

ATONEMENT AND THE SACRED THOU
AT THE CENTER OF
JOSEPH SMITH'S REVELATIONS

Blake T. Ostler

It is significant, for reasons that I will explain shortly, that Joseph Smith did not arrive at his understanding based on a theological analysis. Given his penchant for the prophetic, it is understandable that his views are not expressed as a systematic logic of carefully crafted axioms and assumptions. His ideas are not the result of logical calculation but of sacred revelation, not of evidential proof but of intimate experience. His views are expressed as rhetorical exhortations and devotional observations rather than analysis and argument. His religious vision was more like sparks flying from a flint wheel than a seamless fabric of postulates and premises. However, these sparks did not careen off the wheel at random; rather, they flashed in a common direction and in interesting patterns. His insights are like embers of thought deep in the heart seeking to catch fire; like fuel for creative contemplation.

There is a central or controlling metaphor that burns at the core of his religious vision. Joseph Smith realized that divinity arises from a relationship of sacred and intimate unity. The unity is so complete that the separate persons may be said to be “in” on another. The Father is “in” the Son, and the Son “in” the Father, and both are “in” the Holy Ghost and he “in” them. The loving relationship is so profound that it is improper to think of one of the persons acting or willing without the others. What one wills, the others will; what one does, the others do. There is a single agency and divine power exercised by these persons in unity. There is a single mind in the sense that what one knows, the others know; what one intends, the others intend. It is because they share this indwelling love that they are

divine. If the union were somehow severed, they would no longer be divine, for God is essentially love. God's complete power, knowledge and presence arise in virtue of this relationship. As Joseph Smith stated in an 1833 revelation:

[Christ] received a fullness of glory of the Father; and he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, *for he dwelt in him*, and it shall come to pass that if you are faithful ... you shall receive of his fullness, and be glorified *in me as I am in the Father*; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace.¹

The stunning reality, according to Joseph Smith, is that the very purpose of human life consists in the fact that persons have been invited “into” this relationship. It is a gracious offer, for it is offered in unconditional love. God wants to relate to us just as the divine persons relate to one another; God wants us to be one in the Father and the Son as they are one in each other. God desires to be “at-one-ment” with persons. When God is one with us, according to Joseph Smith, we shall see Him as He is, for we shall be just as God is. The relationship of indwelling union between the Father and the Son is the model of the desired relationship between God and humans. The best expression of this insight is, surprisingly enough, the Lectures on Faith:

[A]ll who keep His commandments shall grow from grace to grace, and become heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image or likeness, even the express image of Him who fills all in all; being filled with the fullness of His glory, and become one in Him, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one....

¹D&C 93 17-18; 20.

.... As the Son partakes of the fullness of the Father through the Spirit, so the Saints are, by the same Spirit, to be made partakers of the same fullness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and the Son are one, so in like manner the saints are to be one in them, through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit; they are to be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.²

The relationship obtaining between the divine persons thus became the model for all human relationship. God is the mirror in which we look to see the reflection of what we can be; indeed, what we already are. If we reflect God's love, then it is *His* likeness and image that we see in the mirror. God's people have been commanded "to be holy as God is Holy"; and this holiness consists precisely in reflecting the divine love of absolute unity in all human relationships. The tense of the verbs used in scripture is pregnant with meaning, for the scriptures do not say that we shall one day become or somehow evolve into gods; rather, they assert without apology that "ye *are* gods." Christ did not command us to "become" perfect or holy; he simply reminded us "to be." Joseph Smith grasped the present reality of what God is and what we are as a result. He wanted to teach persons how to be gods here and now by reflecting the nature of the divine relationship in every aspect of all human relationships. This intimate picture of God became the core of his prophetic mission. He understood that *apotheosis* or deification of humans was implicit in the commandment to love one another as God loves us. He understood love to be a commandment for every mode of human existence. Joseph Smith's view of human potentiality is based on God's actuality. As the Lectures on Faith put it:

²Lectures on Faith V, 2-3; 1886 ed. of the Doctrine & Covenants.

The Lord said unto Moses - Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy. (Lev. 19:2). And Peter says, But as he who has called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversations; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. (I Peter 1:15-16). And the Savior says, Be ye perfect even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. (Matt. 15:48). If anyone should ask, why all these sayings. The answer is to be found from ... John's epistle, that when he [the Lord] shall appear, the saints will be like him: and if they are not holy, as he is holy, and perfect as he is perfect, they cannot be like him; for no being can enjoy his glory without possessing his perfections and holiness, no more than they could reign in his kingdom without his power.³

The realization that divinity is essentially a loving relationship of properly perfected persons, a plurality in unity, was the organizing principle of Joseph Smith's prophetic vision. It explains his dream for an ideal social order known simply as Zion: the unity of heart and mind which characterizes God's people. If God's people are one by sharing all earthly goods in common then they mirror the divine economy. This vision makes sense of the sacred rituals which he instituted. Their purpose is to teach persons through the best means possible how to be one with God and one with each other. This realization also underscores his emphasis on the family relationship as central to salvation, for the type of love that obtains between parent and child, between husband and wife is the closest human analogue we know to the divine relationship. It also gives meaning to plural marriage as the microcosm of which the divine relationship is the macrocosm. It illuminates his understanding of salvation consisting in the unity of all persons who ever existed. The vicarious rituals for the dead which he instituted both signify and participate in the fact that salvation is a relationship which includes all of our ancestors and our posterity - indeed, the entire human race. Moreover, his view of God demonstrates why an at-one-ment is essential to human exaltation, for the atonement just is God's mode of being in us.

³Lectures on Faith, Lecture 7, 10.

An Ethic of Religious Discourse. An ethical problem with the way we discourse in relation to God immediately arises from this understanding of God. A Christian cannot speak of God as if God were just some other object of analysis among others. The proper relation to God demands that we approach Him as a Holy Thou. We must “be holy in all manner of conversation” because God is holy. (I Peter 1:15-16). Immanuel Kant elucidated an ethical imperative that arises in human relationships: We must never treat persons as mere means, as mere objects, but always as ends in and of themselves.⁴

Expanding on Kant, Martin Buber related that persons should be accorded status as a Thou, a personal center of intrinsic value. To speak to a Thou in a proper relationship is not to use one’s vocal cords but to stand before existence and to relate to it in a certain way; to take an ethical stance in relation to persons. To treat a person as an object is to treat it as an It, to regard the object, even if it be a He or a She, as if it were a mere thing. We stand apart from an object in order to coldly scrutinize and exploit it: to observe, measure, categorize, and manipulate it - to bend it to our advantage. In an I-It relationship there is no genuine reciprocity. The relation is that of manipulator to an instrument, of mechanic to engine, or computer scientist to computer. To treat a person as an It implicitly results in our being treated as mere objects. Thus, for me to speak to a person as a mere object also objectifies me as an object, a thing rather than a person in relationship. If I treat a person as a mere object of pleasure, to be appropriated for my purposes and to deny any independent purpose to that person, then both of us have lost our intrinsic value as Thou in a relationship. The relation is one of a person observing a pornographic picture of a person. Both the observer and the observed are mere objects in such a relation. It is the relation of a biological organism controlled by its hormones to a mere body.

