

# IT'S ALL IN ARMINIUS: MORMONISM AS A FORM OF HYPER- ARMINIANISM

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In dialogues and debates between Evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints, as these have increased in frequency over the past few years, it has been common for well-informed Latter-day Saint participants, when attempting to find common ground with Evangelicals, to claim Arminian or near-Arminian status for some of their beliefs, especially on issues having to do with salvation. Evangelicals have usually argued, in response, that LDS doctrine goes far beyond Arminianism in the radical nature—radical at least from the perspective of historic orthodox Christianity—of its doctrinal claims. This is, of course, true. But it would be wrong to ignore the significant truth in the claims of some LDS scholars to be akin to Arminianism on some important points of doctrine. I have been involved in a grass-roots dialogue group between Evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints for the past two-and-a-half years, a group that I have co-coordinated with the help of faculty of the LDS Institute at the University of Utah. In the course of these discussions, it has been very apparent to me, as a Calvinist Christian, that in many of the discussions of difference between my Calvinist beliefs and the beliefs of Latter-day Saints, the arguments I have with LDS theology are very frequently the same arguments I have with Arminian doctrine. The same thing has been seen in debates my church, Christ Presbyterian Church, has sponsored between James White, a Calvinist apologist, and various LDS scholars and thinkers. In his afterword to Robert Millet's new book, *A Different Jesus?: the Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, Richard Mouw, president of Fuller

Theological Seminary, has stated that he has encountered the same phenomenon in his interactions with Latter-day Saints:

Second, reading this book has made it even clearer to me that many—not all, but many—of the arguments that I as a Calvinist evangelical have with Mormons are not too far removed from the arguments that I have pursued with theologians who represent traditions that are clearly in the Christian mainstream. We evangelicals argue at length with Roman Catholics about whether the Bible is our only authority or whether there are additional sources of revealed truth that must be taken as equally authoritative. The question of “divinization”—of how we must think about the apostle John’s promise that, while we are already God’s children, “it does not yet appear what we shall be,” but we can be assured that someday “we will be like Him”—has been much discussed between Christians of the Western churches and the Eastern Orthodox. And Bob Millet’s insistence that the “good work” that we must perform in order to gain saving grace is the act of having faith—well, this is not unlike a claim that I regularly argue about with my friends in the Arminian tradition.

Of course, we will have to see whether the Mormon “spin” on these matters means that the apparent similarities with admittedly intra-Christian perspectives are deceptive. But the recognition that something like these and other teachings have been long debated within mainstream Christianity can give us some new handles for assessing the unique “spin” that Mormons put on them.<sup>1</sup>

One of the reasons LDS participants in dialogues with Evangelicals have tried to align themselves with Arminians has been to persuade Evangelicals to be more tolerant and less worried about certain characteristics of LDS thought. “Hey,” the argument goes, “you guys accept Arminian theology as fully Christian, and we are really much like the Arminians, at least in our theology of salvation. So why are you so paranoid about us?” Stephen Robinson, professor at Brigham Young University, provides a good example of this kind of argumentation in the book he coauthored with Evangelical scholar Craig Blomberg, *How Wide the Divide?*:

The astute reader will recognize that in this (and in many other theological points) the LDS view is thoroughly Arminian. Like the late sixteenth-century Dutch Reformer Jacob Arminius, Latter-day Saints reject the Calvinist doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints—the whole TULIP (an acronym for these five doctrines). Like Arminius, the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Mouw, afterword to *A Different Jesus?: The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, by Robert L. Millet (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 181.

LDS insist on real free will, “agency” or “moral agency” as we call it. Calvinist Evangelicals frequently label LDS soteriology sub-Christian when it is in reality Arminian, so I am comforted by Prof. Blomberg’s assurances (p. 175) that informed Evangelicals accept Arminian theology (the Wesleyan tradition among others) as fully Christian. Time and again I have been accused of heresy by Calvinist Evangelicals not only for the LDS distinctives but also for beliefs the LDS hold *in common with Arminian Evangelicals* [emphasis in original].<sup>2</sup>

It appears to me that this kind of argumentation is working. Greg Johnson, who has been one of the major players in the dialogue between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints in recent years, and whose ministry *Standing Together* sponsored “The Evening of Friendship” held at the Tabernacle on Temple Square last November, featuring a talk by well-known Evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias, has said publicly that he believes his soteriology is fundamentally the same as that of Robert Millet.<sup>3</sup> Richard Mouw, whom I quoted earlier, in his afterword to Millet’s *A Different Jesus?*, has declared that he understands Millet’s affirmation of faith in the grace of God in Christ to mean fundamentally the same thing as his own profession of faith in Christ. I have been told that some college students from an Evangelical university who have been making regular trips to BYU to dialogue with the LDS community have been coming to similar conclusions, finding in the midst of their conversations that they really don’t have much

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Robinson and Craig L. Blomberg, *How Wide the Divide?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 146-147.

<sup>3</sup> In private conversation, Johnson recently told me that he regrets his choice of words here because some have read into it more than he intended. He did not mean to say that LDS theology in general is the same as his own, but simply that many current LDS theologians, including Robert Millet, as well as certain statements in the Book of Mormon, seem to articulate a view of how one is saved that is difficult to distinguish in many ways from historic Evangelical (I would say Arminian) views on this subject.

disagreement with Latter-day Saints on the doctrine of salvation.

As I have hinted at above, I believe that one of the main reasons this sense of agreement on the doctrine of salvation is emerging between many Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints who have been engaged in dialogue is that these Evangelicals either embrace or lean strongly towards Arminian theology, or at least they have accepted Arminian theology as agreeing with their own theology in fundamentals.

I would like to argue in this paper that the observation, made increasingly by both Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals, that Mormonism is akin to Arminianism in a number of ways, is basically correct. In fact, it is my contention that it is not only in the doctrine of salvation that such similarities can be found. We will see as we proceed that many of the distinctive teachings of Arminianism—such as the insistence on libertarian free will, the desire of God for the salvation of all people, the belief in unlimited atonement, etc.—when drawn out into their full depth of meaning, lead to doctrines of God, man, God’s relationship with man, creation, and salvation that are the same fundamentally as those held in Latter-day Saint theology. Arminianism and Mormonism are ultimately variations of the same basic religion or worldview.

This is not to say that Arminianism and Mormonism are identical in every important respect. This is, of course, not true. For example, there is no parallel to distinctive LDS doctrines on the priesthood in Arminian thought. The fundamental similarities are specifically in the doctrines of God, man, salvation, etc., which are doctrines that are at the heart of any worldview. And even in these areas, Arminianism and Mormonism are certainly not identical. Arminianism is much less developed in terms of its radical nature than LDS theology. Arminianism might be described as

“Mormonism in embryo.” Many of the radical elements that stand out so clearly in LDS thought are only “in the bud,” so to speak, in Arminian thought. This is why I have chosen to refer to Mormonism as a form of “hyper-Arminianism” rather than just “Arminianism” in the title of this paper. Mormonism is what Arminianism would start to look like if it did a bit more developing of its distinctives. A prominent example of Arminians doing just that is the current Open Theism movement in Evangelicalism. Open Theism claims to be a more consistent version of Arminianism, and I think that this is accurate. It is interesting to observe how, as the Open Theists take Arminian doctrines more and more to their logical conclusions, they are more and more coming under attack from other Evangelicals, especially Calvinist Evangelicals, and at the same time are becoming more and more on friendly terms with the LDS philosophical community. I do not think this is a coincidence. However, I do think that many of those who have come to embrace Arminian teachings, or at least to parrot back Arminian theological vocabulary, especially in the Evangelical community, are often quite unconscious of the logical implications of Arminian doctrine, and thus find offensive coming from Mormonism positions that are actually logical implications of aspects of their own theology.

The other main argument that I want to make in this paper is that, while Arminianism and Mormonism turn out to be very close in terms of their fundamental worldviews, the dividing line between Arminianism and Calvinism turns out to be much more significant than many have supposed. In fact, I will show that the most important theological dividing line is not between Arminianism and Calvinism on the one side and Mormonism on the other, but between Calvinism/Augustinianism on the one side and the doctrines of Arminianism and Mormonism on the other.

