

Becoming Like God

Gospel Topics Essay



1. One of the most common images in Western and Eastern religions alike is of God as a parent and of human beings as God's children. Billions pray to God as their parent, invoke the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people to promote peace, and reach out to the weary and troubled out of deep conviction that each of God's children has great worth.
2. But people of different faiths understand the parent-child relationship between God and humans in significantly different ways. Some understand the phrase "child of God" as an honorary title reserved only for those who believe in God and accept His guidance as they might accept a father's. Many see parent-child descriptions of God's relationship to humanity as metaphors to express His love for His creations and their dependence on His sustenance and protection.
3. Latter-day Saints see all people as children of God in a full and complete sense; they consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each has an eternal core and is "a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents." Each possesses seeds of divinity and must choose whether to live in harmony or tension with that divinity. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all people may "progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny." Just as a child can develop the attributes of his or her parents over time, the divine nature that humans inherit can be developed to become like their Heavenly Father's.
4. The desire to nurture the divinity in His children is one of God's attributes that most inspires, motivates, and humbles members of the Church. God's loving parentage and guidance can help each willing, obedient child of God receive of His fullness and of His glory. This knowledge transforms the way Latter-day Saints see their fellow human beings. The teaching that men and women have the potential to be exalted to a state of godliness clearly expands beyond what is understood by most contemporary Christian churches and expresses for the Latter-day Saints a yearning rooted in the Bible to live as God lives, to love as He loves, and to prepare for all that our loving Father in Heaven wishes for His children.

What does the Bible say about humans' divine potential?

5. Several biblical passages intimate that humans can become like God. The likeness of humans to God is emphasized in the first chapter of Genesis: "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." After Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," God said they had "become as one of us," suggesting that a process of approaching godliness was already underway. Later in the Old Testament, a passage in the book of Psalms declares, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High."
6. New Testament passages also point to this doctrine. When Jesus was accused of blasphemy on the grounds that "thou, being a man, makest thyself God," He responded, echoing Psalms, "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded His disciples to become "perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." In turn, the Apostle Peter referred to the Savior's "exceeding great and precious promises" that we might become "partakers of the divine nature." The Apostle Paul taught that we are "the offspring of God" and emphasized that as such "we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." The book of Revelation contains a promise from Jesus Christ that "to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."
7. These passages can be interpreted in different ways. Yet by viewing them through the clarifying lens of revelations received by Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints see these scriptures as straightforward expressions of humanity's divine nature and potential. Many other Christians read the same passages far more metaphorically because they experience the Bible through the lens of doctrinal interpretations that developed over time after the period described in the New Testament.

How have ideas about divinity shifted over Christian history?

8. Latter-day Saint beliefs would have sounded more familiar to the earliest generations of Christians than they do to many modern Christians. Many church fathers (influential theologians and teachers in early Christianity) spoke approvingly of the idea that humans can become divine. One modern scholar refers to the “ubiquity of the doctrine of deification”—the teaching that humans could become God—in the first centuries after Christ’s death. The church father Irenaeus, who died about A.D. 202, asserted that Jesus Christ “did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself.” Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150–215) wrote that “the Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God.” Basil the Great (A.D. 330–379) also celebrated this prospect—not just “being made like to God,” but “highest of all, the being made God.”
9. What exactly the early church fathers meant when they spoke of becoming God is open to interpretation, but it is clear that references to deification became more contested in the late Roman period and were infrequent by the medieval era. The first known objection by a church father to teaching deification came in the fifth century. By the sixth century, teachings on “becoming God” appear more limited in scope, as in the definition provided by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. A.D. 500): “Deification ... is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible.”

Why did these beliefs fade from prominence?

10. Changing perspectives on the creation of the world may have contributed to the gradual shift toward more limited views of human potential. The earliest Jewish and Christian commentaries on the Creation assumed that God had organized the world out of preexisting materials, emphasizing the goodness of God in shaping such a life-sustaining order. But the incursion of new philosophical ideas in the second century led to the development of a doctrine that God created the universe ex nihilo—“out of nothing.” This ultimately became the dominant teaching about the Creation within the Christian world. In order to emphasize God’s power, many theologians reasoned that nothing could have existed for as long as He had. It became important in Christian circles to assert that God had originally been completely alone.
11. Creation ex nihilo widened the perceived gulf between God and humans. It became less common to teach either that human souls had existed before the world or that they could inherit and develop the attributes of God in their entirety in the future. Gradually, as the depravity of humankind and the immense distance between Creator and creature were increasingly emphasized, the concept of deification faded from Western Christianity, though it remains a central tenet of Eastern Orthodoxy, one of the three major branches of Christianity.

How were ideas about deification introduced to Latter-day Saints?