⁴Immanuel Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals in Kant’s Theory of Ethics*, trans T.K. Abbott Abbott (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1879).

On the other hand, to approach a person in an I-Thou relation is to engage one's intrinsic being in direct and sympathetic contact with another intrinsic being. The Thou is cherished and valued as an individual, not as a means but an end; not for what It can do for me but valued intrinsically as a person. The I-Thou relation is thus necessarily reciprocal. To approach a Thou is to be constituted as a Thou in the relationship. In such a relationship, I not only give but also receive; I not only speak but also listen; I not only respond but also invite response, I not only value but also am valued. Only in such a relationship where soul truly mingles with the soul of another Thou are persons constituted as persons. The relationship creates us in its image.⁵

The same demand exists within the human-divine relationship. To approach God as a Thou demands that we do not treat God merely as an object of analysis. To analyze means to dissect into analytic parts; but every school child knows that you can't dissect a frog without killing it. Similarly, we cannot analyze and dissect God without taking the divine life out of our religious discourse. I am not asserting that a Christian shouldn't think carefully or thoughtfully and responsibly; I am asserting that Christians must think and speak of God caringly and evenly passionately. A Christian cannot speak of God objectively and dispassionately, for that destroys the divine life in us and impairs the relationship that the Christian seeks with God. An I-Thou relation consumes our entire being; it involves our entire existence. As Martin Buber stated:

The basic word I-Thou can be spoken only with one's whole being.
The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be
accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require
Thee to become; becoming I, I say Thou. All actual life is encounter.⁶

⁵Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 3.

⁶*I and Thou*, 62

Thus, there is a reason that Joseph Smith could not have been a theologian — and it is not merely because he lacked the training and talent to be one. Theology is immoral from the Christian standpoint to the extent it objectifies God. The Christian cannot be objective about the matter at all, for a Christian is a person seeking a passionate I-Thou relationship. There is a vast distinction between the way a non-believer and a Christian perceives the subject matter when the subject is God. There is a sense in which God cannot be an object of discourse. Whenever we seek to enter into an I-Thou relationship, we cannot speak *of* God as an object; rather, we must either maintain a holy silence or speak in a way that reveals our love and commitment. We must either hold our tongue or speak with a voice that relates to Him with our entire being, our entire heart, might, mind and strength.

Sacred Silence as a solution to improperly objectifying God does not mean that there is not a proper language to communicate the divine. Joseph Smith recognized that rituals and ordinances are the “language” of the sacred. I will address below how ordinances communicate the divine relationship to those approaching God through them. Right now I want to focus on the necessity of the sacred silence. To discuss what is sacred outside the context of the loving relationship “in” which alone the sacred has meaning is a grave distortion of value. The sacred looks very different from within the relationship than from without. Within the relationship, the sacred demands taking off one’s shoes to tread lightly and reverently before incommensurate power and love. Looking at the rituals from outside the relationship, as mere objects for scholarly study, one sees only non-sense. The natural reaction is bewilderment and perhaps uneasy laughter and mocking.

The closest comparison in human experience to the divine relationship is the complete and total unity of body and spirit found between passionate and caring lovers in a sexually intimate relationship.

The closest analogue to breaking the sacred silence is infidelity or unfaithfulness. To use a metaphor to illustrate, if I were to discuss with you as an object of discourse the acts of physical intimacy that I enjoy with my wife, I would be unfaithful to the trust inherent in such a relationship. By merely making my intimate relationship an object of discourse I objectify it, and in so doing I devalue and degrade it.

Looked at from the outside, my physical intimacies with my wife become pornographic and vulgar. If I were to discuss the sexual passion arising from my relationship with my wife, I would be unfaithful to our relationship; I would transform an I-Thou relationship into an It-It relationship; I would profane the holy.

Depicting the act of human intimacy from outside of the relationship looks the same whether it involves a caring spouse or a whore. The sacred value can be seen only from within the relationship. It is therefore imperative to understand that the value and life of the relationship is wounded when it is made an object of discourse.

On the other hand, looked at from inside the relationship, my intimacies are the most self-affirming experiences I know. The relationship provides the most soul-satisfying fulfillment that I am capable of grasping. Looked at from within the relationship, these intimacies are sacred and beautiful. I truly find my meaning and value as a person confirmed in such intimacies. The details are none of your business. You can fully understand what I am saying only by experiencing it for yourself. It would therefore not only be morally wrong, but foolish for me to try to explain the nature of the acts involved, for in so doing we necessarily lose the value and miss the point.

The sacred ordinances of salvation are sacred in this same sense. Looked at from outside the divine relationship they make little sense and may even look foolish. Exposés of such ordinances have the same moral status as pornography. To speak of them outside the context of the divine relationship

they were designed to effectuate profanes them. It is only when viewed from within the divine I-Thou relationship that the ritual acts have sacred meaning. It is only from within the relationship that the sacred discourse of ritual can occur.

The Language of Ritual Viewed From Within. One way to communicate the life “in” God which maintains the I-Thou relationship is through ritual and rites. Ordinances can convey the life of God to our souls because they participate in what they signify. They signify our relationship with God by which we become identified with God. Joseph Smith understood this nature of divine discourse: “Reading [about] the experiences of others, or the revelations given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience of these things, through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose.”⁷

The purpose of the saving ordinances according to Joseph Smith was to gain saving knowledge by vicariously experiencing through them Jesus Christ’s own experience. The ordinances are thus a means of making God’s indwelling spirit or grace manifest in human lives, a means of effectuating unity between God and humans. The ordinances are not merely outward signs causing inward grace; rather, they mediate the very relationship they signify. Sacred ordinances are not merely signifiers of something beyond them, as a metaphor or symbol, because they participate in what they point to. The ordinances are a means of ritually participating in the divinizing experience of Jesus Christ.

⁷In *The words of Joseph Smith, eds.* Andrew What and Lyndon Cook, (Salt lake City: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 253.

For example, in baptism we identify ourselves as Christ in his experience of death and resurrection. We are buried with him in the water and rise with him.⁸ When we become identified with Christ, we take upon us His name — we become known as Christians. In so doing we enter into the community of those found in Christ. We enter the fold of God and are called His people. We bear one another's burdens, we mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that need comfort.⁹ We are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost and when we come forth from the water it is a moment when each of the divine persons is manifest as present with us. Viewed from outside the relationship, baptism is just a bath.

Bread and water are the most basic life-sustaining staples known to humankind. We eat bread and water and they become part of our body. The bread and water are in us and become one with us. Jesus turned his most basic of all acts into a sacrament. He said that the bread is His body and the water His blood. Symbolically, we take Christ's very body and life-blood into our interiority to become ourselves. Nothing is more intimate than eating and drinking and thereby making what I consume into myself. In the act of eating, something from outside is taken into our own bodies and sustains our life. The sacrament is a holy moment when we take God's body into our bodies and make His blood our life. Viewed from inside the relationship, the sacrament is a holy moment where God is "in" us as our very life. Viewing the ordinance from the outside, the sacrament has been characterized as cannibalism.

