

“Justified by Faith – After All That We Can Do!”: Mormon Soteriology and the Doctrine of Justifi- cation by Faith¹



R. PHILIP ROBERTS

President

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Kansas City, MO 64118

PRoberts@mbts.edu

Winston Churchill once said that the Soviet Union was “a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”² Confusing, complex, bewildering—yes—and the same might be said of the confusing, intricate, and complex system of soteriology found in the doctrine of the Church of Latter-Day-Saints. It is perhaps best represented by the verse found in the Book of Mormon—2 Nephi 25:23 which states—“for we know that it is by grace that we are saved *after all we can do*.” In these few words lies a world of complex elements in terms of what it means to be “justified”, “saved”, “redeemed”, and to know the realities of salvation in its *fullness*! Fullness is a very important code word for LDS conversation on soteriology because it reflects the highest level of salvation—the level towards which LDS membership should lead you!

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a quick panorama of the LDS Church’s doctrine of salvation—with particular reference to justification—and to do so in order to clearly distinguish it from the ge-

¹ This article originated as a paper delivered by President Roberts on November 17, 2010 at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia.

² Churchill made this comment in a 1 October 1939 radio broadcast in London (see *Never Give In!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches: Selected by His Grandson Winston Spencer Churchill* (ed. Winston Spencer Churchill; New York: Hyperion, 2003), 199.

neric evangelical doctrine of *Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone*. Our main concern here is with the official church teaching conveyed through its documents, resources, and its presidency. Some attention will be given to a few of its various spokesmen who do not necessarily reflect official views but who are adept at encouraging church members and interfacing with evangelicals in particular.

I. MORMONISM AND THE AFTERLIFE

In order to understand the LDS doctrine of salvation, we must begin with an overview of its four-tiered, two-dimensional understanding of the afterlife and salvation. The two dimensions of LDS salvation involve what is called by Mormons unconditional and conditional salvation. Unconditional salvation is exactly what it means—salvation without any conditions, or almost none, at least.

The lowest level of salvation is labeled the Telestial realm. In this lowest realm will be consigned people who are unrighteous, immoral, and without faith in Christ. Nothing in LDS scripture or teaching indicates that anything, including faith, is necessary to receive the “blessings” of the Telestial Kingdom. On the Terrestrial level, one up from the Telestial, good and righteous people are welcome there along with nominal Mormons—those who are not “temple worthy.” Continued existence in these two realms is made possible by the atonement of Christ for original sin. This atonement makes it possible for virtually all people to have a continued form of existence with few, if any, conditions applying—hence the term “unconditional” salvation. Christ’s atonement made “life after death” in the happier realms of the Telestial or Terrestrial levels possible. They are in some sense “saved” and Jesus is, according to LDS belief, the savior of the world.

It is at the highest level of eternal rewards, the Celestial Kingdom, where faith is expected and necessary. In the doctrinal catechism *Gospel Principles*, faith is required as a first prerequisite for “exaltation” as the Celestial realm is termed. A list of what is essential for “Exaltation” (also termed the “fullness of salvation” or “eternal life” in the LDS tradition), provided in a chapter by the same name in *Gospel Principles*, duly notes that “we first must place our faith in Jesus Christ and then endure in that faith to the end of our lives. Our faith in Him must be such that we repent of our sins and obey His commandments.”³

³ *Gospel Principles* (hereafter *GP*), (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 278.

II. FAITH EQUALS GOOD WORK

It is not clarified that obeying “His commandments” is done as a fruit or result of faith, but rather the intention is that these “commandments” are an explicit and exact expression of what faith is! And so, as not to leave a new church member guessing, they are explicitly listed, preceded by the words: “He commands us all to receive certain ordinances.” They are five as listed in *Gospel Principles*.

It should be noted that baptism, as mentioned above, is not *any* baptism by *anyone* or any *church* but by the “proper authority,” which is a member of the Aaronic priesthood in the LDS church. Apart from the “required ordinances,” there are other duties “the Lord commands all of us to”:

- (1) Love God and our neighbors.
- (2) Keep the commandments (not just any commandments—teachings and directions of the LDS church).
- (3) Repent of our wrongdoings.
- (4) Search out our kindred dead and receive the saving ordinances of the gospel for them.
- (5) Attend our Church meetings as regularly as possible so we can renew our baptismal covenants by partaking of the sacrament.
- (6) Love our family members and strengthen them in the ways of the Lord.
- (7) Have family and individual prayers every day.
- (8) Teach the gospel to others by word and example.
- (9) Study the scriptures.
- (10) Listen to and obey the inspired words of the prophets of the Lord.