Before we get into the heart of this paper—the examination of LDS, Arminian, and Calvinist doctrine—we need to define what we are talking about when we refer to “Arminianism” and “Calvinism.” These terms, especially the former, are not familiar to everyone.

First of all, I want to make clear that I am not attempting to provide a historical perspective on these traditions in this paper. I am not so interested in what Arminius taught as in what Arminians believe. I am not interested in trying to show that Calvinism can be traced legitimately back to John Calvin, although I believe that to be the case. I am also not using the terms “Arminian” and “Calvinist” to refer to historic, concrete, clearly delineated denominational traditions. Rather, I am using them to refer to two different sets of very basic doctrinal positions and outlooks on reality. Some people I would classify as “Arminian” would not even have ever heard the term before, and some would probably even object to being called “Arminian,” but I would classify them as such simply because they hold the basic substance of the position I am dealing with in this paper under that name. Likewise, not all “Calvinists,” as I am defining them, would necessarily call themselves such. To make it as simple as possible, I am calling an Arminian anyone in the historic Christian tradition, especially Protestantism, who believes these things: 1. God does not will all that comes to pass in history; some things, particularly sin and suffering and some people going to hell, happen that are contrary to what he would like to see happen. 2. God does everything he can to save all people from hell and bring them into heaven. 3. Christ died for all men and not simply for the elect. 4. Grace sufficient to enable one to be saved is given to all people, not just to the elect, but what ultimately determines whether or not one is saved is whether one accepts or

rejects that grace, both of which all people are able to do because they have free will. 5. For a choice to be truly free and one for which the chooser can be held morally responsible, the choice must be undetermined by God. A Calvinist, on the other hand, is someone in the historic Christian tradition, especially Protestantism, who holds these positions: 1. All things that occur do so because of God's will. Although not all things are in themselves pleasing to him, yet all things, including sin, suffering, and hell, have been ordained by him to exist according to the dictates of his own will and desire. 2. God does everything he can to save his elect from hell and bring them into heaven, but, according to his wisdom and the free counsel of his own will, some of the fallen race of men he passes by and leaves in their sins, choosing not to save them. 3. Christ died for the purpose of saving only the elect, and only the elect are actually saved by his death, according to his intention. 4. Sufficient grace to be saved is not given to all people, but only to the elect. This grace is efficacious and causes those to whom it is given to infallibly, yet voluntarily, respond in faith, repentance, and obedience. The non-elect are given enough to be without excuse, but not enough to bring about their salvation. 5. A choice can be truly free and the chooser morally responsible even if that choice is determined by the decree and caused by the grace of God.

Although this paper is not focused on history, yet it might be helpful to give a very brief historical overview to put Calvinism and Arminianism into historical context. Calvinism is a form of Augustinianism, named after the famed St. Augustine, who lived from 354 to 430 AD. While the distinctives of Calvinism had been taught previously (and, indeed, are believed to be biblical doctrines by Calvinists), Calvinism in its modern form arose out of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and particularly out

of the teachings of John Calvin. It later became even more thoroughly systematized by the so-called Reformed scholastic theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Probably its most classic and influential expression (at least in the English-speaking world) is in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which were penned in the mid-seventeenth century by the Westminster Assembly in London. Calvinism has historically been the doctrine of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, and it has also had strong followings in certain Congregationalist and Baptist circles.

Although, like Calvinism, many of its distinctive teachings were around previously, in the form of Pelagianism and what has been called “semi-Pelagianism,” Arminianism in its current form arose in the context of the Reformed scholasticism of the seventeenth century as Jacob Arminius, a Reformed theologian, and his followers (known in their early days as the Remonstrants) reacted against certain teachings of Calvinism. Their theology was condemned as heretical by the Reformed churches at the Synod of Dordt in Holland, which included representatives not only from the Reformed church in Holland but from Reformed churches in other countries as well. Arminianism was not destroyed by this condemnation, however, and went on to gain a strong following in various places, including Great Britain and later the United States of America. It is now, to various degrees, prominent in much of Evangelicalism, although Calvinism also has strong spokesmen in Evangelical circles. The various branches of Wesleyanism, such as the Methodists, are historically Arminian in their theology. Other groups, such as the churches coming out of the Stone-Campbell Restorationist movement of the nineteenth century, also hold to Arminian thinking to a large degree, although they do not like to be called “Arminian.” Many Baptists are also strongly Arminian in doctrine. Now that we

have defined our terms and put our discussion in at least a very basic historical context, we can begin our examination of the doctrinal issues.

### **THE NATURE OF GOD’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSE**

LDS theologians have frequently, and proudly, pointed out how the LDS view of God’s relationship with the universe differs significantly from the historic Christian perspective. Particularly, LDS doctrine holds that God is not the only uncreated existence in reality. There are also uncreated laws, uncreated matter, and uncreated “intelligence.” Some LDS thinkers have referred to the LDS doctrine of God as a “finite” version of deity, because God, in this view, is seen as limited by the presence of the other eternal realities. Since he did not create some of the basic laws of reality, such as the laws of logic, the fundamental laws of morality, etc., he must simply work with them as he finds them. Similarly, if he wishes to make use of matter or “intelligence”—in the work of creation or organization, for example—he must take them as they are and work with the essential properties he finds in them. LDS theologians have pointed out these teachings especially in the context of the problem of evil. They believe that these distinctive LDS teachings help them to avoid some of the foundational assumptions that create that problem and that prevent it from being finally resolved. LDS thinkers begin with the assumption that God, to be good, must desire the holiness and happiness of all his children. Thus, if God could remove all sin and suffering from the creation without incurring a worse condition, he would be evil if he did not do so. And yet, we obviously do have sin and suffering in the universe. God is off the hook, however, because he is unable to remove the presence of these elements without completely abandoning his plan for the universe, which is a plan that is necessary for the fullest happiness of himself and

his children. God is omnipotent, but his omnipotence does not give him the ability to make the universe exactly the way he would like it to be. He must work with the laws and entities that are not traceable to his will, and this limits him. David Paulsen writes on the term “omnipotence” in volume one of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*:

The Church does not understand this term in the traditional sense of absoluteness, and on the authority of modern revelation, rejects the classical doctrine of creation out of nothing. It affirms, rather, that there are actualities that are coeternal with the persons of the Godhead, including elements, intelligence, and law (D&C 93:29, 33, 35: 88:34-40). Omnipotence, therefore, cannot coherently be understood as absolutely unlimited power. That view is internally self-contradictory, and, given the fact that evil and suffering are real, not reconcilable with God’s omnibenevolence or loving kindness.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*’s entry on “evil,” Paulsen writes, “Since there are realities that are coeternal with God, his omnipotence must be understood not as the power to bring about any state of affairs absolutely, but rather as the power to bring about any state of affairs consistent with the natures of coeternal realities.”<sup>5</sup> In a speech given at Brigham Young University, Paulsen said that “Joseph Smith’s way out of the conceptual incoherency generated by the traditional theological premises is not to go in. His revelations circumvent the theoretical problem of evil by denying the trouble-making postulate of absolute creation—and, consequently, the classical definition of divine omnipotence.” Paulsen speaks of “chaotic matter”, “intelligences”, and “lawlike structures or principles” as being things which are coeternal with God. As an example of coeternal “lawlike structures or principles,” he quotes the Book of Mormon’s statement (found in 2 Nephi 2:11) that “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things,” and elaborates upon it:

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<sup>4</sup> citation

<sup>5</sup> citation

According to Lehi, there are apparently states of affairs that even God, though omnipotent, cannot bring about. Man is that he might have joy, but even God cannot bring about joy without moral righteousness, moral righteousness without moral freedom, or moral freedom without an opposition in all things. With moral freedom as an essential variable in the divine equation for man, two consequences stand out saliently: (i) the inevitability of moral evil; and (ii) our need for a Redeemer. If my interpretation of 2 Nephi is correct, then it seems as if we ought to reject the classical definition of omnipotence in favor of an understanding that fits better with the inspired text. . . . B.H. Roberts plausibly proposed that God’s omnipotence be understood as the power to bring about any state of affairs consistent with the natures of eternal existences.

