

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Number:</b>	<b>24</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### THE NATURE OF GOD: INVISIBLE AND INCORPOREAL

Over the last decade or so there has been a highly-publicized campaign to make Mormonism into simply another *Christian* denomination. To a very large extent this has been done with the assistance of a number of high-profile Evangelicals, notably Richard Mouw,<sup>1</sup> former president of Fuller Seminary, and Craig Blomberg, Professor of NT at Denver Seminary.<sup>2</sup> Mouw even declared that Evangelicals have sinned against Mormonism (and he specifically has the late Walter Martin in mind) for writing anti-Mormon books. Mouw says that Mormonism is moving toward orthodox Christian. Regarding the Mormon doctrine of God was once a man, he writes, “Mormonism is often portrayed as a self-deification program – and not without some legitimacy, given the popularity of the Lorenzo Snow couplet: ‘What Man now is, God once was; what God now is, Man may become.’ My Mormon friends are quick to point out, however, that this couplet has no official canonical status – indeed, Gordon Hinckley famously told *Time* magazine that he had no idea what it means to say, ‘As God is, man may become.’”<sup>3</sup> But Robert Bowman, a friend of mine from seminary, demonstrated that Mouw is looking at Mormonism through rose-colored glasses:

“With all due respect, what Mouw’s Mormon friends told him carries no authority as far as defining what has official or canonical status in Mormonism. Gordon Hinckley’s statement to *Time* magazine also does not pass what Mouw himself says is the test, which is what Mormons say *to each other* -- not what they say to the secular media. Yet there is more to the story with regard to Hinckley’s supposed denial of the doctrine. As we explain in a separate article, Hinckley did not disavow any understanding of the Snow couplet. We will summarize the issue briefly here.

“In Hinckley’s 1997 interview, he was asked, ‘*Is this teaching of the church today, that God the Father was once a man like we are?*’ Here is what he said:

‘I don’t know that we teach it. I don’t know that we emphasize it. I haven’t heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don’t know. I don’t know all the circumstances under which that statement was made. I understand the philosophical background behind it. But I don’t know a lot about it, and I don’t know that others know a lot about it.’

“In saying that he didn’t ‘know a lot about it,’ Hinckley was admitting implicitly that he did know *something* about it, while at the same time saying that Mormonism doesn’t provide much in the way of details about God the Father’s life before he became a God. Thus, Hinckley was not suggesting that the doctrine expressed in the Snow couplet was not part of Mormon doctrine. It may not be something the LDS Church emphasized, but it is still part of their belief system. The doctrine of eternal progression – that God the Father was once a mortal man, that he became a God, and that we can become Gods like him – has continued to be taught by Mormons right up to the present. Joseph

Smith taught that God ‘was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself’ (*Teachings*, p. 346 . . .). In 2014, the LDS Church posted a *Gospel Topics* article on its website with the title *Becoming Like God*. Here is some of what that article stated:

“‘What kind of a being is God?’ he asked. Human beings needed to know, he argued, because ‘if men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.’ In that phrase, the Prophet collapsed the gulf that centuries of confusion had created between God and humanity. Human nature was at its core divine. God ‘was once as one of us’ and ‘all the spirits that God ever sent into the world’ were likewise ‘susceptible of enlargement.’ Joseph Smith preached that long before the world was formed, God found ‘himself in the midst’ of these beings and ‘saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself’ and be ‘exalted’ with Him. . . . Since that sermon, known as the King Follett Discourse, the doctrine that humans can progress to exaltation and godliness has been taught within the Church. Lorenzo Snow, the Church’s fifth President, coined a well-known couplet: ‘As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.’ Little has been revealed about the first half of this couplet, and consequently little is taught. When asked about this topic, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told a reporter in 1997, ‘That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about.’ When asked about the belief in humans’ divine potential, President Hinckley responded, ‘Well, as God is, man may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly.’