12. The earliest Latter-day Saints came from a society dominated by English-speaking Protestants, most of whom accepted both ex nihilo creation and the Westminster Confession's definition of God as a being "without body, parts, or passions." They likely knew little or nothing about the diversity of Christian beliefs in the first centuries after Jesus Christ's ministry or about early Christian writings on deification. But revelations received by Joseph Smith diverged from the prevailing ideas of the time and taught doctrine that, for some, reopened debates on the nature of God, creation, and humankind.
13. Early revelations to Joseph Smith taught that humans are created in the image of God and that God cares intimately for His children. In the Book of Mormon, a prophet "saw the finger of the Lord" and was astonished to learn that human physical forms were truly made in the image of God. In another early revelation, Enoch (who "walked with God" in the Bible) witnessed God weeping over His creations. When Enoch asked, "How is it thou canst weep?" he learned that God's compassion toward human suffering is integral to His love. Joseph Smith also learned that God desires that His children receive the same kind of exalted existence of which He partakes. As God declared, "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." In 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon experienced a vision of the afterlife. In the vision, they learned that the just and unjust alike would receive immortality through a universal resurrection, but only those "who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise" would receive the fullness of God's glory and be "gods, even the sons of God." Another revelation soon confirmed that "the saints shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him." Latter-day Saints use the term exaltation to describe the glorious reward of receiving one's full inheritance as a child of Heavenly Father, which is available through the Atonement of Christ, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.
14. This striking view of each human's potential future was accompanied by revealed teachings on humanity's past. As Joseph Smith continued to receive revelations, he learned that the light or intelligence at the core of each human soul "was not created or made, neither indeed can be." God is the Father of each human spirit, and because only "spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy," He presented a plan for human beings to receive physical bodies and progress through their mortal experience toward a fullness of joy. Earthly birth, then, is not the beginning of an individual's life: "Man was also in the beginning with God." Likewise, Joseph Smith taught that the material world has eternal roots, fully repudiating the concept of creation ex nihilo. "Earth, water &c—all these had their existence in an elementary State from Eternity," he said in an 1839 sermon. God organized the universe out of existing elements.
15. Joseph Smith continued to receive revelation on the themes of divine nature and exaltation during the last two years of his life. In a revelation recorded in July 1843 that linked exaltation with eternal marriage, the Lord declared that those who keep covenants, including the covenant of eternal marriage, will inherit "all heights and depths." "Then," says the revelation, "shall they be gods, because they have no end." They will receive "a continuation of the seeds forever and ever."
16. The following April, feeling he was "never in any nearer relationship to God than at the present time," Joseph Smith spoke about the nature of God and the future of humankind to the Saints, who had gathered for a general Church conference. He used the occasion in part to reflect upon the death of a Church member named King Follett, who had died unexpectedly a month earlier. When he rose to speak, the wind was blowing, so Joseph asked his listeners to give him their "profound attention" and to "pray that the L[ord] may strengthen my lungs" and stay the winds until his message had been delivered.
17. "What kind of a being is God?" he asked. Human beings needed to know, he argued, because "if men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves." In that phrase, the Prophet collapsed the gulf that centuries of confusion had created between God and humanity. Human nature was at its core divine. God "was once as one of us" and "all the spirits that God ever sent into the world" were likewise "susceptible of enlargement." Joseph Smith preached that long before the world was formed, God found "himself in the midst" of these beings and "saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself" and be "exalted" with Him.

18. Joseph told the assembled Saints, “You have got to learn how to be a god yourself.” In order to do that, the Saints needed to learn godliness, or to be more like God. The process would be ongoing and would require patience, faith, continuing repentance, obedience to the commandments of the gospel, and reliance on Christ. Like ascending a ladder, individuals needed to learn the “first prin[ciples] of the Gospel” and continue beyond the limits of mortal knowledge until they could “learn the last prin[ciples] of the Gospel” when the time came. “It is not all to be comprehended in this world,” Joseph said. “It will take a long time after the grave to understand the whole.”
19. That was the last time the Prophet spoke in a general conference. Three months later, a mob stormed Carthage Jail and martyred him and his brother Hyrum.

What has been taught in the Church about divine nature since Joseph Smith?

20. Since that sermon, known as the King Follett discourse, the doctrine that humans can progress to exaltation and godliness has been taught within the Church. Lorenzo Snow, the Church’s fifth President, coined a well-known couplet: “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.” Little has been revealed about the first half of this couplet, and consequently little is taught. When asked about this topic, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told a reporter in 1997, “That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about.” When asked about the belief in humans’ divine potential, President Hinckley responded, “Well, as God is, man may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly.”
21. Eliza R. Snow, a Church leader and poet, rejoiced over the doctrine that we are, in a full and absolute sense, children of God. “I had learned to call thee Father, / Thru thy Spirit from on high,” she wrote, “But, until the key of knowledge / Was restored, I knew not why.” Latter-day Saints have also been moved by the knowledge that their divine parentage includes a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father. Expressing that truth, Eliza R. Snow asked, “In the heav’ns are parents single?” and answered with a resounding no: “Truth eternal / Tells me I’ve a mother there.”⁴⁵ That knowledge plays an important role in Latter-day Saint belief. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.” Humankind’s divine nature and potential for exaltation have been repeatedly taught in general conference addresses, Church magazines, and other Church materials. “Divine nature” is one of eight core values in the Church’s Young Women program. Teaching on human beings’ divine parentage, nature, and potential features prominently in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” Divine nature and exaltation are essential and beloved teachings in the Church.