Paulsen goes on to say that “from Joseph Smith’s theological platform, it does not follow that God is the total or even the ultimate explanation of all else. . . . Within a framework of eternal entities and structures that God did not create and that he cannot destroy, it seems to me that the logical problem of evil is dissolved.”<sup>6</sup>

Arminians will recognize large areas of similarity between this LDS theodicy and that put forward by many Arminians. Moving along a similar path to LDS thinkers, Arminian theologians have often attempted to solve the problem of evil by affirming that, due to the laws of logic, God is unable to make a world of free creatures without incurring the possibility of sin. But not to create the world would be a worse situation, so God has gone ahead and created. If God could remove sin and suffering from the creation without abandoning his fundamental plan for the universe, he would be evil not to do so; but, as it turns out, he cannot, so he is off the hook. Probably the most famous advocate of this response to the problem of evil was C. S. Lewis. In *Mere Christianity*, he writes,

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<sup>6</sup> David Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” delivered on 21 September 1999 at the Marriott Center at Brigham Young University, accessed on July 20, 2005, at <http://speeches.byu.edu/htmlfiles/PaulsenF99.html>.

God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.

Of course, God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk. . . . If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will—that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings—then we may take it it is worth paying.<sup>7</sup>

What is not often sufficiently noted, however, is how this Arminian response to the problem of evil leads us to the same view of God's relationship to the universe I discussed above in the context of the LDS view. Before God created the world, in the Arminian view, he had two options: He could refrain from creating a world of free moral agents and have no potentiality for sin or suffering, or he could create free moral agents and necessarily create that potentiality. What he could not do was create a world of free moral agents where there would be no possibility of going wrong. But here's the rub: That last world, the one that he couldn't create, was the one he really would have liked to have created! The other two possibilities were both not entirely satisfactory to him. If he creates moral agents, which he wants, he has to have the possibility of sin and suffering, which he does not want; if he does not create, he has no sin and suffering, but he doesn't get any free moral creatures. In the end, he decided to create moral creatures. But, unfortunately, the potentiality for evil has been actualized, and to the extent that it has,

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960),

God is disappointed in the attaining of his desires. God wishes that reality were different than it is. He wishes there was a way to attain all his desires. But there isn't. He has to live with reality as it comes to him. It is a given he must submit to. And here we see the connection with my previous comments about LDS theology. In the Arminian view, reality is not what a perfectly good being wishes it was. There is a conflict between the nature and will of God, who is perfectly good, and the nature of reality, and the former must submit to the latter. But if there is a fundamental conflict between God, and everything that he is, and the basic nature of reality, then the laws that govern and give structure to that reality can no longer be thought of as being grounded in God or identical with God, but must be thought of as independent variables, structural principles of a universe which is independent of God and in the context of which God exists, and which limit and thwart him from accomplishing all that he desires to accomplish. Ultimate reality in this view, as in the LDS view, is thus not identical with God nor derived from him and his will. God must submit to the laws of reality, which are as much a given to him as they are to us. God is no longer the ultimate answer to all questions of existence or questions of "Why?" As in Mormonism, Arminianism makes God a finite being, limited by "lawlike structures or principles" which are not identical with him and which he did not create and cannot destroy.

Mormonism, of course, takes the concept of God as a finite being to much greater levels of development than is the case in Arminian thought. For one thing, matter is considered to be an uncreated, co-eternal reality in LDS doctrine, whereas this is not the case in Arminianism. Even more radically, LDS theology teaches that God the Father

has not always been God, that he was once a man and became God at some point in time in the past. This brings out in bold colors the finite nature of the LDS God. Such a being clearly cannot be the ultimate answer to the most basic questions of existence. He did not create the universe, so he cannot be appealed to as its ultimate explanation (as Paulsen, quoted above, readily acknowledges). However, while LDS theology is more radical in its emphasis on God as finite, the finitude of God is entailed merely by the less dramatic claim that there are laws and structures of reality that are not identical with God, that God did not create and cannot destroy, that are coeternal with him, and that limit his ability to accomplish all that he would like to accomplish. And this teaching Mormonism holds in common with Arminianism.

In contrast to both Arminianism and Mormonism, Calvinist thought holds that God is never defeated in any of his desires. Calvinists believe that all the events of history, including all sin and suffering, have been ordained by the eternal will of God and are thus, obviously, in accordance with that will. As the Calvinist Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that God desired sin and suffering to exist *for their own sake*. As the nature of sin and evil are opposite to God’s own holy and good nature, so they are in themselves repulsive to him. But God desires them to exist because they are a contributing factor in the creation of the universe that God truly desired to create. In themselves, they are only negative. In the context of the whole, they are benefits due to their contributions to the whole. They do not, as they do in Arminianism and

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<sup>8</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter III, “Of God’s Eternal Decree.”

Mormonism, detract from the whole so that on the whole God wishes reality were different than it is. All God's desires are fulfilled in the reality that in fact exists. Thus, in Calvinism, there is no conflict between the will and nature of God and the nature of ultimate reality, or the basic laws of reality. Whereas in an Arminian or an LDS view, sin and suffering, to the extent that they occur, are indications of the failure of God to attain his desires and reminders that God is limited by a universe he did not create and over which he does not have full control, in the Calvinist view, sin and suffering, like all things, are outworkings of the free plan of God. There are no "lawlike structures or principles" which are coeternal and not identical with God himself. Rather, in Calvinism, all the laws of reality are rooted in him, in his nature and will. He is in full control of reality. He is the only ultimate answer to all questions of existence.

### **THE AUTONOMY, CENTRALITY, AND DIVINITY OF MAN**

LDS theology has a very radical view of the essential nature of man. In his famous King Follett funeral discourse, Joseph Smith declared,

I have another subject to dwell upon, which is calculated to exalt man; . . . It is associated with the subject of the resurrection of the dead,—namely, the soul—the mind of man—the immortal spirit. Where did it come from? All learned men and doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning; but it is not so: the very idea lessens man in my estimation. . . .

We say that God himself is a self-existent being. Who told you so? It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. . . .

The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is coequal with God himself.<sup>9</sup>

According to Joseph, the very essence of our being, our very souls, are uncreated, self-

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1989, 1976), 352-353. In this edition of the text, there is a footnote that occurs after the word "coequal" in the quotation, attributed to B. H. Roberts, in which he asserts that the word ought to be have been "co-eternal" rather than "co-equal," and that the latter word was the result of

existent entities. Joseph made very clear the importance of this teaching and the effect he thought it ought to have when he declared that his doctrine was “calculated to exalt man.” In contrast, he said that the doctrine of the creation of man by God out of nothing “lessens man in my estimation.” This same concern was echoed, among other places, in a 1984 Melchizedek Priesthood study guide manual, in a chapter dealing with the doctrine of man’s potential to become what God is, a concept intimately connected to the idea of man’s eternal being. A note at the very end of the chapter which is intended to prevent misuse of the material in the chapter cautions, “Be careful in presenting this material that you don’t bring God down to man’s level. Our objective is to perfect ourselves and *raise* our level to his exalted place.”<sup>10</sup>

This concern to raise man’s level of importance in reality is reflected in a number of other LDS teachings as well. It seems to me that other than the claim that man is a self-existent entity, the most important LDS teaching in this regard is the doctrine of man’s free agency. Free agency clearly has a central role in LDS thought. Free agency, as the term is used in LDS discourse, can be defined as the power to determine one’s own choices, and thus character, independently from God and his will. This is not to say that God’s power and aid are not considered necessary, but that the choices each person makes are traceable ultimately only to himself/herself. I do not choose what I choose because God determines me to choose it or in some way causes me to choose it, but solely because *I choose it*. My choice is an independent contribution to reality that is not

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a mistake in the taking down of Joseph Smith’s oration.

