

# How Limited Is Postmortal Progression?

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One way of making sense of Latter-day Saint heterodoxy—its location outside the spectrum of mainstream, historic Christianity—is to envision it as the culmination of early Christian trends that were suppressed or reconfigured in the early centuries of the new faith. In other words, one could see the Restoration as a road of Christian development not taken. After all, holds the great historian Walter Bauer, heresy is merely the orthodoxy that lost out.<sup>1</sup> One scholar of early Christianity observes that the condemnation of Origen, church father of the third century, ensured the supremacy in the Christian tradition of a “theology whose central concerns were human sinfulness, not human potentiality; divine determination, not human freedom and responsibility.”<sup>2</sup>

Few theologians would do more to celebrate human possibilities and inherent worth than Origen. In significant ways, he espoused core principles that would fall by the wayside along the highway of Christian development, only to be restored by Joseph Smith more than a thousand years later. Born in the late second century, this scholar from Alexandria authored the very first treatise of Christian theology—*On First Principles*. Several of his teachings have a familiar ring for Latter-day Saints. In contrast to the God of the creeds, having neither body, parts, nor

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1. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), xxiii.

2. Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 250. She considered the condemnation of Pelagius, a fourth-century writer, to be part of the same paradigm shift.

passions, Origen proclaimed, “The Father himself is not impassible. If he is besought he shows pity and compassion; he feels . . . the passion of love, . . . and for us men he endures the passions of mankind.”<sup>3</sup> Pondering the origin of the human soul, Origen held that we all existed as spirit beings in a premortal world. He erred, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, in assuming that premortal error was the cause of our expulsion from heaven, but he correctly ascertained our habitation in those celestial spheres long before birth. Seeing a destiny of endless progress in store, he referred to the “souls of men [who] in consequence of their progress, we see taken up into the order of angels.”<sup>4</sup> He also taught a doctrine of apokatastasis, or full restoration. By this he meant that God would find a way to redeem and exalt the entire human family, bringing them back into the presence of God. He saw mortality as the crucial second stage in an ongoing saga of eternal progression.

The saints as they depart from this life will remain in some place situated on this earth which the divine scripture calls “paradise.” This will be a place of instruction, and so to speak, a lecture room or school of souls, in which they may be taught . . . and may also receive some indications of what is to follow in the future, . . . which are revealed more clearly and brightly to the saints in their proper times and places. If anyone is “pure in heart,” and of unpolluted mind, . . . he will make swifter progress and quickly ascend . . . until he reaches the kingdom of the heavens. . . . And thus he will proceed in order through each stage, following “him who has entered into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” and who has said, “I will that, where I am, they also may be with me.”<sup>5</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa taught the same doctrine: “[God’s] end is one, and one only; it is this: when the complete whole of our race shall have been perfected from the first man to the last . . . to offer to every one of us participation in the blessings which are in Him.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Morwenna Ludlow has written that “in the early Christian Church there were two important streams of eschatological thought: a universalist stream, which asserted that all people would be saved,

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3. Origen, “Hom. in Ezechiel vi.6,” in *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 186–87.

4. Origen on *First Principles*, Being Koetschau’s Text of the *De Principiis*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 72.

5. Origen on *First Principles*, 72, 152.

6. Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 90.

and a dualistic stream, which stressed the two parallel fates of eternal heaven and eternal hell.”<sup>7</sup> The first tradition was represented by, besides Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory’s sister Macrina, Maximus the Confessor, and others.

By the advent of the Church of Jesus Christ in the nineteenth century, a plan of salvation that encompassed the entirety of humanity was barely a dim memory of the Christian past—except for a few small circles of a burgeoning movement called Universalism. Meanwhile, as Joseph Smith labored at his retranslation of the New Testament, he paused to ponder John’s words about two resurrections only, one to life and one to death. “It appeared self-evident from what truths were left,” he recorded, “that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one. Accordingly, . . . while translating St. John’s Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision.”<sup>8</sup>

The resulting section 76 turned Christian models upside down by proposing a three-tiered heaven that accommodated virtually every inhabitant of the planet, past and present. Two reactions registered among Latter-day Saints. Some responded Jonah-like, resentful that they would not enjoy the prestige of a salvation reserved for a few elect. As Brigham Young’s shocked brother characterized the vision, “Why the Lord was going to save everybody.”<sup>9</sup> Some rebelled to the point that Parley Pratt disfellowshipped a protesting member.<sup>10</sup> Others, however, rejoiced in a heaven far more commodious than contemporary versions.

