

“Welcoming and Opening Prayer” by Rob Lauer

[April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

Good morning, and welcome to this the very first Reform Mormon General Conference! My name is Rob Lauer and I have been a Reform Mormon for 21 years, So this conference today is something that I'm very excited about!

If you know nothing else about Reform Mormonism what you need to know is that Reform Mormonism truly is "big tent Mormonism". Regardless of who you are, where you come from, what your past experiences may be, what your current condition might be, regardless what church you belong to or don't belong to, or what you believe or what doubts or questions you may have - you are welcomed here.

And now before we start with the conference, let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer.

Our kind, gracious, and loving Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, we come before you as your children with hearts filled with thanksgiving and joy. We're so thankful for those who will be presenting talks today; who will be opening their hearts and sharing their honest beliefs, their doubts, their questions, their revelations, their understanding of things, their experiences. We thank you for them, for their openness, and for their willingness to share. And we ask that you will bless them.

We're also grateful for all of those who have worked to make this conference a reality, for those who have basically organized the videos, edited them and posted them, and gotten the word out. And we ask that you will continue to bless them.

We also ask that you bless everyone who is watching this conference, whether live today or in the future.

We ask that - we pray that whatever questions they have, doubts they have, needs they may have in their lives, they will hear something that will speak to their condition and give them light and encouragement to continue on.

We also give thanks for the wonderful experience of life on earth as human beings. Human beings who are able to grow into your image and likeness. We share your attributes. We're thankful for the gift of life and for all the blessings that that brings to us.

And now we ask that your spirit will be present throughout this day - throughout this conference - touching all of those who are speaking and touching all of those who are listening, and that we may come to better understand our purpose in life, find meaning in our lives, and find joy in living.

And we ask for all of these things in the name of Jesus Christ Amen

“The Changing Perspectives of God in the Restoration” by Evan Sharley

[April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

1. Introduction

On April 7th, 1844, Joseph Smith Jr. proclaimed: “The first principle of truth and of the gospel is to know for a certainty the character of God”. However, from the earliest days in New York to his final sermons in Nauvoo, even Joseph’s understanding of God underwent significant shifts. Our collective journeying as a people didn’t stop with Joseph; many branches of Mormonism have continued to explore and reinterpret the nature of God over time and in their own ways.

Now, I realize that learning about the intricacies of these different perspectives may feel uncomfortable or even intimidating. However, I believe that understanding these different perspectives is an opportunity to connect more deeply with our Mormon heritage. We as a people have always strived to seek truth and light; boldly pressing forward with courage and humility. As we examine our old views of God, we might find new ways to expand our own understanding, to see the Divine with fresh eyes, and to feel empowered to pursue our own spiritual journeys.

Today, I invite you to join me in reflecting on some of the major understandings of God that have emerged within Mormonism, and conclude with you my own humble attempt to answer that eternal question: what kind of a being is God?

2. Modalism

2.1. Background

Joseph Smith once said that the Book of Mormon is “the keystone of our religion,” and so it is a natural starting point for understanding Mormonism’s relationship with God. Within the Book of Mosiah, the prophet Abinadi, while imprisoned by King Noah, delivers a profound lesson on the nature of God. He proclaims:

“I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son — The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son — And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth.”

In this passage, Abinadi describes a God who manifests as both Father and Son, emphasizing their unity in purpose and essence. This portrayal of God aligns with Modalism, the theological idea that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are different modes or manifestations of a

single divine being. To illustrate Modalism, many use the analogy of water, which can exist as a solid, liquid, or gas. In this framework, God, like water, manifests in different ways—Father, Son, and even Spirit—depending on the context and need.

It's worth noting that some interpret this teaching as Trinitarianism, but a closer examination reveals key differences. Traditional Trinitarianism, often depicted with "The Shield of the Trinity," asserts that the Father is not the Son, nor the Spirit, but that all three are distinct persons united as one God. By contrast, Abinadi's words suggest that the Father and the Son are the same being, experienced in different forms. Thus, the Book of Mormon presents a modalistic view of God.

2.2. Usefulness

Modalism offers a lens through which to understand divinity that suggests that God meets us where we are in many different forms. This dynamic and flexible understanding of God can be deeply comforting. It reminds us that the divine is not bound by rigid definitions but adapts to reach us in the most meaningful ways. Modalism also invites us to reflect on how we, as children of God, might likewise embody different "modes" in our lives—serving as creators, redeemers, or comforters to those around us.

By this same token, Modalism fosters humility and curiosity by acknowledging that no single perspective can fully encapsulate the Divine. It encourages us to remain open to new revelations and experiences, enriching our understanding of God's nature and inspiring continual growth in our spiritual journeys. In this way, Modalism not only deepens our connection to the divine but also challenges us to transform and evolve in our faith.

3. Binitarianism

3.1. Background

The Doctrine and Covenants, which was first canonized in 1835, originally looked quite different from the versions we are familiar with today. The beginning of this scripture included a series of theological teachings called "[The Lectures on Faith](#)", which were considered the "doctrine," while the revelations that followed were the "covenants." These lectures served as theological lessons for the priesthood and as a catechetical tool for articulating core beliefs of the time.

In the fifth lecture, the Godhead is explained in detail. It asserts that there are only two personages in the Godhead: Jesus Christ, described as a physical person, and the Father, portrayed as a person of spirit. The Holy Spirit, according to this scripture, is not an independent person but is the mind shared by the Father and the Son.

This interpretation of the Godhead, emphasizing two distinct individuals unified by one mind, is commonly referred to as Binitarianism.

3.2. Usefulness

Binitarianism offers a compelling framework for understanding Divinity by emphasizing the profound unity between the Father and the Son while also respecting their individuality. By

presenting them as two distinct personages who share one mind—the Holy Spirit—this view highlights principles of harmony, cooperation, and shared purpose.

This theological model invites us to consider how we might cultivate similar connection, understanding, and unity in our own relationships and communities. It challenges us to transcend personal differences and work collaboratively toward shared goals, drawing inspiration from the Divine example of the Father and the Son.

4. Monolatry

4.1. Background

In 1836, Joseph Smith Jr. studied Hebrew under Joshua Seixas, where he learned that the Hebrew term for Divinity, "Elohim," is the plural form of "El." This insight profoundly shaped Joseph's theology, influencing the way he understood and described the Divine. This perspective is reflected in the Book of Abraham, where God is depicted as the head of a council of gods, yet remains the sole deity humans are commanded to worship.

Joseph further expanded on this concept in his later teachings, such as the King Follett Discourse and the Sermon in the Grove. In these sermons, he described God as a being who was once a mortal man who attained godhood and taught that this progression is possible for humanity as well.

Brigham Young developed these ideas further, proposing that Adam was the God of this Earth. He taught that Adam had previously served as a savior on another planet, much like Jesus did for Earth, and had also held the role of a Holy Ghost. In this framework, the titles "God," "Savior," and "Holy Ghost" were understood as priesthood offices, which individuals might hold in their progression through divine roles.

