

# Mormons at the Forefront

by [Terry Givens](#) June 2016

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Many would like to domesticate Mormon strangeness, what Richard Mouw recently called in these pages its “ill-considered and defective elements” (“[Mormons Approaching Orthodoxy](#),” May 2016), in the hope of promoting a more productive Evangelical-Mormon dialogue. They consider Joseph Smith’s teaching that God was once an embodied human to be an unacceptable challenge to God’s radical transcendence, but note that Mormonism’s Christocentric piety shows the possibility of greater Mormon conformity with the “orthodox Christian consensus.”

This is a generous gesture, but it gets the direction in which the consensus is moving precisely backwards in some crucial ways. It also ignores the fluidity of the orthodox consensus. The history of theology features many teachings and positions that eventually failed in the orthodoxy wars, often to reappear centuries later—from Origen’s (and the early Augustine’s) teachings on human pre-existence to Montanus’s resistance to confining canons and creeds, from patristic teachings on divine passibility to Pelagius’s defense of free will. Heterodoxy, in other words, often depends on what historical moment establishes your baseline for orthodoxy.

From a historical perspective, the problem of Mormonism’s heterodoxy is not as simple as presentist dismissals of Mormon theology have presumed. In many cases, Mormon heterodoxy has become the current orthodoxy—or subject of renewed discussion. Mormons denied the original guilt and damnation of unbaptized children 177 years before Pope Benedict’s 2007 document, “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized.” Mormons recuperated a version of patristic teaching on theosis—neglected if not rejected for much of Protestant history—only to see it raised in such venues as *Christianity Today*. Mormons proposed a progressive, tiered salvation generations before Karl Barth asked, “If God’s . . . saving will is supreme, how is eternal loss possible?” And the Latter-day Saints elaborated a scheme of salvation for all the living and the dead a century and more before Pope John Paul II spoke of universal salvation and Rob Bell asked of the uncatechized, “What if the missionary gets a flat tire?” Mormon heterodoxy, in so many cases, appears to be a function of timing.

The history of one Mormon teaching in particular inverts the notion that “Mormons are approaching orthodoxy”: the doctrine that God the Father himself shares in human pain and suffering. Although there were early figures who spoke of divine passion or suffering, for most of Christian history, it was simply assumed that God cannot suffer. He is infinite, unchanging, and impassible. “Who can sanely say that God is touched by any misery?” asks Augustine in a typical formulation.

Mormonism broke decisively and unambiguously with this nearly universal theological consensus in 1830. The Book of Mormon contains an allegory attributed to a certain Zenos. In it, the chronicler Jacob relates the story of a servant who labors incessantly to preserve a dying olive tree. The servant’s intercessory role, pleading to forestall the tree’s burning, identifies him

as the Christ. The lord of the vineyard who sends him, watching the object of his care fall into ruin, is a clear representation of God the Father. Seeing the fruitlessness of his servant's efforts, "the Lord of the vineyard wept, and said unto the servant: What could I have done more for my vineyard?"

Months after the Book of Mormon's publication, Smith further developed this motif of the weeping God in an ascension narrative firmly situated within the Enoch tradition in extracanonical literature. In Smith's account, the prophet Enoch is taken into heaven and records his ensuing vision. He sees Satan's dominion over the earth and then witnesses God's response to a world veiled in darkness. "The God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept . . . And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep?" Three times he asks incredulously, "How is it thou canst weep?"

The answer, it turns out, is that God is not exempt from emotional pain. As the Father explains to Enoch:

Unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood . . . and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?

It is not their wickedness but their "misery," not their disobedience but their "suffering," that elicits the God of heaven's tears. Enoch's weeping God participates in rather than transcends the ebb and flow of human history, tragedy, and grief.