III. JUSTIFICATION: NOT EASY BUT POSSIBLE

It becomes obvious to the observer and student of Mormon thought, despite the protestations of some Mormon apologists, that what is set forth in Mormon soteriology is a clear form of LDS sacerdotalism and sacramentalism. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in a Mormon parable contained in *Gospel Principles* in its chapter entitled “Atonement.”⁴ This parable presents the story of a man who owes a great debt. With clear and noticeable parallels to a similar biblical parable, the debtor finds himself unable to repay his obligation. Doom appears eminent. Suddenly, help appears in the form of an intercessor who offers to pay

⁴ *GP*, 1997, 63–5.

the debt for the hapless indebted soul. Once the judge is satisfied that the obligation can be met, the financial savior and mediator turns to the debtor and states, "If I pay your debt, will you accept me as your creditor?" "Oh, yes, yes," cried the debtor, "you save me from prison and show mercy to me." Here is where the LDS parable turns even more significantly and obviously from the biblical account. The story continues, "Then," said the benefactor, "you will pay the *debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible. I will provide a way. You need not go to prison.*" LDS interpretation is followed in the story. "Our sins are our spiritual debts. Without Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and Mediator, we would all pay for our sins by suffering spiritual death. But because of Him, if we will keep His terms, which are to repent and *keep His commandments*, we may return to live with our Heavenly Father."⁵

IV. JUSTIFICATION MIXED WITH SANCTIFICATION

Similar statements are replete in LDS doctrinal literature. "Salvation" begins with faith in Jesus, the Jesus of LDS Latter-Day revelation, but "eternal life" (synonymous with the attainment of the Celestial Kingdom) is something that must be achieved through hard work. One might see it as faith to begin with, but it is only by works—Mormon sanctioned works—that salvation is actually attained. This is seen in the comments on *real* repentance in *Gospel Principles*. It is stated, "We are not fully repentant if we do not pay tithes or keep the Sabbath day holy or obey the Word of Wisdom."⁶ Sanctification is certainly mixed with justification in LDS thinking, and repentance, in the LDS definition of the word, is a necessary work for that justification. Consequently, the doctrine of infused righteousness is emphasized and the doctrine of imputation is placed on the back-bench. Hear elder and former president Spencer Kimball:

Repentance means not only to convict yourselves of the horror of the sin, but to confess it, abandon it, and restore to all who have been damaged to the total extent possible; then spend the balance of your lives trying to live the commandments of the Lord so *he can eventually pardon you and cleanse you.*⁷

⁵ *GP*, 1997, 65.

⁶ *GP*, 2009, 111.

⁷ Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1969), 200. See also *GS*, 1997, 126.

In his oft-quoted book *Miracle of Forgiveness*, Kimball speaks to the conditional nature of forgiveness and comments on 2 Nephi 25:23.

[E]ven though forgiveness is so abundantly promised there is no promise nor indication of forgiveness to any soul who does not totally repent.

To every forgiveness there is a condition. The plaster must be as wide as the sore. The fasting, prayers, the humility must be equal to or greater than the sin.⁸

One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation . . . [2 Nephi 25:23] makes clear the two facets, neither of which alone would bring the individual salvation—the grace of Christ . . . and individual effort. However good a person’s works, he could not be saved had Jesus not died for his and everyone else’s sins. And however powerful the saving grace of Christ, it brings exaltation to no man who does not comply with the works of the gospel.⁹

Mormon Apostle Bruce R. McConkie writes:

What then is the law of justification? It is simply this: ‘All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations’ (D. & C. 132:7), in which men must abide to be saved and exalted, must be entered into and performed in righteousness so that the Holy Spirit can justify the candidate for salvation in what he has done . . . Justification is available because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but it becomes operative in the life of an individual only on conditions of personal righteousness.¹⁰

Though some have tried to distance themselves from Kimball and McConkie, they are both frequently quoted in church publications and their doctrine remains unrefuted by official sources. The following statements found in official LDS church publications reveal the confusing synergistic concept of justification retained in Mormon soteriology.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 206–7.