The early Christians participated in an ordinance known as *chrism* or anointing. In Greek, an anointed one is a *christos*. By becoming anointed, we become known as anointed ones, or messiahs in

⁸Romans 6:4

⁹Mosiah 18: 8-9

Hebrew. The fourth century priest, Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313-386), explained the meaning of the ordinance as viewed from within the Christian community:

You have received the first anointing on your brow to deliver you from the shame of the first man for having transgressed the Lord's commandment, and that you may reflect the glory of Christ; the second on the ears, that you might hear and properly understand the divine mysteries ... The third [anointing] on the nostrils, that by so receiving the holy ordinances you say, "We have the same sweet odor as Christ and are saved by God." After that you were anointed on the breast and clothed in a breastplate of righteousness. It is because you are worthy of the holy anointing (χ_εσμ) that you are called *Christians* ... because before this ordinance you had no right to that title but you were only proceeding on the path toward becoming Christians ... Having then become partakers with Christ, you can now be called Christs, or anointed ones.¹⁰

Following the anointing, the initiate received a white garment that represented putting on Christ.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), commenting on the same complex of rituals, stated:

¹⁰*Katachesis Mystagogikoi in Partologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graecae*, 161 vols., J.P. Migne, ed. (Paris: (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1857-68), vol. 33, cols. 1065-1128, 21.3,4.

When you advance to the holy baptism you take off your clothes. Adam was born in the beginning without any reason to be ashamed, but after having transgressed the commandments and becoming mortal, he needed a garment. Just as you received the gift of the holy baptism to be born again through grace through Him and to become immortal as a likeness [of Him], it is required to take off your clothes, the sign of mortality and evidence of the sentence that submits man to the need of a garment ... but at the time you come up out of the water you will cover again your body with a shining garment. This [garment] is the symbol of the radiant and glorious world ... When you resurrect you will cover yourselves again with immortality and incorruptibility; that garment ... will then be necessary for you.¹¹

Cyril of Jerusalem summarized the ordinance of putting on a new garment: “Having been baptized in Christ and thereafter having put on Christ like a garment, you have become of the same nature as (συμμο_φοι γεγονατε) Christ, the Son of God.”¹² Through these rituals, the initiate became identified not merely with, but also *as* Christ.

¹¹Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Homilies on Baptism and the Eucharist* in Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium, Coptorum, Syrorum et Amenorum in administrations sacramentorum* (Wurtzberg: Denzinger, 1863), vols 1.1

¹²In A. Human, *L'initiation Chretienne* (Paris: Bernard Grasset Editeur, 1963), 48

One is also reminded of the many stories of visions found in pseudepigraphic works wherein the prophet ascends through the several heavens prior to entering into God's presence. At each heaven a sentry is set to test the prophet to make sure he possesses the required "passport" to enter the heaven. The passport is in the form of some sign or key word that shows that the prophet has the required knowledge and ordinances to proceed to the next level. The sign is a way of showing that the prophet "knows" God, that he possesses the $\gamma\nu_σ\iota\sigma$. However, the knowledge is not to know objects; but to have interpersonal knowledge of an intimate Thou. Almost all languages distinguish between knowledge of objects (Latin *sapere*; Greek $_π\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\alpha\iota$) as opposed to interpersonal knowledge of persons (Latin *conoscere*; Greek, $\gamma\iota\nu\omega\sigma\chi\omega$). To know ($\gamma\iota\nu\omega\sigma\chi\epsilon\iota\nu$) the only true God as a Thou is life eternal because to know in this sense is to have an intimate knowledge possible only from within the I-Thou relationship of perfect unity and love.¹³ The distinction between the two forms of knowledge requires two forms of speech, two forms of demonstrating the knowledge. The key word is almost always the name of the God at the gate, for "the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel, and He employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name." (2 Nephi 9:41)¹⁴ To ritually know the name of an individual meant to have an intimate acquaintance of that person; to have power to approach the person on an interpersonal basis.¹⁵ Having such a knowledge is especially important when the person is a Holy Thou whose very presence portends an awesome power that is dangerous to those who would profane the holy.

¹³John 17:3

¹⁴2Nephi 9:51

¹⁵All of these themes have been treated in my "Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Ancient Christianity," *BYU Studies* 22:1 (Winter 1982), 31-45.

The ordinances culminated in a ritual embrace of love and union at the veil as a means of ritually being admitted into God's presence. However, immediately prior to being accepted into God's presence, each of the ritual initiates participates in a prayer circle where absolute love and acceptance must abound. All present must be of one heart and one mind to proceed to union with God.¹⁶ The ritual embrace at the veil between humans and God is a moment of complete union and identification with Christ, for at the veil we receive the very marks of crucifixion which marked Christ.¹⁷ The unity of love and purpose which characterizes the divine relationship, both among the divine persons and offered by them to humans, could not be better expressed than in the ritual embrace. To be embraced by God is to become one with Him and to be allowed fully into His presence and life.

These rituals are ordinances of salvation because they signify the relationship with God. Salvation consists precisely in a fullness of relationship with God. However, it is a relationship which necessarily seeks to include all persons, both those who have lived and those who will yet live. We vicariously become one with our ancestors and seal our posterity to us through these ordinances. Thus, the ordinances do not merely represent but also actually constitute our identity and relationship with those who have departed as a means of accomplishing both their and our own exaltation.

¹⁶These ordinances are discussed by Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), 45-99.

¹⁷See my "Clothed Upon," *BYU Studies* 22:1 (Winter 1982), 31-35.

The Divine Risk of Love. Yet the question immediately arises: If God wants to be one with us, then why have we been banished from His presence? It is a strange way to show one's love by asking for a separation. However, that is exactly what God has done according to Joseph Smith. An I-Thou relationship requires genuine regard for the Thou that honors the dignity and freedom of that person. Such accorded dignity is possible only in a relationship that is freely entered, a relationship freely chosen without coercion or threat. According to Joseph Smith, God seeks our happiness. To be fit to be one as the Father and the Son are one, we must enhance our capacities to receive "joy unalloyed." To be capable of such joy, we must confront the risk of pain, sadness and evils in our lives. To have a genuine relationship, it was necessary for persons to leave God's presence and enter into a situation where His existence, glory and power were not obvious to make room for both moral and religious faith; a situation where persons could freely enter into a genuine relationship without being coerced to do so by the obviousness of God's overwhelming power and glory. Thus, God has set us at a "cognitive distance" from Him out of respect for our freedom. Such a distance was necessary to permit faith. Thus, God's existence must be ambiguous. The world must be capable of appearing as if there were no God, precisely to make room for us to come to a genuine relationship with God.¹⁸ God seeks us in the world to come out of the world as lovers to be wooed and won by loving persuasion. Yet only those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can detect the subtle signs of His overtures of love. Because a genuine relationship of trust and love cannot be coerced in such a manner by its very nature, it became necessary for God to place us in a world where His presence and even His very existence are capable of being denied. Only in this way can our Father become a Thou to be encountered by the grace of

¹⁸John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 271-74

love rather than a mere super-power to be manipulated to our advantage. Only in this way can we come know our Father by our choice to value Him as Thou to be encountered rather than an It which forces itself upon us.

