

# Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God

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On 6 April 1844, Hyrum Smith, counselor to the Prophet Joseph Smith, speaking at the general conference of the Church, stated, “I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and power.”<sup>1</sup> Yet on 13 January 1867, speaking as president of the Church in the Tabernacle, Brigham Young stated, “According to [some men’s] theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children.”<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a more stark contradiction in authoritative statements about the Mormon concept of God: Hyrum Smith says that God has all wisdom and power; Brigham Young says that he does not and is progressing in those attributes. How could there be such a dramatic reversal in dogma? Isn’t this a simple matter of fact or falsehood? Isn’t it certain that either God is perfect, with all knowledge and power, or he is not? How could there be direct opposition at the prophetic level about something so unambiguous and fundamental?

My simple thesis here is that, in fact, these statements are not contradictory.<sup>3</sup> These Church leaders were using two different, but complementary, ways of talking about God based on two different aspects of the Mormon understanding of God, both of which, I believe, are essential to our theology and must be maintained. With the help of a basic concept—that of different, progressive *spheres* of development and of possible perfection within each sphere—it is possible to believe *both* in God’s perfection of knowledge and power in relation to our sphere and in his progression in these attributes in his own and higher spheres. This concept was first firmly articulated by Brigham Young, but it was suggested earlier in some of Joseph Smith’s discourses and in the Doctrine and

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Covenants, and it has been employed by most of the main figures in Mormon theology from the beginning until the present.

Joseph Smith taught both of these doctrines about God. The Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, consistent with the traditional Christian scriptures, refer to God as having all knowledge and all power.<sup>4</sup> The Church's earliest major doctrinal exposition, the Lectures on Faith, actually uses the traditional Christian categories (borrowed from Greek philosophy) of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence in describing God. It makes the explicit claim that "without the knowledge of all things God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures . . . and if it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men that God had all knowledge it would be impossible for them to exercise faith in him."<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Smith's part in authoring the Lectures on Faith is still uncertain. They seem mainly the work of Sidney Rigdon, and some readers have suspected they reflect a very early stage of Mormon doctrinal expression about God, one still heavily influenced by traditional Christian creeds.<sup>6</sup> For instance, God is described as a personage of spirit, only Christ as a personage of tabernacle, and the Holy Ghost not as a personage at all but as a kind of unifying mind of the Father and Son. Those who quote the Lectures on Faith have had to editorialize, to add footnotes and explanations in order to make it conform to later orthodox Mormon thought, as, for instance, Joseph Fielding Smith does at the beginning of *Doctrines of Salvation*. This problem was recognized in the inclination of Church authorities to revise the Lectures on Faith in the early 1900s, or at least to add a footnote, and then the 1921 decision instead to exclude them from the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>7</sup> But Joseph Smith never repudiated them. It is likely that, had they been written later, as his understanding developed, he too would have qualified or explained some of the terms and concepts used there, but I think he saw no inherent contradiction between them and his later understanding of God's relationship to higher spheres of existence.

This understanding had been received and amplified over a number of years before it was most clearly, comprehensively, and publicly declared in the famous "King Follett Discourse," given at that same April 1844 conference at which Hyrum Smith emphasized God's perfection. The "King Follett Discourse" itself has somewhat questionable status because it was recorded only in the rather sketchy way possible then, in longhand—though by four scribes, whose work was later amalgamated. Joseph Smith nowhere in it states definitely that God is now progressing in knowledge and power, but both there and in the Doctrine and



Covenants he makes it perfectly clear that God is not everywhere supreme and does not have all power by stating that there are gods above him and by naming specific things that cannot be done, even by God: God cannot create elements, or anything else, out of nothing; he cannot create intelligences or force salvation on them. Joseph Smith also clearly describes an eternal process of learning and growth by which Godhood is attained, and he at least *implies* that that process *continues* for God himself:

First God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! . . . The first principle of truth and of the Gospel is to know of a certainty that character of God, and that we may converse with Him . . . that He once was a man like one of us. . . . You have got to learn how to make yourselves God . . . and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace . . . from exaltation to exaltation. [Jesus said], “I saw the Father work out His kingdom with fear and trembling and I am doing the same, too. When I get my kingdom, I will give it to the Father and it will add to and exalt His glory. He will take a higher exaltation and I will take His place and also be exalted, so that He obtains kingdom rolling upon Kingdom.” . . .