These unambiguous 1830 Mormon pronouncements about the capacity of God the Father to suffer, to weep, to mourn in solidarity with human misery were harbingers of a broad change in the Christian consensus about God. Thomas Weinandy observed in *First Things* that "toward the end of the nineteenth century a sea change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God is passible, that He does undergo emotional changes of states, and so can suffer" ("Does God Suffer?" November 2001). Ronald Goetz has referred to the surge in "theopaschism" (the affirmation of a suffering god) as a "revolution," marking a "structural shift in the Christian mind." He opines, "We have only begun to see where systematic theologies rooted in the suffering God might lead." Paul L. Gavrilyuk states that there is now "a remarkable consensus" behind the claim that "God suffers." Check any Christian bookstore for shelves with titles referring to "the Most Moved Mover," "the God who risks," and "the Suffering God." Mormon heterodoxy, in other words, became, by the century's end, Christian orthodoxy.

It is my contention that we should read the King Follett Discourse, so disconcerting to other Christians because of its bold claims about a prehistory of divine embodiment, as part of the larger Mormon project, one that brings the divine and the human into closer correspondence. The theological dissonance of Smith's theological speculations needs to be weighed alongside the powerful attractiveness of a belief in a passible God. Which is to say, in a proximate God.

How, the unspoken question goes, can a faith community so obviously committed to the love and worship of Christ be reconciled with a doctrine that impugns traditional Christian verities about God's incorporeality and transcendence of history? I believe the answer is fairly straightforward. Mormons love God and his Christ because they long ago recovered from the malady first diagnosed by the great Congregationalist divine Edward Beecher. "Of all errors," he wrote, "none are so fundamental and so wide reaching in their evil tendencies and results as errors with respect to the character of God." Prominent in this regard is "the denial of the suffering of God."

Mormonism collapses the infinite distance that has historically separated the created from the Creator, Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative difference." But this theological move has not diminished Mormon adoration of their God. It has enhanced, enriched, and empowered the love and adoration and intimacy that are hallmarks of the Mormon faith. Mormons do not see embodiment as a limitation. It is a divine form more perfect than the ineffable, as Christ's incarnation shows us.

Martin Buber wrote that "the longing for relation is primary, the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles." God's literal fatherhood, with body, parts, and passions, grounds Mormon faith in a familial intimacy that works more powerfully than belief in the unnamable of apophatic theology, the Being beyond human categories and comprehending. Because the Father may at one time have experienced human incarnation—the speculative claim in the King Follett Discourse—what is true of Christ would be equally true of him: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15).

Mormons do not profess any certainty about the meaning of Smith's revisionist sermon on God's eternal divinity. But they know they worship a being who is perfect—possessed of a fatherly love undiminished by attenuating metaphors, and exhibiting a grace that transcends and precedes the miracle of Gethsemane: a God who from before creation made himself vulnerable to the ebb and flow of human agency, open to shared suffering in their spiritual travails. To the objection that this Mormon view of deity risks the logical possibility of a fallible God incapable of guaranteeing his promises, David L. Paulsen, one of Mormonism's premier philosophers, responds that he trusts God "because He's told us that we can. My faith in God is grounded in His self-disclosures, not in logical inferences from philosophically constructed premises." I believe his simple trust is echoed by millions of his fellow believers.

Like other Christians, Mormons believe in a tradition that is alive. It unfolds under the guidance of a divine influence, subject to fits and starts and a revelatory process administered through imperfect and at times fallible intermediaries. Mormons will bring to our shared tradition a soteriology, a divine and human anthropology, and a Christology that ground their enduring love and devotion to the Savior, and do so with great effectiveness. It is a tradition rich in ancient Christian precedents and, in numerous instances, it anticipates contemporary shifts in the larger Christian consensus.

In sum, the Mormon theological tradition has demonstrated enduring relevance and resonance, one that Mormons embrace without excuses. We feel no need for "greater conformity with the orthodox Christian consensus." Indeed, the Christian consensus is fluid and, in some cases, has lagged behind the Mormon model.

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