<sup>10</sup> *Search These Commandments: Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), 158.

ultimately traceable to God and his will or plan. Most Mormons frame this doctrine of free agency by means of the concept of “libertarian” free will, the idea that for a choice to be free it must be possible to do the opposite, all circumstances involved in the choice being equal. Some LDS theologians, however, have adopted a version of “compatibilist” free will, which states that our choices are rooted in our character, or who we are, and are determined by our character, and it is not possible to do the opposite. Both camps would agree, however, that the important point here is that our choices are caused, ultimately, *only by us*, and are not rooted in the determination of God. The importance of the principle of free agency, as it is defined in the LDS context, is that it, like the concept of man as an uncreated entity, gives man a place of independence in the universe. It allows human beings to make original, novel contributions to the fabric and history of reality. This concept is usually contrasted with the vision of a world without free agency, which is imagined as a rather empty place in which God is the only real agent and the rest of the world is filled with lifeless puppets or robots who simply carry out the divine programming. God’s situation, in this scenario, has been said to be similar to a man who, upon finding no real woman who would marry him, created a robotic wife and programmed her to say “I love you!” whenever he so desired. In opposition to such a meaningless universe, devoid of any real significance (as LDS thinkers see it), LDS doctrine prefers a universe in which God’s children, or God’s creatures, are able to make significant contributions to God’s life and to the life of the universe, to enrich the universe with their own independent contributions. Instead of a scripted play, the LDS universe is more of an improv event, where the story develops by means of the spontaneous contributions of all the actors. God plays his part, which is, of course,

extremely important, but we play our own parts as well. The world we live in today is the result, not only ultimately of the plan of God being carried out, but of the cacophony of often contrary voices, self-determined and first-causal, in the past and in the present. The question of how history will turn out is likewise not answered merely by an appeal to the will and plan of God, but to the wills of all the actors in history—human, divine, angelic, and whatever else there may be. The novel of the history of the creation is not written solely by God, but is coauthored by all of us. God is not content simply to enjoy himself and his own contributions to reality, but wants to be enriched by relationships with independent beings who truly add something new to his life.

The concept of judgment in LDS theology also reflects this sense of man’s significance. Human beings will be judged on the basis of what they have made themselves. They will inherit the final states for which they have made themselves fit. Human beings are not only the ultimate determiners of their choices and character, but of their eternal destiny as well. What we will become does not depend on some preordained plan of God, but on what *we make ourselves by our own independently-produced choices*.

In LDS terminology, such beings as we are—beings who are uncreated, independent entities who are able to enrich the universe with content not derived from our Father—are called “Gods.” There is not just one God, but there are many Gods, or independent intelligences, who exist in the universe, although at different levels of development, just as there are many human beings on the earth at different levels of development. We are still in the childhood stage, which is why humans have been described as “Gods in embryo” by some LDS teachers. In my opinion, “Gods” is precisely the right term to use to refer to such beings as LDS thought considers us to be.

Arminianism, of course, disagrees with Mormon thought on the doctrine of man in many important ways. Arminians emphatically reject the notion that we are uncreated entities. According to Arminianism, far from being uncreated, humans were created *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. Arminians would also reject the notion that we are the same “species” as God and that we are in any sense divine. Rather, they wish to preserve a fundamental Creator-creature distinction. God is not man (except insofar as he took on a human nature in addition to a divine nature in the Son’s incarnation), and man is not God.

However, Arminianism also shares some central concerns with the LDS viewpoint and has some distinctive teachings that ultimately qualify, and even contradict, its classical theistic teachings and put it on the same track with LDS thought. As I mentioned, one of the central concerns that Latter-day Saints have is that man be seen as significant, where “significant” means “not totally defined by what God produces in us.” We are not significant if God determines all our choices; on the contrary, we need to be able to be independent, to be first-causal and original co-creators with God in making the universe what it is. One of the great fears in the LDS worldview is that human beings should be thought of as mere expressions of the will of another, as merely reflections of the one truly original and independent Agent. If God determined our choices, it is felt that we would be mere puppets, and any real give-and-take relationship with God would be lost and the whole history of the universe would be a mere sham. Arminianism shares this concern and this corresponding fear. The quote from C. S. Lewis I cited above illustrates this beautifully. For Lewis, a universe with creatures whose choices are not determined by God is a “live world in which . . . something of real importance can happen,” whereas a universe without this “free will” would be “a toy world” that “would

hardly be worth creating.” Clark Pinnock, an Evangelical Open Theist, also states this perspective very clearly. In his book, *Most Moved Mover*, he says that “God wants input from creaturely agents and does not control everything that happens. God invites us to participate with him in loving dialogue, to bring the future into being.”<sup>11</sup> On the next page, Pinnock elaborates on the relationship between the Arminian God and his creatures:

Herein we glimpse, I believe, the true glory of God as the one who wills and is committed to creatures. . . . This is a God who creates a world that is not just a mechanical expression of his own purposes but an environment for other free, though finite, agents to exist with a degree of autonomy and a measure of real freedom. This is a God who loves being in covenant partnership with the creature and longs to draw us into a community of love, both with God and among ourselves. God’s perfection is not to be all-controlling or to exist in majestic solitude or to be infinitely egocentric.<sup>12</sup>

Free agency, or free will, is as central to Arminian thought as it is to LDS thought, as is evident from the above quotations.<sup>13</sup> As free agency functions as a mechanism for metaphysical independence from God, and thus “significance,” in LDS thought, so it does in Arminian thought. What has not been frequently observed, however, is that the concept of free agency allows Arminian thought to do an end-run around the concept of our creation *ex nihilo* and brings in by the back door a concept of human beings as

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<sup>11</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Arminians, unlike Latter-day Saints, must be committed to a “libertarian” version of freedom and must reject compatibilism in order to preserve their concept of “free agency,” because they do not have the concept of uncreated intelligences. If you are uncreated, you can have compatibilistic freedom and still be independent from God; but if you have been created *ex nihilo*, your only hope of independence must rest in libertarian freedom. I am about to say more about the significance of this presently.

uncreated entities. Creation *ex nihilo* implies a radical metaphysical dependence upon God, one that logically guarantees that the creature will not be independent from God or be capable of independent contributions to reality in the ways envisioned in Arminian thought. In fact, creation *ex nihilo* logically leads directly to Calvinistic determinism. So there is a conflict between *ex nihilo* creation and some of the central features of the Arminian universe. The concept of “free will” allows the force of creation *ex nihilo* to be effectually negated so that the independence Arminianism requires can exist. It does this by creating a “causal gap” between God’s creative activity and the actual essence of our will and choices. Whatever God did in creating humans and their free agency, in the Arminian view, he did not create an unbroken causal chain from himself, or from his act of creating us and our agency, to the actual choices made by his creatures. Those choices are still undetermined by God. The reason for their existence, since they are undetermined and first-causal, cannot be anything God has done. They are not traceable to any creative action of God, but are wholly self-originated in their nature. To put it another way, the explanation for the particular choices free creatures make, in the Arminian view, cannot be found in the fact that God gave his creatures free agency. God’s act of creation was a cause that had some effects. By definition, an effect is something that exists by means of having been determined by some preceding action as its cause. If our choices are *undetermined by God* and *first-causal* by nature, they therefore cannot be effects of God’s creative activity. They cannot be explained by it or traced back to it. They are wholly self-existent or self-originated. God cannot create uncaused choices, directly or indirectly. He cannot create them directly, nor can he start in motion a chain of causes and effects that eventually leads to them, for the very simple

reason that they are, by definition, *uncaused* or *self-caused*. And the choices here cannot be separated from the person choosing. Since the choice is uncaused, the will that produces the choice must be uncaused. Since God did not create (even indirectly) any of the actual choices of the will, he did not create whatever it is in the will that is the cause of the actual choices we make. Even proponents of libertarian freedom will admit, although paradoxically, that the choices we make are the results of the motivations, desires, loves, values, priorities, beliefs, etc., that constitute who we are, that make up the real essence of our actual being. That is why our choices reveal *who we are*. If our choices were not produced from the essence of our being, they would not be *our choices* fundamentally and would not reveal anything about who we are. Therefore, if God were the creator of our *being* or *the essence of who we are*, as a logically consistent account of creation *ex nihilo* would affirm, he would also be the creator and cause, at least indirectly, of the *actual choices we make*. But since these cannot be causally traced back to God, in Arminianism, the essence of who we are that our choices flow from, and thus reveal and express, must also be unable to be traced back to God or his creative activity. Whatever God created *ex nihilo* when he created human beings, he thus did not create that which constitutes the real essence of our being and character. So we can see that, in Arminian theology, the main implications of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* are negated and the doctrine itself is thus, in effect, relegated to practical unimportance, since the most important part of who we are, that which defines our primary essence, is not created by God, but is self-existent or self-created. In Arminianism, we are uncreated, self-existent entities, just as Joseph Smith stated in the King Follett discourse. And just as the term “Gods” is the appropriate metaphysical term for such entities in Mormonism, so it is

appropriate for such entities in Arminianism, although Arminians, being less consistent and developed in their theology, usually do not clearly see this and avoid the term because of its obvious clash with more classical theistic aspects of their thinking that they do not want to wholly or explicitly jettison.