In essence, Monolatry is the worship of one God while acknowledging the existence of other gods. It blends elements of polytheism and monotheism.

4.2. Usefulness

Mormon Monolatry offers a transformative vision of divinity by presenting God as an example of what we can become. It reimagines God not as a distant, static, and unattainable being but as someone who once lived a mortal life, experiencing joys, struggles, and growth. This understanding fosters a deeper sense of connection to the Divine, as God is portrayed as intimately familiar with the human experience.

Monolatry also inspires hope by emphasizing that humanity is on a Divine path. It encourages us to view ourselves and others as "gods in embryo"—beings with immense potential for growth, creation, and transformation. This perspective invites us to see life as a sacred journey toward exaltation and encourages us to approach ourselves and others with reverence, patience, and faith in the capacity for progression.

5. Panentheism

5.1. Background

Although Community of Christ is formally a Trinitarian church, with many members leaning toward Modalism in practice, a compelling case for Panentheism emerges through the works of one of its most noteworthy figures, David Hyrum Smith. As the youngest son of Joseph and Emma Smith, David is widely regarded as one of Mormonism's most gifted artists and poets, and much of David's theological insights were expressed through his artistry. A talented painter, singer, and poet, his works often intertwined themes of divinity with the natural world, which he deeply admired. His 1872 treatise, *De Profundis* (Latin for "From the Depths"), eloquently outlines his understanding of God. While the work is lengthy, the following excerpt has been particularly pivotal in my own spiritual journey:

"There is unity in the universe. Man is a tide, a stream flowing over the earth; our individuality is only in part – members of a family, a state, a church, a race. No wonder that the prophet styles the nations "many waters", granules of a fluid, ere we dissolve, we impart our being and flow onward in posterity. Well for us if then our individuality be of that nature to gravitate to the host of the holy on high, to be in union with God and the lamb. ...

What is the inner meaning of the great Force? We cannot speak of it as a force, because it is one that comprehends all forces; as a power, because it embraces all powers; as an entity, because it moulds, moves, and handles all entities.

At the pushing forth of a grass blade; at the birth of a butterfly; at the waking of an earthquake; at the marshaling of millions of worlds; in you, and around you; it is there, and underlies them all.

Listen to its inner meaning, to the arcane of the ages, 'It is God!'

When we go out into the depths and look from afar at the wide realms they present to us, we are near Him; let us abide in Him, and He will put us forth to full fruition like a vine from its root. ... He was defined by some of the earlier church worthies to be 'that mysterious chain that binds all things together,' and its impress leaves the mark of its unity."

5.2. Usefulness

This perspective emphasizes that God is both immanent (present within every part of creation) and transcendent (existing beyond all that we can comprehend). This dual nature offers a sense of intimate connection to the Divine while preserving a transcendent sense of awe and wonder at the vastness of God's being.

Panentheism also underscores the sacredness of the natural world and encourages responsible stewardship of our environment. Afterall, if God is present in all things, then all of creation is inherently sacred. This understanding challenges us to act with reverence toward the earth and its inhabitants, honoring the divine not only through worship but also through our actions.

Moreover, it invites us to view our relationships—with others, with nature, and with ourselves—as extensions of our relationship with God. This perspective encourages us to see the divine in every aspect of life, fostering a deeper sense of interconnectedness and responsibility.

6. Atheism/Humanism

6.1. Background

Within Mormonism, belief in God has often been framed as a central and defining aspect of the faith. However, as with any tradition, not everyone maintains this belief in the same way—or at all. While atheism may seem to stand at odds with Mormonism’s theistic core, it can also be viewed as a legitimate path within the broader Mormon experience, similar to how some Reformed Jews embrace atheism while remaining deeply connected to their Jewish heritage and culture.

The path to Atheism or Humanism within Mormonism often begins with questioning foundational claims, such as the miraculous origins of the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith’s prophetic role. Many of us were taught growing up that “Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is or this Church and its founder are false, fraudulent, a deception from the first instance onward”. This mentality leaves little room for nuanced belief within certain expressions of Mormonism. For some, letting go of these claims leads naturally to re-evaluating the existence of God altogether.

6.2. Usefulness

Nevertheless, denying the existence of God does not necessarily signify a rejection of Mormon identity. After all, Joseph Smith Jr. once proclaimed that:

“Mormonism is truth; and every man who embraced it felt himself at liberty to embrace every truth. Consequently, the shackles of superstition... fall at once from his neck and his eyes are opened to see the truth.”

After discarding the supernatural and superstitious parts of Mormonism, many are able to reinterpret the tradition to be a place of shared cultural heritage, including histories, songs, stories, and oftentimes values.

Some of these unique Mormons may still retain a love for traditional theistic concepts and stories in scriptures, but now view them as metaphors or symbolic and express deeper desires of the human condition. Some also find meaning in the rituals of their heritage which serve as rites of passage or as a way to extend comfort.

Within Atheism and Humanism, this life is the only one that we *know* that we have, and thus the need to use it wisely is even more important. These family and friends do not procrastinate building equitable communities, fostering compassion, seeking knowledge, and uplifting the oppressed. These are values that are at the core of what it means to be Mormon.

And so, Atheistic and Humanistic Mormons are just as much rightful inheritors and stewards of the Mormon tradition as their theistic counterparts are. We should listen to their wisdom and learn from it.

6. Polytheism (my view)

After I left the LDS church, I had a tough time figuring out how to re-approach God. What gave me some solace was this quote that is attributed to Marcus Arrileus:

“Live a good life.

If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by.

If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them.

If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.”

And so, because of this I have felt the ability to explore and reinterpret my understanding of God. In my quest to find a myth that works for me, I have wanted something that is distinctly Mormon, and I have said for years “weird Mormonism is the best Mormonism”, and my own personal relationship with the concept of Divinity certainly fits within the realm of weird.

I think Mormonism’s doctrine of eternal progression to the point of godhood is incredible, and I love how Adam was made to be Heavenly Father, and thus Eve was Heavenly Mother. However, this has come with some very clear downsides, including male and heterosexual supremacy.

And so, I decided to reinterpret this myth that I like to make it even more palatable. Instead of an “infinite regression” of gods which are spirit-birthed through heterosexual celestial sex, I prefer a primordial “prime mover” which created a spiritual species called the Elohim. This species decided to experience multiple mortal probations, until they achieved the growth that they desired, and reached exaltation. The first of these who experienced mortality were Michael and Sophia, who became Adam and Eve, and then in their exalted state became known as El and Asherah.

Anyone can achieve this exalted state, just as They did. In this state, we can help those who are still working to achieve it, and in this way we serve as Heavenly Parents.

7. Conclusion

A willingness to embrace truth wherever it is found and a respect for the spiritual journeys of all people is at the heart of Mormonism. In 1842, we articulated this in the Articles of Faith, with the 11th declaring:

"We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may."

