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A COMPELLING CASE FOR THEOSIS

John C. Hancock

Abstract: *What is theosis? Why does the doctrine of theosis matter? Why did God become man so that man might become God? In his book To Become Like God, Andrew C. Skinner answers these questions with compelling clarity. He provides ample convincing evidence that, far from being a deviation from original Christian beliefs, the doctrine of theosis, or the belief that human beings have the potential to become like God, is central to the Christian faith.*

Review of Andrew C. Skinner, *To Become Like God: Witnesses of Our Divine Potential* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016). 164 pp. \$18.99 (hardback).

Andrew C. Skinner's *To Become Like God* is a life-changing book. It is rigorously researched and eloquently written, but more importantly, it communicates sublime truths in simple language. It expands the reader's vision of time and eternity, and it inspires the humble seeker of truth to reform his or her life in light of the ennobling doctrine of deification. "It is true intelligence," President John Taylor observed, "for a man to take a subject that is mysterious and great in itself and to unfold and simplify it so that a child can understand it."¹ No subject is as mysterious and great in itself as the doctrine of theosis, and in *To Become Like God*, Skinner unfolds and simplifies this subject in a marvelous way.

Skinner couches the Latter-day Saint doctrine of deification in its scriptural and historical context. He emphasizes the strength of the Latter-day Saints' doctrinal position: "It is my hope that readers will see that belief in the possibility that human beings can become like God is not a deviation from original Christian beliefs" (ix-x). Thus, Skinner's

1. John Taylor, "Discourse," *Deseret News*, Sept. 30, 1857, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews1/id/7995/rec/9>.

explicit intention is both descriptive and apologetic. But his aim is higher still; it is “to elevate our perspective and instill in us a desire to rejoice again over the restoration of ancient doctrine, specifically the doctrine of deification or, as it is called in classical Christian theology, *theosis* — the teaching that mortals can become gods” (x).

Skinner sets the stage for his masterful explanation of the doctrine of theosis with introductory chapters on the nature of God and Heavenly Father’s perfect plan. This introduction inoculates the reader from the danger of emphasizing one particular doctrine of the Gospel to the detriment of the beauty of the whole. Skinner’s study of the doctrine of theosis is deep and penetrating, but it is also broad and balanced. It squares well with Neal A. Maxwell’s insight:

The doctrines of Jesus Christ by themselves are dangerous, as G.K. Chesterton observed. Any principle of the Gospel, isolated, spun off, and practiced in solitude, can go wild. The incomplete insight is not insight at all! ... Just as the people of the Church need each other “that all may be edified together,” the doctrines of the Church need each other.²

Skinner avoids the trap of isolating, spinning off, or practicing the doctrine of theosis in solitude by unfolding it within the context of the plan of salvation, which was prepared in Heavenly Father’s perfect love and actualized through the Atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ. In this context, the ancient prophetic witnesses of the doctrine of theosis, along with the witness of Peter, the chief apostle, and the witnesses of the post-apostolic writers, Greek orthodoxy, the Protestant tradition, and the restored Gospel, become clearer. By carefully establishing the connection between the doctrine of theosis and the undergirding and overarching truths of Heavenly Father’s loving plan of salvation and the Atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ, Skinner inspires his readers to better understand and assimilate the truth concerning our divine potential.

In essence, Skinner sets out to answer a few basic questions, as posed on the inside front flap of the book’s dust jacket:

What does it mean to be a son or a daughter of God? A joint-heir with Jesus Christ? A possessor of all that the Father has? What did ancient Christians believe about the ultimate purpose of our creation? Do any other Christians hold similar views today?

2. Neal A. Maxwell, *A Time to Choose* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972).

The simple answer to these questions is that far from being a heresy, as some Christians suppose, the doctrine of theosis is one of the oldest and most fundamental teachings of Christianity. Skinner draws from the writings of both ancient and modern Christians to demonstrate that the doctrine of deification was partially lost and then fully restored through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Skinner's opening chapters are rich with true doctrine, including doctrinal statements from the scriptures and latter-day prophets and apostles. These chapters also contain illuminating personal insights. He unpacks the statement attributed to the early Church Father Athanasius about the role of Jesus Christ: "God became man, so that man might become God" (4). After shedding light on the meaning of theosis, Skinner touches on the nature of God, His character, and His attributes, particularly His perfect love. Regarding God's glory and intelligence, he cites Elder Maxwell:

I testify that [God] is utterly incomparable in what He *is*, what He *knows*, what He *has accomplished*, and what He *has experienced*. ... In intelligence and performance, He far surpasses the individual and composite capacities and achievements of all who have lived, live now, and will yet live! (19)

Skinner notes that "one attribute of God seems to undergird and overarch all the rest: God is love (1 John 4:8)," or as is taught in *Lectures on Faith*:

[L]astly, but not less important to the exercise of faith in God, is the idea that he is love; for with all the other excellencies in his character, without this one to influence them, they could not have such powerful dominion over the minds of men; but when the idea is planted in the mind that he is love, who cannot see the just ground that men of every nation, kindred, and tongue, have to exercise faith in God so as to obtain eternal life? (21)

Skinner's chapter on the attributes of God is one that I hope to read over and over again, not only because it is true, but because it glows with the love of God.

