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[Introduction to] Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis

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Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought. Church and Praxis
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Preface

In volume 1 of my history of Mormon thought I chose “Wrestling the Angel” to designate the metaphorical struggle to articulate in human terms the key ideas pertaining to the nature of God, the human, and their relationship. (I use “Mormon” as a simpler and interchangeable term for “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” the formal designation for the faith tradition.) In this, the second volume, I chose “Feeding the Flock,” as it is the metaphorical expression the resurrected Jesus used to refer to the work of the ministry, executed in and through his church by his delegated servants. I intend those words to convey the general scheme of organization, offices, authority, and practices that God designed to bring to fruition his ultimate intentions for the human family discussed in that first volume. This is a book, simply put, about the church, or what religious scholars call ecclesiology. In referring to a history of Mormon practice, I do not mean to present a sociology of Mormonism, or a history of Mormon culture. I mean only to contrast the study of Mormon theology, or Mormon thought as a system of ideas and doctrines, with Mormon ecclesiology, that is, the study of how those ideas and doctrines have been formally implemented through an ecclesiastical structure and modes of worship. In one volume, I cannot hope to cover the entire range of the institutional church, historically or organizationally. So while important, many aspects of the institutional church (like auxiliary organizations and educational systems) I have had to neglect or pass over lightly as being less central to the study of ecclesiology as historically understood.

The same caveats apply to this volume as they did with the first. I make no claims to either a comprehensive or authoritative presentation and have selected for treatment those aspects of Mormon ecclesiology that strike me as most useful in answering the fundamental question of ecclesiology: what did Joseph Smith and his successors understand the purpose of the church to be, and how did the resultant structure and forms of practice evolve over time?

1. Introduction

What Is the Church, and Why Is One Necessary?

In Mormon theology, human anthropology is traceable to a premortal sphere in which God the Eternal Father invited into eternal relationship with himself and a Heavenly Mother an innumerable host of those immortal human spirits by which they found themselves surrounded. Rather than forming humans for their own glory, the Divine Parents choose to nurture these souls toward godliness so that these their children, women and men, “might have joy.” It is at this moment, before the earth is created or the first person formed, that grace— God’s freely given offering of love— irrups into the universe. In a seventeenth- century

sermon, the English Puritan Thomas Watson asks, "What is the chief end of man," and replies, "Man's chief end is to glorify God." A historian of theology writes that according to the great American divine Jonathan Edwards, God "always acts for his own glory and honor. Why did God create anything outside himself? ... God's only motive was self-glory." The first lesson of the Catholic Baltimore Catechism asked, "Why did God make you?" The answer: "God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him." One of the most popular preachers of the twenty-first century writes, "You were made for God's glory." Mormon scripture challenges such orthodoxy, asserting, on the contrary, that humans were not created to serve as instruments of God's glory but that he has made it his project and purpose to create the conditions for our happiness, by bringing "to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."

God, being perfectly and supremely joyful, wished the same condition to be shared by the human race and made provision— at his unfathomable personal cost— for this to be so. Embodiment for billions of spirits, the travails of mortality, and the educative experiences of pain and pleasure, dissolution, and death— all are orchestrated to effect the eventual incorporation of these numberless multitudes into a celestial family. Full communion with God, partaking of the divine nature by immersion in an eternal web of loving relationships, is the purpose and project of human existence. A mortal sphere exposing humans to the formative crucible of experiences and choices defines as much as refines our nature and propels the process onward. The crowning culmination is achieved when sanctified individuals are assimilated into eternal union with each other and with heavenly parents, in a divine family. Such ends are achieved through belief in God and his providence, and faith in an atoning sacrifice of God the Son that makes repentance, sanctification, and resurrection possible. This is the fundamental framework of Mormon thought. The contrast with orthodox conceptions of human existence and redemption is profound. "God's purpose and goal in redemption," writes one religious historian, "is to reverse the sin, corruption and death introduced into humanity by Adam." Mormons, on the other hand, do not see God's primary work as recuperative or restorative but as progressive and additive. They see the Fall as part of God's plan from the beginning, a prelude to a mortal experience that is educative, formative, and ennobling, linking an eternal, premortal past with post-resurrection future. As Smith would say in one of his last sermons, at some moment in a distant, primeval past, "God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself and be exalted with Him." This conception of a covenant that precedes the world's existence, wherein a divine being (and a feminine divine companion) invites humans to participate in the divine nature and enter into eternal relation with them, with that human family reciprocally committing to the terms and conditions of such an outcome, is the governing paradigm of Mormon soteriology. This is the covenantal relationship that underlies and encompasses all other covenants. Smith is a long time unfolding the full cosmic narrative, but he finds the principal impetus with his translation of the Book of Mormon and its radical reworking of covenant theology, aided by revelations in the months following that detail premortal councils and human participation

in the grand design. Mormon ecclesiology is best understood— indeed, it can only be understood— insofar as it is situated within this underlying covenantal framework.

Why, we might ask to begin with, is a church even necessary in such a bold scheme? A world of independent agents, exercising faith and living virtuous lives as motivated or drawn by the clarion call of a heavenly love is a powerful point of departure. The comforting, fortifying, and instructing divine Spirit guides in the journey.