The various views of God we've explored today—Modalism, Binitarianism, Monolatry, Panentheism, Atheism, and Polytheism—are not merely intellectual exercises but expressions of our tradition. These views enrich the landscape of Mormon theology, providing opportunities for us to see God—and ourselves—with greater depth and clarity.

Ultimately, the nature of God will likely remain a mystery, but our collective exploration of these theological ideas bring us closer to one another and to the Divine, however we conceive it. May we each feel inspired to continue this journey, not just with our minds but with our hearts—seeking to better understand the Divine, to strengthen our communities, and to live lives that reflect the highest ideals of our faith. For in doing so, we honor the core of our Mormon heritage: a tradition of seeking, growing, and striving for exaltation in its many forms.

Thank you for joining me in this exploration. May your own path to understanding God—however you define or experience the Divine—be filled with insight, wonder, and connection.

“Reclaiming our relationship with Christ: God Gives Unconditionally to All” by John R. Crane

Written February 2025; [Given April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

Introduction

My name is John Crane. I live in Austin, TX. I was born into an inactive part-member family in the tiny town of White Salmon, WA, along the Columbia River. I grew up in Portland, OR and converted myself to the church and gospel, through my own reading. I served a mission to Sweden, married in the temple, have four grown children. I left the church at age 36. The church promised it could make me happy, but I was angry and miserable and sought a new life. I moved to California to work in Silicon Valley and the Los Angeles area. It was there I met Thomas Gibby, a 7-generation Mormon from Sacramento. We have been together 38 years, married 12 years

During our time together, I had the opportunity to co-found The Church of Jesus Christ of ALL Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ. We started much the same as the Reform Mormon movement, but were under pressure to reorganize ourselves along the lines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was a huge mistake for us, because the same individuals who pushed us for the change, desired to make the church a power base instead of a gathering of followers of Christ. We were like Alma and his followers who fled into the wilderness, but were taken over by King Noah's priests. Before this happened, I had many opportunities to serve: as co-president, co-revelator, patriarch/evangelist, apostle, temple worker, and temple sealer. I mention these roles because I joined that church, primarily to serve. I received revelation teaching me how to fulfill those offices, and I can testify that when you seek the Lord's will, He will bless you with knowledge of how to properly fulfill your calling, authority to perform ordinances in His name, and the grace of the Spirit to perform those callings with the power of the Lord, which has nothing to do with the power of men.

The church was founded in 1985, apostatized in 1987, limped along until 2011. Today, in 2025, a team of people will undertake to write and publish the history of the church.

If you want to know more about me or the church, I have links in the comment section of this video:

- My interview with Bishop Richard Ostler
<https://soundcloud.com/user-818501778/episode-774-john-crane-late-70s-rm-believes-in-gospel-same-sex-marriage>
- My story in Latter-Gay-Stories
<https://lattergaystories.org/coming-out-all-the-pieces-fittogether/>
- A link to my blog <https://john144.com/>
- A link to a transcript of this talk

- A link to some software I wrote: a searchable database of all the LDS standard works, the Lectures on Faith, the Book of Commandments, the speeches and writings of Joseph Smith and other early church leaders, with links to Strongs Concordance, the Joseph Smith translation, King James cross-reference, the Gileadi translation of Isaiah, and Biblehub. <https://john144.com/2024/08/12/free-scripture-searching-software/>
- A link to Hidden Treasures & Promises, a collection of revelations given to the leadership of the church, and a new, contemporary testament of the dealings of Christ with all peoples in our day: even those who were rejected and disenfranchised from the traditional Restoration Churches. Did not the Lord say He was inviting all to come to his feast: first the wealthy and well-connected, then going out into the streets to gather the poor, the lame, and the rejected? Showing that the Voice of God is truly unto all peoples, and also showing that God speaks to both men and women, and to multiple people – not just a single mouthpiece, but to multiple witnesses, giving the people a shared vision. People must develop the mentality of one heart (love, ahava) and one mind (unity, echad) before Zion can be built.
https://john144.com/wpcontent/uploads/2019/08/http_08_2019.pdf

Speech

My Brothers and Sisters:

In the other conference, you will hear a lot about keys and hear a lot of threats about God withholding blessings. It all adds up to creating turmoil, discouragement, and yes, boredom.

I come to you today with a message of peace and encouragement. And hopefully excitement

In the First Vision, when he asked the Lord which church he should join, Joseph Smith was told:

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." (JS 1:19)

These words echo the words of the prophet, Isaiah who said:

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: (Isa 29:13)

Men who claim to hold keys teach you to fear God. They teach you that if you have sinned, you must run and hide from God, like Adam and Eve were told to hide from God in the Garden. Men who claim to hold keys tell you that repentance is a long and painful process and you can't come to Christ unless you are worthy, and they are the people who get to decide whether or not you are worthy.

Keys are not monopolistic power. Keys are knowledge. Joseph Smith taught that a man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge.

Here are some keys that I have learned over the years that you can easily remember and use in your life right now. These are keys that teach you to love God, not fear him, because His heart is always turned to you. Take what you can use, now and keep the rest in your mind for later.

- God's love is not conditional. God does not use his favor to manipulate you. His love is constant and faithful, even when you place yourself beyond His ability to reach you.
- Always live true to the highest you know, not the highest that somebody else tells you. Never give in to the temptation to claim to believe something that you don't believe, or live lesser than the best you know.
- The desires and the intentions of our hearts are the key to opening the blessings of heaven. Works are important, but unless those works are motivated by real intent, they are counted as evil, because an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.
- Give thanks to the Lord for everything. Think of three new blessings every day. The more blessings you count, the more you will see in your life.
- Practice forgiveness – especially forgiving yourself.
- Satan knows you by your name, but calls you by your sins. Jesus knows your sins, but calls you by your name.
- Repentance means to turn and face the Lord – to come to Him, just as you are – sins and all.
- When you turn your back on the Lord, and His light, all you see is your own shadow.
- The Book of Mormon says that "The natural man is an enemy to God." But, God loves His enemies the same way that He loves His friends.

People who really have keys will share those keys with you. People who use keys to keep you out of the kingdom of heaven don't have keys. They have locks.

God is not God because of what He can withhold. God is God because of what He can bestow. Everywhere he taught, Jesus handed out keys.

This reminds me of a dream I had about the Tree of Life in the Book of Mormon. Here is a brief reminder of the vision that Nephi had.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?

Notice that the angel doesn't tell Nephi what the tree means. He respects Nephi's free agency and lets Nephi figure it out for himself.

And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things.

And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters **are a representation of the love of God**; and I also beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God. (1 Nephi 11:21-22, 25)

Now, for the dream. I was in a marketplace back in the time of Jesus, and Jesus was sitting in a corner of the marketplace under a tree. I was struck by His humility. He was so humble that I felt struck down to the ground. He was humble beyond anything that I ever dreamed a person could be humble. He was sitting there under a tree offering the fruit of the Tree of Life to anybody who passed by, saw him, and asked for it. Nobody asked. Nobody noticed. Here I was in a group of people so busy buying and selling and trying to make their way through the market that they never noticed the Lord right there in front of them. But, I noticed, and I was on my knees.

