crowd; all the others (October 1974 and April 1975 and every conference between April 1976 and October 1980 and between April 1984 and the present) have been unanimous.

Robinson's presentation makes things sound more democratic than they really are. As Clark L. and Kathryn H. Kidd write,

Voting against sustaining is such a rare occurrence that many Church members never see it happen. The reason for this is that most members realize that they are not casting a vote when they raise their hands . . . they are being asked to ratify or sustain a decision that has been made by those in authority.<sup>60</sup>

Since the results of the sustaining vote are always the same, they are a mere formality, a rubber stamp. Because this is the case, there is really no reason for the leadership to delay action until general conference once they

<sup>58</sup> Millet and McConkie, *The Life Beyond* 148–49.

<sup>59</sup> Such a mistake is certainly understandable in view of the way Robinson writes on these things, as for example when he says: "Latter-day Saints do not, or at least should not, believe that they will ever be independent in all eternity from their Father in heaven or from their Savior Jesus Christ or from the Holy Spirit. Those who are exalted by his grace will always be 'gods' (always with a small *g*, even in the Doctrine and Covenants) by grace, by an extension of *his* power, and will always be subordinate to the Godhead" (Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide* 86). This statement of Robinson's is of course not official, nor is it consistent with the Church manuals he reads and discusses at his local Mormon ward, which, as we have already seen, freely use the capital "G" in describing what we shall be, as do First Presidency statements (*Ensign* [Feb. 2002] 30). Nevertheless, Robinson's view need not contradict what might be called the continuous teaching of the Mormon Church, as long as he is willing to say that the present God the Father is also eternally dependent on his Father, Savior, and Holy Spirit, and therefore is also ultimately only a god with a small "g" just like we will be). However, much as the LDS Church has become reserved in teaching the traditional Mormon plan of salvation as expressed in the couplet, it has never repudiated it. Therefore Robinson must be asked whether he wants to say that the current God is more ultimate in some sense than the Gods that went before. And then, if the answer is yes, why?

<sup>60</sup> Clark L. Kidd and Kathryn H. Kidd, *A Convert's Guide to Mormon Life* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1998) 74.

have set their minds on doing something. A case in point is President Spencer W. Kimball's revelation granting the priesthood to blacks announced on June 9, 1978, which marked one of the greatest turning points in LDS history. Robinson cites it as an example of how doctrine becomes official:

When Spencer W. Kimball declared in 1978, by revelation from the Lord, that the priesthood was henceforward to be given to all worthy male members, this pronouncement became Official Declaration—2 by the sustaining vote of a general conference on 30 September 1978.<sup>61</sup>

Robinson only gives part of the story. The LDS Church leadership did not wait until it had been sustained in general conference to put the new revelation into practice. Rather, it began immediately. Probably the first African American to be ordained to the LDS priesthood in the United States was Joseph Freeman Jr. of Granger, Utah, only two days after the June 9 announcement.<sup>62</sup> By the time the next general conference was convened the floodgates had already long since been opened and the ordination of blacks become an irreversible reality. The only thing that remained was for the gathered faithful to cast their obligatory unanimous vote in favor of its inclusion in the *Doctrine & Covenants*, which they did at the Saturday afternoon session on September 30, 1978.

#### VI. THE COUPLET AND THE DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

Mouw comments that “[a] number of LDS writers have been formulating the ‘becoming God’ theme in terms that are common in Eastern Orthodoxy: that ‘we shall be like Him’ in the sense of I John, but that we will never *be* Him.” As far as I know, no Mormon ever taught that we are going to be God the Father. A better way of expressing this from the perspective of the Mormon system is to say that we will never *catch up* with God. We may well reach a point at which we will be equal in attributes and exaltation to God as he is now. But by the time we do, God will have become more exalted. Indeed, the very fact that we as his children come to be exalted actually adds to his greater exaltation, and by extension, to the greater exaltation of the current God's God, and indeed of all the Gods above him. Exaltation, in other words, functions as a sort of cosmic pyramid scheme. This is the teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse: “God is . . . glorified and exalted in the salvation and exaltation of all his children.”<sup>63</sup>

What Mouw is referring to also has to do with the current interest among Mormon apologists in the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification. Although we find occasional earlier references to the alleged similarity between the

<sup>61</sup> Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* 14.