All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself and be exalted with Him, so that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge, power, and glory.<sup>8</sup>

Notice the lack of traditional Christian absolutism here. The emphasis seems rather to be on God’s similarity to humans, on God as having the same kind of being as we do and making available to us a process of growth he himself has been engaged in and apparently is still engaged in, “whereby the less intelligent . . . could have a privilege to advance like Himself.” The verb structure implies he *still is* advancing. God is a “greater” but not absolute intelligence; he is moving to “higher” and “higher” exaltations, not to some absolute state of the highest possible exaltation; one glory is added to another “in all that knowledge, power, and glory.”<sup>9</sup>

In the Winter 1978 issue of *BYU Studies*, which contains a newly amalgamated text of the “King Follett Discourse,” Van Hale demonstrates that the concept of the plurality of gods had been taught by Joseph Smith from 1835 and was clearly understood by his close associates, such as Hyrum Smith and Brigham Young. Hyrum himself is quoted in George Laub’s journal as teaching, on 27 April 1843, that there is “a whole train and lineage of gods.”<sup>10</sup>



In fact, in that very sermon Hyrum provides the basic scriptural text for the shift in perspective that makes it possible to talk about many gods, of ascending spheres of power and intelligence, and then to turn around and talk of one God, our God, perfect in intelligence and power and thus able to save his children on the earth. He begins his discussion with a quotation from 1 Corinthians 8:5–6: “There be gods many and lords many. But to us there is but one God the Father.” Despite the context of this scripture—a discussion by Paul of belief in idols—Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, and many others have used it as a brief explanation of how it is possible to be both a Christian polytheist (technically a henotheist) and a monotheist: how we can talk sometimes in an adventuresome mode about multiple orders of godhood, and how we can consider the advanced spheres that exist in the infinities, and yet at the same time, without contradiction, we can talk in a worshipful mode about our one God and his perfect knowledge and supreme redemptive power in the sphere of our world.

Some Latter-day Saint prophets and theologians have believed the passage from Corinthians serves specifically to describe the difference between a way of talking and thinking that focuses on the multiple spheres of infinite existence where there are “gods many and lords many” and a way that focuses on the single sphere of our immediate existence where there is “but one God the Father,” the one to whom we are responsible and who is perfect and therefore not progressing in our mortal sphere. To me, this use of the passage by the prophets suggests as well that *both* ways of talking about God are true and orthodox—and complementary.

With this perspective we can understand how Hyrum Smith, when he proclaims, “I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and power,” is talking in that second, single sphere mode in which “to us there is but one God the Father.” His concern, it is clear from the context, is with the Saints’ faith in Christ’s power to save, which had perhaps been undermined by too exclusive a focus on the first, multiple spheres mode:

I want to put down all false influence. If I thought I should be saved and any in the congregation be lost, I should not be happy. . . . Our Savior is competent to save all from death and hell. I can prove it out of the revelations. I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and power.

Brigham Young, like Hyrum Smith, used both ways of talking about God. At times, apparently when he felt his audience most needed the emphasis, he would speak in the single sphere



mode, focusing in classical Christian terms on God's sovereignty in our world. President Young often emphasized God's perfections, his knowledge and power absolutely sufficient to save us. But at many other times, especially in his ongoing debates with Orson Pratt, he spoke forthrightly in the multiple spheres mode, rejoicing in the expansive vision he had received from Joseph Smith of the "eternal progression" (a phrase he seems to have coined) that is the heart of activity and motivation for both gods and men:

The first great principle that ought to occupy the attention of mankind, that should be understood by the child and the adult, and which is the main spring of all action (whether people understand it or not), is the principle of improvement. The principle of increase, of exaltation, of adding to that we already possess, is the grand moving principle and cause of the actions of the children of men . . . the main spring of the actions of [all] people. . . . Those who profess to be Latter-day Saints, who have the privilege of receiving and understanding the principles of the holy Gospel, are in duty bound to study and find out, and put in practice in their lives, those principles that are calculated to endure, and that tend to a continual increase in this, and in the world to come.

All their earthly avocations should be framed upon this principle. This alone can insure to them an exaltation; this is the starting point, in this existence, to an endless progression.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from other sermons that Brigham Young does not mean by "progression" mere *quantitative* increase, in numbers of spirit children or kingdoms, as we sometimes now use the term "eternal increase" to mean. He said, "We shall never cease to learn, unless we apostatize. . . . Can you understand that?"<sup>12</sup> And this was not a peripheral notion. It was central to his theology:

Let us not narrow ourselves up; for the world, with all its variety of useful information and its rich hoard of hidden treasure, is before us; and eternity, with all its sparkling intelligence, lofty aspirations, and unspeakable glories, is before us.<sup>13</sup>

When we have passed into the sphere where Joseph is, there is still another department, and then another, and another, and so on to an eternal progression in exaltation and eternal lives. That is the exaltation I am looking for.<sup>14</sup>

When we have lived millions of years in the presence of God and angels . . . shall we then cease learning? No, or eternity ceases.<sup>15</sup>