The three-tiered heaven functioned effectively like the old system, with only the uppermost kingdom constituting genuine salvation. Rather like the Catholic soteriology, the restored gospel now had a hell (outer darkness), a middle realm of the almost-saved (the celestial and terrestrial kingdoms), and exaltation with God (the celestial kingdom). Latter-day Saints have come to conceive of salvation in two distinct ways: following a final judgment (though the term “final judgment” nowhere appears in scripture), resurrected souls are assigned to one of three kingdoms, where they will dwell eternally with no further

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7. Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 1.

8. Doctrine and Covenants, section 76, introduction.

9. Joseph Young, “Discourse,” *Deseret News*, March 18, 1857, 11.

10. Both Orson Pratt and Warren Foote noted the episode in their journals. See Terrell L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67.

change in their inheritance. Or following a postmortal judgment, they will inherit a kingdom of glory; those in the celestial and terrestrial will have the opportunity of further progression both within and between the kingdoms.

It may simplify matters to state at the outset the official Church position: progression through the kingdoms is not a matter of settled doctrine.

As the First Presidency told an inquiring member in the 1950s:

Dear Brother,

The brethren direct me to say that the Church has never announced a definite doctrine upon this point. Some of the brethren have held that it was possible in the course of progression to advance from one glory to another, invoking the principle of eternal progression; others of the brethren have taken the opposite view. But as stated, the Church has never announced a definite doctrine on this point.

Sincerely your brother,

Joseph L. Anderson, Secretary to the First Presidency.<sup>11</sup>

To the present, that statement has never been superseded by any other official declaration. Throughout Church history, some leaders have emphatically opined in favor of continuing progression, and some have opined emphatically against. Others have made comments that are open to interpretation on the theme. In what follows, I include a sampling of such views, along with my thoughts on what rationales may be relevant if not always explicitly addressed. Joseph Smith learned, as recorded in section 76, that the terrestrial world comprised those “who died without law; . . . who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:72, 74). His brother Alvin, who died in Joseph’s youth, would have been in that category—or so Joseph likely assumed. Hence his happy shock when, in 1836, through spiritual eyes he saw his brother in the celestial kingdom: “And [I] marveled how it was that [Alvin] had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been

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11. Letter from the Office of The First Presidency, March 5, 1952, and again on December 17, 1965, cited in George T. Boyd, “A Mormon Concept of Man,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 72 n. 4. A typescript is in the BYU library: *Degrees of glory*, 1952 March 5, MSS 3082, box 8, folder 19, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

baptized for the remission of sins" (D&C 137:6, emphasis added). The reasonable explanation for Joseph's surprise is that he expected Alvin would indeed inherit a terrestrial kingdom as described in section 76. Verse 8 of the new revelation offered an explanation. An exception to the assignment that had been decreed in section 76 is apparently made for the unbaptized "who would have received [the gospel] with all their hearts." It is therefore possible that the celestial kingdom may only be reached by those of the unbaptized who comply with the necessary vicarious ordinances and principles while in the spirit world.

However, it is also reasonable to infer that both section 76 and 137 are accurate as written: that the unbaptized, even if "honorable men [and women]," inherit the terrestrial kingdom but continue their progress from the terrestrial kingdom to the celestial. Thus those who "would have accepted" the gospel continue their progress indefinitely in the future. We cannot tell which possibility Joseph inferred, but the temple ritual he initiated, if read in the most literal way, recapitulates the eternal journey of the soul through the degrees of glory. The individual thus depicted advances from premortal life through mortality and into the beyond, passing through the lower two kingdoms and culminating with entry into a representation of the celestial kingdom itself. Excepting only those few who will refuse Christ's mercy till the end, Joseph later taught, man "cannot be damned through all eternity, their [sic] is a possibility for his escape in a little time."<sup>12</sup>

The likelihood of interpreting Joseph's views as encompassing a post-spirit world progression is enhanced by the fact that his two closest associates, his brother Hyrum and Brigham Young, both interpreted his teachings in just this way. Hyrum believed that salvific states in the hereafter were not static: He taught that "those of the Terrestrial Glory either advance to the Celestial or recede to the Telestial."<sup>13</sup> Brigham Young was also in line with such a conception. He was teaching in 1855 that those who fail to secure exaltation by the conclusion of their earthly probation "would eventually have the privilege of proveing [sic]

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12. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," [138], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/6>; Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 346.