<sup>62</sup> See David John Buerger, “What Constitutes Official Doctrine?” *Sunstone* 10/2 (Feb. 1985) 39 (New Mormon Studies CD-ROM). Also, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Curse of Cain? Racism in the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2004) 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 348. See on this concept the discussion on Lorenzo Snow's couplet in Millet and McConkie, *The Life Beyond* 143–53. The passage quoted from Joseph Smith appears on p. 150.

Mormon and Orthodox teaching on deification,<sup>64</sup> the current interest among Mormons in this doctrine arose in the 1970s and 1980s after two Mormon scholars, Philip L. Barlow and Keith E. Norman, became interested in the subject independently while studying at Harvard.<sup>65</sup>

But it is Stephen E. Robinson who has done most to give the apparent similarity an apologetic slant. In his *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* subentry "LDS Doctrine Compared With Other Christian Doctrines,"<sup>66</sup> Robinson quotes what he says is the second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons as saying, "If the word became a man, it was so men may become gods." In reality, it is not Irenaeus he is quoting (Irenaeus never said this)<sup>67</sup> but the generalized couplet used by Eastern Orthodox theologians, beginning with Athanasius, to express the doctrine. In the context Robinson claims that the Eastern Orthodox couplet says "essentially the same thing" as Lorenzo Snow's couplet.<sup>68</sup>

More recently, even Mormon Apostle Dallin Oaks spoke of the alleged similarity between Eastern Orthodox and LDS teaching at general conference when he said that the Mormon understanding of the future life "should be familiar to all who have studied the ancient Christian doctrine of deification or apotheosis."<sup>69</sup>

This development would seem to function very nicely in the LDS/Evangelical apologetic exchange, because by appealing to the ancient doctrine LDS writers can present themselves as closer to the roots of Christianity than Western Christians, who use the language of deification only infrequently.<sup>70</sup> But the emphasis must rest on the words "seem to function."

<sup>64</sup> Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel through the Ages* (Salt Lake City, UT: Stevens and Wallis, 1945) 108–9.

<sup>65</sup> See Philip L. Barlow, "Unorthodox Orthodoxy: The Idea of Deification in Christian History," *Sunstone* 8 (Sept.–Oct. 1983) 13–18; Keith E. Norman, *Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology* (F.A.R.M.S. Occasional Papers 1; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University, 2000); and "Deification, Early Christian," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1.369. The details about when these two scholars became interested in deification were gathered from personal communication with Norman and Barlow.

<sup>66</sup> See under "Doctrine," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

<sup>67</sup> For a full account of this see my online publication: "Tracing the Source of Stephen E. Robinson's Misquote of Irenaeus," at <http://www.irr.org/mit/huggins%2Don%2Dfarms.html>.

<sup>68</sup> The same point is made by Robinson in *Are Mormons Christians?* (p. 60) and probably also in the booklet *Latter-day Saints: 10 Basic Issues* (Provo, UT: Foundations for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998) 26. I say "probably," because although Robinson is one of the contributors to this booklet, it does not explicitly credit him with this section.

<sup>69</sup> Dallin Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration," *Ensign* (May 1995) 84–86.

