

A PERPLEXING GIFT: TOWARD CLARITY IN THE EVANGELICAL-MORMON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON GRACE

JOHN ANTHONY DUNNE AND LOGAN ALEXANDER WILLIAMS*

Abstract: *In recent years the dialogue between evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) has become increasingly focused on the theology of grace. Participants in the dialogue, however, sometimes assume that the role of grace in salvation is monolithic within each tradition, and thus they are not always attentive to the unique ways in which grace may be configured. In this article we seek to move the discussion forward by looking more carefully at LDS constructions of grace. In so doing we utilize the taxonomy developed in the recent work by John M. G. Barclay, Paul and the Gift. Barclay helpfully provides six ways in which grace may be perfected. These categories will help us identify some broad trends in LDS discourse on grace as well as theological distinctions between LDS authors. Without supposing that our analysis is able to identify what is or is not proper or official Mormon doctrine, we note the differences among LDS authors in both their doctrine of grace and how it is related to other doctrines. The differences between these authors' configurations of grace suggest that, instead of speaking of a monolithic LDS doctrine of grace, participants in the LDS-evangelical dialogue must be attentive to these differences if the dialogue is to be fruitful in the coming years.*

Key words: *dialogue, evangelical, gift, grace, interfaith, John Barclay, LDS, Mormon, perfection, salvation*

The interfaith dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons has progressed significantly in recent years. Moving beyond the “anti-Mormon” invectives of the past,¹ evangelicals have become increasingly concerned to conduct civil and productive discussions with Mormons and *vice versa*. Derek J. Bowen has noted several reasons for why, particularly in the past two decades, there have been significant advances in the evangelical-Mormon dialogue, including (1) evangelicalism’s loss of influence and normativity in American society; (2–3) broad political and ethical affinities between evangelicals and Mormons; (4) theological shifts within Mormonism; (5) Rev. Gregory C. V. Johnson’s Utah-based ministry directed in part toward interfaith dialogue, *Standing Together*; (6) publications that model interfaith dialogue;²

* John Anthony Dunne is assistant professor of NT designate at Bethel Seminary (St. Paul). He may be contacted at jad58695@bethel.edu. Logan Alexander Williams is a Ph.D. Candidate at Durham University, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham, DH1 3RS, England, UK. He may be contacted at logan.a.williams@durham.ac.uk.

¹ J. Spencer Fluhman, *“A Peculiar People”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

² See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon & an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997); Robert L. Millet and Gregory C. V. Johnson, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2007); Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Dialogue*

and (7) a semiannual dialogue between evangelical and Mormon scholars.³ These advances in evangelical-Mormon dialogue have provided more opportunities and platforms for evangelicals and Mormons to interact. In the wake of these developments, the present authors have personal experience organizing, leading, and participating in formal dialogues between evangelical college students and General Authorities within the Mormon Church, as well as students and faculty of various institutes of religion in California, Idaho, and Utah, including the flagship Mormon institution of higher education, Brigham Young University. In these contexts, the doctrine of grace in particular has been foregrounded as an important topic of discussion—one that at times has proven rather unwieldy and thus stands in need of further clarification. It is the purpose of this article to provide precisely that.

Grace, however, has not only been a major aspect of the evangelical-Mormon dialogue in recent years; it has also been a major topic of discussion within LDS circles. According to anthropologist and theologian Douglas J. Davies, there are two primary reasons for this:

What may be happening ... is a twofold development in turn of the century and millennium LDS life. The one answers the needs of devoted Saints, labouring under apparently impossible goals of achievement, the other displays the preparedness of a Church that now need not fear its distinctive identity to accept wider Christian theological terms. It is as though modern Mormonism feels free to draw on the discourse of grace. This is due, partly, to the influence of Evangelical Christianity in many parts of the world and, partly, to the real pastoral need of a striving Mormon membership.⁴

If Davies is correct, evangelicals bear some responsibility for the recent rise of grace language amongst Mormons.