13. Franklin D. Richards, "Words of the Prophets," in the Church History Library. This is a small thirty-page handwritten booklet produced by Richards from 1841 to 1844. In it he recorded notes from a number of sermons given by Joseph Smith and others.

themselves worthy & advancing to a Celestial kingdom but it would be a slow progress.”<sup>14</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ’s eminent theologian and Seventy B. H. Roberts acknowledged that scripture was vague but argued that the ministry alluded to in each kingdom seemed meaningless “unless it be for the purpose of advancing our Father’s children along the lines of eternal progression.”<sup>15</sup> However, whether “after education and advancement within those spheres” all could “at last emerge from them and make their way to the higher degrees of glory”<sup>16</sup> was not revealed. The *Improvement Era*, published under the direction of Church President Joseph F. Smith, took a moderate position, holding that “the answer to this question may not be absolutely clear.” In some cases at least, the *Era* proposed, though not as a general rule, “passing from one [kingdom] to the other . . . may be possible for especially gifted and faithful characters.”<sup>17</sup>

James Talmage, virtually the only Apostle to produce a theological treatise (two, actually) under official imprimatur, wrote in his first edition of *The Articles of Faith* that the answer was implicit in the principle of eternal progression itself: “Advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for. . . . Eternity is progressive.”<sup>18</sup> He later elaborated that no man will be detained in the lower regions “longer than is necessary to bring him to a fitness for something better. When he reaches that stage the prison doors will open and there will be rejoicing among the hosts who welcome him into a better state.”<sup>19</sup>

In subsequent editions of *The Articles of Faith*, the key words “from kingdom to kingdom” were removed. According to the translator of his work into German, Talmage clarified that in his earlier editions he had

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14. Diary of Wilford Woodruff, August 5, 1856, in *Waiting for World’s End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 167.

15. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 419.

16. Roberts, *Ecclesiastical History*, 419.

17. “About Passing from One Glory to Another,” in “Priesthood Quorums’ Table,” *Improvement Era* 14, no. 1 (November 1910): 87.

18. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899), 421.

19. James E. Talmage, in *One Hundredth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 97.

declared for progression through the kingdoms at the explicit request of the committee of Apostles reviewing his work. So at that time, an apostolic majority (or a majority of the committee) believed that progression through the kingdoms was consistent with Church doctrine and did not approve of denying that possibility in a Church publication. Talmage reportedly claimed that he had personally never favored the principle and indicated as much in his revised twelfth edition.<sup>20</sup>

In the latter half of the twentieth century, other leaders explicitly stated the view of kingdom-to-kingdom progression. President J. Reuben Clark stated: “It is my belief that God will save all of His children that he can; and while, if we live unrighteously here, we shall not go to the other side in the same status, so to speak, as those who live righteously; nevertheless, the unrighteous will have their chance, and in the eons of the eternities that are to follow, they, too, may climb to the destinies to which they who are righteous and serve God, have climbed.”<sup>21</sup>

Some have found assurance in Joseph Smith’s comments about the power of sealing to bind children unconditionally to their parents. (It is perhaps arguable that such promises extend only to those who received the fulness of the priesthood, his audience at the time). The significance of those temple sealings was interpreted by Elder Orson F. Whitney and has been reaffirmed with increasing frequency in recent years: “Joseph Smith declared . . . that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return.”<sup>22</sup> The extent of that return

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20. LDS scholar Ben Spackman uncovered this fact in a 1949 letter authored by Max Zimmer. He posted the letter on August 17, 2021, on his blog at <http://benspackman.com/2021/08/james-e-talmage-the-articles-of-faith-and-progression-between-kingdoms/>. The letter is in UA 618, box 2, folder 5, Sidney B. Sperry Collection, Perry Special Collections.

21. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “Pres. Clark Delivers Easter Address in Ensign Stake,” *Deseret News*, April 23, 1960, 3.

22. Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 110. The quotation has been cited frequently in general conference addresses. See Boyd K. Packer, “Our Moral Environment,” *Ensign* 22, no. 5 (May 1992): 68; Robert D. Hales, “Strengthening Families: Our Sacred Duty,” *Ensign* 29, no. 5 (May 1999): 34; James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign* 33, no. 5 (May 2003): 62; Robert D. Hales, “With All the Feeling of a Tender Parent: A Message of

is, however, not clearly indicated, nor are the implications for potential progression between kingdoms versus while in the spirit world.