Yet God's willingness to give us cognitive space exposed God to risks of pain, suffering and loss. In Joseph Smith's view, Lucifer's sin was precisely his unwillingness to take such risks which only a genuine regard and love would be willing to chance. Lucifer failed to have regard for personal freedom. According to the Book of Moses, Lucifer bragged: "I will redeem all mankind, that not one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore, give me thine honor."¹⁹ Such pride refuses to accord dignity and freedom to a Thou. All persons become mere means to one's own self-aggrandizement. Persons who use others as mere means to make points to show how great they are constitute the ultimate threat to genuineness in relationships. Lucifer was cast out because "he sought to destroy the agency of man."²⁰ Lucifer's plan couldn't work because no true I-Thou relationship could have been developed in the absence of a genuine choice to enter into a relationship.

The choice to enter the I-Thou relationship with the holy God requires faith — a full-blooded choice to be faithful to the relationship of unconditional love offered by God. Faith is not to accept the right set of propositions, it is not to have correct beliefs except to the extent those beliefs are included in the possibility of knowing God interpersonally. To have faith is to stand before the world in an appropriate relationship. It is to stand in a relationship of faithfulness, to demonstrate fidelity, to accept fiduciary responsibilities for the well being of another. *Fide* (faith), *Fidelita* (faithfulness) and *Fiducia*

¹⁹Book of Moses 4:3.

²⁰Book of Moses, 4:1.

(trust) are concepts all having a common linguistic root; a family resemblance of meaning reflecting the image and likeness of the I-Thou relationship of unconditional love. The relationship offered by God is necessarily an unmerited gift, a sheer grace. We love Him only because He first loved us. (I John 4:18)

As Martin Buber explained: “The Thou encounters me by grace - it cannot be found by seeking.”²¹

“Grace” is thus the way that loving persons relate to one another in an I-Thou relationship. A Thou is valued for itself intrinsically without any other proof of its worth required. To value another as a Thou is to be constituted in the relationship also as a Thou. Because the relationship makes us over in its image, we are justified by a faithful response to freely enter into the divine relationship. We are thus saved by our faith through God’s unmerited grace, without the necessity of any work to earn it.

Indeed, trying to earn unmerited love just shows that we misunderstand the nature of the relationship offered by God. No one can earn something given in unconditional love, least of all a genuine I-Thou relationship. When we try to earn God’s acceptance by our works we stand before existence and declare that we have no intrinsic value that God should love us for ourselves. We implicitly assert that our only value resides in our works and not intrinsically in us for ourselves. Because our works are never sufficient, we consign ourselves to the status of worthless objects before God. The relation offered by God could not proceed on such a basis of disregard for the I-Thou relationship He offers. God values us for ourselves and not for our works. He loves us without condition as a sheer act of grace. Having accepted us already, He waits on us to accept Him in faithful love. Simply by accepting His love we stand in a proper relation to the world. This is to say, we are justified, declared guiltless, because the relationship has made us over in God’s image and likeness. If we truly love God

²¹*I and Thou*, p. 62.

in an I-Thou relationship, sin does not remain in us, for to know God is to love Him, and to love God is to keep his commandments (I John 2:3-7; 3:6-9).

However, that God offers us love unconditionally doesn't mean that there are no conditions to remain faithful to the loving relationship. For example, I love my wife unconditionally, but there are conditions and covenants to which we must remain faithful to preserve the fidelity of our relationship. The foremost condition is that no others come before her in my life. I must remain faithful to her lest I injure our unity and love. An I-Thou relationship requires such unconditional commitment and priority. That is what it is like to have faith in God, to be faithful to Him. We are saved by our faith in God and His faith in us. The only commitment that is appropriate is one without any conditions, one that dedicates our entire heart, might, mind and strength. Only an unconditional willingness to be faithful, an ultimate commitment to what matters most can save us in God. As the Lectures on Faith put it:

[A] religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things, never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary to salvation; for ... the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without sacrifice of all earthly things....²²

God knew that not all persons would choose to enter into relationship with Him. According to Joseph Smith, God explained that risk to us before we chose to confront a genuinely dangerous world where none were guaranteed a return ticket to God's presence. Because God seeks a true I-Thou relationship, He cannot coerce anyone to accept the gift He offers. I think that is the meaning of the story that many spirits reject God's plan for our growth; no one was coerced to confront the evils, pains and dangers that are necessary to our personal progression toward a relationship of complete unity.

²²Lectures on Faith 6,7.

Yet to participate in the divine love by loving others, to possess a fullness of glory and joy by becoming one with God, is the greatest joy possible for persons. It is an incommensurate good which justifies confronting any finite evils necessary to accomplish it.

Yet there is a danger in the very possibility of genuine relationships. Our Father must give us interpersonal space to enjoy freedom in relation to him. Otherwise, His power and glory would act as coercive inducements to force us to recognize Him as Lord. Given our cognitive distance from God, given the necessity of the ambiguity of God's existence, it is natural for persons to lose sight of God. It is natural for persons to be self-regarding and to fail to see the subtle signs of His love. The cognitive distance between us and God threatens to leave us without a sufficient grasp of the incommensurate good we can achieve by our faithfulness. To overcome this self-regarding existence, the existence of an It regarding itself as an object, God has broken into our consciousness by the light of the life of Jesus Christ. He is the exemplar that draws us out of ourselves and into the holy Thou who seeks us in love. As the Lectures on Faith put it:

When men begin to live by faith they begin to draw near to God; they are like him; and because he is saved they are saved also; for they will be in the same situation as he is in, because they have come to him; and when he appears they shall be like him, for they will see him as he is.²³

Perhaps no aspect of our existence more fully demonstrates the risk of the divine love than God's willingness to share with us the power of procreation. God seeks a peer-love with us. Nothing in human existence draws nearer to Godhood than parenthood. The power to procreate hopefully involves begetting life out of the total physical union of two persons who are "one flesh" passionately in love. Out of their love and passion for each other they create persons who share their likeness and

²³Lectures on Faith, Lecture 7,8.

image. I can think of no instance in which I was more like God than when I first peered into the face of my firstborn daughter. I saw the love of my wife for me and my love for her reflected in the face of our daughter. I saw me in seeing her. I was in her and she in me. I have learned the pains and joys of giving life to a free agent who must be left alone to learn by making morally significant decisions in concrete situations. In such learning insights, I sense the pathos of our Heavenly Father in the risk He took to give life to mortals who might reject Him and never return His love with their love. I have felt the climax of my ability to love as my heart has expanded to include other children who are little reflections of my love for my wife and her love for me. I have also felt the pain of rejection that a father feels when children grow older and do not return love as fully and constantly as sought. It is thus not difficult for me to understand why Joseph Smith put so much emphasis on the family unit as the starting place for salvation. No other relationship could bring us closer to God, could open us to the pain entailed by love, could force us to grow through love offered in unconditional grace to others who might not return our love.