LDS scholars themselves are divided over the proper interpretation of the increase in grace discourse among Mormons. On the one hand, scholars such as Camille Fronk Olson, associate professor of ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, suggest that the dearth of grace discourse in most of LDS history was due to a fear that emphasizing grace would lead to a lack of “obedience and discipleship.”⁵ The tide began to change, Olson contends, after a *Newsweek* article appeared in 1980 suggesting that Mormonism taught that humanity received salvation strictly through their own means—a claim that precipitated a major response from Mor-

(Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007); Richard J. Mouw and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Talking Doctrine: Mormons & Evangelicals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

³ Derek J. Bowen, “The Dialogue: Backgrounds and Context,” in *Talking Doctrine: Mormons & Evangelicals in Conversation*, 16–19.

⁴ Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace, and Glory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 58.

⁵ Camille Fronk Olson, “‘How Great a Debtor’: Mormon Reflections on Grace,” in *Talking Doctrine: Mormons & Evangelicals in Conversation*, 162. She states later on in relation to Mormon perceptions about this tendency within Protestantism, “I correct those who want to simply write off any Protestant who talks about being ‘born again’ and ‘saved by grace’ as though their only definition of grace required no response from them in the way they live, much like the antinomians in Paul’s day” (ibid., 169).

mons at large who felt misrepresented.⁶ From there, Olson points out, the frequency of grace language surged within Mormonism, and ultimately, she suggests, this shift constitutes a return to the heart of early Mormon theology.⁷ Alternatively, another LDS scholar, O. Kendall White Jr., understands this trend as a significant shift within Mormonism (and one that goes beyond a theology of grace itself). White suggests that traditional Mormon articulations of salvation by merit, among other historic theological convictions, are being replaced by a “neo-orthodox” configuration that resembles Protestant theology particularly in regard to its soteriology.⁸ Thus, some LDS scholars see the recent changes in LDS grace discourse as a return to early Mormonism, whereas others see it as a fundamental deviation from it. Like the LDS responses, evangelical responses to the development of LDS grace discourse are variegated. Some see this move as a positive sign of evangelical Protestant influence, while others are not so optimistic.

In many cases when evangelicals engage their Mormon colleagues on the place and function of grace in soteriology, the discussion is riddled with polemics.⁹ Often, the fundamental question is “Do Mormons believe in grace?” followed by an unequivocal answer of “No.” This way of framing the question, however, is rather misleading: stated as such, the question and its answer presuppose that only one particular configuration of grace may be bestowed the label of “grace.” In other words, for an evangelical Protestant, the question “Do Mormons believe in grace?” *really* means, “Do Mormons believe in the *Protestant configuration of grace*?” The question and its answer are not entirely illegitimate, but for the purposes of effective dialogue, the question is misleading and naturally results in skewed analyses and conclusions if not preceded by proper, careful, and rigorous investigation. Everyone must acknowledge *that* Mormons use “grace” language in their theologizing: the theological terminology of “grace” and that which it signifies has a place in many accounts of LDS soteriology.¹⁰ Whether or not LDS accounts of grace are legitimate, scriptural, or coherent is certainly an important question, but in order to facilitate dialogue the question must first be “*How* do Mormons configure grace?” before any other question of legitimacy may be answered. Evangelicals should not make claims about the existence or non-existence of grace in LDS theology prior to substantiating the manner in which grace is defined within LDS discourse and how grace relates to the larger theological structures within which each LDS author

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 163–65.

⁸ O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature, 1987), xvi. He goes further to state that this is explicitly a reappropriation of Pauline theology on the one hand (pp. 80–81, 148), and a return to the theology of the Book of Mormon on the other (pp. xx–xxi, 139–40).

⁹ Note Gregory C. V. Johnson’s concern: “Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals are too prone to define their own doctrines by advancing the extreme opposite of what the other faith believes.” See Millet and Johnson, *Bridging the Divide*, 173.

¹⁰ For more on LDS grace discourse, see Loren David Pankratz, “Latter-Day Grace: Comparing Justifying Grace in Latter-Day Saint and Traditional Christian Theology” (D.Min. diss., Talbot School of Theology, 2012).

speaks. In short, investigation must always precede evaluation. “Do Mormons believe in grace?” is an evaluative question. It is the investigative question—“How is Mormon grace talk configured in *Mormon terms*?”—that has been lacking in the evangelical-Mormon dialogue. Our purpose therefore in this article is to investigate individual Mormon accounts of grace and suggest some ways forward for clearer and more productive dialogue for both sides of the debate, such that proper and clear evaluations may be made by both parties.