¹⁰ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1966), 408. Cited in Bill McKeever, *In Their Own Words: A Collection of Mormon Quotations* (Draper, UT: Mormon Research Ministry, 2010), 184.

Since the Savior paid for our sins and satisfied justice for us, we become debtors to Him rather than to justice. We must therefore meet the stipulations He has established for forgiveness and cleansing. Otherwise, He withdraws His proffered mediation, and we are left to deal alone with the demands of justice, lacking the means to become pure. One must choose Christ to receive what Christ offers.¹¹

Coming to Christ, in LDS thinking, makes keeping the “commandments” possible, or nearly possible, in order to complete the meriting of “eternal life” or the “Celestial Kingdom.” General Authority Dallin Oaks states:

Believers who have had this required rebirth at the hands of those having authority have already been saved from sin *conditionally*, but they will not be saved *finally* until they have completed their mortal probation with the required continuing repentance, faithfulness, service, and enduring to the end.¹²

Some Christians accuse Latter-day Saints . . . of denying the grace of God through claiming they can earn their own salvation. We answer this accusation with the words of two Book [*sic*] of Mormon prophets. Nephi taught, “For we labor diligently . . . to persuade our children . . . to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23). And what is “all we can do”? It surely includes repentance (see Alma 24:11) and baptism, keeping the commandments, and enduring to the end.¹³

Another authority states:

Being born again, unlike our physical birth, is more a process than an event. And engaging in that process is the central purpose of mortality.¹⁴

Ezra Taft Benson underscores:

¹¹ D. Todd Christofferson, “Justification and Sanctification,” *Ensign* (June 2001): 23.

¹² Dallin H. Oaks, “Have You Been Saved?,” *Ensign* (May 1998): 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴ D. Todd Christofferson, “Born Again,” *Ensign* (May 2008): 79.

As a Church, we are in accord with Nephi, who said, “It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23). Grace consists of God’s gift to his children wherein he gave his Only Begotten Son that whosoever would believe in him and comply with his laws and ordinances would have everlasting life. By grace, the Savior accomplished his atoning sacrifice so that all mankind will attain immortality. By his grace, and by our faith in his atonement and repentance of our sins, we receive the strength to do the works necessary that we otherwise could not do by our own power. By his grace we receive an endowment of blessing and spiritual strength that may eventually lead us to eternal life if we endure to the end. By his grace we become more like his divine personality.

Yes, it is “by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.” (2 Ne. 25:23).¹⁵

S. Michael Wilcox notes:

Ultimately, our justification before God *is* a product of faith in the grace of Christ. As Nephi said, “It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.” (2 Ne. 25:23). But the Lord does expect us to do all we can—to repent of our sins, to covenant with him in the waters of baptism, to keep his commandments, and to follow his example of love. (See 3 Ne. 27:16, 21–22). After all, he gave everything—his blood, his body—to remove our sins from us; is it too much to ask that we give him in return our hearts, minds, and strength?¹⁶

V. MOVING TOWARD EVANGELICALISM?

Current LDS apologists, perhaps in an attempt to mollify concerns of their own constituents, seem to show some evidence of moving closer to a classical understanding of justification. Robert Millet, a professor at BYU and enthusiastic proponent of the “Standing Together” Movement, an evangelical-LDS dialogue venture, is a noted spokesman for Mormon thinking—especially to the evangelical world. His 2003 book, *After All We Can Do...Grace Works*, addresses 2 Nephi 25:23 in the context of salvation by grace through faith. While Millet is an employee of the church and, in some sense, a spokesman, it must be remembered that he

¹⁵ Ezra Taft Benson, “First Presidency Message Redemption Through Jesus Christ After All We Can Do,” *Tambuli* (December 1998): 3.

¹⁶ S. Michael Wilcox, “I Have A Question,” *Ensign* (June 1991): 53.

is not a General Authority. He does not speak or write with the authority of the LDS presidency or its council. Whatever is said by him, therefore, may be considered “unofficial” by the church or at least understood as not having the authority of an inspired “spokesman of the Lord” as the President of the Church. Being an “unofficial” publication, not church or LDS published, all that is printed in it has the aura of “plausible deniability.” Nonetheless, it is a widely circulated piece and is sold and distributed by several bookstores.