If somebody tells you that you should fear God, ignore them and turn your heart to God. The only thing you should fear is the effect of not turning your heart to God. Perfect love casts out all fear.

I follow Christ. I have been seeking Him for decades. We have been carrying on a personal dialog for decades. I have received thousands of pages of personal revelation. Not for the purpose of gaining popularity, wealth, or followers, but for the purpose of knowing Him and doing His will. He is the Vine and we are the branches. We need constant nourishment, constant connection, constant flow, or else we will wither and die a spiritual death. That is, until we repent, turn and face the Lord, and renew that connection. The power plug is in our hands, not His.

Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, **immediately** shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you. (Alma 34:31)

Not after a period of probation. Not after a period of not partaking of the sacrament – the very gift that connects us to Christ – **immediately**.

And, in all these messages from the Lord and answering my questions, revealing the mysteries, the strongest message I have received is this: Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.

Anybody can experience the love and saving grace of God. God is not God because He plays favorites and denies His favor to all but the chosen few. God is God because He is no respecter of persons and because He is willing to bestow His grace and favor upon all: young and old, male and female, bond or free, black or white, Jew or Gentile.

He doesn't see you as a member of a particular religion, race, ethnicity or sexual or gender identity. He sees you as you, just as you are. He has known each of us for far longer than we

realize. I would invite each of you to make a connection with the Lord, and be amazed at how much He really does know you and love you. It will change your life, but not in the way you were taught. Remember, He said: "The whole have no need of a physician." He will save the part of you that needs saving and bless everything about you and make you a better version of yourself.

It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.

As revealed in Christ, God, the Creator of all, ultimately is concerned about behaviors and relationships that uphold the worth and giftedness of all people and that protect the most vulnerable. Such relationships are to be rooted in the principles of Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness, against which there is no law.

If the church more fully will understand and consistently apply these principles, questions arising about responsible human sexuality; gender identities, roles, and relationships; marriage; and other issues may be resolved according to God's divine purposes. Be assured, nothing within these principles condones selfish, irresponsible, promiscuous, degrading, or abusive relationships. (CoC D&C 164)

I want to close with a story that was shared with us yesterday. I will tread very lightly because this story is very sacred and personal to this family, but there are some points which must be shared. An elderly matriarch of an Hispanic family in our neighborhood recently passed away. She was a devoted Catholic, a devoted follower of Jesus, and a woman devoted in service to her family and the entire community. She was a widow of over 30 years, but she had a young grand-son who was her constant young friend and companion for his entire life and her remaining three years. He is your typical 3-year-old, but has the face of an angel. When his grandma had her first heart attack, he was at her side and alerted the rest of the family. When he first saw a picture of his grandpa, he said "This is the man who is going to come and take grandma." When the time finally came for her to pass, the entire extended family was gathered around her. She saw across the veil. She saw the angels coming to greet her. She saw Jesus and her beloved husband, called out his name, and reached for him. The little boy saw them, too. She sang one last song of praise to the Lord that she loved to sing, then the Lord reached out and received her. She got a smile on her face that was frozen in death.

This goes without saying, but I am going to say it again. God is no respecter of persons. Young and old. Regardless of our religion. He inspires people to serve Him with all their hearts and invites us all to come unto him.

"Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt 18:10)

In His Name, Amen.

“Reclaiming our Humanity” by Rob Lauer

[April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

"Reclaiming Our Humanity"

by

Rob. Lauer

Delivered during the April 5, 2025, morning session
of the First Reform Mormon General Conference

Seven years ago, I heard a friend quote the Living Bible's translation of Ecclesiastes 7:29 in a sermon he was delivering. It was slightly different from other modern English translations of that verse, but it immediately struck me and stuck with me. It reads:

"This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated."

I was shocked by how deeply this resonated with a conviction I have had since age 15—a conviction that has been the guiding star in my intellectual, spiritual, and ethical development over the past 50 years. This conviction was the result of a childhood and youth spent absorbing and contemplating the teachings and stories of Jesus in the New Testament and the ancient Jewish writings of the Old Testament.

My conviction was simply this: human beings exist in the image of God, and God loves them unconditionally in the same way that all good parents love their children. Like all good parents, God wants his children to have this same love for one another; to help one another through hard times, protect one another from danger, and forgive one another when disagreements and conflicts occur. When we hurt one another's feelings or wrong one another—intentionally or unintentionally—we should remember that we are still a family and do all we can to be reconciled. My conviction was that no human being is inherently evil or good because regardless of the rightness or wrongness of past choices and actions, we are always free, at any moment, to change our course, to see and feel differently about things, to form new values—to renew our minds and have a change of heart. People's choices in no way lessen God's love for them. And since all human beings exist in God's image, Godlike love should be

the foundation of human relationships. Years before I became aware of "The Book of Mormon" and read II Nephi 2:11's declaration that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things," it seemed perfectly evident to my young mind that life was inherently difficult, confusing, painful, and complicated at times. Despite that, I never doubted that life here and now on earth was worth living or that human beings, by their nature, have within themselves everything they need to lead meaningful lives and develop a Godlike character. To me, the self-evident truth was that life is complicated, but human beings are plain and simple—that, in harmony with Genesis 1:28 and 31, God blessed human nature and considered it good.

It came as a shock when, as an adolescent, I was asked to make a profession of Christian faith, and I discovered that my convictions regarding Humanity—convictions rooted in Biblical literature as a whole—were not only somewhat different from those of Christianity but the polar opposite.

According to Christian theology, sin isn't merely doing something wrong or committing an evil act; sin is the condition into which all humans are born. Because human nature itself is fallen and sinful, the gulf that forever separates us from God is our Humanity, and nothing we do—no good works or good deeds—can bridge that gulf. In fact, because human nature itself is seen as sinful, it is believed that humans are incapable of doing anything good. All human attempts to act righteously, justly, and lovingly are doomed to failure. Only God Himself can transcend the gulf separating us from Him—and He will only do this if we throw ourselves on His mercy, confessing that our nature is utterly corrupt and undeserving of his love and admitting that our so-called righteousness is like filthy rags.

If God is to be thought of as our parent, my first response to this was that if any parent treated their child this way, we would consider it emotional abuse and call Child Protective Services.

I was also struck by how different this understanding of human nature seemed from that found in the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler. When the young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus doesn't tell him that he's fallen, inherently sinful, and can do nothing worthy of eternal life. Instead, Jesus tells him precisely what he should do to inherit eternal life—by referring only to those six of the ten commandments concerning human relationships. And when the young man says he's kept all those commandments, Jesus doesn't tell him that his righteous works are like filthy rags. In fact, Jesus's reaction was quite the opposite. Mark 10:21 reads, "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack a single thing.'"