Though grace might be everywhere in Mormonism, is it everywhere the same in Mormon discourse on the topic?¹¹ We suggest that it is not. We will find in this article that Mormon authors can and do speak differently about grace, defining and configuring it in different ways with reference to scriptural texts and larger theological structures. Thus, instead of speaking of “the” LDS doctrine of grace, we should rather speak of LDS *theologies* of grace, and for productive interaction the theological diversity in Mormon grace discourse must be acknowledged by both parties in the LDS-evangelical dialogue.

Given the overlap in terminology between evangelicals and Mormons within dialogues on grace, further clarity is needed regarding the definition of grace itself. Toward this end, the recent work of John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, will be brought in for its utility in providing the necessary clarity for interfaith dialogue on grace. Barclay provides for his readers a six-fold taxonomy of different ways grace can be “perfected” by different authors, and in this article we will utilize this taxonomy to categorize different construals of grace in LDS works.¹²

At this point, a few methodological points are in order. First, our analysis of LDS texts will include a variety of authors who identify as Mormon. In so doing, we do not claim to describe what may be considered official LDS doctrine.¹³ We are analyzing Mormon discourse on grace but not necessarily what is proper Mormon theology or “official doctrine.” Accordingly, when we analyze Mormon theologies of grace, we will be careful to avoid assuming that Mormonism is a monolithic theological entity. Second, our analysis will be primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive or evaluative, and thus we will not set forth our own perspective on a proper doctrine of grace but rather note the differences in LDS accounts of grace and how they function in relation to each author’s larger doctrinal system.

The goal of this study is that by understanding these different LDS accounts of grace, evangelicals will be further equipped to avoid talking past their Mormon dialogue partners or mischaracterizing them. In so doing, we are committed to the spirit of interfaith dialogue promoted by Krister Stendahl. He provides three principles for healthy dialogue:

¹¹ This sentence is adapted from John M. G. Barclay’s question, “But if ‘grace’ is everywhere in Second Temple Judaism ... is it everywhere the same?” (*Paul and the Gift* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015], 2).

¹² *Ibid.*, 67–70, 72–74.

¹³ We recognize that some Mormons might find the ideas of certain authors to be more authoritative and binding than others, depending upon their location within the LDS church hierarchy.

Let the other define herself (“Don’t think you know the other without listening”); compare equal to equal (not my positive qualities to the negative ones of the other); and find beauty in the other so as to develop “holy envy.”¹⁴

In this spirit, we hope to make accurate use of the Mormon sources and represent their theology fairly.

We will first explain Barclay’s contribution to Pauline studies, highlighting the six “perfections” of grace that he identifies, and include an additional perfection of our own. After briefly summarizing Barclay’s work, we will analyze particular Mormon authors who set forth a theology of grace while applying Barclay’s six perfections to this material. We will conclude with some final suggestions for how the evangelical-Mormon dialogue on grace should progress.

I. BARCLAY’S SIX PERFECTIONS OF GRACE

To “perfect” a concept is to “draw out a concept to its endpoint or extreme,”¹⁵ to identify what is an essential characteristic of a particular object or idea.¹⁶ A perfection is both determinative and uncanceled; it is the *sine qua non* or necessary element of a concept. A “perfection” of grace, or gift, is that which makes grace, *grace*. In order to properly analyze any author’s conception of grace, therefore, it is helpful to show the ways in which grace is perfected. Barclay identifies different possible perfections in order to disaggregate different notions of grace presupposed or espoused by different authors, both ancient and modern.¹⁷ He demonstrates the utility of his taxonomy by analyzing Second Temple Jewish texts, Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans, and the writings of some Christian theologians. Barclay identifies six potential perfections:

1. *Superabundance*: the superabundance of grace identifies the overflow, lavishness, and extensive benefits that are God’s gifts.
2. *Singularity*: the singularity of grace identifies graciousness as the sole characteristic of God. All of God’s acts are purely gracious.