The Calvinist/Augustinian worldview stands in dramatic contrast with LDS and Arminian perspectives on the nature, significance, and independence of man. Calvinists do not share with Latter-day Saints or Arminians the concern that mankind be thought of as metaphysically independent from God or able to contribute independent, original, first-causal elements to the fabric of reality and history. In Calvinist thought, God did not create human beings in order to enrich his experience or the universe by bringing about relationships with independent beings. Instead, he created us to manifest his own glorious perfections. In the Calvinist view, God was and is wholly satisfied with his own glory and has no desire to seek enrichment from outside sources. The significance that human beings have to God is their God-given characteristic of being able to reflect God's glory back to him. God has loved himself from all eternity in the contemplation of himself in his Son.<sup>14</sup> The relationship God seeks with human creatures is not something essentially different from God's love of his own glory, but is one way in which this love

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<sup>14</sup> See Jonathan Edwards's "Essay on the Trinity" for a good Calvinistic account of the Trinity, showing how the eternal relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is an eternal manifestation of God's love of his own glorious perfections. This essay can be found, among other places, in Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, edited by Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co. Ltd., 1971).

manifests itself. The words of a song by contemporary Christian recording artist Rebecca Saint James brings this fact out well: “Take me, make me, beautiful to you; create me so I mirror you. Take me and make me an image of you. Lord, I want to mirror you.” What makes a human creature beautiful and valuable to God? It is not that we give God a breath of fresh air by bringing something new into what would otherwise be a rather stale and boring universe; it is the fact that we have been created to mirror God and his glorious perfections. What God loves in human beings is himself reflected in us.

The different view Calvinists have as to what God was after in creating human beings in the first place leads us to have a very different perspective on what the universe is and should be like. Calvinists reject the concept of free agency as it is defined in LDS and Arminian contexts and assert bluntly, as I have already noted, that God has “freely, and unchangeably ordain[ed] whatsoever comes to pass,” including all the free choices of his creatures. Our choices are not independent contributions to reality by which we, together with God, “bring the future into being.” Rather, they are outworkings of God’s own plan and his creative and providential activity. This is not to say that human beings do not make real choices. Calvinists believe in the reality of the will and the reality and truly voluntary nature of the choices humans make, but they do not believe that these choices, to be truly free and significant, need to be first-causal or made in metaphysical independence from God. Calvinists are often accused of denying that human beings make real choices and of making people into nothing but puppets or robots, but this is because the other side insists on linking inseparably the power to make voluntary choices with the power to first-causally produce new elements of reality. Calvinists do not agree that these are inseparable and in fact strongly insist on their being separated. So do

Calvinists truly make people nothing more than puppets? I think we have to answer that question carefully, because it is a question that gives us a window into the very different assumptions and concerns of two very different theological perspectives. As far as being a “puppet” means that one does not have a real soul, a real self, or a real will, or does not make real choices, Calvinists do not make people puppets. But so far as being a “puppet” means that one is not independent, but is wholly under the ultimate control of another being and exists solely to carry out the purposes of that being, and that everything one is and does is ultimately determined by the will of that being, Calvinists do make people puppets. And they fully intend to do so. The Calvinist universe is indeed a scripted play, in which all creatures carry out the roles ordained for them by God in the script which he himself, and he alone, wrote. This does not make us or our actions insignificant. It simply makes us significant in a different way for a different reason. Calvinists, who are concerned that God be seen as all-in-all, do not find the idea that he determines everything revolting or problematic, but elating. We delight that all of creation and history unfolds to our minds the wonder, glory, and beauty of God’s nature and plan. Calvinists fully appreciate and accept the implications of creation *ex nihilo*. They do not aspire to make humans into independent beings or “Gods,” but emphasize rather their total and complete dependence on God as creatures. We are delighted to put ourselves in our own place and give all glory to God. To put the entire matter briefly, the Arminian and LDS universe is all about God and independent creaturely entities and the different contributions they all make to each other, whereas the Calvinist universe is all about God and how he glorifies himself in his works of creation, providence and redemption.

### **SALVATION, BY GRACE OR BY MERIT?**

There are two strands of teaching in LDS thought that appear, or at least they have in times past appeared to me, to be contradictory. On the one hand, there seems to be a strong element of grace in the LDS doctrine of salvation. For example, Alma 22:14, in the Book of Mormon, states that “since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth.” In 2 Nephi 2:8, the point is made that “there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.” It is basic LDS teaching that human beings, because of our sins, have made ourselves incapable of being justified by our own works or merits. Because of this situation, Christ was sent into the world to make an atonement for our sins, so that the demands of justice could be met and yet we would be able to return to our Father’s presence and be exalted. We are thus justified by Christ’s merits rather than our own. Stephen Robinson, in *How Wide the Divide?*, puts it this way:

Latter-day Saints believe that God in his perfect justice cannot tolerate or condone sin in any degree (Doctrine and Covenants 1:31) and that all human beings have sinned in some degree and are therefore unworthy of the glory of God (Rom 3:23; Mosiah 5:21). This condition cannot be remedied by subsequent individual righteousness, since we have already *broken* the moral law and cannot justly claim innocence under a law we have broken. The curse of the law is that our very first sin renders justification by law or by works forever impossible to even the most subsequently righteous and upright human being.

To overcome this obstacle, God through grace has provided the gift of his perfect Son. If humans accept this gift and enter the gospel covenant by making Christ their Lord, they are justified of their sins, not by their own works and merits, but by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ accepted in their behalf. As Father Lehi explained to his son Jacob, even though Jacob was a “good” boy: “I know that thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:3).<sup>15</sup>

Robert Millet, another professor at BYU, has told a number of times a story in which he was having dinner with an Evangelical theologian, who asked him, basically, “If you

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 144.

were to stand before God, and he were to ask you what right you have to enter into heaven, what would you say?" Millet's reply was, "I would say that my right to enter heaven is solely based in the merits and mercy and grace of Jesus Christ." The Evangelical theologian then sat back and said, astonished, "That's the right answer!"

On the other hand, LDS teaching is full of statements that clearly indicate a concept of salvation by personal merit. One statement that stands out in my mind comes from an article by Elder Russell M. Nelson, an Apostle, in the February 2003 edition of *Ensign* magazine. In the article, which is focused mainly on explaining the conditional nature of certain aspects of God's love and the blessings that flow from that love, Nelson quotes President Joseph F. Smith from an article in the *Deseret News* of November 12, 1873, in which he says, "This is how I look at the requirements which God has made upon his people collectively and individually, and I do believe that I have no claim upon God or upon my brethren for blessing, favor, confidence or love, unless, by my works, I prove that I am worthy thereof, and I never expect to receive blessings that I do not merit."<sup>16</sup> In the 1979 edition of *Gospel Principles*, in the chapter on the Last Judgment, it is stated that "at the final judgment we will be assigned to the kingdom we have earned." It goes on to say,

In a revelation to Joseph Smith (D&C 76) the Lord described several ways we can

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<sup>16</sup> *Deseret News*, 12 Nov. 1873, 644; quoted in Russell M. Nelson, "Divine Love," *Ensign*, Feb. 2003, 24. Elder Nelson himself uses the term "merit" in the same way in the article: "Life here is a period of mortal probation. Our thoughts and actions determine whether our mortal probation can merit heavenly approbation" (Nelson, "Divine Love," 22).