Skinner's chapter on "The Father's Perfect Plan" (26) is no less true and no less inspiring. What is the Father's plan, and why did He create it? Skinner cites the Prophet Joseph Smith: "God himself [found] himself in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was greater ... saw proper to institute laws, whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself" (27). In other words, Heavenly Father wants us to become like Him because He loves us. Heavenly Father's plan provides the privilege

for His children to advance and to become like Him, and theosis is only possible through the Savior Jesus Christ, whom God sent to execute the plan of salvation. Skinner cites the Prophet Joseph Smith again:

The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever “the morning stars sang together” for joy; the past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal “now;” He knew of the fall of Adam, the iniquities of the antediluvians, of the depth of iniquity that would be connected with the human family, their weakness and strength, their power and glory, apostasies, their crimes, their righteousness and iniquity; He comprehended the fall of man, and his redemption; He knew the plan of salvation and *pointed it out*; He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the council of His own will. (36)

Jesus Christ came to do the will of His Father so that God’s children might become like Him and share in His glory. Athanasius’ proclamation is true: “God became man, so that man might become God” (38).

Skinner then shows that there were many ancient prophetic witnesses of theosis, the greatest of which is that of the Savior Jesus Christ Himself. Skinner expounds upon many other Old and New Testament witnesses of theosis, including Adam, Abraham, John the Beloved, and the Apostle Paul. “It bears repeating” he writes, “the doctrine of godhood is at the heart of what we aim for in the true Church of Jesus Christ. Little wonder it is attacked, lampooned, downplayed, diminished, and ignored in our day” (54). Skinner demonstrates that the witness of Peter, the chief apostle, is particularly poignant with regards to the doctrine of theosis, or that which he called being “made partakers of the divine nature” (59). Peter received a powerful witness of the doctrine of theosis on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and his fellow apostles James and John (67–68).

In addition to the witnesses of the Old and New Testament prophets and apostles, and to further establish the truth of the doctrine of theosis, Skinner draws from the witnesses of post-apostolic writers such as Athanasius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome, Cyprian of Carthage, Polycarpus, Heraclitus, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, and deification in fifth century liturgy. He consults the witnesses of Greek Orthodoxy, including Macarios of Philadelphia, Macarius of

Egypt, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Michael Psellus, and others of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic tradition, including Bernard of Clairvaux and Nicholas of Cusa. He gives voice to the witnesses of the Protestant tradition, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and inspired protestant writers and poets. He also highlights the witnesses of the restored Gospel, including Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and many others. Finally, Skinner echoes the witnesses of Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow. In his King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith taught:

Here, then, is eternal life, to know the only wise and true God [D&C 132:24]. You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done; by going from one small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit in glory as doth those who sit enthroned in everlasting power; and I want you to know that God in the last days, while certain individuals are proclaiming his name, is not trifling with you or me. (130)

Of course, there are things that we don't know, and Skinner stops short of theological speculation. In conclusion, he returns to his initial explanation of the nature and character of God in order to reemphasize the truth that is most fundamental to the doctrine of theosis, namely, "God is love." "The possibility that each of us may become like God," Skinner concludes,

should certainly humble us, but even more, it should thrill, inspire, and motivate us to strive to receive of God's fulness and his glory. Such knowledge should transform the way we see our fellow human beings. . . . Latter-day Saints, by doctrine and by practice, affirm that we are children of loving Parents who are anxious to have us return and live in their family unit, possessing what they possess. The doctrine of deification is a manifestation of that love. (141–42)

To Become Like God is a life-changing book, and it is a great addition to the Latter-day Saint Gospel library, the Christian library, and any other library. It scintillates with the light of truth and of true intelligence. More importantly, it radiates the love of God and the pure love of Christ. In it, Andrew C. Skinner provides ample convincing evidence that, far from being a deviation from original Christian beliefs, the belief in the possibility that human beings can become like God is central to the Christian faith. I couldn't recommend it more highly.

John C. Hancock was born in Payson, Utah, and raised in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Michigan, Idaho, and Utah. He served a mission in southern Italy. He holds a bachelor's degree in comparative literature from Brigham Young University, and a master's degree in politics from Hillsdale College. He has participated in study abroad programs in France, Italy, and Israel, and his areas of interest include political philosophy, American politics, literature, languages, religion, and medicine. He also enjoys athletics, art, travel, and music. He currently resides in Provo, Utah.