As a Christian apologist and student of Mormonism, Bill McKeever, in his review of this work, states:

As I read Dr. Millet’s book, I honestly didn’t know whether to rejoice or grieve. Could it be that an educated Mormon was actually setting aside the works-based theology that has long separated Mormonism from the Christian fold? Or was this merely an attempt to use Christian terminology to superficially make it appear that Mormonism was moving towards an orthodox position?¹⁷

But McKeever goes on:

Where Dr. Millet really stands on this issue depends on what page you are reading. On page 70 he says “faith is complete trust, confidence in, and reliance upon the merits, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ for salvation.” Then he turns around and says that only by a person’s “continued observance of the requirements of God” can a person have the confidence that he is “acquitted,” “righteous,” and “in divine favor” (page 72). On page 128 he rhetorically asks, “If I rely **wholly** upon the merits of Christ, how much do I **rely** upon myself to be saved? If I rely alone upon the merits of Christ, how much do I rely upon myself to be saved? The answer to both questions is a resounding ‘None’ ” (emphasis his). None?

He correctly notes that “justification is a legal term” and insists that justification establishes his righteous standing before God. But he adds that when Paul says a believer is justified by faith, he merely means it is “the starting point.” “In short, as we have faith, repent, and are baptized, we are justified before God” (page 75). Paul says no such thing. The apostle emphatically declares that a believer is justified by faith and that no man is

¹⁷ Bill McKeever, “After All We Can Do—Grace Works,” <http://mrm.org/grace-works> (Accessed September 15, 2010).

justified by works of the law (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; 3:24). Paul does say we are saved “unto good works,” but his writings make a clear distinction between what justifies the believer before an all-Holy God, and what separates the believer unto God.

If, as he says, “Christ’s own infinite merit thus becomes the ground on which the believer stands before God” (p. 77), how can an individual’s sin-stained merit add to this? If I am justified by Christ’s merit, how can I become more justified by including my own?

Dr. Millet’s beliefs regarding salvation by grace alone are nothing new to Mormon thought. ‘The works and deeds of man, though insufficient of themselves for salvation, are necessary . . . Man cannot be saved by grace alone; as the Lord lives, he must keep the commandments; he must work the works of righteousness; he must work out his salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord’ (pp. 118–119).¹⁸

And McKeever concludes:

Like many LDS authors, Dr. Millet demonstrates his lack of understanding when it comes to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Like many of his colleagues and leaders, he continues to confuse sanctification with justification. Because of this, I have an increased concern that many Christians will give this book only a superficial read and, without understanding the necessary Mormon definitions of crucial terms, assume that Dr. Millet is abandoning his old Mormonism and coming closer to a New Testament consensus. If he wrote *Grace Works* with traditional Mormon definitions in mind, then he is really offering nothing new on this important topic.

There are some who do not share my skepticism and, in turn, feel Dr. Millet is leading his church to a more orthodox position. If that is the case, then I don’t think this view is shared by the leadership in Salt Lake City. In a conference address titled ‘The Atonement: All for All,’ Mormon Seventy Bruce Hafen quenched such high hopes when he commented on how some people “mistakenly think our Church is moving toward an understanding of the relationship between grace and works that draws on Protestant teaching.” Such “misconceptions,” he said, prompted him to address this topic on his conference message (*Ensign* magazine, May 2004, p. 91). He then proceeded to warn

¹⁸ Ibid.

LDS members that “If we must give all that we have then our giving **almost** everything is not enough. If we almost keep the commandments, we **almost** receive the blessings.” (p. 98, emphasis his).¹⁹

I must confirm that I agree completely with McKeever’s view.

A notable number of Mormon apologists have continued to make the case that Mormonism really does teach justification by faith. They have always carefully alluded to the fact that this does not necessarily mean justification by faith alone. At the same time, the emphasis is put upon the need for perseverance and godliness. This type of approach can be seen clearly in the work of Stephen Robinson, particularly in his book, *How Wide the Divide*. Clearly this is a minimalist approach to the understanding of Mormon thought and theology and does not, at least in my mind, represent a clear demarcation from traditional church teaching. What it does tend to indicate is that one is brought into a relationship with Christ, but then is to be kept in that relationship and brought on to experience the fullness of the Gospel or exultation by continued works. These works were not mere human righteousness such as keeping the Ten Commandments, but it is obvious from Mormon teaching and the direct instruction of the church that temple worship and other issues are the essential matters of concern here. As well, the church documents themselves do not reflect any serious change or alteration of views. While *Gospel Principles* itself, being the primary discipling manual for the LDS church, does present as attractive and fine-tuned an approach to understanding Mormon soteriology as possible, the necessity of good works to maintain one’s “saved status” are obvious. And these works are clearly essential for a Mormon adherent to move on in the process of being and maintaining Temple-worthiness.