Brigham Young delighted in his expansive vision of continued, unlimited learning and experience. It was, for him, both the reason for and the means of continued existence, of eternal life. It led him to exult in the inclusiveness of the gospel:

Every accomplishment, every grace, every useful attainment in mathematics . . . in all science and art belongs to the Saints, and they

should avail themselves as expeditiously as possible of the wealth of knowledge the sciences offer to the diligent and persevering scholar.<sup>16</sup>

As Saints in the last days we have much to learn; there is an eternity of knowledge before us; at most we receive but very little in this stage of our progression.<sup>17</sup>

Such enthusiasm led Brigham Young to completely reverse the medieval Faust legend, which implies that too much learning leads a Christian to blasphemy; he claims that only when we blaspheme, when we sin against the Holy Ghost, do we finally *stop* learning:

If we continue to learn all that we can, pertaining to the salvation which is purchased and presented to us through the Son of God, is there a time when a person will cease to learn? Yes, when he has sinned against God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—God's minister: when he has denied the Lord, defied Him and committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. That is the time when a person will cease to learn, and from that time forth, will descend in ignorance, forgetting that which they formerly knew. . . . They will cease to increase, but must decrease. . . . These are the only characters who will ever cease to learn, both in time and eternity.<sup>18</sup>

His belief in endless progression in knowledge was not a speculative matter with Brigham Young, as some other matters clearly were. About some things, such as the exact status of Adam, he frankly said, "I guess" such and such, or this subject "does not immediately concern your or my welfare." But he clearly felt that the idea of eternal progression was indeed the mainspring of *all* action, including divine action, and that the central concepts he had learned from Joseph concerning progression in both humans and God must be kept alive in the Mormon heritage. He reprinted the "King Follett Discourse" a number of times and referred often to doing and teaching only what he had learned from Joseph. Only a few months before his death he testified,

From the first time I saw the Prophet Joseph I never lost a word that came from him concerning the kingdom. And this is the key of knowledge that I have today, that I did hearken to the words of Joseph and treasured them up in my heart, laid them away, asking my Father in the name of his Son Jesus to bring them to mind when needed.<sup>19</sup>

The testimony of many of the Apostles who knew them both—and who like Brigham were taught and trained by Joseph in a concentrated way in the last two years of his life—was that Brigham Young indeed succeeded in remembering and teaching what Joseph taught.

A major motive for Brigham Young's continuing and remarkably public doctrinal disagreements with Orson Pratt was



his concern not only that Elder Pratt was wrong in insisting without qualification on God's absolute perfection and the impossibility of his further progression, but that such an influential speaker and writer would convince many to follow after him and leave to posterity the impression that only his view and emphasis had a place in Mormon thought. President Young felt it so crucial to keep before the Saints his own and Joseph Smith's emphasis as well that he pushed Elder Pratt to a public recantation in 1865.<sup>20</sup> Then he published the recantation in the *Deseret News* along with a denunciation of specific doctrines of Elder Pratt signed by the First Presidency. When these documents were reprinted, signed by the other Apostles, Brigham Young specifically condemned a number of assertions Elder Pratt had taught in his book *The Seer*. The following beliefs of Elder Pratt were identified as *not* true:

1. There will be no being or beings in existence that will know one particle more than we know, then our knowledge, and wisdom, and power will be infinite; and cannot from thenceforth be increased or expanded in the least degree.
2. There will be nothing more to be learned.
3. The Father and the Son do not progress in knowledge and wisdom because they already know all things past, present and to come.
4. None of the Gods know more than another and none are progressing in knowledge; neither in the acquirement of any truth.<sup>21</sup>

Part of Brigham Young's concern was with the presumption of actually *limiting* God while seeming to describe him as having limitless power and knowledge. In October 1856 he commanded the Saints, "Now do not lariat [rope off] the God that I serve and say that he cannot learn anymore; I do not believe in such a character."<sup>22</sup> President Young's counselor, Jedediah M. Grant, developed the same image later that month: "[If God] is lariatied out, as Orson Pratt lariatied out the Gods in his theory, his circle is [only] as far as the string extends. My God is not lariatied out."<sup>23</sup> It was this concern that motivated the statement of Brigham Young I began with, the one that seems to contradict Hyrum Smith:

Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson has, in theory, bounded the capacity of God. According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children; they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful.<sup>24</sup>

Brigham Young's concern was also with spiritual psychology, the importance, in motivating mankind toward salvation, of



their retaining a certain vision: that what was most rewarding in earthly progression would continue forever and would make celestial life, or Godhood, genuinely attractive. Godhood is not to be a mysterious stasis or a mere endless repetition of the same process of creating spirits and saving them. Wilford Woodruff, in 1857, gave pointed expression to this concern:

If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent and reflecting mind. God himself is still increasing and progressing in knowledge, power and dominion, and will do so world without end. It is just so with us.<sup>25</sup>

Lorenzo Snow, who like Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff knew Joseph Smith's teachings firsthand, provided the famous Mormon couplet that summarizes memorably the concept of a God who is in genuine relation to us humans and our process of progression: "As Man now is, God once was: as God now is, Man may be."<sup>26</sup> As President of the Church in 1901, President Snow also spoke clearly in the multiple spheres mode about eternal progression after Godhood is reached:

We are immortal beings. . . . Our individuality will always exist . . . our identity is insured. We will be ourselves and nobody else. Whatever changes may arise, whatever worlds may be made or pass away, our identity will always remain the same; and we will continue on improving, advancing and increasing in wisdom, intelligence, power and dominion, worlds without end.<sup>27</sup>

In the twentieth century, some Church leaders began to use mainly the mortal sphere way of talking about God, which emphasizes his perfection and his ability to save us. Orson Pratt's absolutism about God that harked back to the Lectures on Faith had been rejected and the Lectures themselves demoted in status, but President Joseph F. Smith, like his father Hyrum Smith, was concerned that some in the Church were inclined to demean God, to reduce too much the distance between God and man and thus to undermine confidence in God's saving power. (I remember some Mormons in my own youth who were so caught up with the vision of eternal progression that they could hardly wait to die to be like God!) Speaking in 1914 about those who would thus reduce God's power and majesty, President Smith said:

Beware of men who come to you with heresies of this kind, who would make you to think or feel that the Lord Almighty, who made heaven and earth and created all things, is limited in his dominion of earthly things to the capacities of men. . . . They would, if they could, make you believe that the Son of God, who possessed all power . . . power to raise the dead, power to unstop the ears of the dead . . . did



not do such things. . . . There are just a few ignoramuses, “learned fools,” if you please, who would make you believe, if they could, that the Almighty God is limited in His power to the capacity of man. . . . Don’t you believe it, not for one moment.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph F. Smith’s son, Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., took a similar position. In his extremely influential book *Doctrines of Salvation*, he quotes the passage from his grandfather Hyrum, about not serving a God who was not absolute, and also the passages from the Lectures on Faith on the perfections of God. It is clear that his concern, like that of his father and grandfather, is with God’s power in relation to humans. He asks, after that quotation from Hyrum, “Do we believe that God has all wisdom? . . . Does he have all power? If so then there is nothing in which he lacks. If he is lacking in ‘wisdom’ and in ‘power’ then he is not supreme and there must be something greater than he is, and this is absurd.”<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, Elder Smith is here speaking in the single, mortal sphere mode, the one bounded by the idea that *to us* there is only one God the Father. He of course knew that both his grandfather and Joseph Smith taught that in a particular sense there is “something greater” than God—that God is in fact (if we speak in terms of the multiple, eternal spheres) *not* supreme, that there are Gods above God, a Father of God who gave him salvation and a Father of that god and so on, apparently to infinity. In response to a question about “plural gods,” in the second volume of *Answers to Gospel Questions*, he quotes a long passage from Joseph Smith’s discourse of 16 June 1844, the one most full and explicit about the challenging doctrine Joseph called “the plurality of Gods.” There we can see the Prophet Joseph at ease with both modes of thinking, multiple and single sphere, because he uses in support and explanation that same passage from Corinthians that his brother Hyrum had used the year before. In the passage quoted by Joseph Fielding Smith, he states:

Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many. I want to set it forth in a plain and simple manner; but to us there is but one God—that is *pertaining to us*; and he is in all and through all. But if Joseph Smith says there are Gods many and Lords many, they cry, “Away with him! Crucify him!”

Joseph Smith then proceeds to some analysis of the Hebrew original of Genesis 1:1, after which he continues:

In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. It is a great subject I am dwelling on. The word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods. The head of the Gods appointed one God for us; and when you take that view of that subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods.<sup>30</sup>



After repeating this long quotation from Joseph Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith shows his own understanding of the two different modes:

It is perfectly true, as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price and in the Bible that to us there is but one God. . . . This Godhead presides over us, and to us, the inhabitants of this world, they constitute the only God or Godhead. There is none other besides them. [Here he cites that same scripture from Corinthians about gods many and lords many but to us one God the Father.] To them we are amenable, and subject to their authority, and there is no other Godhead unto whom we are subject. However, as the Prophet has shown, there can be, and are, other Gods.<sup>31</sup>

Joseph Fielding Smith clearly recognized both the multiple sphere and single sphere perspectives and the basis of both in the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, but he also shared his father's concern about belittling God and his grandfather's concern about the Saints losing faith in God's absolute power to save. He seems to have chosen to focus his own writing and talking about God in the single sphere mode.