The power to procreate is the closest analogue that human experience offers to divine unity and a peer relationship with God. Yet it also includes the power to destroy lives. I can think of nothing more bitter and evil than incest or rape. I have seen the way these crimes can destroy personalities and any hope for wholeness as a person. Misuse of this power entails the power to cause other people, babies and children, to suffer in the most reprehensible circumstances. The misuse of the divine power to procreate almost always arises from the failure to properly value other persons as ends in themselves. Sex sought for its own sake involves treating a person as a mere means to a moment of pleasure, as mere bodily objects of desires run amok. Use of this power outside of the context of covenants to

recognize each other as Holy Thous, as intrinsically valuable ends whose happiness we seek even above our own, threatens to destroy the value of the persons which it can most enhance if used properly. Sex is either the best thing in our lives or the worst. It can either regenerate our society or destroy it. That is the nature of the divine risk to share with us divine power and knowledge to procreate.

The divine risk entails the shocking realization that the divine life necessarily includes a divine pathos, the potential to experience loss and pain just as great as the joy and gain that characterizes the divine relationship. Because God's light proceeds from his presence to indwell in all things (D&C 88:7-13), and thereby to include all things in His experience, God includes a fullness of human tragedy, sin, evil and pain within His experience. Our pain is thus quite literally God's pain; our sadness and sorrows are taken into His life. Although God experiences my experiences directly, as a part of his own experience, it does not follow that God simply feels my feelings as His feelings. When I experience fear because I am in a dangerous situation, God knows that I have these feelings, but that doesn't mean that God is afraid for his well being in the way that I may be. God experiences my experiences from the fully mature perspective of the divine life. However, when persons freely reject the loving relationship offered by God, it must be concluded that God experiences sadness, a genuine loss in comparison to what might have been. God's sorrow is unrequited whenever the joy that might have been shared in the divine unity is freely rejected by us.

In scripture, God uses the language of broken relationships to teach us how God feels when we reject Him. He feels like a husband whose wife has been unfaithful and turned into a whore, like a Father whose son has forgotten all of the things the father has done for him and rejects the Father. In Jeremiah, Yahweh revealed his suffering:

I thought
 how I would set you among my sons,
and give you a pleasant land,
 a heritage most beautiful among all nations,
And I thought you would call me, My Father!
 and would not turn from following me.
Surely, as an unfaithful wife leaves her husband,
 so surely you have been faithful to me, O house of Israel. (Jer. 3:19-20).

The intimacy of this divine lament is striking. That God suffers because of us also means that He suffers with us. It entails the realization that God suffers for us. Surely the strongest focus of the divine suffering is manifest in the at-one-ment. Joseph Smith understood that the atonement is not valid just after Christ's passion in the garden of Gethsemane; rather, it was just as real for persons before Christ suffered. At-one-ment is God's very mode of relating to persons in an I-Thou relationship, to be in us; to be one with us. In the garden of Gethsemane we catch a glimpse of the Johannine vision of God's suffering both because of us and for us. God suffers because of our sins and implicit rejection of Him. It teaches us that sin is ultimately an act that alienates us from God or others. God suffers with us because He was one of us. God suffers for us because in virtue of His suffering, we are brought into the divine unity. As John portrayed Christ in the High Priestly prayer uttered in the moment of at-one-ment:

Neither pray I for these alone,
 but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;
That they may be one;
 as Thou, Father, art in me,
and I in Thee,
 That they may also be one in us;
that the world may believe that Thou has sent me.
 And the glory which Thou gavest me I have given them;
that they may be one, even as we are one:
 I in them, and Thou in me,
that they may be made perfect in one;
 and that the world may know that Thou hast sent me,
and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved me. (John 17:20-23)

I know of no better expression of at-one-ment. I know of no better summary of Joseph Smith's prophetic vision. Joseph Smith didn't invent the notion of *apotheosis*, it was always explicitly there in the Johannine corpus to be explained and expanded into a fuller understanding. God's love for us has made Him vulnerable to our pains and suffering for our sins. God's love for us has made it possible for us to be made over in His image if we accept His indwelling life into ourselves to be purged from the inside out. His likeness becomes our likeness through atonement, for we become one with Him.

The Peer Relationship as Christology. Joseph Smith saw that God did not seek a relationship of master to subject, of owner to slave. Joseph Smith had the gall to teach that God seeks genuine peers. It was the most astounding insight of Joseph Smith's prophetic vision that a genuine relationship is possible between God and humans because we are of the same genus and species. Only a peer relationship is one of true oneness and union. Joseph Smith saw that the invitation to become one as the Father is one with the Son would be a sham if persons were forever barred by their inferior ontological status from truly being a peer: a relation of contingent existence to necessary being. Joseph Smith obliterated the vast ontological gulf between God and humans. This ontological gulf is the source of intractable theological problems, including primarily the attempt to develop a coherent Christology. In the tradition, Christ could never really be one with the Father because He is begotten, interpreted in the traditional metaphysic to mean that Christ "issues from" or has derivative or contingent existence; whereas the Father alone is truly God because He exists unoriginated and necessarily. The tradition was only fooling itself if it thought it had resolved the Arian controversy; for Christ remained on the creaturely side of the vast ontological gulf. Christ remains less than fully divine on such a view. It is

surely one of Joseph Smith's greatest accomplishments to simply dissolve this Christological problem generated by the traditional ontological assumptions. He resolved the problem simply by giving up the neo-Platonic assumptions that generated the problem in the first place.

Joseph Smith saw that there can be no ontological distinctions between persons who are truly one in a peer relationship. The Son can become the Father in all respects because both have ontologically necessary existence. Moreover, all persons can become one in the divine union because they too are uncreated.²⁴ The way for a genuine unity of love is therefore opened to all persons. If Christ is to save us "in" God, He must be fully what we are and also fully what God is. Only by being both fully God and fully man can Christ reconcile us to God so that we can become what God is. Christ was one of us in every respect save sin. He condescended to leave behind his divine glory and status by temporarily severing the relationship of complete unity and love. The profound insight revealed to Joseph Smith is that the divine persons are divine, possess Godhood as one, because they are one in loving unity. The corollary to this insight is that the divine persons can leave behind their divinity by becoming alienated and taking upon themselves individually the human condition of estrangement. The Word was made flesh. In so doing, he ceased to have the properties of divinity which inhere in the God as divine persons. Christ emptied himself of his divinity analogous to the way the properties of water cease to arise from the molecular union of hydrogen and oxygen when the molecular union is severed. The properties of divinity arise from the synthesis of persons "in" on another, from the indwelling union of properly perfected persons, analogous to the way the properties of water arise from the molecular union of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. In the union of hydrogen and

²⁴D&C 93:24; Book of Abraham, ch. 3

oxygen, atoms manifest causal properties on a new level of molecular organization. Analogically, the synthesis or union of divine persons gives rise to life on a new level of existence. The divine persons can empty themselves of the divine properties by freely choosing to condescend to live life on the individual level of existence rather than the interpersonal level of existence. This view is essentially Joseph Smith's implicit Christology.