Former LDS President Ezra Taft Benson’s comments demonstrate the insufficiency of grace alone for salvation:

“After all we can do” includes extending our best effort. *It includes living his commandments . . .* We must become pure and holy as Jesus Christ and his Father are pure and holy—for “Man of Holiness” is the name of God. We become pure only as we subscribe to the laws and ordinances the Savior has prescribed in his gospel.

This means we acknowledge the name of Christ as the only name under heaven by which salvation may come to us. It means we fully repent and forsake all that has been evil in our past

¹⁹ Ibid.

lives. It means we receive the ordinances of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost so that we are cleansed from sin “every whit,” as the scriptures teach. It means thereafter a life committed to practicing his teachings. Then we truly are his disciples. But all of this is not sufficient to make us worthy to come unto the glorified presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

As a Church we are in accord with Nephi, who said “It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23). Grace consists of God’s gift to his children wherein he gave his Only Begotten Son that whosoever would believe in him *and* comply with his laws and ordinances would have everlasting life.²⁰

VI. THE DANGER OF MORMON CONVERSION

Mormon theology clearly is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. In fact, it is the case that if Mormonism is true, converts to the truth should never consider conversion into the LDS community. The risks are too great! First, a convert who has received a witness that Mormonism is true, been baptized, and received the Holy Ghost is immediately put into jeopardy regarding outer darkness or perdition. For in the Mormon teaching, those who have received the witness of the Spirit, been baptized, and assimilated into the family of Mormons, if they should ever apostatize they are condemned in the afterlife to outer darkness. You may be as guilty and as foul and evil as Adolf Hitler, and yet miss this tragic destination. If you are, however, a Mormon convert who is apostate, you, along with Lucifer and his angels, are doomed for certain and sure eternal death. Just consider that the possibility of not converting provides and guarantees a destiny far more attractive and vital in a place called the Telestial kingdom. Additionally, conversion into the Mormon Church probably will involve a nominal church commitment. This eliminates the possibility of the celestial kingdom for those who have been unable bring themselves up to temple-worthy status. If one remains unconverted to the church, they certainly and more likely than not will experience proxy baptism in the course of the millennium. This guarantees the opportunity to accept the benefits of such baptism and to ensure entrance into the celestial kingdom. Isn’t this much better than hoping you can do all the work necessary to maintain temple-worthy status here and now? Wouldn’t you certainly accept this as an alternative if it were offered to you? Mormon missionaries who have committed themselves to diligent door-to-door work will actually, more likely than not,

²⁰ Benson, “First Presidency Message: Redemption Through Jesus Christ After All We Can Do,” *Liahona* (Dec 1988). (Unpaginated online edition at lds.org).

lower the number of people who qualify for the celestial kingdom by making them or encouraging them to join the LDS church. They'll miss the opportunity for a sure way of getting there through proxy baptism. In actual fact, the number of folks destined for exaltation will be decreased instead of increased. My encouragement to our Mormon missionary friends is not to make converts to the Mormon Church because they will in fact lower the numbers of exalted beings headed for the celestial kingdom.

In such a convoluted, discombobulated system of soteriology, where the benefits and attractions of joining are actually lessened by the mere system itself, it would appear to the more than casual observer or the serious student that Mormonism is obviously a man-concocted system. It was devised under the influence of Joseph Smith, who was not necessarily looking for reasons to believe, but rather a belief system to fit his lifestyle. He devised one that is grossly inappropriate and counterproductive to true godliness and Gospel-worthiness. With this in mind, it's obvious why 2 Nephi 25:23 is a confusing statement, for we are saved by grace *after all we can do*. How can grace be grace if it is after all that we might do? It becomes rather a self-help scheme that falls far short of the biblical concept of God's *charis* and *agape*. For us to understand and embrace the true Gospel, it is a warning and encouragement for us to be busy about the work of sharing with our Mormon friends and acquaintances the truth as we know it in Jesus Christ.