What was that single thing? Jesus didn't say the "single thing" the young man lacked was a proper confession of his fallen sinful state and acceptance of God's undeserved saving grace. Instead, Jesus told the young man to do something that he was perfectly capable of doing: "Go, sell whatever you possess and give to the destitute, and you shall have a treasury in the heavens, and come follow me." But the young man sadly walked away because he had many possessions. (See Mark 10:17—21, DBH Translation). What kept the young man from eternal life was that he valued his possessions more than other human beings.

In no way does this story and any other Biblical story teach that the fault lies in human nature itself—in our Humanity. Instead, the fault lies in our inhumanity toward one another. This is more than evident in Matthew 25—the only New Testament account of a final judgment. Are people judged by whether or not they confessed their inherent sinfulness and professed belief in God's undeserved saving grace? No. They are judged by how they treated other human beings. Did they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison? Most revealing, they are told that whatever they did or did not to others, they did or did not do it to the Son of Man who stands as their Divinely-ordained judge.

I walked away from Christianity because its demonization of human nature and Humanity is not supported by the Bible.

Some churches and religions teach the importance of "good works." But usually, those "good works" consist of becoming a member of a particular community or organization, supporting its programs, following its leaders, performing required rituals, strictly adhering to specific interpretations of scripture, and obeying an increasingly difficult series of commandments that the church or religion will usually admit are contrary to our nature. Thus, as in traditional Christianity, these religions also designate human nature itself—our shared Humanity—as that which separates us from God. They teach commandments that "have a form of godliness," but they deny that we humans, in and of ourselves, have the power to be godly.

Other spiritual disciplines teach that human individuality itself—that one's sense of being a separate entity, distinct from other people and from God—is not only an illusion but the primary problem. Humans are inherently selfish, and so one's ego must be annihilated; all personal preferences, loves, desires and earthly attachments must be laid aside so that one's pure essence can be absorbed back into the one Divine essence from which everything originally emanated.

Then there are philosophies dating back to the ancient Greeks, which hold that human beings have two distinct, incompatible natures that are eternally at war with each other: an incorruptible, immaterial, other-worldly spirit and a corruptible, fallen, oh-so-worldly physical body. The spirit must overcome the flesh so that, in the end, one can leave behind this life of suffering on earth's fallen, corruptible physical plane and ascend to a spiritual realm that is our "true" home.

Concerning human nature, religions and spiritual disciplines typically gravitate toward one of these understandings or teach a confusing mixture of all four. Either way, the message is clear: human nature—our Humanity—is the problem. Human nature is something that God (however God is envisioned) expects us to overcome, to conquer.

But can anything overcome its nature? How can anything stop being what it is and still exist? To require human beings to overcome human nature is not only requiring them to do the impossible, it is profoundly perverted and sadistic. It is as perverse and cruel as punishing a fish because it can't live out of water and fly like a bird—or punishing a bird because it flies, must breathe air, and cannot survive underwater.

The so-called "ideals" that too many religions and spiritual disciplines seek to impose on us are not ideals at all. For something to be a human ideal, it must be suited to human nature; the ideal must be humanly achievable.

For instance, many religions, while commanding us to love God, declare that God is a being, power, or force that is totally beyond human comprehension and understanding. How can we love someone or something that we can never hope to understand?

It is taught that God is all-powerful, controlling everything that exists. It is also taught that God perfectly embodies love, justice, mercy, and goodness. And yet, if we ask how an all-powerful God can perfectly embody those virtues while allowing innocent humans to suffer, we are typically given two answers (or excuses.)

The first answer is that God's ways are not our ways. God's love is not the same as human love. God's love is beyond human comprehension. Likewise, God's justice, mercy, and goodness are different from human justice, mercy, and goodness. This begs the question, "If God's love is different in nature from human love, then why use the word 'love' at all?"

The other answer to the question of why an all-good God allows innocent people to suffer is that no human being is truly innocent in God's eyes. In some way beyond human understanding, their suffering is justified in God's eyes. This again begs the question, "If God's justice is different in nature from human concepts of justice, why use the word 'Just' at all when describing God?"

It has been taught that Humanity's relationship to God is like that of a clay pot to a pot maker. The clay pot is, by its nature, different from the pot maker. Clay pots can never understand the pot maker. This analogy fails because clay pots cannot act, feel, think, or understand anything. But we humans can. By nature, we are nothing like pots; we live, feel, think, imagine, act, and create. In every way, we are like the pot maker. The pot maker is human. The pot is not.

It has been taught that human willfulness, our capacity to think independently, make judgments for ourselves, and act upon those judgments, separates us from God. We should obediently submit to God's will—however it is defined—laying aside and sacrificing the fundamental, driving force that makes us human. Again, human nature—our Humanity is taught to be the problem.

No wonder so many people of integrity have turned from religion—from deep-thinking, highly-rational intellectuals to average men and women who are simply doing the best they can from day to day while trying to make sense of their lives. Rather than giving people tools to deal with life's complexities, too many religions offer just enough comfort to get believers it through the week, and just enough guilt to bring them back next weekend. And looking at history, everyone can see that religion, faith, and concepts of God have too often been deployed to manipulate, terrorize, subject, and control people.

And yet, walking away from religion does not change the fact that we human beings are hungry to understand ourselves and to have some narrative—literal or figurative—to help us make sense of our lives and our place in the cosmos.

I have found such an understanding in a very different religious narrative—a narrative that includes concepts of the Divine, but when compared to prevailing religious narratives, is heretical—even blasphemous.

In one early Mormon sermon, "The King Follet Discourse," we find this statement: "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."

According to traditional monotheism, God is incomprehensible, so right away, the notion that humans could ever comprehend God probably sounds ridiculous to many. But Mormonism was birthed amidst claims that the established order of the day considered ridiculous.

Many in Mormonism's founding generation seemed to intuitively understand a great truth: our beliefs about God—our sense of what is Holy, Sacred, and Divine—establishes the framework and context in which we understand ourselves, the nature of the cosmos, and our place in it.

Some traditions have taught that as we look within ourselves and start to understand ourselves better, we might begin to partially understand the nature of the Divine.

But some early Mormons came from the opposite direction: if we're going to embrace the idea of God, that idea has to be clear; it must make sense. The big ideas we believe to be true must not contradict what we know to be true by virtue of experience and reason.

Like their Christian and Jewish predecessors, the first Mormons believed that we humans exist in the image of God—going so far as to declare that if we were to see God, we would see a human being like ourselves. As evidence, they pointed to Genesis, chapter one, in which humans were made in the image and likeness of God, were blessed by God, and declared to be good. In doing this, a traditional theological barrier separating the Human and the Divine was removed.

Christianity claims that though God initially declared that humans were good, when they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they rebelled against God's will. Thus, human nature became corrupt, fallen, and inherently sinful.