However, during the same period as Joseph Fielding Smith's early writings others chose to emphasize the multiple spheres way of talking about God, particularly B. H. Roberts and John A. Widstoe, the two twentieth-century General Authorities probably most influenced by Brigham Young and in turn the ones most influential in preserving and developing the basic philosophical thought, the "eternalism," of Joseph Smith.

In his most lengthy discourse on the nature of God, Elder Roberts, after quoting extensively from Joseph Smith, states:

Of course, such views as those expressed above involve us in the reality of a pluralistic universe, and a plurality of Gods; . . . there have been appointed certain exalted, glorified and perfected intelligences, who have attained unto a participation in, and become partakers of, "the Divine Nature" (2 Pet. 1:4), who have been appointed as Presidencies over worlds and world systems, who function in the dignity of Divine intelligences, or Deities, even as to our world and its heavens there has been appointed a Godhead, as taught by St. Paul.<sup>32</sup>

He then goes on to quote that same passage from Corinthians used by Joseph and Hyrum Smith to demonstrate the two perspectives, the two modes of discourse: "As there be Gods many and Lords many—but to us (that is, pertaining to us), there is but one God."

In Elder Roberts's mind, the passage from Corinthians is strong support for his belief in a realm where there are many gods,



all progressing eternally; it is a complement rather than a contradiction to his belief in a realm where, to us mortals, there is but one God, perfect in every way. Earlier, Elder Roberts had taught:

Even with the possession of [the Holy Spirit] to guide us into all truth, I pray you, nevertheless, not to look for finality in things, for you will look in vain. Intelligence, purity, truth, will always remain with us relative terms and also relative qualities. Ascend to what heights you may, ever beyond you will see other heights in respect of these things and ever as you ascend, more heights will appear, and it is doubtful if we shall ever attain the absolute in respect of these qualities. Our joy will be the joy of approximating them, of attaining unto everincreasing excellence without attaining the absolute. It will be the joy of eternal progression.<sup>33</sup>

And in Roberts's famous and influential *Seventy's Course in Theology*, published by the Church and used as an official priesthood manual, he argued, harking back to Brigham Young's concern about limiting God:

God's immutability should not be understood as to exclude the idea of advancement or progress of God . . . an absolute immutability would require eternal immobility—which would reduce God to a condition eternally static . . . which from the nature of things, would bar him from participation in that enlargement of kingdom and increasing glory that comes from the redemption and progress of men. And is it too bold of a thought, that with this progress, even for the Mightiest, new thoughts and new vistas may appear, inviting to new adventures and enterprises that will yield new experiences, advancement and enlargement even for the Most High?<sup>34</sup>

John A. Widtsoe, the brilliant immigrant convert who had studied Joseph Smith's thought in detail for his 1903 work, *Joseph Smith as Scientist*, emphasizes there the Prophet's naturalism, his emphasis on God as organizer according to natural law and thus not truly omnipotent in the traditional absolutistic Christian sense. In *A Rational Theology*, Elder Widtsoe is even more explicit about the similar capability of both humans and God for eternal progression:

The essential thing is that man has to undergo experience upon experience, to attain the desired mastery of the external universe; and that we, of this earth, are passing through an estate designed wholly for our further education. Throughout eternal life, increasing knowledge is attained, and with increasing knowledge comes the greater adaptation to law, and in the end an increasingly greater joy. Therefore, it is, that eternal life, is the greatest gift of God. . . . if the great law of progression is accepted, *God must have been engaged from the beginning, and must now be engaged, in progressive development.* As knowledge grew into greater knowledge, by the persistent efforts of will, his recognition of universal laws became greater until he attained at last a conquest over the universe which to our finite understanding seems absolutely complete.<sup>35</sup>



That last sentence shows that Elder Widtsoe was also concerned to give the single sphere mode of thought its proper due. He goes on with that single sphere emphasis even while talking of multiple spheres:

As more knowledge and power are attained, growth becomes increasingly more rapid. God, exalted by his glorious intelligence, is moving on into new fields of power with a rapidity of which we can have no conception, whereas man, in a lower stage of development, moves relatively at a snaillike though increasing, pace. Man is, nevertheless, moving on, in eternal progression. In short, man is a god in embryo. He comes of a race of gods, and as this eternal growth is continued, we will approach more nearly the point which to us is Godhood, and which is everlasting in its power over the elements of the universe.<sup>36</sup>