“The above statement provides a convenient basis for a review of the main points that have been made here”

- The LDS Church continues to cite approvingly both the King Follett Discourse and the Lorenzo Snow couplet. Mouw’s claim that the Snow couplet or the idea it expresses has ‘no functioning place in present-day Mormon doctrine’ is still false.
- Joseph Smith is credited with having ‘collapsed the gulf . . . between God and humanity’ found in traditional (orthodox) Christian theology. The statement here, in attributing that ‘gulf’ to ‘centuries of confusion,’ obviously is approving of and affirming Joseph’s teaching that collapsed that gulf.
- The LDS Church affirms here that human nature is divine; this is another way of saying that God and humans are the same kind or species of being, albeit at very different stages of development.
- Hinckley’s point that not much is known about God’s life before becoming God is affirmed. To say that little has been revealed or is taught about this doctrine is not to deny that the doctrine exists. The LDS Church is still committed to teaching that God was once a man like us and became exalted to Godhood, even though it has little more to say about the matter than that.
- The LDS Church also affirms strongly the doctrine of eternal progression, which includes the idea that human beings can become like God in his essential attributes. God is an exalted man, and we who are mortals can likewise become exalted like him. This doctrine clearly goes outside the boundaries of orthodox theology, according to which redeemed human beings will become like God morally (perfect in love, holiness, etc.) and become immortal, but will not become ontologically the same kind of being as God.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Jesus, God is *spirit* (a Spiritual Being) in His essence or nature (John 4:24) and a “spirit” by definition does not have a physical body (Luke 24:39). Thus we should not think of God as the “Man Upstairs,” because He does not have a male human body. “God is not a man” (Num. 23:19). Since God is spirit, He is invisible (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27). Thus, no one has seen God the Father, for there is nothing physical to see (John 1:18). The only way to see God is to see Him in

His Son, who became a real man of flesh and blood (John 1:14-18; 14:9). In John 4:24, Jesus did not say that “God is a spirit” but “God is spirit.” The distinction is crucial. If God were “a spirit,” this would imply that He is only one finite spirit among many others. He would be in essence no different from the Devil and his demons. But when Jesus said that God was “spirit,” this implied that He is spirit in an infinite sense. God cannot have a body, because He is infinite spirit. Those who deny God’s infinite nature are actually robbing God of His spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

## I. GOD IS SPIRIT

What does Jesus teach about the essential nature of God when He describes God as *Spirit*?<sup>6</sup>

- A. ***God is Personal.*** He is self-conscious and self-determining, living and active. The fact that the Bible ascribes to Him such attributes as wisdom, knowledge, a will, and goodness also indicates that God is personal. “The God of the Bible is anything but inert impersonalness: he is the living and active Creator and Architect of the universe, beneficent Provider of the creature’s needs, Advocate of the poor and the oppressed, Freedom-fighter, just Judge, empathetic Counselor, suffering Servant, and triumphant Deliverer.”<sup>7</sup> His personalness should not be taken to mean, however, that God is *one* person; for while it is true that God prefers as a literary convention to speak in His revelation to people as an “I” (see the “I Am” of Ex. 3:14), only rarely speaking as a plural subject employing the first person plural “we” or “us” (see Isa. 6:8 and Jesus’ statements in John 10:30 and 14:23), yet in the “fullness” of his own being he speaks within himself as a plural subject for he is actually *tripersonal* (see Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8). The word *person* -- which comes from the Latin word *persona* -- signifies the mask which an actor used when representing some character in a Greek drama. But when we talk of a mask we are already off the track. For we must not think of the persons in God being merely a way in which God from time to time represents Himself to human beings. This particular error is known as modalism or Sabellianism, from the name of the man who first popularized it in church history (about the middle of the third century). Actually, the word *person* is all right, as long as we understand what we mean by a person. In common speech the word normally denotes a human being, and therefore one who is uniquely an individual. We have that concept in mind when we speak of depersonalizing someone. But that is not the meaning of the word as used in theology. It is possible to be a person entirely apart from our bodily existence. We may, for example, lose an arm or leg in some accident, yet we will still be a person with all the marks of personality. Moreover, at least according to Christian teaching, even when we die and our bodies decay to ruin we will still be persons. What we are really talking about, then, is a sense of existence expressing itself in knowledge, feelings, and a will.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Berkhof observes: “In view of the fact that there are three persons in God, it is better to say that God is personal than to speak of Him as a Person.”<sup>9</sup>
- B. ***God’s Spiritual Nature Means He is Noncorporeal.*** This may be demonstrated from Luke 24:36-43, where, in response to the disciples’ assessment that He was “a spirit,” Jesus said: ‘Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; for a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have’ (vs. 39). But what does it mean for God, as spirit, to be noncorporeal? It means that *no* property of matter may be ascribed to Him. He has no extension in space, no weight, no mass, no bulk, no parts, no form, no taste, no smell. He is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16) and, being one in essence and without parts, is indivisible (this last term denotes what some theologians refer to as his “simplicity”). It is this fact of His spiritual essence that underlies the second commandment, which prohibits every attempt to fashion an image of Him. Moses reminded the nation of Israel: “You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape” (Deut. 4:15-16). The result of every effort