But for the first Mormons, the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolized a foundational step in human progress. If it was a fall, then it was a fall upward. The story symbolized our species becoming fully human; it symbolized the igniting of human consciousness, self-awareness, abstract thinking, and imagination. It symbolized the point at which humans realized that they were mortal and subject to death—when they began judging matters in terms of right and wrong and acting in accordance with those judgments. By eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve grew up. They became capable of acting rationally and not merely being acted upon, and they realized that they could be held morally responsible for their choices. In becoming what we now recognize as fully functional human beings, they became—as the Genesis story confirms—like Gods, knowing good from evil. Initially organized in the image of God, they could now think and reason and act like Gods.

Christian theologians such as Augustine and Calvin rejected such a notion. Adam and Eve fell, and the human heart is unspeakably evil.

Anne Frank famously believed the opposite, writing in her diary: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." What makes this so compelling is that she was cruelly murdered in a Nazi concentration camp.

The fact of the matter is that there is much in human history and in our current world that—when taken out of context—could be used as evidence for either of these views.

To me, however, both views present a false dichotomy. Human beings are neither inherently good nor inherently evil; human beings are inherently free. I once heard a former Catholic priest say something that struck me as oh-so-true: "You don't need a devil to explain the existence of evil in the world; all you need are billions of people, each of them with free will."

The good news of Mormonism—the Mormon Gospel, if you will—is that every human being is born innocent—under no penalty, under no curse, in the image of God, and with the same ability to freely think, reason, imagine, and act that God possesses. True, humans exist within the limitations of time, space, and natural laws, but so do all things that exist—including God. Such limitations are not sinful; they are not weaknesses. They are simply the parameters of existence.

Human nature is not inherently conflicted. We are not each a battlefield on which our spirits and physical bodies are constantly waging war for dominance. As the Doctrine & Covenants teaches, "The body and the spirit are the soul of man," and "Spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy."

The Spirit and body are not separate entities but are intertwined. Together, they constitute the essence—the soul—of what it means to be fully human. Ancient Greek philosophers may have believed the spirit entering the body at birth was analogous to entering a prison and that death frees the spirit from the earthly realm of misery and woe. But early Mormonism taught that birth was a step forward, that a physically embodied spirit was superior to a disembodied spirit, and that death, in agreement with I Corinthians 15:26, was "the last enemy that will be destroyed."

In Mormonism, one's body is as much one's soul as one's Spirit. An 1840 Mormon missionary tract entitled "Intelligence & Affection" discouraged readers from praying that their physical desires and affection be lessened, subdued, or eliminated. Instead, readers were encouraged to pray that their physical desires and affections would be strengthened and used in ways that would bring joy to their lives and those of their loved ones.

As for the human Spirit, early Mormonism taught that human intelligence—the human mind—is "co-equal with God" and exists on the same principles as God Himself. God never had the power to create the human mind because God could not create Himself. Our minds are eternal, uncreated, existing before our birth, existing beyond death, and always possessing the innate ability to understand, gradually by degrees, all truth. In Mormonism, this pursuit of Truth—defined as a knowledge of what was, what is, and what will be—is the key to human growth, progression, flourishing, and joy. The human capacity to understand all things has no boundaries. As early as December 1832, Mormonism promised that for those continually embracing more intelligence, truth, and light, the day would come when they would "comprehend even God."

This brings us back to something I referenced earlier—the 1844 Mormon teaching that "if men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves." Nearly a decade earlier, The Seventh Lecture on Faith defined God as "a saved being" and "the prototype of all saved beings."

When I first read that, two things jumped out at me.

The first was that the word "prototype" was not only around in the mid-1830s but that it was then being used in the theological lectures of a small church in rural Ohio.

The second was that "prototype" was the word I had been searching for to describe my understanding of Humanity's relationship to the Divine. If we humans are made in the image of the Divine, then God must be the prototype for human potential. We humans are what God once was; God is what we humans have within ourselves to become.

The Human and the Divine share a common nature. Humanity and Deity are currently at separate points on the same spectrum. Divine love, Divine justice, Divine mercy, Divine righteousness are by nature the same as Human love, Human justice, Human mercy, Human righteousness—but with a greater, more mature capacity. Salvation is not about going somewhere when we die. It is about growing, progressing, and becoming to a greater degree like God. Salvation isn't a destination; it's the process of being fully human in all the ways the Spirit calls and entices us to be.

This process begins by acknowledging that every single human being—regardless of who they are, what they have done in the past, or what their current situation may be—already, by nature, bears the Divine image; that God is constantly encountering us in the person of other human beings; that the truth and knowledge required from us to become Gods ourselves comes not only by study and faith but, most importantly, through our relationships with others—all others: family, friends, and even those who we might initially think of as adversaries—even enemies. In the crucible of human relationships, we can choose to become more human, more humane, and, thus, more like God.

So, let us lay aside traditions, customs, beliefs, and superstitions that would undermine a healthy understanding of human nature—a nature that all of us share with God. Let's lean into the reality of being human. Let's reclaim our Humanity, in the Name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

“The Deplorables” by Adam M. Shaffer

[April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

Hello, my siblings in Christ! My name is Adam Shaffer, and I am an unordained Teacher in Community of Christ, reaching out to you, from the shores of the mighty Columbia River, here in the Tri-Cities of Washington State.

As a Teacher, I feel led by the Holy Spirit, to give a short sermon to the conference, even though I do NOT have a direct message from God, provided by revelation or prophecy, nor have I had a direct witness of the divine by a vision or visitation. But what I can provide is a message of the gospel which I have learned by study, and which we can reason upon together.

The title of my talk is: The Deplorables—and now, I need to provide a trigger warning for my sermon today, since it will contain depictions of people who often wrongly:

- Advocate for violence
- Threaten or bully others
- Demean others, and knowingly, or even more often, unknowingly, launch personal attacks and microaggressions by:
 - name calling,
 - using hostile sarcasm,
 - Judging the worthiness or sincerity of others, and
 - Questioning, denying, or diagnosing the lived experience of others.

So, in short, the subject of my talk today, is about Bigots— those people who personify the evils that still exist in our society, which includes, but is not limited to, queerphobia, racism, sexism, and ableism. In my talk today, I will be using Sweeping Generalizations about them, and often referring to them in both charitable and quite Pejorative terms.

So, if you are still with me, lets begin with a scripture reading starting within the Book of Luke in Chapter 10, verse 25, which I will read from the New International Version of the New Testament Bible:

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’[a]; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[b]”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving

him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

So, this is a moving parable which Jesus gave, which is still salient today, but in order to feel its true import, we should adapt it to our circumstances. And since this was a work of fiction, I feel justified in doing so:

To begin, let's think of a few groups of people we trust and respect today, such as talented anti-racist authors, caring and insightful therapists, and community building activists. It is not hard to imagine such respected people passing the man by as he lay suffering and dying. They would have good reasons to do this. They would be on their way to important conferences, book readings, counseling sessions, or important protests. And after all, they are not first responders, and have not been adequately trained to help the man, remembering that moving someone without training could cause more physical trauma.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, Would not care about any of that. Jesus depicts him as being ideologically tainted, maybe even a member of a cult, which at the time was based on a racial divide. So, in our modern context, I see him as a homophobic christian nationalist, member of the alt-right, and a white supremacist.