An emphasis on the multiple spheres mode, focusing directly on our adventure in forever progressing to higher realms, continues in the writings of President David O. McKay: "A man's idea of the significance of the words 'eternal progression' will largely determine his philosophy of life. . . . The great secret of human happiness lies in progression. Stagnation means death. . . . The doctrine of eternal progression is fundamental in the Church of Christ."<sup>37</sup> President McKay quotes the passage from Brigham Young I gave earlier on the principle of improvement as the mainspring of all action, then comments:

Somebody has said, "Show me a perfectly contented man and I will show you a useless one." So there must be some other element with contentment, some other virtue. What is it? Progress. Contentment and progress contribute to peace. If we are no better tomorrow than we are today, we are not very useful . . . so we want to experience two things: contentment and progress—progress intellectually, progress physically, but above all, progress spiritually; and the cognizance that we grow contributes to peace. You cannot remain stationary.<sup>38</sup>

Hugh B. Brown, President McKay's counselor in the First Presidency (1962–69), also emphasized this multiple spheres mode:

The time will come when all men will know something of the glory of God. But the time will not come when I or any other man will arrive at a point in knowledge, experience or understanding beyond which we cannot go. In other words, we believe in eternal progression.<sup>39</sup>

When we speak of eternal increase, we speak not only of increase of posterity, we speak of increase of knowledge and the power that comes with knowledge; increase of wisdom to use the knowledge and power wisely; increase of awareness and the joy that comes through understanding; increase of intelligence, which is the glory of God; increase of all that goes to make up Godhood.<sup>40</sup>



President Brown carried on the multiple spheres, adventure-some mode of talking about God until his death in 1975. And some younger Mormon thinkers have continued to explore the implications of the unusual Mormon belief in a finite, learning God for our concepts of evil, time, prophecy, etc.<sup>41</sup> Other influential voices in recent Mormon doctrinal writing, on the other hand, have emphasized the single sphere, worshipful mode, especially Elder Bruce R. McConkie and his son Joseph F. McConkie, a professor of religion at Brigham Young University.<sup>42</sup> These two, and some others, have thought of the two modes as opposed, as mutually exclusive; but it seems more useful to recognize the authoritative base for both modes in Mormon thought and the evidence that advocacy of both modes by the prophets provides that God is not to be limited to mutually exclusive human categories.

A few authoritative Mormon thinkers have gone to great lengths to explain *how* these two ways of talking about God are complementary, how each mode can be useful and true, depending on which sphere of God's existence and activity one is considering. The Doctrine and Covenants contains the key idea (including the very word "sphere") that was used by Brigham Young to describe this harmony. Section 93, received by the Prophet Joseph in 1833, tells us that "all truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence" (v. 30). This passage seems to evoke a universe of coexistent (perhaps concentric or more likely hyperspatial, multi-dimensional) spheres of truth and intelligent activity. In such a universe, a statement such as that God has all knowledge and power can be taken to be true when applied to our sphere, in which God is not progressing, but it is not completely true when applied to larger or more advanced spheres, where God *is* progressing. Brigham Young expressed this precise understanding:

We can still improve, we are made for that purpose, our capacities are organized to expand until we can receive into our comprehension celestial knowledge and wisdom, and to continue worlds without end. . . . [I]f men can understand and receive it, mankind are organized to receive intelligence until they become perfect in the sphere they are appointed to fill, which is far ahead of us at present. *When we use the term perfection, it applies to man in his present condition, as well as the heavenly beings.* We are now, or may be, as perfect in our sphere as God and angels are in theirs, but the greatest intelligence in existence can continually ascend to greater heights of perfection.

We are created for the express purpose of increase. There are none, correctly organized, but can increase from birth to old age. What is there that is not ordained after [such] an eternal Law of existence? *It is the Deity within us that causes increase.*<sup>43</sup>



B. H. Roberts, fully aware of the emphasis throughout the scriptures on the worshipful mode of discourse, the almost exclusive focus on God's perfection in our single sphere, developed an explanation, which I find persuasive, of why the other mode, the expansive vision of progress beyond this sphere, is used so rarely, even in modern scripture. He quotes the Doctrine and Covenants reference to many kingdoms, greater and lesser ones, filling all space (88:37), then points out that when God speaks to Moses, though he also hints of these other kingdoms, of many heavens that "cannot be numbered unto man," he informs Moses that he will give him only an account "concerning this heaven and this earth" (Moses 1:37, 2:1). Elder Roberts concludes that virtually all the revelations in the scriptures relate *only* to our earth and its heavens:

In other words, our revelations are local; they pertain to us and our limited order of worlds. It is only here and there a glimpse of things outside of our earth and its heavens is given. . . . This limited knowledge, these glimpses of the universe, were doubtless displayed by the Lord to these prophets at the heads of dispensations of truth, because of the influencing power which this knowledge of the nature of the universe upon man's conception of God would have; for undoubtedly such knowledge clearly influences conceptions of God.<sup>44</sup>

Elder Roberts also cites the expanding modern scientific awareness of a limitless universe and concludes:

This universe must be more than a mere creation for definite relationships to our earth . . . and God must be conceived of as having larger interests and immensely greater objectives than the affairs of the race inhabiting our world. . . . [T]he very limited revelations given concerning our earth and its heavens are not adequate as an explanation of the universe at large.<sup>45</sup>

Such an expansive vision of the cosmos, a vision also worshipful and deeply ennobling in its ultimate humility, seems to me vital to the Mormon spirit and to Mormon thought. It must not be lost in our very proper emphasis on the equally true and important vision of God's perfections and the human dependence on him for salvation. I appreciate the influence of those Mormon theologians who, speaking in the single sphere mode, might help correct, as Joseph F. Smith and Joseph Fielding Smith did, any tendency to belittle God or reduce faith in his saving power. But it is also important not to polarize Mormon doctrine about God or to obscure the grand vision of eternal progression that has traditionally energized it.

I do not expect that to happen. Modern writers as diverse in focus and orientation as Gerrit de Jong, Jr., and Hyrum Andrus



accept the reconciliation between the two modes of discourse suggested by Brigham Young, that is, that perfection in one sphere is possible, but then so is progress in a higher sphere or realm.<sup>46</sup> With a little discussion, perplexed students, who encounter what seem to them contradictory statements by their Church leaders and other authorities, can be helped with analogies. For instance, a being who is learning and progressing in a four dimensional realm, or hyperspace, can at the same time have *all* knowledge and power that is available to beings in only three dimensions—and all that is necessary for their salvation.<sup>47</sup> The anxiety often voiced against the idea that God is still learning—that he might therefore make disastrous errors or be unable to save us—can be calmed with the analogy that a person can know algebra perfectly and make absolutely no mistakes in using it, but can still be learning new things in calculus without endangering the realm of algebra. In a similar way, God can have all knowledge and power in our realm or sphere and still be learning in higher spheres, without in any way endangering his absolute ability to save us in this sphere. Or to rephrase Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "In the cosmos there are a multitude of progressing Gods, but pertaining to us there is one God, with all knowledge and power." We should be able to hear and appreciate the emphasis and the apostolic witness of both Hyrum Smith and Brigham Young, of both Hugh B. Brown and Joseph Fielding Smith. Mormon thinkers of various orientations can unite in this task, while continuing to use whichever way of talking about God is more appropriate to what they choose to emphasize in their ongoing struggle to know God: adventure or worship, potential or dependence, progress or perfection, the multiple spheres of our ultimate vision or the single sphere of our immediate concern.

I realize that thinking of God as genuinely progressing and therefore in some sense less than absolutely perfect is fearful. I feel that fear—that ultimate insecurity—myself when I think there is no source of *all* the answers, no final bulwark against all danger, and frustration, and change, and loss, nothing to prevent even God from weeping. But Enoch tells us that God does indeed weep (Moses 7:28), and the alternative to that weeping and my fear—the absolute, changeless, impassive, and thus necessarily impersonal God of traditional Christianity and of the philosophers—is even more fearful. I must accept the witness of the Prophet Joseph that the universe is ultimately open, an invitation to adventure and change, that the very divinity of God demands, as Brigham Young taught, not only dependence but creation and qualitative "increase," and that my own related divinity demands the same.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted In Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. by Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 5; from *History of the Church* 6:300.

<sup>2</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 11:286.

<sup>3</sup>James R. Harris also attempts a reconciliation of seemingly contradictory statements from Church leaders about progression and perfection as they apply to God. He quotes conflicting statements in parallel columns and tries to explain how it can be that God is able "to 'know all things' and at the same time to progress eternally in 'light and truth.'" But he does this with a move that seems to me untrue to the clear meaning of various leaders' statements about the nature of God's progression in knowledge and power (see James R. Harris, "Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God," *Brigham Young University Studies* 8 [Autumn 1967]: 37–46).

<sup>4</sup>See 2 Ne. 9:20; Alma 26:35; D&C 38:1–2, 88:7–13, 93:21, 26.

<sup>5</sup>Lectures on Faith, 44, in all editions of the Doctrine and Covenants before 1921.

<sup>6</sup>On authorship and decanonization see Leland H. Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?" *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 5–19, and Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, and Allen D. Roberts, "The 'Lectures on Faith': A Case Study in Decanonization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Fall 1987): 71–77. For a consideration of apparent changes in doctrine that may have led to the decanonization, see Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 53–66, and for a critique of Alexander, see Robert L. Millett, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," on pages 49–68 of this issue.