choose to live our earth life. The Lord explained that our choices would earn for us one of the four kingdoms. We learn from this revelation that even members of the Church will earn different kingdoms because they will not be equally valiant in keeping the commandments.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1992 edition of *Gospel Principles*, the terms “earn,” “earned,” etc., have been replaced by other terms in this same section. The first sentence now reads, “At the Final Judgment we will be assigned to the kingdom for which we are prepared.” In another place on the same page, whereas the earlier edition said, “The following are the kinds of lives that we can choose to live and the kingdoms that our choices will earn for us,” the 1992 edition says, “The following are the kinds of lives we can choose to live and the kingdoms our choices will obtain for us.”<sup>18</sup>

The changes that have been made in *Gospel Principles* are interesting. Do they indicate a shift in LDS doctrine away from a concept of merit-salvation? It is hard not to see in these changes at least a softening of the LDS doctrine in this area and a shying away from certain harsh connotations a strong merit doctrine seems to have. However, I believe the changes were not intended to alter the meaning significantly, but were meant to say basically the same thing in less harsh language. Merit is ultimately a form of fitness. If I were to say that such and such a philosophy paper “merited” my attention, I would mean that the paper was such that it would be fitting for me to give it my attention and not fitting for me to ignore it. When people say that some possibility “merits” consideration, they mean that it is such that it is fit for it to receive consideration, that it “ought” to be considered. We use the term “merit” with regard to human beings, statuses

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<sup>17</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 221.

<sup>18</sup> *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), 297.

and activities as well. We might say that such and such an office “merits our respect.” We mean that it is such that it ought to be respected by us, that it is only fitting that we should respect it. The term “merit” is roughly equivalent to terms such as “deserve” or “warrant,” which are also used to express this concept of fitness for a certain response. When we see someone being treated badly, we often say in response, “That person deserves to be treated better,” meaning that the person is such that she ought to be treated better, or that it is unfitting for her to be treated the way she is. When we understand better what “merit” is, it seems that the changes in *Gospel Principles* are changes in terminology rather than changes in substance. The phrases used in the current edition of *Gospel Principles* still communicate the idea of fitness, just in a less striking way. If our choices “prepare” us for certain kingdoms and “obtain for us” these kingdoms, the idea clearly is that we are made fit for these kingdoms by means of the character we have developed and expressed through our choices. In substance, this is no different than what was apparently intended in the earlier edition of *Gospel Principles*. Just because the word “merit” is not used does not prove that no merit concept exists.

In the Book of Mormon quotations above, there seem to be a denial that human beings can merit eternal life. But the Book of Mormon also seems to teach a concept of merit-salvation. For example, in Alma 41:3-6, it is stated,

And it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good.

And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore, all things shall be restored to their proper order, every thing to its natural frame—mortality raised to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on the one hand, the other on the other—

The one raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil; for as he has

desired to do evil all the day long even so shall he have his reward of evil when the night cometh.

And so it is on the other hand. If he hath repented of his sins, and desired righteousness until the end of his days, even so he shall be rewarded unto righteousness.

This concept is also explained clearly by Professor Robinson in his book *Following*

*Christ:*

Nevertheless, the Fall was neither a tragedy nor a mistake but a necessary step in the eternal progress of God's spirit children, for we had reached the point in our premortal growth where it was time to meet the opposition in a mortal setting, to encounter the evil and negative elements of existence, and to be sorted out according to our response to that opposition. Mortality is the sorting shed. Here some of us will pursue light most of the time no matter what the cost; some will pursue light some of the time if it doesn't cost too much; and others will prefer darkness. . . . Mortal life is like an all-you-can-eat buffet dinner with all the moral options spread out before us, from the pure, the virtuous, the righteous, and the holy at one end of the table to the abominable, the wicked, the corrupt, and the vile at the other end. Pick what you like; eat all you want; but your choices will unmistakably reveal what you prefer and therefore what you are. When we can have all we want of whatever we want, our choices unerringly reveal our true character. In this analogy, you are what you eat. In real life, you are what you choose.<sup>19</sup>

This is clearly a concept of salvation that is dependent on one's fitness for the reward, which is another way of saying "merit for the reward."

As I said above, these two parts of LDS thought—one seeming to teach salvation by grace and one seeming to teach salvation by merit—seem contradictory. Are we justified and receive eternal life only by Christ's merit, or do we "merit" and "earn" our eternal blessings and destiny by our choices? Are these two ideas, as they exist in LDS thought, really contradictory, or do they fit together when seen in their proper places in the context of the LDS system? Latter-day Saints will probably think that the answer is obvious, but I must confess that it is a question that has greatly puzzled some Protestants.

I think we can see how the two pieces fit together by examining the different roles

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen E. Robinson, *Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good*

played by free agency and grace in the LDS doctrine of salvation. In the LDS view, all human beings are born into a world that brings upon them corruption and the inevitability, or at least the extreme probability, of sin. Although we were pure spirits before coming here, we were placed into a mortal body that is dominated by a fallen nature, the flesh, and that nature subjects us to sin. We are not identical with the flesh, however, and so have not become hopelessly evil or totally depraved. We still have a good spirit at the core of our being. In this fallen state, however, we are unclean and would never be able to return to our Father's presence. It would not be fitting, however, for God to leave any human being in this condition, for two reasons: 1. It would be cruel for God not to do everything he can to save all people and make them as happy as possible. He owes us his best efforts at our salvation, if he is to treat us as we ought to be treated, if he is to love us as he ought to love us. 2. In this state of bondage to the flesh, we are unable to choose the right. But if we are unable to do good, we cannot be justly condemned for doing evil. God would be unjust if he were to condemn us without giving us the opportunity, or chance, to be saved. This is, in fact, as Professor Robinson pointed out in our quotation above, one of the main purposes of our "second estate," or our mortal life—to be tested to prove whether we will choose good or evil, or to what degree we will choose them, and then to have our destiny be determined by what we choose. (See Abraham 3:22-26 in the Pearl of Great Price.) For these two reasons, then, God ought to give all people all the grace they need for their salvation. He must do for all people all he can to save them. He owes this to all of us, if he is to treat us properly.

Therefore, God has given his grace to all people. He has sent Christ to remove

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*News* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1995), 47.

the obstacle of our past sins. He has given us enabling grace through the Spirit to enable us to be free moral agents, able to choose either God or sin. (See 2 Nephi 26-27.) And he has done many other things for us as well. But this grace does not result automatically in anybody's salvation. There is one thing that can keep God's grace from having its full effect and that can keep us from full salvation, and that is our own will. If, upon being given enabling grace and the opportunity to choose, we choose evil, we block the effects of grace in our lives and effectually prevent our salvation. Although this is a sad state of affairs, it is just, because we were not condemned without our will. We had the chance to be saved and blew it. We therefore brought our condemnation upon ourselves. If we choose the right, however, we remove the only obstacle to our salvation. Grace can then have its full effect on our lives, and we are brought to the fullness of eternal life. Since God owes us the chance to be saved, if we use that chance wisely by choosing right, he then owes it to us to save us and grant us eternal life, and justice will infallibly bring us there.

In this system, we see that grace is subordinate to free agency in our salvation. The grace of God is owed to us, is merited by us, because it would not be fitting for God not to give it to us, and because it is impossible for us to be responsible moral agents without it. Grace is not, however, the determining factor in or the ultimate cause of our salvation. Ultimately, it is our choices that determine this. If we choose wrongly, we obtain or merit damnation for ourselves. If we choose rightly, we obtain or merit grace and eternal life. Grace gives us all the deserved opportunity to be saved, and our choices then merit our final destiny. It is clear that such a system is not fundamentally a system of salvation by grace, or unmerited favor, but is a system of salvation by one's merit. We

are not saved by Christ's merit as a gift of grace in this system, because God owes us the gift of Christ's merit on the condition that we obtain or merit the merit of Christ by our own good will. The atonement is necessary, but the cause that obtains or merits for us our final destiny is our own choices.