Does belief in exaltation make Latter-day Saints polytheists?

22. For some observers, the doctrine that humans should strive for godliness may evoke images of ancient pantheons with competing deities. Such images are incompatible with Latter-day Saint doctrine. Latter-day Saints believe that God’s children will always worship Him. Our progression will never change His identity as our Father and our God. Indeed, our exalted, eternal relationship with Him will be part of the “fullness of joy” He desires for us.
23. Latter-day Saints also believe strongly in the fundamental unity of the divine. They believe that God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost, though distinct beings, are unified in purpose and doctrine.⁴⁷ It is in this light that Latter-day Saints understand Jesus’s prayer for His disciples through the ages: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.”
24. If humans live out of harmony with God’s goodness, they cannot grow into God’s glory. Joseph Smith taught that “the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only [except] upon the principles of righteousness.” When humans abandon God’s selfless purposes and standards, “the heavens withdraw themselves [and] the Spirit of the Lord is grieved.” Pride is incompatible with progress; disunity is impossible between exalted beings.

How do Latter-day Saints envision exaltation?

25. Since human conceptions of reality are necessarily limited in mortality, religions struggle to adequately articulate their visions of eternal glory. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” These limitations make it easy for images of salvation to become cartoonish when represented in popular culture. For example, scriptural expressions of the deep peace and overwhelming joy of salvation are often reproduced in the well-known image of humans sitting on their own clouds and playing harps after death. Latter-day Saints’ doctrine of exaltation is often similarly reduced in media to a cartoonish image of people receiving their own planets.
26. A cloud and harp are hardly a satisfying image for eternal joy, although most Christians would agree that inspired music can be a tiny foretaste of the joy of eternal salvation. Likewise, while few Latter-day Saints would identify with caricatures of having their own planet, most would agree that the awe inspired by creation hints at our creative potential in the eternities.
27. Latter-day Saints tend to imagine exaltation through the lens of the sacred in mortal experience. They see the seeds of godhood in the joy of bearing and nurturing children and the intense love they feel for those children, in the impulse to reach out in compassionate service to others, in the moments they are caught off guard by the beauty and order of the universe, in the grounding feeling of making and keeping divine covenants. Church members imagine exaltation less through images of what they will get and more through the relationships they have now and how those relationships might be purified and elevated. As the scriptures teach, “That same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”

How important are teachings about exaltation to Latter-day Saint beliefs overall?

28. The teaching that human beings have a divine nature and future shapes the way Latter-day Saints view fundamental doctrine. Perhaps most significantly, belief in divine nature helps us more deeply appreciate the Atonement of Jesus Christ. While many Christian theologians have expressed the magnitude of the Savior’s Atonement by emphasizing human depravity, Latter-day Saints understand the magnitude of the Atonement of Christ in terms of the vast human potential it makes possible. Christ’s Atonement not only provides forgiveness from sin and victory over death, it also redeems imperfect relationships, heals the spiritual wounds that stifle growth, and strengthens and enables individuals to develop the attributes of Christ. Latter-day Saints believe that it is only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ that we can have a sure hope of eternal glory and that the power of His Atonement is fully accessed only by faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end in following the instruction and example of Christ. Thus, those who become like God and enter into a fullness of His glory are described as people who have been “made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood.”
29. An awareness of humans’ divine potential also influences Latter-day Saints’ understanding of gospel principles such as the importance of divine commandments, the role of temples, and the sanctity of individual moral agency. Belief that human beings are actually God’s children also changes Latter-day Saints’ behavior and attitudes. For example, even in societies where casual and premarital sex are considered acceptable, Latter-day Saints retain a deep reverence for the God-given pro-creative and bonding powers of human sexual intimacy and remain committed to a higher standard in the use of those sacred powers. Studies suggest that Latter-day Saints place an exceptionally high priority on marriage and parenthood, a consequence in part of a strong belief in heavenly parents and a commitment to strive for that divinity.

Conclusion

30. All human beings are children of loving heavenly parents and possess seeds of divinity within them. In His infinite love, God invites His children to cultivate their eternal potential by the grace of God, through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. The doctrine of humans’ eternal potential to become like their Heavenly Father is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ and inspires love, hope, and gratitude in the hearts of faithful Latter-day Saints.

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