¹⁴ Yehezkel Landau, “An Interview with Krister Stendahl,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35.1 (Winter 2007): 30. Cf. Millet and Johnson, *Bridging the Divide*, 126.

¹⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷ In early twentieth-century biblical scholarship it was sometimes stated that ancient Jews did not have a meaningful place for grace in their theological system. This conclusion was reached by analyzing texts in which scholars found Second Temple Jewish construals of grace (in their estimation) to be insufficient or incorrect. In 1977, E. P. Sanders attempted to show that the logic of grace permeated Second Temple and Rabbinic texts (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977]). More recently, however, Barclay helpfully points out that Sanders’s definition of grace mostly focuses on the priority of God’s grace in granting the covenant to Israel before any demands for obedience (Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 319). Defining grace purely in terms of *priority* allowed Sanders to contend that grace was everywhere in Second Temple Judaism (Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 158). Barclay contends against this reductionism, however: “But if ‘grace’ is everywhere in Second Temple Judaism—in the celebration of divine beneficence, goodness, and mercy—is it everywhere the same? Are Jewish configurations of this topic uniform, or is the map of Jewish theology ever oversimplified if labelled ‘a religion of grace’? Might there be various construals of divine mercy and goodness, and of their relationship to justice?” (*ibid.*, 2).

3. *Priority*: the priority of grace identifies God as the first giver in the bestowal of gifts, the one to initiate a relationship of gift-giving.
4. *Efficacy*: the efficacy of grace is that the gift enables and empowers a response to the gift itself.
5. *Incongruity*: the incongruity of grace is that the gift is given without regard to the worth of the recipient.
6. *Non-Circularity*: the non-circularity of grace is that the gift is given without expectation of a response or anything given in return.¹⁸

For our purposes, we need to modify Barclay's six perfections by including one additional category: the *necessity* of grace. That is, Mormons often perfect grace in such a way as to affirm that *it is absolutely necessary*, a requisite element of salvation.¹⁹ With Barclay's six perfections, along with our additional category of necessity, we now turn to offer an analysis of Mormon theologies of grace.

II. MORMON PERFECTIONS OF GRACE

As we delve into LDS writings on grace, we must first comment on the potential confusion that could be caused by the various ways the notion of "salvation" may be understood in Mormon thought. In many LDS configurations, "salvation" refers to that which leads to deification, exaltation, and attaining the highest level of heaven. But "salvation" can also refer to the general salvation provided to all humankind in the atonement, which guarantees that all people, regardless of faith, will be resurrected on the last day.²⁰ Richard Lloyd Anderson describes the distinctions within the hierarchy of salvation clearly:

Latter-day Saints know that there are degrees of salvation, so these terms ["save" and "salvation"] could logically refer to salvation from death. ... But that is a partial salvation in the case of those not entering God's kingdom in eternity. Full salvation is receiving the highest degree of glory. Full salvation is receiving the first resurrection and entering Christ's kingdom. Full salvation reverses the effects of sin and purifies one to standing in God's presence.²¹

As part of the complexity of salvation in Mormon theology, grace is typically perfected and defined in different ways depending on the kind of salvation being referenced. Note how one author specifies the distinct modes of operation:

¹⁸ This list is taken from Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 72–74.

¹⁹ Although it is not entirely clear what necessity might entail for each author, the necessity of grace is a common emphasis in LDS discourse, as will be shown below, and in the case of John Gee (cf. 2.6 below), he presents necessity as the only perfection of grace.

²⁰ See, e.g., 2 Nephi 9:6–13. Cf. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2004), 77; Gordon B. Hinkley, "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," *Ensign* (November 1986): 49–51; Bruce C. Hafen, "Grace," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (ed. Daniel H. Ludlow; 4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1992), 562.

²¹ Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (rev. ed.; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 2007), 150. So also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (2nd ed.; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1979), 338–39; Dallin H. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?," *Ensign* (May 1998): 55–57; *True to the Faith*, 151–53; Robert L. Millet, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-Day Saints* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 81, 114–15.