Moreover, it is no contradiction that Christ "learned obedience from the things that He suffered" though he was "like unto God" prior to mortality, for he was "made perfect" through his experience.²⁵ These affirmations from Hebrews were among Joseph Smith's favorite texts. There are some things that can be learned only through experience. There is a kind of perfection that only comes through experience of pain and stark alienation. Prior to Christ's condescension to become mortal, he had never experienced the limitations of alienation from the Father and Spirit. He had never experienced the physical pain inherent in being mortal. Jesus had to truly grow and learn what it was like to be human just as His Father had before him.

Because to be divine necessarily entails existence within a relationship of complete and loving union, there are experiences that the divine persons *as* one Godhead cannot experience. A person in such a loving relationship cannot experience alienation, estrangement, alone-ness or abandonment because these experiences necessarily presuppose interpersonal alienation to which we as humans are heir. In the Godhead there are *distinct* divine persons, but hardly *separated* or *independent* divine persons. In the divine life there is no alienation, isolation, or secretiveness. The divine persons exist in a unity that includes loving, inter-penetrating, intimate, knowledge of another who is also in one's self. In contrast, standing before existence as an isolated individual entails spiritual death or alienation from the

²⁵Hebrews 4:15, 5:8-9.

very source of our lives. In addition, divine persons cannot be subject to the temptations possible only to individual existence such as selfishness and pride. Being proud or acting selfishly presupposes seeking one's own glory as the only worthwhile end and using all others as means to such an end. The love abounding in the divine relationship is precisely self-giving to another self so that the other is "in" one's self and one's self "in" the other. Pride and selfishness are the antithesis of divine love.

The temptation stories found in the synoptic gospels are literary attempts to show that Jesus was subjected to temptations of pride, material gain and power as a mortal -- but he did not succumb though he was free to do so. Jesus was fully exposed to our mortal condition as individuals alienated from God's presence and isolated from each other by our particularity; however, He lived in complete fidelity with God and thereby lived a life reconciling our alienation from God. Jesus gained experiential knowledge of a dimension of existence which it was logically impossible for Him to gain *as God*. Contrast the realization of unity in the Father and all humankind sought in Gethsemane with the sense of abandonment by and alienation from the Father reflected in his cry from the cross in words so important that the gospel writers preserved them in Jesus's native Aramaic: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He became our peer in all things that we might become His peers in all things.

Zion as the Sacred Society Reflecting Divine Love. Nothing contributed more to the Mormon identity than the concept of and hope for Zion: a sacred place, a holy people, a quality of heart and mind. Almost nothing in Mormon history can be understood independently of the quest to establish Zion. For early Mormons, Zion was a fulfillment and culmination of their Judeo-Christian heritage. Zion was the center place where the four corners of the world would be gathered in one and heaven and

earth would meet at the Second Coming. Zion was the unity of God's people in space and time. It was the "center place," the *centrum mundi* where God's temple would be established and all generations of humankind would mingle with inhabitants of heaven. Zion was the hope for a more just society predicated on a new economic order. Rather than a society based on getting individual gain, Zion based its existence on social equality and sacred covenants of unity in all things. Zion was the rejection of existing social and economic mores, for these defined Babylon, the society Mormonism was called to transform. Zion was the hope for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven so that God's spirit would indwell in all aspects of society. Zion was ultimately the hope for a sacrilized or divinized people who could be translated and fit to enter into God's presence as one in heart and mind, one in all things. Zion is the social order of humans which reflects the unity of heart and mind which obtains among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Zion is ultimately the social reflection of the divine love wherein an entire society is constituted of individuals who accept every other person as a Thou.

The model for this ideal social unity was the relationship between Enoch and God. Enoch walked with God. Enoch transformed his community into a society fit to walk with God. The unity which characterized Enoch's people was reflected in their unwillingness to allow any poor among them: "The Lord called His people Zion because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there were no poor among them." (Moses 7:18) Zion was eventually translated and taken into God's bosom. The unity of heart and mind among mortals translated into a union in the bosom of God.

The ideal social order was envisioned as a communal sharing of property where all agree in one. After having received the Gospel directly from the glorified Christ, it was perfectly natural for the

Nephites to enter into a communal love which annihilates social strife and poverty: “There were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things in common among them; therefore, there were no rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift.” (4 Nephi 1:3-4). Zion thus defined an economic order wherein all God’s people share all things in common. This sense of social justice characterized the Mormon vision of the ideal community from its inception. Although Zion had a spatial dimension as the place to which God’s people gathered, it was not necessarily any particular spot. Zion defined sacred space which could be found wherever God’s people had their habitation. As Joseph Smith stated in an 1833 revelation: “Therefore, verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion - THE PURE IN HEART; therefore, let Zion rejoice.” (D&C 97:21)

Joseph Smith wanted the same unity that defined the relationship among the divine persons in the Godhead to extend to all human relationships. He wanted to replace the capitalistic motivation which is given free reign in market economies. Just as a father looks out for his children without expecting some economic return from them in exchange for his care and protection, the laborer in Zion was expected to regard all members of the community as a member of the immediate family — with no economic boundaries to such care-taking love. Persons were not to be exploited as economic means to some less valuable goal, such as personal wealth. Given the natural tendency of persons to look out for their own interests in economic transactions, Joseph Smith would have to transform human nature from self-regarding selfishness to self-giving love. The vehicle for this transformation was Zion.

Nothing expressed the ideal of divine unity among a society of truly separate persons better than the economic order of Zion, or law of consecration. Zion required a new type of economy — one

based on the economy Joseph believed the first Christians practiced. This new economic relationship was premised on the principle of mutual covenants, a promise or compact setting forth a relationship freely entered between the community and a person to be one in all things. The revelations defined the covenant obligations of all who wished to enter the Zion community: “[T]hou shalt remember the poor, and consecrate of thy properties for their support that which thou hast to impart unto them, with a covenant and a deed which cannot be broken.” (D& C 42:30) The purpose of the law of consecration was to establish economic equality among the saints, for according an 1831 revelation: “it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore, the world lieth in sin.” (Book of Commandments 52:20 (1833 ed.)). The unity of heart and mind that defined Zion as a community could not obtain in a society divided by class struggles. As another revelation given in 1832 stated:

[I]t must needs be that there be an organization of my people, in regulating and establishing the affairs of the storehouse of the poor of my people, both in this place and in the land of Zion... that you may be equal in the bonds of heavenly things, yea, and earthly things also, for the obtaining of heavenly things. (D&C 78:5-6)

The dichotomies between sacred and secular, holy and profane, temporal and spiritual, were obliterated in the Zion community. A revelation to Joseph Smith expressly stated that “all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given you a law which was temporal.” (D&C 29:31). Equality and unity of purpose in earthly goods and material possessions was essential to salvation in the Mormon economy of things. The covenant relationship sacralized all transactions between citizens of Zion, for God was a partner to all economic transactions. Because all “surplus” was given to the poor, the only motive for working beyond one’s immediate needs could be love for others. Work was endowed with a purpose of love for all others in the community. Zion was a commitment to the poor,

for the redistribution of goods was effected “that the poor shall be exalted and the rich are made low.” (D&C 104:16).