<sup>70</sup> We still occasionally encounter it, as, for example, in the eighth-century Celtic theologian John Scotus Eriugena (d. c. 877) who declares: "He [Jesus] came down alone but ascends with many. He who made of God a human being makes gods of men and women" (*Prologue to the Gospel of John* 21; ET: *Celtic Spirituality* [The Classics of Western Spirituality; trans. and intro. Oliver Davies with the collaboration of Thomas O'Loughlin; New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999] 430). The great western Father Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) also uses the language of deification: "For God wishes to make thee a god; not by nature, as He is whom He has begotten, but by his gift and adoption" (*Sermon* 166:4; quoted in Norman, *Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology* 104). Deification language has even been preserved as part of the Roman Catholic Mass, where it currently appears as part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our

In reality, there is nothing in the Eastern Orthodox or early Christian doctrine of deification to which any Western Christian should object. Indeed, there is much to be gained by reading the mature Eastern Orthodox reflection on the subject.<sup>71</sup> The only problem from an exegetical point of view is that the standard formulation of the doctrine relies on a misinterpretation of a particular passage in the Gospel of John. Early Christians did not have trouble describing their future hope in terms of “becoming gods,” because they took Jesus’ quote of Ps 82:6, “I said you are gods,” in John 10:34 to be a reference to “those . . . who have received the grace of the ‘adoption, by which we cry, ‘Abba Father’” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.6.1; cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 124).<sup>72</sup> But there is no reason to suppose that that is what the author of John had in mind.

The real appeal of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine to Mormon apologists is that it is regularly stated in a way that *sounds* similar to Snow’s couplet. But this has to do more with the fact that a couplet is used in both cases than that the two couplets have anything really in common. It is in fact when one lays the two couplets side by side to reflect upon Robinson’s claim that they say “essentially the same thing” that their real differences appear.

First Half:

Snow’s Couplet: “As man now is God once was . . . .”

Athanasius’s Couplet: “the Word of God Himself . . . assumed humanity . . . .”

(*On the Incarnation of the Divine Word* 54)<sup>73</sup>

Here Snow is talking about the Father’s having become God, even though he was previously a man. Athanasius was talking about the Son’s having

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humanity.” On the evangelical side we find it, for example, in the lyrics of the great Methodist hymnologist Charles Wesley (d. 1788): “He deigns in flesh to appear, Widest extremes to join; To bring our vileness near, And make us all divine” (hymn *Let Heaven and Earth Combine*). Or again, speaking more broadly of trinitarians as such, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his journal entry for Feb. 14, 1827: “The Trinitarian urges a natural & sublime deduction from his creed when he says of the Saviour that as he became a partaker in our humanity so we also shall become partakers in his divinity” (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* [ed. William H. Gilman and Alfred R. Ferguson; Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1963] 3.74).

<sup>71</sup> A good place to start is Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001); Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (trans. Norman Russell; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997); and Christoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (ed. Daniel B. Clendenin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 183–92. For a discussion from an evangelical perspective see Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40 (1997) 257–69; and my entry on deification in the forthcoming *Dictionary of North American Sects and Religious Movements* (ed. Wayne House; Grand Rapids: Baker). For more on what Mormons have been doing with the doctrine see Jordan Vajda OP, “Partakers of the Divine Nature”: A Comparative Analysis of Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization (F.A.R.M.S. Occasional Papers 3; Provo, UT: Foundation for the Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> ET: ANF 1.419.

<sup>73</sup> ET: A Religious of C. S. M. V. (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 93.

become a man, even though he was previously God.<sup>74</sup> Who can fail to see that, although similar words are used, the underlying concepts are completely different?

Second Half:

Snow's Couplet: "As God now is man may be."

Athanasius's Couplet: ". . . that we might become God."