The atonement of Christ overcame physical death through the resurrection. This is *salvation by grace* because it comes to all men automatically and does not depend on what kind of lives they have lived. But, if we wish to overcome spiritual death and enter back into God's presence, we must be obedient to laws and principles. This is *exaltation by works*. Thus, according to this explanation, we are *saved* by grace and *exalted* by works.²²

As it is explained here, different gifts of God should be perfected and defined in different ways: The lower gifts are given incongruously and the higher gifts are given congruously. This observation, however, is not ubiquitous throughout LDS discourse, but this example demonstrates the potential for variation in grace perfections insofar as they apply to different elements of the LDS soteriological hierarchy.

When evangelicals and Mormons dialogue about grace, therefore, they must be clear about *which* gifts are being discussed, since *different gifts may be configured with different perfections*.²³ For the sake of dialogue, each party must be clear not only about which perfections of grace are being accepted or rejected, but also to which gifts these perfections apply. To critique one example, David Rowe, an evangelical author, states, "Mormons are taught that grace is conditional,"²⁴ but this is not entirely clear or accurate, since it depends on *which* gifts are being discussed. Statements such as these prove to be unhelpful for the purposes of dialogue because they fail to be entirely specific about or attentive to LDS soteriology in the first place.

In the analyses that follow, we will be attentive to the different ways in which each LDS author perfects grace, but we will also be attentive to the different gifts that may cause variation in these configurations or perfections. The figures to be analyzed here have been chosen because they are influential and form a diverse cross-section of LDS theology. The group is neither exhaustive nor necessarily representative. The majority of these authors are twenty-first century scholars who have written within the past decade and thus have contemporary relevance and influence.

1. *Bruce R. McConkie*. We begin with Bruce R. McConkie, former LDS apostle who served from 1972–1985, because of the pervasive influence of his famous dictionary of LDS theology, *Mormon Doctrine*. McConkie defines grace in the following way: "*God's grace* consists in his love, mercy, and condescension toward his children."²⁵ All of God's good gifts, McConkie affirms, are manifestations of his grace. After stressing the ubiquity of grace, McConkie pivots to state that grace is given congruously, "Grace is granted to men *proportionately* as they conform to the stand-

²² Gerald N. Lund, "Salvation: By Grace or By Works?," *Ensign* (April 1981): 18 (italics original). Cf. Bruce C. Hafen, "The Restored Doctrine of the Atonement," *Ensign* (December 1993): 6–13; D. Todd Christofferson, "Justification and Sanctification," *Ensign* (June 2001): 18–25.

²³ This is not unique to LDS theology, as Philo of Alexandria, an ancient Hellenistic Jew, also provided different perfections amongst different types of gifts. See especially Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 212–38.

²⁴ David L. Rowe, *I Love Mormons: A New Way to Share Christ With Latter-Day Saints* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 62.

²⁵ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 338 (italics original).

ard of personal righteousness that are part of the gospel plan.”²⁶ The congruity here should be understood in relation to the higher gifts specifically, which is made clearer elsewhere when he states,

Conditional or individual salvation, that which comes by grace coupled with gospel obedience, consists in receiving an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of God. This kind of salvation follows faith, repentance, baptism, receipt of the Holy Ghost, and continued righteousness to the end of one’s mortal probation.²⁷

However, when McConkie describes the nature of the lower gifts, he expresses a perfection of incongruity:

Unconditional or general salvation, that which comes by grace alone without obedience to gospel law, consists in the mere fact of being resurrected. In this sense salvation is synonymous with immortality; it is the inseparable connection of body and spirit so that the resurrected personage lives forever.²⁸

Thus, we can see a clear distinction in McConkie’s thought on grace as it pertains to the lower and higher gifts.