Recently, leaders have reminded us that even sealing power cannot contravene individual agency; President James E. Faust believed the two principles—unlimited progression and personal accountability—could be reconciled: “I recognize that now is the time ‘to prepare to meet God,’ ” he said, affirming the words of Alma, but then asked, “If the repentance of the wayward children does not happen in this life, is it still possible for the cords of the sealing to be strong enough for them yet to work out their repentance? . . . Mercy will not rob justice, and the sealing power of faithful parents will only claim wayward children upon the condition of their repentance and Christ’s Atonement.” And he concluded, “There are very few whose rebellion and evil deeds are so great that they have ‘sinned away the power to repent.’ . . . Perhaps in this life we are not given to fully understand how enduring the sealing cords of righteous parents are to their children. It may very well be that there are more helpful sources at work than we know. I believe there is a strong familial pull as the influence of beloved ancestors continues with us from the other side of the veil.”<sup>23</sup>

Opponents of progression have invoked difficult passages from Alma: “Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis [like Kori-hor], that I will repent” (Alma 34:34). This is because, as Amulek taught, we will emerge on the other side of the veil with the very same disposition with which we left this one, and time is the necessary requirement for change (Alma 34:34). Elder Charles W. Penrose felt that the book of Alma’s focus on this-life-only repentance failed to accommodate the diversity of life experiences and opportunities. He preached in a general conference address that “there are hundreds of thousands who have heard the Gospel in the flesh and through fear or folly have not embraced it, having been afraid to come forward and join themselves with this unpopular people, when they pass away from this stage of being into the spirit world [they] will be prepared to receive it when it is being preached among the spirits that are there.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, he agrees

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Hope to Families,” *Ensign* 34, no. 5 (May 2004): 91; and Richard H. Winkel, “The Temple Is about Families,” *Ensign* 36, no. 11 (November 2006): 10.

23. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep,” 62.

24. Charles W. Penrose, in *Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1906), 86.

with Elder Talmage that repentance—the changing of the heart—will bring us to “a fitness for something better.” If the Book of Mormon also teaches that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) and that we should “consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments” (Mosiah 2:41), then there is no doubt that “this life is the time for men to prepare” (Alma 34:32).

Certainly, “repentance will be possible . . . even after death,” as Elder James E. Talmage insisted (see D&C 138:57–59). To some, he continued, “it may appear that to teach the possibility of repentance beyond the grave may tend to weaken belief in the absolute necessity of repentance and reformation in this life.” There is “no reason for such objection,” he explains, when we consider that willful neglect here and now will render the process that much more lengthy and difficult in the future.<sup>25</sup> Whether such repentance can extend beyond the spirit world is not resolved by such caveats, but such readings mitigate the finality of Amulek’s timeframe.

The length and difficulty to which Elders Penrose and Talmage allude are crucial elements in understanding the logic of progression through the kingdoms. Any postmortem progress at all—within or beyond the spirit world—would in no way suggest shortcuts, cheap grace, or exemption from all salvational requirements. Progress would in any case require conformity to all the principles and ordinances of the gospel. This is why, as declared in Doctrine and Covenants 131 and 132:16–17, without accepting the law of celestial marriage, one does necessarily “remain separately and singly, without exaltation, . . . to all eternity.” Those choosing to persist in a state of wickedness undoubtedly will find it their “final state” (Alma 34:32, 35).

Those who believe in eternal progression for all must deal with one particularly challenging scriptural text in addition to those cited above: “Where God and Christ are they cannot come, worlds without end,” describes those who inherit the celestial kingdom (D&C 76:12). In his reworking of Genesis, Joseph Smith learned that Eternal is one of God’s names or titles: “Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and Endless and Eternal is my name” (Moses 7:35). The Lord reiterated this point to Joseph in section 19: “eternal” punishment is not endless punishment. “It is not written that there shall

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25. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 57, 59–60.

be no end to this torment, but it is written *endless torment*. Again, it is written *eternal damnation* . . . that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men" (D&C 19:6–7, italics in original). "Worlds without end" is an expression virtually identical to "eternal" in both usage and effect; why the Lord's explanation of employing the first would not apply to his using the second is a fair question to ask.

So Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, the apostolic committee supervising the *Articles of Faith*, and J. Reuben Clark believed that God's generosity would not preclude progression from a lower kingdom to a higher. Their position may be implicit though not expressed in the words of Robert D. Hales, who urged parents to "never, never shut the door of your heart to any of your children."<sup>26</sup> Like the Savior's admonition to forgive "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22), Elder Hales' directive poses the question: Why would God impose limits to *his own* forgiveness when in our quest for godliness we are told we should not?