The law of consecration apparently overestimated human nature, or at least the charity of the “saints.” As Brigham Young acknowledged, surplus was hard to come by: “I was present at the time the revelation came from the brethren to give their surplus property into the hands of the Bishops for the building of Zion, but I never knew a man yet who had a dollar of surplus property. No matter how much one might [already] have, he wanted all he had for himself, for his children, for his grandchildren and so forth.”²⁶ Love for others and not the profit motive was to be sufficient motivation to encourage the laborer in Zion. Unfortunately, love was not sufficient. The law of consecration was not an economic success — and wasn’t intended to be. Unfortunately, the saints thought in terms of economic success rather than spiritual progress. It would be entirely inappropriate to judge the success of the law of consecration in terms of bottom line profits. The purpose of the covenant society was not to amass wealth, but to forge a pure people who are one as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. The goal was to forge a people who were one in heart and mind and thus in all earthly possessions to reflect in their countenances the likeness and image of God. Profit was subordinate to that purpose. Wealth was to be a gift from God that was merely a by-product of love for others.

It is not difficult to see that the motive for Zion was theological and not economic. All relationships between God’s people, even economic transactions, were to reflect the love and unity which exists among the members of the Godhead. Every person was to be accorded status as a holy Thou, as an intrinsically valuable purpose. To be a member of Zion is thus to stand before the

²⁶Journal of Discourses of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 16:11 (7 April 1873 discourse).

community and to speak to each of its inhabitants as a Thou, to enter into the divine discourse by making every act by the sweat of our brow an act of love to provide for another. In such a society, our every act is dedicated to put into concrete action in the here and now the relationship of unity in heart and mind to be realized in the there and then. The love for one another which defines God's people sacralizes every aspect of our existence. Zion is a means of bringing about the *apotheosis* of God's people, of creating a people that is holy as God is Holy — a people who are God's. Zion is the perfect reflection of a society made over in God's image, a flawless manifestation of God as a plurality of persons united as one agency in love. The Mormon relationship to God thus demands a just society, an obligation to the poor and a debt and stewardship for every person who ever has or ever will exist.

Human Sacrifice, Plural Marriage and the I-Thou Relation. Before Abraham could walk to Mount Moriah with his only son, Sarai gave him Hagar because she was not fruitful. Even before we confront the horror of human sacrifice commanded by the holy and loving God, we confront a suspension of our moral expectations. Abraham was a polygamist. Perhaps we excuse him because we expect him to be ignorant of the great moral truth that polygyny is tantamount to adultery. After all, Abraham lived in a culture where having more than one wife was the norm. As a spiritually perceptive prophet, why didn't he grasp the great truth that polygamy is one of the twin evils alongside slavery — which was also common in his culture? Perhaps he was spiritually obtuse. Even more frightening to contemplate, perhaps he was not. Perhaps he was as spiritually perceptive as the text makes him out to be, even able to hear God speaking when none around him heard.

For Joseph Smith, polygamy was a type of Abrahamic test. It served the same purpose in God's plan. The divine purpose rests in the very fact that God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his

only begotten son sets the mind in revolt. How could a loving God ask such a thing, let alone command it? Everything in my head screams, “No, that is impossible!” at the very thought of such a command. Can the being who commands such a thing really be regarded as just, as good, as holy, as loving as God? If the answer is even possibly yes, then everything we think we know, every moral judgment we hold onto to give some order to our notions of justice, love and the holy must be abandoned. But how can we abandon these beliefs without losing ourselves wholly and giving up our own lives entirely? No, it is not Isaac that was sacrificed on the altar on Moriah (for he was saved by the angel’s intervention), it was every hope of making any sense of God in a way true to our own moral judgments.

Joseph Smith confronted his own Mount Moriah. At first he walked up alone. Yet there is every indication that he knew full well that disclosure would certainly lead to moral outrage by even his closest and most trusted friends in Christ. Yet in walking a path contrary to every belief, every held prejudice and moral commitment, he confronted the world with a bold denial. The prophet of God took other wives than his beloved Emma. And then he informed others that God demanded that they walk up the Mountain to offer a sacrifice of everything they held most dear. Those who were commanded (mark it well – they were not asked) to practice “the Principle of Celestial Marriage” by Joseph Smith almost without exception reacted with horror and disbelief. The response to the thought of a loving husband taking another wife set their minds on fire. They were sick. They wanted to die. It was impossible for God to ask such a thing. It is much easier to believe that Joseph Smith was a lecherous and dirty old man than to believe that God would ask such a thing. Easier to believe that Joseph suffered from megalomania and wanted an ultimate test of the loyalty of his followers than to accept the unthinkable – God was asking the Saints to do something unfathomable, surely something immoral

based on everything they had been taught. Every feeling of order and morality in the universe was set in disarray if God could ask such a thing.

Those who accepted the Principle gave a single reason for entering the Practice -- they did it to gain eternal life. They were promised that their “eternal lives” would be sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise. But why would being willing to sacrifice one’s own son, or to be unfaithful to one’s own spouse lead to eternal life with God? Murder and adultery lead to damnation; surely not eternal life.

Yet there is profound possibility embedded in the very command to sacrifice Isaac, in the revelation to take another wife. To know God. For it is life eternal to know God and Jesus Christ. Not merely to know *of* them, to know *about* them, to be acquainted *with* them, but to *know* our Father and Savior intimately and intrinsically. The very command forced the Saints to shuck off every belief and assumption that they had about God to able to encounter God without prior judgment, without expectations, without imposing their beliefs and demands on God -- but simply to encounter God as he is, as he reveals himself. They were forced to let go of every presupposition, forget everything that they thought they knew, and suspend every notion about how and what God must be to be God.

The greatest shock of all is that one’s own way of seeing the world won’t work to make sense of it. And what is it that is challenged by the thought that God commands human sacrifice or polygamy? Immanuel Kant held, rightly in my view, that when we experience the world we do so through a conceptual framework of “categories of understanding” that we create. Some of these categories, like space, time and number are assumed in the very act of perception of experience according to Kant. Others are based on our experience from our perspective. Yet other categories of thought are

deductions and conclusions we have reached which we have hardened into controlling beliefs the hardening of the categories! Some of these categories we inherit from our culture or our linguistic practices. Whatever the basis, *we* create them or buy into them. The categories are creations of our minds; they are not there in the real or *noumenal* world. We have a world view, a paradigm, a conceptual scheme that we use to make sense of our experience and by which we pre-judge what we experience. Not in the sense of a conscious judgment, but in the sense that we overlay our experience with our conceptual framework. We see everything we experience and think about through a filter of our own creation.