<sup>7</sup>In editing the *History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts noted that the Lectures on Faith were "not of equal authority in matters of doctrine" compared with the regular sections of the Doctrine and Covenants because when they were originally presented to the Church for acceptance they had been separately designated as not inspired revelation, though "judicially written and profitable for doctrine" (*History of the Church* 2:176).

<sup>8</sup>Stan Larson, "The King Follet Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 200, 203, 204.

<sup>9</sup>Harris quotes one of these passages from the King Follett Discourse that implies progression but then goes on to define "eternal progression" as meaning *God's* progression, by which Harris means merely God's perfect union with "the Patriarchal Order of Exalted Fathers" and thus perfect access to their absolute power and knowledge. This, of course, removes the crucial element of change in any useful notion of "progression" (Harris, "Eternal Progression," 37, 43–44). For more on Brigham Young's belief in a progressing God, see Boyd Kirkland, "Eternal Progression and the Second Death in the Theology of Brigham Young," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 174–75.

<sup>10</sup>"George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," ed. Eugene England, *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 176.

<sup>11</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 2:90, 6 February 1853.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* 3:203.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* 8:9.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* 3:375.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* 6:344. These quotations were compiled by Hugh Nibley, "Educating the Saints," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, ed. Truman Madsen (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 235.

<sup>16</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 10:224.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* 3:354.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.* 3:302.

<sup>19</sup>*Deseret News*, 6 June 1877.

<sup>20</sup>This experience is thoroughly reviewed in Gary J. Bergera, "The Orson Pratt-Brigham Young Controversies," *Dialogue* 13 (Summer 1980): 7–49; and in Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 209–17.

<sup>21</sup>*Deseret News*, 25 July 1865, 162–63. This statement, together with additional comments and signed as well by the Apostles, was reprinted in the *Deseret News* of 23 August 1865, 372–73.

<sup>22</sup>*Deseret News Weekly* 22:309.

<sup>23</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 4:126–27.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.* 11:286, 13 January 1867.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* 6:20, 6 December 1857.

<sup>26</sup>The origin of this couplet is explained in Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 46, 47.

<sup>27</sup>Conference Report, April 1901, 2.

<sup>28</sup>Conference Report, April 1914, 5.

<sup>29</sup>Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:5.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 2:140.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.



<sup>32</sup>*Discourses of B. H. Roberts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1948), 93–94.

<sup>33</sup>B. H. Roberts, "Relation of Inspiration and Revelation to Church Government," *Improvement Era* 8 (March 1905): 369.

<sup>34</sup>B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1911), 69–70.

<sup>35</sup>John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee of the LDS Church, 1915), 30–31, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 23–25.

<sup>37</sup>David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 260.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>39</sup>Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 116.

<sup>40</sup>Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1961), 4.

<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Gary James Bergera, "Does God Progress in Knowledge?" *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 179–81; Blake Ostler, "The Concept of a Finite God as an Adequate Object of Worship," in *Line upon Line*, 77–82; and Kent E. Robson, "Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 67–75.

<sup>42</sup>See Bruce R. McConkie's January 1974 address, "The Lord God of Joseph Smith," *Brigham Young University Devotional Addresses* 55 (Provo: BYU Press, 1972), 1–8, in which Elder McConkie states that God "has attained a state where he knows all things and nothing is withheld" (7); "The Seven Deadly Heresies," *BYU Speeches of the Year* (1980): 74–80, in which Elder McConkie lists belief in God's progression as one of the heresies; Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Life Beyond* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 148–49, in which the authors declare, "Our Father's development and progression over an infinitely long period of time has brought him to a point at which he now presides as God Almighty, He who is omnipotent, omniscient, and, by means of his Holy Spirit, omnipresent: he has all power, all knowledge, and is, through the light of Christ, in and through all things."

<sup>43</sup>Brigham Young, sermon preached in the old tabernacle, Salt Lake City, 13 June 1852, quoted in Hugh B. Brown, *Continuing the Quest*, 4, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup>*Journal of Discourses* 1:92–93.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>46</sup>Gerrit de Jong, Jr., *Living the Gospel* (1956 Sunday School lesson manual) (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1956), 138; Hyrum Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1967), 507.

<sup>47</sup>See Robert P. Burton and Bruce F. Webster, "Some Thoughts on Higher-dimensional Realms," *BYU Studies* 20 (Spring 1980): 281–96; see also an unpublished, but excellently reasoned paper by BYU student Jonathan Visick, "God, Man, and Hyperspace: Multidimensional views on Philosophy and Religion," on file in the BYU Honors Program.