Is an actual church necessary in the process? Certain functions of the church are neatly laid out in the letter to the Ephesians: ministering, edifying, and teaching until the imitation of Christ is fully achieved. But is the church thus alluded to essential and indispensable or merely helpful? “Without religion,” one literary character claims, “you cannot make the will equal to its tasks.” As fallen, self- interested creatures with “willing spirits but weak flesh,” outside aid is critical. A church, from this perspective, serves as spiritual reinforcement, a catalyst or facilitator of moral betterment. In a related way, the collectivist model of public worship and religious affiliation can provide a kind of spiritual as well as material synergy, transforming the good intentions of solitary efforts into both personal transformation and public impact. Not only are “two or three ... gathered in [his] name” the guarantee of God’s presence, but large- scale dilemmas require concerted action that charities and orders and congregations moving in concert are better prepared to address than individuals. But are such rationales sufficient explanation?

At the same time, institutional religion comes at a cost. Once a formal institution enters the religious picture, a critical Rubicon in the call of faith has been crossed, and a whole series of dichotomies complicate the life of discipleship. Belief and practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, inward faith and outward performance, private conscience and organizational affiliation— such distinctions are useful labels, organizing categories we have come to employ in the study of religion. These dichotomies, however, can also suggest a rupture that portends a crisis, if not a catastrophic failure, of the animating imperative at the core of Christianity: pure and uncalculating love, leading to the holiness that fits one for full communion with God. The moral philosopher and theologian Kenneth Kirk considers that the institutionalization of the Christian church itself threatens to undermine its own avowed purpose, as faith, yearning, love, and loyalty become overwhelmed by forms, rules, and procedures. Such a dilemma manifested itself almost immediately in the Christian church, he believes: “with the Apostolic Fathers ... the actions and dispositions are [already] wholly confused,— actions right and wrong pushing their way more and more into the foreground of the code, and obedience and conformity taking the place of enthusiastic loyalty as the basis of Christian life.” The problem, in other words, is that moving from spontaneous love of God as a natural response, to creeds and practices as prescribed belief and performance, would seem to turn religion into the self- conscious pursuit of a goal. Selfless response becomes self- interested quest. “If my aim in life is to attain a specified standard,” notes Kirk, “or to live according to a defined code, I am bound continually to be considering myself, and measuring the distance between my actual attainment and the ideal. It is impossible by such a road to attain the self- forgetfulness which we believe to be the essence of sanctity.” One remedy suggests itself: “How is disinterestedness, unselfishness, to be

attained? Once granted that moralism, or formalism, cannot bring the soul nearer to it, and there remains only one way— the way of worship. Worship lifts the soul out of its preoccupation with itself and its activities, and centers its aspirations entirely on God.”

Worship is, as James White notes, “an exasperatingly difficult word to pin down.” Luther saw worship in terms of communion through “prayer and the song of praise,” Calvin saw its end as union with God, while Archbishop Thomas Cranmer said worship was “directed to God’s glory and human rectitude.” In Kirk’s view, worship in its pure form is what saves us from preoccupation with self and turns our hearts and minds upward— enhancing a “stream of new life” that characterizes “this primary bond set up between God and the soul.” Most conceptions of worship, then, emphasize interaction, reciprocity, praise given, and God’s spirit felt, “the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity” in the Catholic view. In what follows, I will treat the broad theme of Mormon worship in a similar way but extending Kirk’s emphasis on how believers develop to fruition “this primary bond set up between God and the soul.” Geoffrey Wainwright is correct that “the proper relationship between creature and Creator is ... the relationship of worship,” but Mormons construe this “proper relationship” rather differently from other Christians. As I have suggested above and explicated at length elsewhere, Latterday Saints interpret that bond “between God and the soul” as a literal kinship, a version of theosis more robust and more literal than other Christian versions of the doctrine. Given Mormonism’s reading of that bond as one that is unimpeded by an “infinite qualitative divide,” worship entails adoration and praise but also the forging of an eternal, familial relationality.

In addition, worship is not a solitary act— it is communal, an activity expressed in solidarity with others. “To S. Paul and S. John,” notes Kirk, “it could have no other context than that of the Church.” As White quotes the Russian Orthodox theologian George Florovsky, “Christian existence is essentially corporate; to be a Christian means to be in the community.” Theologians like Wainwright have also emphasized worship’s community- building and unifying function. Latter- day Saints in particular emphasize the communal nature of religion but as much more than an assist to compensate for the human frailty of solitary devotion, or for purposes of establishing communities of merely provisional duration. Mormons construe salvation as eternal relationality with other human beings as well as with God, or what Joseph Smith called a “sociality” with friends and family “coupled with glory.” (In this volume, I am using salvation to refer to the Mormon conception of the highest degree of glory, the celestial kingdom or “exaltation.” Mormons— confusingly— also use the term to refer to the state that virtually the entirety of the human race will inherit, excepting only the “sons of perdition.”)

The philosopher Charles Taylor sees secularism as following upon a great cosmic reorientation in the Western world— an “anthropocentric shift,” or a substitution of man for God at the center of ultimate concern. This anthropocentrism, he writes, replaces theocentrism as a consequence of Enlightenment thought. Mormonism refuses this either/ or split and reconstitutes heaven as a matrix of eternal relationships that are horizontal as well as vertical. Rather than transcending human relationships in a beatific vision, Mormonism sacralizes them and incorporates them

into a divine family of which God (as Eternal Father united with an Eternal Mother) is the head. In both these ways, as celebration of God's invitation to participate in his heavenly family and as the work of forging a heavenly community here and now, Mormon worship seeks to reverse the direction of religious concern from self to other. More than this, however, the church exists as an indispensable means for developing communities of sanctified individuals that can endure eternally. This requires particularly robust means of shaping character and solidifying durable relationships, means that require covenants and sacraments.