The categories are like the classical notion of original sin in the sense that they are there before we can even think about it. They are part of being in the world of things which we must categorize as useful and non-useful, safe and dangerous, good to eat and poison, etc. We have no choice if we are in the world, we confront objects that we must judge and categorize to survive.

All of our experience of things is experience and interpretation at the same time. In experiencing we identify what is experienced and we do this by classifying what we experience in terms of already known models and concepts, patterns and categories. Our present is colored with our past. We experience things through conceptual paradigms and assumptions that give order and meaning to the chaos that confronts us. There is a unity present in experience that is not present in the data experienced.

A paradigm is a set of broad assumptions which are presupposed in experience. These paradigms are so powerful that when they change, our perception of the world changes and our most basic understanding changes with them. We bring our experience to consciousness by interpreting the

things we experience within this framework of meaning. Yet we are usually unaware of the “categories of understanding,” to use Kant’s term, that we employ in the act of extracting meaning from the chaos of stimuli from which we fashion our experience.

If we come to God with moral demands placed upon Him as a condition to trust him, then we encounter not God but our presuppositions of ultimate moral values. If God must conform to our moral judgments, if He must fit within our moral framework, then we never encounter God as Thou, for a Thou is encountered free from judgments and demands. The Thou is encountered in sheer grace. Not only does the Thou give itself to us freely without demands as a gift, but the grace is reciprocal. We encounter the Thou only through grace by giving up all of our categories and concepts. Otherwise, what we experience and encounter is not a Thou, not the intrinsic person, but our own categories and concepts. We force the It into our mold, into our categories to understand it and place it on the Procrustean bed of our own concepts that we can grasp. Our own conceptual schemes become an opaque wall between us and the Thou on the other side. We experience the It through the reality we have created rather than the Thou who seeks to disclose and reveal his intrinsic being in sympathetic contact with our own intrinsic being.

When God must fit into our carefully organized mental framework, our categories and schemes of morality, we create our own idols to worship, our own ultimate and supreme judgments as the basis of “experience of God.” When we go to God with presuppositions and judgments about what He must be before he discloses himself, we have erected an idol of our own judgments and thinking. God *cannot* reveal himself because we will not allow him to; instead, we insist on making our own thinking

and judgments our ultimate savior and master. All we encounter if we insist on our own moral judgments to judge God is our own conceptual framework.

Only when we are willing to let go of all of our moral schemata, only when we do not judge before we encounter, can we truly encounter God as He is - as He reveals Himself. God can be encountered as a Thou only when we give up our will to think we know before we know God. Knowing about God and what He must be is different than “knowing” God. But it is not only different, it is an entirely different way to stand in relation, a different voice with which we speak, a different way of being in relation with God. God is not an object among other objects to be categorized and manipulated; He is a holy Thou to be encountered. As Martin Buber speaks it:

The relation to the Thou is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and Thou, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity to wholeness. No purpose [expectation] intervenes between I and Thou, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur²⁷.

The distinction is like that pointed out by Kierkegaard in his Fear and Trembling. The tragic hero will never grasp God fully, only Abraham, the Knight of Faith, can encounter God with the passion and subjectivity necessary to salvation. The difference is that the tragic hero remains within the moral sphere and cannot enter the world of faith. Only the Knight of Faith can enter the world of real risk that God is loving and worthy of trust even when everything in the mind screams “It cannot be so!” The Knight of Faith cannot be understood, for to understand is to fit him in some moral category, to judge him as right or wrong, good or evil. No, we cannot begin to understand a stance in life, a way of

²⁷I and Thou, 62-63

speaking and being in the world that refuses to be categorized. We can only experience it immediately – or un-mediated-ly. If we sift God through the filter of our judgments, we do not know Him at all.

To encounter God we must give up everything and engage in the ultimate stretch. We must give up our past and let go of it, for “insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence. He has nothing but objects; but objects consist in having been.... What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past.”²⁸ In other words, we must repent. The fundamental meaning of the Greek word *ἄφεσις* (“forgiveness or remission [of sins]) is to “let go.” And we are asked to let go of everything that we hold onto – everything in our past. The last and most frightening thing to let go of is our way of seeing the world in the past. For there is real risk that we will confront not God, but chaos. When there is no past experience as a basis upon which to judge we can only live in present, the “now” where all life is actual and alive. There is no risk in the past; but there is no life there either.

Once having leaped by faith the threshold to encounter the true and living God who is ever present and now, a new possibility of relationship is opened. Then a new law of morality arises, for “morality” as such is not “out there” in the world of ideal absolutes to be discovered by thinking. Rather moral demands arise only in interpersonal relationships. The simple and only moral imperative is the law of love, and we don’t really love a person if we refuse to encounter but insist on judging them by our own “moral” judgments. Judgment by our moral judgments is merely looking into the mirror of our own categories of understanding and judgment. We end up judging only ourselves.

The bottom line is that ultimate trust means accepting that God can be trusted to be supremely loving even when everything in our head screams: “no, that is impossible.” For in the movement from

²⁸I and Thou, 63-64

judgment to trust we create unconditional love, and it is only love that can finally see God as He truly is.

This love without condition does not say that I will trust only if I can understand Thee, for there is no possibility of fully understanding a dynamic and living Thou – least of all the Thou who is God.

CONCLUSION

The ethics of divine discourse thus requires us to stand before existence, before our community, before each other, and to declare in each moment what we value most. Each moment of our existence engages us in the dialogue, for in every moment of reality we must choose how we will address our existence. In every moment we declare what is most valuable by committing our attention to it. We may stand before existence and relate to it as a mere thing, a profane object in which we and all things we encounter are mere means to some more valuable end. The moment is lost and devalued because it was not fully experienced, it was not invested with intrinsic value that we recognized and created in the interaction. When we treat the world as a profane object, we fritter away our existence always waiting for the value to be realized only at the end, never in the here and now.

In contrast, to relate to existence as a Thou is to endow it with sacred meaning. To approach existence as a Thou is to extend the sacred space of the temple to all of nature; to find the divine already present in persons we encounter. We value everything that we encounter as a new experience to be enjoyed intrinsically in the here and now. We engage persons in discourse in the here and now, fully investing ourselves into the relationship with them because they are to be valued as ends in and of themselves. Joseph Smith sought to teach all persons to enter into the ethics of discourse. He sought to make all that matters ultimately also all that matters presently. To engage in the ethics of discourse properly is to address our existence from within the I-Thou relationship, to move and have our being in

God. To enter into ethics of the divine discourse is to enter the temple, to belong to Zion, to be reconciled as at-one-ment with God - to be as God is.