The Orthodox teaching refers to our *becoming*, as 2 Pet 1:4 says, "partakers of the divine nature," through union with Jesus Christ. John's Gospel presents Jesus as praying that believers will be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:21; cf. 10:30), yet it is without in any way losing sight of Jesus' unique relationship with God as both the pre-existent Word and only begotten of the Father (John 1:1, 18). The Son has divine life in himself (John 5:26). We have it only through the Son (John 3:36; 6:53–54, 68; 10:28), only as we abide in him (John 15:1–7). The same point is made by Athanasius: we partake of Christ's divine life only because Jesus first partook of our mortal flesh:

But if death was within the body, woven into its very substance . . . the need was for Life to be woven into it instead . . . the Saviour assumed a body for Himself, in order that the body [i.e. our bodies], being interwoven as it were with life, should no longer remain a mortal thing, in thrall to death, but as endued with immortality and risen from death, should therefore remain immortal. For once having put on corruption, it could not rise, unless it put on life instead." (*On the Incarnation of the Divine Word* 44)

Mormons, however, cannot really appeal to 2 Pet 1:4 in defense of their doctrine at all, because their notion of exaltation does not involve becoming partakers of the divine nature.<sup>75</sup> They believe that they have the divine nature already, as "literally the sons and daughters of Deity . . . undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage,"<sup>76</sup> "gods in embryo,"<sup>77</sup> and, to use Robinson's own words, as the "same species of being as God."<sup>78</sup> They only have to grow up into it through a process toward perfection that includes a period of testing during the mortal experience.

## VII. CONCLUSION: MOUW, THE COUPLET, AND THE FUTURE

Richard Mouw has served very faithfully as a kind of evangelical statesman, and I believe he has much to contribute to the evangelical/Mormon dialogue in the future. In relation to the continuing currency of Lorenzo

<sup>74</sup> Craig L. Blomberg has already underscored this important distinction: "Most of Stephen Robinson's references to early Christian belief in the corporeality of God are talking about the Incarnation—the Son taking upon himself human flesh, not the Father having a body as in the uniquely Mormon claim" ("Is Mormonism Christian," in *The New Mormon Challenge* [ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002] 320).

<sup>75</sup> That is not to say they do not appeal to it; see Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide* 80.

<sup>76</sup> 1909 First Presidency statement "The Origin of Man," *Ensign* (Feb. 2002) 26–30.

<sup>77</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1969) 286.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen E. Robinson, "God the Father," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1992.

Snow's Couplet, however, Mouw is simply incorrect when he says that it has "no functioning place in present-day Mormon doctrine." Mouw's recent apology also places him in a somewhat ambiguous position given the fact that he contributed an enthusiastic preface to a book published in 2002 containing two articles presenting Snow's couplet as representative of Mormon teaching.<sup>79</sup> In that preface, Mouw offered an apology similar to the one rendered in the Mormon Tabernacle. He stressed how "ashamed" he was "of our record in relating to the Mormon community"<sup>80</sup> and spoke of how "we evangelicals" had been "bearing false witness against our LDS neighbors." Against this he set the essays contained in the book, which he represented as "a laudable attempt to set the record straight." The question raised by Mouw's more recent apology in the Tabernacle is whether he has changed his mind in the past two years and come to believe that the book he previously praised is guilty of bearing false witness as well, and that he now wishes to distance himself from it.

However that may be, it has been the writer's purpose in the present article to show that Snow's couplet is not irrelevant to current Mormon teaching. Unlike relics of old Mormonism such as Brigham Young's Adam-God doctrine<sup>81</sup> or plural marriage,<sup>82</sup> Lorenzo Snow's couplet summarizes a truth that still lives at the heart and logical center of the whole Mormon religious system. Evangelicals are not therefore "bearing false witness" when they regard it as representative of Mormon belief and critically discuss it as such.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Parrish (with Carl Mosser), "A Tale of Two Theisms: The Philosophical Usefulness of the Classical Christian and Mormon Concepts of God," and Francis Beckwith, "Moral Law, The Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose," in *The New Mormon Challenge* 204 and 223.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>81</sup> See Chris A. Vlachos, "Brigham Young's False Teaching: Adam is God," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 3/2 (1979) 93–119, which has frequently appeared in pamphlet form and remains one of the best materials available on the subject; and Gary James Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books: A Smith-Pettit Foundation Book, 2002).

<sup>82</sup> See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989).