Despite this distinction between the lower and higher gifts, it is important to note that McConkie believes that grace is always prior and superabundant in every gift. He argues, “Since all good things come by the grace of God (that is, by his love, mercy, and condescension), it follows that salvation itself—in all its forms and degrees—is bestowed because of this infinite goodness.”²⁹ Yet McConkie is concerned to avoid a potential implication of this: the perfection of the non-circularity, that God’s gift of salvation expects no response or return gift. He states this rather strongly as he transitions to speak of the “untrue” belief in salvation “by grace alone and without obedience.” About this doctrine McConkie states, “This soul-destroying doctrine has the obvious effect of lessening the determination of an individual to conform to all of the laws and ordinances of the gospel, such conformity being essential if the sought for reward is in reality to be gained.”³⁰ From this we can see that McConkie is uncomfortable with perfecting the incongruity of grace for the higher gifts because, for him, *incongruity necessarily leads to non-circularity*, or, in other words, he sees it leading to a form of antinomianism. This conclusion is shared by many other LDS scholars, as we will see below. Thus, the clearest perfection of grace that we can see in McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine* is priority and supra-

²⁶ Ibid., 339 (italics added).

²⁷ Ibid., 669–70.

²⁸ Ibid., 669.

²⁹ Ibid., 670.

³⁰ McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 670. The idea of non-circularity is met with equal vehemence by former president of the LDS Church Spencer W. Kimball, who served as president when McConkie served as an apostle. Kimball states, “One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation.” See Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1969), 206.

bundance for all of God's gifts and incongruity for the lower gifts (but not for the higher ones).

2. *Stephen E. Robinson*. Professor of ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, Stephen E. Robinson was one of the Mormon pioneers in the evangelical-Mormon dialogue, due especially to his landmark contribution to *How Wide the Divide?* Prior to that, Robinson famously articulated his view of the relationship between grace and works in what he called "the Parable of the Bicycle." The parable, which appears in his book *Believing Christ*, is about a father who buys a bicycle for his child after the child offers a mere sixty-one cents toward the purchase.³¹ The point of the parable is that the child in no way secured the purchase of the bicycle, yet the child still demonstrated his desire to give all that he had. Thus, as a metaphor for salvation, the parable highlights the necessity of the gift, since it is an absolutely necessary element and without it there is no salvation at all, and it also emphasizes the incongruity of the gift.

The emphasis on incongruity appears at the very outset of the same chapter ("Saved by Grace") when Robinson shares an anecdote in which he asks his students whether they wish God will be fair with them on the day of judgment. He notes that although the students raised their hands, they had not understood that if God were completely fair, this would lead to condemnation since justice would demand it.³²

In addition to incongruity, Robinson perfects the priority of grace by showing that God is predisposed to be gracious. He adds, "Grace ... is not something that I can trigger, manipulate, earn, deserve, or control, for it is a preexisting aspect of God's attitude toward me."³³ This *unconditioned* feature of grace, however, is not *unconditional*, since Robinson notes that grace can be "sought after, increased, decreased, or even lost completely."³⁴ Good works unfold as part of the covenant partnership between humans and God in which humans do all that they can and what they cannot do is done by Jesus.³⁵ Robinson comes close to emphasizing efficacy when he speaks of how "evil" it is to think that someone could earn salvation on their own. He notes not only how imperfect people truly are, but also how dependent they are.³⁶ Yet, rather than extolling the efficacy of grace for this plight, Robinson's language perfects the necessity of grace as well as its priority.

In the following chapter of *Believing Christ*, "Misunderstanding Grace," Robinson unpacks two additional concerns about grace: the idea that salvation by grace

³¹ Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1992), 30–34.

³² *Ibid.*, 57. He goes on (pp. 58–61) to note the importance of God's grace and mercy, even highlighting some ways in which Mormons have struggled with these conceptions precisely because they are not "fair" concepts. Cf. also pp. 76–83 for Robinson's response to the claim that grace is "easy."

³³ *Ibid.*, 62. Cf. pp. 63–64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64. Cf. p. 65. This important distinction is explicated clearly by Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, *passim*.