Arminianism is fundamentally in the same boat. According to Arminianism, we are all born in sin and unable to choose the right. But it would not be fitting for God to leave us here without giving us saving grace because it would be cruel and because we wouldn't have the opportunity to say yes to God and thus could not be justly condemned. Therefore, God sends the merited grace to us in Christ, granting us enabling power to choose either good or evil and the atonement of Christ to cover our sins, as well as other benefits. But his grace does not obtain salvation for any, but only the opportunity or the possibility of salvation. If we, with our undetermined, first-causal, free will, choose to reject grace, we block God's grace in our lives and bring upon ourselves damnation in hell. If we accept grace, we attain God's grace and eternal life. All of this can be clearly seen in a quotation from John Wesley, one of the most famous Arminians of all time and the founder of the Methodist tradition, in a diatribe he wrote against Calvinism entitled *Predestination Calmly Considered*. Wesley is attempting to argue that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination destroys the biblical doctrine of a final judgment:

If, then, God be just, there cannot, on *your* scheme, be any judgment to come. We may add, nor any future state, either of reward or punishment. If there be such a state, God will therein "render to every man according to his works" [*cf.* Rom. 2:6]. "To them who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality: eternal life; but to them that do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath: tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil."

But how is this reconcilable with *your* scheme? You say, "The reprobates cannot but do evil, and the elect, from the day of God's power, cannot but continue in well-doing." You suppose all this is unchangeably decreed; in consequence whereof, God acts

irresistibly on the one and Satan on the other. Then, it is impossible for either one or the other to help acting as they do; or rather, to help being acted upon, in the manner wherein they are. For if we speak properly, neither the one nor the other can be said to act at all. Can a stone be said to act when it is thrown out of a sling, or a ball when it is projected from a cannon? No more can a man be said to act, if he be only moved by a force he cannot resist. But if the case be thus, you leave no room either for reward or punishment. Shall the stone be rewarded for rising from the sling, or punished for falling down? Shall the cannon ball be rewarded for flying towards the sun, or punished for receding from it? As incapable of either punishment or reward is the man who is supposed to be impelled by a force he cannot resist. Justice can have no place in rewarding or punishing mere machines, driven to and fro by an external force. So that your supposition of God's ordaining from eternity whatsoever should be done to the end of the world, as well as that of God's acting irresistibly in the elect and Satan's acting irresistibly in the reprobates, utterly overthrows the Scripture doctrine of rewards and punishments, as well as of a judgment to come.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly before this, Wesley had said,

How shall God in justice judge the world, if there be any decree of reprobation? On this supposition, what should those on the left hand be condemned for? For their having done evil? They could not help it. There never was a time when they could have helped it. God, you say, "of old ordained them to this condemnation" [Jude 4]. And "who hath resisted his will?" He "sold" them, you say, "to work wickedness," even from their mother's womb. He "gave them up to a reprobate mind" [cf. Rom 1:28] or ever they "hung upon their mother's breast." Shall he then condemn them for what they could not help? Shall the Just, the Holy One of Israel, adjudge millions of men to everlasting pain because their blood moved in their veins? Nay, this they might have helped, by putting an end to their own lives. But could they even thus have escaped from sin? Not without that grace which you suppose God had absolutely determined never to give them. And yet you suppose him to send them into eternal fire, for not escaping from sin! That is, in plain terms, for not having that grace which God had decreed they should never have! O strange justice! What a picture do you draw of the Judge of all the earth?<sup>21</sup>

I will respond shortly to Wesley's rather passionate caricature of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. In the mean time, we can see how the grace of God functions in salvation for Wesley. Without it, we could not be condemned. With it, we are able to exert our free agency, which exertions then become the basis for the final judgment. The grace of God enables us to choose good or evil. Those who choose evil will be condemned; those

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<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," in *John Wesley*, edited by Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 442.

who choose good will be rewarded with eternal life. Grace is not the determining factor in salvation, but rather is a help to enable us to get to the point that we can then merit salvation or damnation by our choices. We can therefore see that Arminianism, like Mormonism, teaches fundamentally a system of salvation by one's own merit rather than by unmerited grace, because the ultimate cause of salvation is one's own good will. As in Mormonism, the grace of God in Christ is necessary; but as in Mormonism, this grace is owed to us on the condition that we obtain or merit it by the right use of our free will.

Once again, while LDS and Arminian thought turn out to be on the same page, Calvinist/Augustinian thought is worlds away from both of them. In Calvinism, we are all born into sin as a result of Adam's fall. We are guilty and in bondage to sin, and cannot choose the right. However, in contrast to Arminian and LDS teaching, Calvinists believe that our sin, though inevitable, is voluntary and culpable, even without our being given enabling grace to choose the right. This is because, as we've already noted, Calvinists, unlike Arminians and Latter-day Saints, do not believe that there is a necessary connection between an act being *voluntary* and *culpable* and its being done in total freedom from all kinds of necessity from outside of oneself. As we saw from the quotation, John Wesley attacked Calvinism for saying that man is condemned for something that is not his own fault. But this is because he insisted on reading into Calvinist thought his own view of the nature of the will. For him, as for most Mormons and Arminians, any kind of inability to choose the right removes responsibility. But Calvinists disagree. We hold that while man is, by nature, in bondage to sin, he is not in bondage to sin *against* his will but *by* his will. Just as God is so good that it is impossible

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 439.

that he should sin, although he is not forced against his will to be righteous, so human beings, without regenerating grace, are so evil that it is impossible that they should choose the right (in the highest sense of true spiritual good), but they are not forced to sin against their will. There is no good spirit at the core of our being, as there is in Mormonism, trying to get out and do good but prevented by the flesh as by some cumbersome external obstacle. Rather, all unregenerated human beings are, in the most proper sense of the word, nothing but *evil* through and through.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely from the innermost core of their being, their innermost spirit or will, that their evil comes.

The fact that man's natural sinful state is *voluntary* and *culpable* in Calvinist thought as well as being inevitable puts man in a very different situation than he is in in Arminianism or in Mormonism. In Calvinism, man is not just a helpless and basically innocent slave; he is a wilful rebel, and thus deserves nothing but damnation from God. It would therefore be fitting for God to condemn the whole human race without mercy. God would not be cruel to do so, because human beings deserve damnation, and it is

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that unregenerate people cannot do things that have an appearance of good or are good in an external sense. Once again, the Westminster Confession puts it beautifully: "Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God" (Westminster Confession, Chapter XVI).

never unfitting, unloving or cruel for a person to get what he deserves. Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

When men are fallen, and become sinful, God by his sovereignty has a right to determine about their redemption as he pleases. He has a right to determine whether he will redeem any or not. He might, if he had pleased, have left all to perish, or might have redeemed all. Or, he may redeem some, and leave others; and if he doth so, he may take whom he pleases, and leave whom he pleases. To suppose that all have forfeited his favor, and deserved to perish, and to suppose that he may not leave any one individual of them to perish, implies a contradiction; because it supposes that such a one has a claim to God's favour, and is not justly liable to perish; which is contrary to the supposition.<sup>23</sup>

God doesn't owe us grace because we have deserved damnation, and he also doesn't owe us grace, as he does in Arminianism and Mormonism, because without it we would be condemned for something that is not our fault; for as we have seen, in Calvinism, man is already justly guilty simply by being and doing what he is and does by nature and without the help of enabling grace.

However, because of his own sovereign purposes, God has chosen to save some sinners from their own evil hearts and their own just condemnation and grant them salvation and eternal life as an unmerited free gift. In eternity past, God elected some of the fallen race of Adam to salvation, "out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto."<sup>24</sup> When the time had come, he sent Christ into the world to make satisfaction for the sins of his elect and to obtain for them a righteousness that merits eternal life, and to earn for them all the graces necessary for the obtaining of his full salvation and eternal life. The Holy Spirit, in God's own

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 670.

