

Defending the Faith: 'He became man that we might be made divine'

By [Daniel Peterson](#), For the Deseret News
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Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that human beings can grow spiritually and progress morally until, through divine mercy and grace, they can inherit and possess all that the Father has. To put it bluntly, if they're faithful they can become gods. This is taught in revelations given to modern prophets (see Doctrine and Covenants [76:58](#); [132:19-20](#)), as well as in sermons delivered by Joseph Smith. [A couplet associated with President Lorenzo Snow](#), fifth president of the LDS Church, explains that "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become."

But this doctrine is often misrepresented and misunderstood, and has drawn a great deal of both mockery and hostility from critics of Mormonism. So it's essential to understand it correctly:

While Latter-day Saints don't believe that human beings will be literally absorbed into God in the manner taught by some Christian and other mystics, they also don't believe that humans will ever be independent of God, or that they'll ever cease to be subordinate to God. They believe that to become as God is means to overcome the world through the Atonement of Jesus Christ (see [1 John 5:4-5](#); [Revelation 2:7, 11](#)). Thus, the faithful become heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ and will inherit all things — just as Christ inherits all things (see [Romans 8:17](#); [Galatians 4:7](#); [1 Corinthians 3:21-23](#); [Revelation 21:7](#)). They're received into the "church of the firstborn," meaning that they inherit as though they were the firstborn (see [Hebrews 12:23](#)). There are no limitations on these scriptural declarations; those who become as God inherit everything God has. In that glorified state, they'll resemble our Savior; they'll receive his glory and be one with him and the Father (see [1 John 3:2](#); [1 Corinthians 15:49](#); [2 Corinthians 3:18](#); [John 17:21-23](#); [Philippians 3:21](#)).

It's also important to know that the doctrine of human deification isn't an exclusively Mormon teaching. It — or something remarkably like it — can also be found in early Christian history. I'll offer just a few examples here:

In the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, who is arguably the most important Christian theologian of his time (about A.D. 130-200), said much the same thing as President Snow: "If the Word became a man, it was so men may become gods."

Similarly, Irenaeus' rough contemporary Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 150-215) wrote, "Yea, I say, the Word of God became a man so that you might learn from a man how to become a god." And, referring to the famous pagan pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, Clement endorsed his declaration that "Men are gods, and gods are men." This recalls the apostle Paul's approving citation of the third-century B.C. pagan poet Aratus of Cilicia to a pagan audience in Athens (Acts 17:28-29): Paul taught that humans are God's "offspring." (See my earlier discussion in a column from March 2013, "[Every man, woman and child is a child of God](#)").

Earlier in the second century, St. Justin Martyr (about A.D. 100-165) insisted that humans can be "deemed worthy of becoming gods and of having power to become sons of the highest." Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (about A.D. 296-373), also stated his belief in deification in terms very similar to those of Lorenzo Snow: "The Word was made flesh in order that we might be enabled to be made gods." On another occasion, Athanasius observed that "He became man that we might be made divine." Finally, Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), perhaps the greatest of the early Christian Fathers, said: "But he himself that justifies also deifies, for by justifying he makes sons of God. 'For he has given them power to become the sons of God' ([John 1:12](#)). If then we have been made sons of god, we have also been made gods."

These five writers weren't just orthodox Christians; in time, they were revered as saints. Three of them wrote within roughly a century of the apostles. Human deification was part of historical Christianity until relatively recent times, and a form of it still exists in some Eastern Christian churches. One scholar states that recognizing "the history of the universe as the history of divinization and salvation" was fundamental to ancient orthodox Christianity: "Because the Spirit is truly God, we are truly divinized by the presence of the Spirit."

Whether one accepts or rejects the doctrine of human deification, it was clearly taught in very early Christianity. Joseph Smith obviously didn't make it

up. Instead, Latter-day Saints believe, it's an eternal truth miraculously restored through a modern prophet.

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