Riding up in his truck, with its fascist bumper stickers and truck balls, he probably shook his head knowingly. He didn't mind trouble, or getting his hands dirty—he could take it or leave it, but that day, the man suffering didn't seem to merit his fate, so he wrestled him up into the bed of his truck, covered him in an old tarp, and drove him into town. Once there, he made sure the man got some help, and when the urgent care clinic asked if the man had insurance, he pushed a substantial amount of cash across the counter, to ensure the man wouldn't be discharged too soon.

So, now that I have respun this parable, this is your opportunity to protest the liberties that I have taken with this tale. How could someone so misguided, who endorses such hurtful politics and candidates, do right by his fellow man in this instance? The answer is that each of us is complex— none of us are all good, or all evil. And the politics we endorse come in a wide spectrum of benefits and harms.

I am assuming that the Samaritan would not have joined in beating the man, if he had showed up a bit earlier that day, but would we still blame him if he was willing to help the victim, but partly blamed the victim for his injuries, or was glad that the victim did not live in his neighborhood?

My children are of mixed race, and I have always sought to protect them, and give them the best start in life. So, when we were moving to Washington, I diligently compared crime statistics to find the safest neighborhood here in the Tri-Cities to move to. After we lived here for about five years, one day my kid asked me why I had moved them to the one place in town that was the most “white bread”--- I was stunned. At the time, I had been studying the historical practice of real estate red-lining, and how systemic racism has pitted minorities against each other, for my state service job sensitivity training, but I hadn’t imagined how my desire for the security of my own residence actually fits into that socio-economic tapestry.

Jesus calls us all to reform ourselves, whether our blind spots are induced by large harmful popular movements, or by the fears we use as an excuse, which we gained in our youth, from earlier generations. And you have to admit that Jesus frequently employed this sort of social ambiguity, and radical acceptance, in His examples, to teach us these truths.

In Luke Chapter 21, verses 1 through 4 of the New International Version of the Bible we read:

1 As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 3 “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 4 All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

I love this example because the widow was a real person, but Jesus saw her differently than anyone else. He was able to discern her real circumstances and motives. Have you seen many of the paintings that depict this? It shows a modest and demure woman, who seems to glow with her own inner light, willingly extending her hands with the money she was giving. I wonder what she would think of these depictions. So often, we imagine that she ran away from a well-appointed household for love, only to be widowed young, when her loving and sensitive husband was killed by some accident, maybe by some ancient scaffolding, or even by sudden horrific violence dealt by the Roman authorities, leaving her destitute, through no fault of her own.

However, we don’t know anything about this woman, aside from the fact that she was widowed and poor. Who are the poor among us, who seem most set on supporting church leaders and their funding initiatives? Usually they are those poor deluded people who send in money to tele-evangelists, and their donations are too often used by men who sow hate, and build mega-churches where only some types of people are welcome.

I hope the poor widow will forgive me for my depiction. I believe that none of the disciples would have given her a second glance if Jesus hadn’t pointed her out to them. She was probably beaten down by life for many years after her husband was taken. She was probably cynical, unhappy, and set in her ways, with little else than religious practices as a ballast during her last

days. This is how I perceived my own grandmother when I visited her in my youth. She was a devout Catholic who was still angry at my Mother, her daughter, for having converted to Mormonism. She still kept her home exactly as it was when my grandfather had died before I was born.

So we, all of us really, no matter how politically, socially and morally enlightened we are, only seem to see the deficiencies in others, rather than their too-often hidden nobility. We are ready to write people off, and reject them, when we see them as our enemies. And we may be right to fear them! They often endorse policies that dehumanize us, or our loved ones, and they may attack us with the awful apparatus of an unjust state. We don't owe them an explanation of who we are, and we must stand against policies that destroy, but what did Jesus say we should do with our enemies themselves?

Luke Chapter 6 verses 27 and 28 and 32 through 36, in the NIV, say:

27 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

These words mean just as much today as they did then. In fact, I would argue that this message means more to a world divided in half, with the other side seen as our sworn enemies. So don't let our struggle against injustice, whether against a tyrannical church, or political party, or an unjust state, with its kangaroo courts, and illegitimate use of force, turn you against everyone who made this awful crisis possible.

Love others radically, unconditionally, knowing full well that they mean you harm— seek to help and bless those who have been fed lies about us, and pray desperately that what they do to us can be forgiven, and they can be healed, so that when we are found broken by the evils of this world that their hearts will soften towards us, enough to help us on their way, and this can be the means of healing this world, when the current storms of life, with all their potential for despair, have passed us by.

Remember that such storms in the past have taken little more than a decade to subside, when our grandparents were left with a broken world in need of healing, and it served no one to seek revenge then, instead our forebears rebuilt the cities and lands that the imperialists and the fascists had controlled, and used, for their awful work of destruction. We can and must survive our current conflicts, with our love of God and man intact, to build our world anew.

And I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

“Covenants, Queerness, and Exaltation”

by Lincoln Fullmer

[April 5th, 2025, First Reform Mormon General Conference](#)

“As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may become.” - Lorenzo Snow

So goes the famous summary of one of the most unique and expansive teachings of Mormonism—that Humanity and Divinity, rather than being ontologically at odds with one another, are merely different rungs on an eternal ladder of upwards progression. Growing up as a mainstream Brighamite Mormon, this teaching, affirming the divine core of all humans and promising the eventual inheritance of all things, was among my most cherished; and yet, this theology that has brought so much joy to me has also wrought heartache and anguish for so many of God’s children—and why is this? Because traditionally, this theology has been inextricably tied to notions of racialized heteronormative patriarchy and authoritarian control; only available to properly married heterosexual partners—often polygamous and white, always patriarchal, and ideally with many children—who accept the unbending authority of a central church body. Unfortunately, this rigid, unyielding structure has denied many thousands of Saints access to the Godhood that they were taught is their birthright. While there are many issues at play that need to be addressed to fully welcome all those who have been excluded from exaltation, I would like to specifically offer ideas to free this theology from its heteronormatively patriarchal cage and boldly offer space for Queer people, no matter if they are members of an institutional church or not, and hopefully create a viable framework for others to fully address the other issues mentioned.