On the other side of the question, we find a series of pronouncements that clearly reject any possibility of progression between kingdoms. Those voices have become more prominent in our own day. One early voice is Elder Melvin J. Ballard, who posed the question of progression through the kingdoms in 1922. In reply, he took Doctrine and Covenants 76:112 in its plainest meaning as regards celestial kingdom inhabitants: "Where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end." He then commented that "no provision has been made for promotion from one glory to another."<sup>27</sup> President George Albert Smith agreed. Quoting the same scripture, he doubted that heirs of lower kingdoms "will continue to progress until we will find ourselves in the celestial kingdom."<sup>28</sup>

In 1980, Elder Bruce R. McConkie denounced the idea as one of "seven deadly heresies." In addition to citing Doctrine and Covenants 76:112, he added a rationale to resist such teachings: "This belief lulls men into a state of carnal security. It causes them to say, 'God is so merciful; surely he will save us all eventually; if we do not gain the celestial kingdom now, eventually we will; so why worry?' It lets people live a life

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26. Robert D. Hales, in North America Northeast Area Broadcast, April 26, 2015.

27. Melvin J. Ballard, "The Three Degrees of Glory," in *Melvin J. Ballard: Crusader for Righteousness*, ed. Melvin R. Ballard (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 224.

28. George Albert Smith, in *One Hundred Sixteenth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1945), 172.

of sin here and now with the hope that they will be saved eventually.”<sup>29</sup> Elder McConkie was following the lead of his father-in-law, President Joseph Fielding Smith, who derived the same conclusion from the same scripture: “The terrestrial and the celestial are limited in their powers of advancement, worlds without end.”<sup>30</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball was of the same opinion: “After a person has been assigned to his place in the kingdom, either in the celestial, the terrestrial, or the celestial, or to his exaltation, he will never advance from his assigned glory to another glory. That is eternal!”<sup>31</sup> Elder Russell M. Nelson, in 1985, added his weight to this view. After resurrection, he taught in a general conference, quoting President Kimball, “the soul . . . will come before the great judge to receive its *final* assignment.”<sup>32</sup>

Although the term “final judgment” does not occur in scripture, Amulek did stipulate a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33). Another scripture may also be interpreted as assuming, if not teaching, that no progression through kingdoms is possible. Doctrine and Covenants 88, elaborating on Paul’s language about resurrection (1 Cor. 15), indicates that “your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened” (D&C 88:28). One reasonable inference from these lines is that our resurrected, immortalized bodies are fixed in a condition that corresponds to a fixed kingdom of glory (D&C 88:29).

Elder Boyd K. Packer and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland have both spoken to the immense reach of the Atonement, without stipulating whether that reach transcends resurrection and judgment. Elder Packer testified that “no rebellion, no transgression, no apostasy, no crime [is] exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness.”<sup>33</sup> Elder Holland affirmed that “however late you think you are, however many chances you think you have missed, however many mistakes you feel you have made or talents you think you don’t have, or however far from home

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29. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” Brigham Young University devotional, June 1, 1980, accessed May 8, 2021, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie\\_seven-deadly-heresies/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie_seven-deadly-heresies/).

30. “The Degrees of Glory,” in *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:32.

31. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 50.

32. Russell M. Nelson, “Self-Mastery,” *Ensign* 15, no. 11 (November 1985): 32, emphasis added, quoting *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 46.

33. Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995): 20.

and family and God you feel you have traveled, I testify that you have *not* traveled beyond the reach of divine love. It is not possible for you to sink lower than the infinite light of Christ's Atonement shines.”<sup>34</sup>

It is, of course, entirely possible that both are referring to a mercy that pertains to this mortal probation only—or is manifest in assignment to any of the kingdoms of glory. It is also likely, however, that such expressions of hopefulness and mercy, balanced against the realities of accountability and life as a “state of probation” (2 Ne. 2:21), factor into the decision of the leadership as a body to leave indeterminate the possibilities of those who at their death fall short of a celestial glory. It is also the case, as the historical record reveals, that a difference of opinion on the subject has characterized the minds of apostles and prophets throughout this dispensation.

What we can know is that the Church leadership decided not just once, as cited at the beginning of this essay, but *again* in 1965 and *yet again* in 1968 to declare that the question is officially open.<sup>35</sup> Faithful Latter-day Saints can believe in the possibility of progression for all or believe the door is shut once assignment to a kingdom is made. We cannot, however, proclaim with any validity that one or the other belief is official Church teaching.

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34. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” *Ensign* 42, no. 5 (May 2012): 33.

35. Gary Bergera refers to the 1952 First Presidency statement cited in footnote 11 as being reaffirmed in 1965. Gary James Bergera, “Grey Matters,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 181–82. Yet a third statement was sent to an institute instructor in 1968. The Church History Library did not grant access to the documents in question to the present author. Photocopies of the latter two letters are in the author’s possession.