to fashion such an image is a distortion and is thus an idol. God is *spirit*, and they who worship Him must worship Him in *spirit* and in truth. Reymond warns, “So the Christian must ever be solicitous never to think of God in His spiritual essence as having any material characteristic.”<sup>10</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Old Bishop Ryle, in commenting on this passage, declared it to be, “One of the most lofty and definite sayings about God’s nature which is to be found in the whole Bible. That such a declaration should have been made to such a person as the Samaritan woman is a wonderful instance of Christ’s condescension! To define precisely the full meaning of the expression is past man’s understanding. The leading idea is probably that ‘God is an immaterial being, that He dwelleth not in temples made with hands, and that he is not, like ourselves, therefore, absent from one place when He is present at another.’ These things are all true, but how little we can realize them!”<sup>11</sup> The great Puritan Divine Thomas Goodwin long ago wrote, “Christ’s speech, ‘God is a Spirit’ (John 4:24), is as proper definition of God as can be given (for He passeth our logic), it expressing the kind of His being, as His name Jehovah, that He is fullness of being.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, Packer summarizes the force of the text, “The God who is spirit must be worshiped in spirit and in truth, as Jesus said (John 4:24). ‘In spirit’ means ‘from a heart renewed by the Holy Spirit.’ No rituals, body movements, or devotional formalities constitute worship without involvement of the heart, which the Holy Spirit alone can induce. ‘In truth’ means ‘on the basis of God’s revelation of reality, which culminates in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.’ First and foremost, this is the revelation of what we are as lost sinners and of what God is to us as Creator-Redeemer through Jesus’ mediatorial ministry.”<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See the insert, “A Review of Richard Mouw’s Talking With Mormons.” The Gospel Coalition (2012/08/14).

<sup>2</sup>cf. Craig Blomberg & Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and An Evangelical in Conversion* (IVP, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Mouw, *Talking With Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Eerdmans, 2012), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Robert M. Bowman, Jr., “Are Mormons Approaching Orthodoxy? A Response to Richard Mouw.” Institute for Religious Research. Published on Mormons In Transition (<http://mit.irr.org>).

<sup>5</sup>R. A. Morey, *Battle of the Gods* (Crown, 1994), p. 189.

<sup>6</sup>The KJV has “God is a spirit.” This is incorrect. Leon Morris notes, “Greek has no such article, and we insert it or not in English as the sense requires. Here Jesus is not saying, “God is one spirit among many.” Rather His meaning is, “God’s essential nature is spirit.” The indefinite article is no more required than it is in the similar statements, “God is light” (1 John 1:5), and “God is love” (1 John 4:8).” *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 271.

<sup>7</sup>R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 167.

<sup>8</sup>See the discussion by J. M. Boice, *The Sovereign God* (IVP, 1979), p. 140.

<sup>9</sup>L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1938), p. 85.

<sup>10</sup>Reymond, op. cit. p. 169.

<sup>11</sup>J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On the Gospels: John 1:1-John 10:9* (rpt. Zondervan, 1956), p. 226.

<sup>12</sup>*The Works of Thomas Goodwin VIII* (rpt. Tanski, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>13</sup>J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Tyndale, 1993), p. 30.