<sup>24</sup> Confession of Faith, Chapter III.

time, then applies these benefits to the elect, changing their wills from evil to good, producing in them faith, repentance, love for God, and obedience, and securing them to Christ. Throughout the rest of their lives, the Spirit continues the work of growth and sanctification, in the end perfecting them, soul and body, to be fit to live with God and enjoy him forever. In contrast with the Arminian and LDS view, in which our evil choice is the one thing that can block God's saving grace and bring us to hell in spite of all God has done, in Calvinism, it is precisely to rid us of that evil will and its consequences that Christ was sent. Grace is able to overcome our evil wills and replace them with new wills that freely choose God and his grace, and this he does for his elect. In Arminianism and Mormonism, sin, in the form of an evil will, is the one thing that can stop God's grace and that we can and must remove by our own free will before God's grace can have its effect in our lives. In Calvinism, sin, including our evil will, is the one thing that we can't remove by our own free will but that God sent his grace to destroy and that his grace can and does in fact destroy in his elect. While in Arminianism and Mormonism, we must produce a good will in order to obtain grace, in Calvinism, part of the gift of grace is the gift of a good will. We don't need to "activate" grace by our good choice; grace is efficacious because it itself "activates," or, more properly, creates, a good will in those to whom it is given and is fully sufficient to accomplish their complete salvation from beginning to end. (Notice that I have not said that there is no need for a good will, right choices, or good works in the Calvinistic system. There is, but they are part of the gift of grace rather than a meritorious condition for receiving grace and salvation as they are in Arminianism and Mormonism.)

We can see, then, that Calvinism is fundamentally a doctrine of salvation by

unmerited grace. Whereas in Arminianism and Mormonism, God's saving grace is owed to us and can only be actualized in our lives by our meriting it with our own independent free will, in Calvinism, God's grace is owed to no one and accomplishes effectually the salvation of God's elect by removing all sin, including our evil will, and effectually making us fit for heaven. In Arminianism and Mormonism, our own worth and good will are the ultimate causes of our salvation and the things that merit it; in Calvinism, God's unmerited grace—flowing from his unconditional election through the efficacious work of Christ, applied to his elect by the effectual work of the Holy Spirit—is the ultimate cause of salvation and it is Christ's merit, not our own, that merits it for his elect.

It is worth noting how these different doctrines of salvation fit very well in the systems in which they are resident. Salvation by personal merit makes sense in Arminianism and Mormonism, because, as we saw in earlier sections, there is a concern that we should be independent from God, that we should have the ability to ultimately determine our own choices, character, and destiny. If we were sinful wretches saved entirely by the unmerited grace of God, if we were evil creatures worthy in ourselves of nothing but God's wrath and hatred and dependent entirely on his unpromised and undeserved charity, this would seem to lower our "significance" as Arminians and Mormons define this. Such a concept would no doubt "lessen man in [Joseph Smith's] estimation." God would ultimately get all the glory for our salvation and eternal reward, as it would all be due to the choice of God, the merit of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. But God is not such an "egocentric," power-mongering being that he should choose "not to give his glory to another," to paraphrase Isaiah. It is surely more appropriate for such significant beings as ourselves that we should share the glory for our

salvation, that we should have a hand in bringing it about by our independent contributions and thus deserve some praise from God for what we have managed to produce with our own independent will. Salvation by merit thus makes perfect sense in these systems.

On the contrary, it is obvious that salvation by grace is the perfect fit for Calvinism. Calvinists are obsessed with making God “all-in-all,” with giving him all the glory. Calvinists love to trace all things to his sovereign will and acknowledge their own complete dependence upon him. They humble themselves to the dust and desire all the praise to ultimately go to God alone. Salvation by merit would be very unfitting for this system. To claim a hand in our own salvation, to feel that God owes us his grace, would be blasphemous. It is not befitting for sinful, dependent creatures to make any claims upon their Sovereign Lord and Benefactor, from whom we have received all good. Calvinists recognize that if there is any hope for such sinful, pitiful, totally yet culpably depraved creatures such as ourselves, it must lie in the totally unmerited favor of an amazingly gracious God and that it must be merited, not by our own sinful and dependent willings, but by the meritorious work of God the Son, Jesus Christ. So salvation by unmerited grace is the natural fit for this system.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Arminianism and Mormonism are very different in important ways, our examination has revealed that there are very significant areas of similarity as well, particularly in the doctrines of God, man, God’s relationship with man (and the rest of the universe), and salvation. We saw that, while Arminianism often sides with classical theism against Mormonism explicitly, implicitly it often sides with LDS thought on

precisely the same issues. Our examination has also revealed the great chasm that exists between LDS and Arminian theology and Calvinist theology in these same areas. In the first section, we saw how both Arminianism and Mormonism make God a finite being by describing him as limited by a universal environment of structural laws and principles that are not identical with him and which he can neither create nor destroy. Calvinism, on the other hand, roots all the laws that govern reality in the nature and will of God, making God infinite and the sole ground of all being. In section two, we saw that both Mormonism and Arminianism make man an independent being whose core essence and character is uncreated by God, while Calvinism asserts that all that man is is determined and caused by the will and work of God in creation, providence, and redemption. We also saw in this section that in Arminianism and Mormonism, human beings were created in order to enrich God by bringing new and original elements into reality, whereas in Calvinism, human beings were created by God as a means of exalting and enjoying his own eternal and unchangeable perfections. In section three, we found that Arminianism and Mormonism are ultimately systems of salvation by merit because, in these systems, man's independent will and not grace is the ultimate determining factor in salvation. Calvinism, by contrast, is ultimately a system of salvation by grace, because unmerited grace itself, in this system, is the determining factor that causes one's salvation, including the good will that is an essential part of that salvation.

In the interest of accuracy, I want to state again clearly that Arminianism is not the same as Mormonism. It is important to remember that Arminianism is best characterized, in terms of the doctrines we have been investigating, as "Mormonism in embryo." This designation is important because it recognizes two important things. One

is that the distinctive Arminian doctrines, when they are explored and fathomed in the depths of their meaning and their necessary logical implications are pointed out, contain the same basic elements that make up the heart of the LDS worldview. Looked at in this way, Arminianism and Mormonism are variations of the same basic religion or worldview. But the designation “Mormonism in embryo” also recognizes that most forms of Arminian thought have some development to do before they become identical to Mormon teaching. Arminianism, though it may *imply* that God is a finite being who is limited by other uncreated elements, usually denies this explicitly and affirms that God is the ground of all being. Arminianism also denies that man is an uncreated entity, but affirms his creation *ex nihilo*. Mormonism, on the other hand, explicitly affirms God’s finitude and man’s uncreated nature. These are crucial differences that should not be underestimated. On the other hand, the fact that Arminianism contains these LDS and very un-classical-theistic teachings, albeit sometimes “in the bud,” also should not be underestimated. The necessary logical implications of a viewpoint are really and truly a part of that viewpoint. Speaking strictly and accurately, a person cannot really believe in some doctrine without believing in all that it logically entails, because these implications are a part of its essence. If an Arminian truly believes that man’s fundamental or primary essence or character is created by God, it might be more accurate to say that such a person is not really an Arminian but *thinks* he is, or that he is not an Arminian but has learned to parrot Arminian articulations, than to say that he is an Arminian who simply does not embrace the logical implications of his own doctrine. That would in a very real sense be to say that he believes but does not believe the very same teaching.

I believe that our conclusions about the close relationship between Arminianism

and Mormonism and the chasm between these viewpoints and that of Calvinism have important implications for the ongoing dialogue between Evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints. Up to this point, this dialogue has been construed to be a conversation between two distinct sides, with both Arminians and Calvinists being lumped into the “Evangelical” side. If Arminianism and Calvinism are as different as we have observed, however, melding them together as one party in a two-way dialogue might be as ridiculous as attempting a two-way dialogue with one of the parties consisting of both Hindus and Buddhists. Arminianism really constitutes an entirely separate religious philosophy from Calvinism; it is an attempt to mix elements of Augustinian classical theism with elements more at home in the LDS universe. Meaningful dialogue might thus be better carried on with Arminians and Calvinists as two separate parties. A three-way conversation, between Latter-day Saints, Arminians, and Calvinists, if one could be managed, might bear some interesting and useful fruit. At any rate, it appears to me that the Evangelical-LDS dialogue as it is currently being carried on must inevitably run into some serious obstacles that will hinder important aspects of its productivity unless Evangelicals become theologically astute enough to distinguish between and separate Arminianism and Calvinism. I speak from personal experience as a participant in LDS-Evangelical dialogue in saying this. Whatever happens, it will be interesting to see how the conversation progresses.