It has long been the conventional wisdom both within and outside of the Latter Day Saint Movement that Mormonism—and especially the Brighamite variety—is fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed to Queerness and anything deviating from the cis-heteropatriarchal norm, and that any project attempting to make room for Queerness in a Mormon context is foolhardy and misguided. But as I’ve learned from the books *Tabernacles of Clay* and *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos*, both about gender and sexuality within the LDS church, by the chair of Kalamazoo College’s department of Religion, Dr. Taylor G. Petrey, the contemporary views of the same that seem so rigid, eternal, and stable are really anything but. For example, rather than gender being an eternal characteristic as is currently taught, Dr. Petrey demonstrates in *Tabernacles* that some earlier LDS leaders taught that spirits both chose their gender of their own accord (1) and can lose it in the future as a consequence of wickedness (2); in *Kinship*, rather than homosexuality being firmly counter to LDS thinking, he proposes that the belief in a Godhead consisting of three men perfectly united to one another in love and mind can be interpreted as a same-sex union—and the most holy in all of Mormonism (3). Because of these demonstrations and many others throughout his work, for which I highly recommend reading his books, I feel no reservations whatsoever in trying to develop new ideas of Mormon theology to fit Queer people.

Now that we know that Mormon theology indeed has a Queer potential, how can we create a consistent conception thereof that's both proudly Queer and uniquely Mormon? This can doubtless be done in several ways, but for my purposes here, I propose now to follow the traditional Plan of Salvation, as taught within the Brighamite church, stopping at each point of Queer exclusion to examine how they might be resolved.

The first step of this plan is the organization by our Heavenly Parents of eternal and uncreated intelligences into fully formed spirit children. At this stage, the main issue touching on Queerness is the assignment of gender to these spirit beings. As mentioned earlier, most current LDS leaders teach that this gender was assigned from God, is unchangeable, and is always identical to birth sex, but others have taught that intelligences proper are in fact genderless, only becoming gendered when an organized spirit child chose it for themselves—however, they still taught that deviation from that chosen gender was sinful. By taking this earlier teaching as inspiration, we can affirm genderqueer people with the understanding that gender or the lack thereof is a fundamental characteristic of spirit beings who constantly re-choose and reexamine their gender experience, casting aside the normative teachings that God chose this experience for them, or that, even if self-chosen, the choice was permanent.

After the organization of spirits, the next step is to send them down to Earth to be tested and taught to progress into Godhood. According to the teachings of the LDS church, this is done by entering into and remaining faithful to a series of covenants within the context of LDS priesthood authority, often nicknamed “the covenant path” in recent years by LDS leaders—namely, baptism, confirmation, priesthood ordination for men, the temple endowment, and sealing—and within this traditional view, each covenant or saving ordinance is absolutely necessary to enter into the exalted glory of God precisely because they were instituted for that purpose before the creation of the world. Making and keeping these covenants is thus, by definition, the only way to truly experience God's presence. Furthermore, the last three of these rungs are all tightly bound to gender norms—only men who are either celibate or in a sexual relationship only with their wife can receive the priesthood; the current text of the Endowment narrative continues to place women on a plane firmly beneath the authority of men (the seating is even gender segregated!), although there have been some significant improvements recently, and also commands a version of sexual purity that unequivocally excludes Queer relationships; and the eternal marriage bond through sealing is restricted to heterosexual couples. And just as appalling, since the LDS conception of covenants requires the institutional authority of a specific church, Queer people trying to seek their own connection to God outside of an organization that denies their full participation are viewed as horribly misguided apostates who have completely rejected all that is good. Thus, to open wide the door to exaltation to all people, two things must be done: reimagining each of these covenants with Queer inclusion baked in, and a brand new covenant framework that is not so strict, exclusive, and authoritarian.

While the issue with “worthy” male-only priesthood can be comparatively easily rectified by simply allowing all people who live ethically, by which I mean living in such a way so as to engender respect for the wellbeing of all people, to equally receive priesthood ordination and the full exercise thereof, the anti-Queerness in the ordinances specific to the temple is deeply rooted enough that serious changes to the theology must be made. With regards to the

endowment ceremony, my solution was to closely go through the entirety of the text to reform it to support my own ritual needs, such as, among many other things, gender equality and true ethical living—a major endeavor considering how fundamental the opposite is within the traditional ceremony—as well as designing more modified ceremonies, but even so, a fully inclusive and theologically consistent view of sealings is yet more challenging, and requires the new covenant framework alluded to earlier. Namely, I propose that covenants, as opposed to the traditional view described earlier, are better conceived as formalized ways to bind an individual to their own conception of Deity and practice Godhood, engage in ethical and Zionite community with the world, and form deeper connections with one's people. Since Humanity and Divinity are ontologically identical within Brighamism, with Humanity being merely less refined while Divinity more, any deep and healthy connection with another human—irrespective of religious tradition, institutional organization, or perceived normativity—can serve to refine one's soul into divinity. With this in place, the theological significance of the sealing ceremony can be revitalized: as opposed to the traditional idea that the sealing of a man and a woman creates the possibility for exaltation because it sanctifies with God's authority the biological power of reproduction, which is then sacralized into the method behind the organization of spirit children—obviously a theology highly dependent upon heterosexuality—we can rather proclaim that the selfless union of a marriage sealing imbued with the blessing of Deity leads to the exaltation of a family unit through their continual striving to gradually realize the divinity present within themselves, thereby rejecting and replacing the biological essentialism contingent in earlier theologies.

Furthermore, this new covenant framework of working in Zionite community to reveal the ontological Divinity already present in Humanity, notwithstanding its already profound utility in rejecting Queer exclusion and institutional uniqueness, has yet more applications—chiefly, the idea of covenant creativity, meaning both continual reworkings of current covenants (for example, the several modifications of the endowment ceremony that people such as Evan Sharley, Rob Lauer, myself, and others have written and planned to suit our own needs) and the freedom to create more. Given that the goal of covenants in this view is to provide divinely centered relationships, any formal recognition of a true healthy relationship could be formalized into a covenant if a person or a community so chooses to do so, thus opening up the possibility for more theological innovation in the future from anyone wishing to participate—perhaps some people, for whom close friends have become just as or even more dear than family, could find value in performing a covenant of friendship to express their deep and abiding commitments to each other. As such, taken as a whole, this new covenant framework affirms the birthright of all human beings to define their own spirituality and allows the participation of historically marginalized people in the revelatory process of theology, and I hope that more people will be able to make effective use of this framework to create further exciting reimaginings of Mormonism.

The goal I hope to accomplish from this talk is not to provide the authoritative framework for Queerness or covenants within Mormonism—plenty of people smarter than I am have already been working through this, and I'm not so presumptuous as to assign myself such great importance—but I do hope that my own, unapologetic, personal exploration and redefinition of Mormon thought to better serve the needs of myself and my community inspires more people to

realize that not only does Mormonism have so much more potential than what it is currently being used for by the institutional Brighamites in Salt Lake City, but also that every Mormon, every Latter Day Saint, every believer within this rich movement founded in Palmyra, New York in 1830, has their own God-given mandate to boldly pursue their own conceptions of the world and self to spread forth human flourishing abroad. This I offer in the name of my dear Heavenly Parents, whose love I feel in my life constantly. Amen.

Citations

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