³⁵ Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 70. Later Robinson reiterates this and notes that this system is in play even in the LDS Church's welfare system (*ibid.*, 87–89).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72–76. Cf. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 143.

means that obedience is unnecessary,³⁷ and the idea that grace only comes *after* one has done all that they could in their attempt to be perfect.³⁸ The second of the two is a more pressing concern for Mormons and is given the lengthier treatment by Robinson. Robinson rejects the second “misunderstanding” because grace precedes the efforts to do all that one can: “We have already received many manifestations of God’s grace before we even come to this point.”³⁹ Hence, the priority of grace is perfected. In this quest for individual moral perfection, which is only an aspiration and never a realization, Robinson noticeably does not emphasize the efficacy of grace. Note the way he quantifies the achievement of perfection without including any language of efficacy,

In my case, my efforts might take me twenty percent of the way to perfection. The Savior covers the other eighty percent. In your case, your efforts might take you fifty percent—or two percent—of the way. The Savior *still* covers the difference. But in every case the sum of the joint effort is the same—anyone’s best efforts, however great or small, plus the atonement of Christ will equal 100 percent of what is needed to enter God’s kingdom.⁴⁰

Although he does not mention it, this corresponds to “the parable of the bicycle” as the analog for that metaphor about salvation.

In the chapter on “Salvation” in *How Wide the Divide?*, Robinson deals with salvation broadly and so addresses far more than the topic of grace. However, when he does broach the topic, he carries forward the same basic perspective as *Believing Christ*, especially regarding the perfection of priority.⁴¹ What is particularly noteworthy about Robinson’s contribution to this volume is the rhetorical move he makes in his interfaith dialogue with Craig Blomberg by articulating his view of salvation with an appeal to Arminianism as the proper Mormon expression.⁴² Robinson affirms, “The LDS view is thoroughly Arminian.”⁴³ Again, he states, “Calvinist Evangelicals frequently label LDS soteriology sub-Christian when it is in reality Arminian.”⁴⁴ He is so comfortable making this connection that he is even able to speak of “the LDS and other Arminians” when expressing disagreement with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.⁴⁵ Later on he asserts,

³⁷ Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 85–89. Cf. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 148.

³⁸ Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 89–108. When addressing this second misunderstanding of grace, Robinson includes a discussion on 2 Nephi 25:23, which he sees as contributing the most to this mindset (*ibid.*, 90–92). This passage will be addressed further below (2.11).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 97 (*italics original*).

⁴¹ For example, Robinson states, “Whatever good works Christians manage to perform are not prerequisites for grace, for justification or for entering the covenant, since their works *follow* their conversion. But such works are the necessary fruits of conversion.” See Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 147 (*italics original*).

⁴² Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 146–47, 149, 154, 159, 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

Continued faithfulness *is* required in order not to fall from grace after we have been saved. This is Arminianism, not synergism. The only obligations of the covenant are to *stay* in the covenant by obedience to the gospel and not to go wandering off.⁴⁶

Despite the debate here about efficacy and cooperation, Robinson expresses that grace precedes human activity and is completely necessary: “The opportunity to be born again in Christ is a total gift of grace, and without the grace of God no one can be justified or saved.”⁴⁷ On the whole, then, we have seen that Robinson perfects the necessity and priority of grace, and avoids perfecting either efficacy or non-circularity. Robinson’s “Parable of the Bicycle” suggests that on the last day the same final gift of exaltation will be given incongruously to those who exerted different degrees of effort. No matter the degree of effort, Christ makes up the difference. Thus, *even with regard to the upper hierarchy of salvation, Robinson perfects incongruity.*

Here it is crucial to point out that Robinson did not configure his definition of grace in such a way as to make it “fair.” For Robinson, an ultimate commitment to the principle of “fairness” (i.e. congruity) would result in the condemnation of all. In contradistinction from McConkie, Robinson concludes that grace *cannot* be fair, whereas McConkie contended that grace is always “proportionate” (i.e. “fair”). Stated simply, for McConkie, grace is grace because it is controlled by the principle of congruity; for Robinson, grace is grace because it is not.

3. *Richard Lloyd Anderson.* In his book, *Understanding Paul*, Richard Lloyd Anderson, emeritus professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, sets forth an LDS reading of the Pauline corpus. Throughout his exegesis he remains in dialogue with LDS sources (e.g. Joseph Smith) as well as bits of early Christian sources (e.g. Origen, Shepherd of Hermas, etc.).

When offering an exegesis of Eph 2:8–10, Anderson argues that the phrase “not of works” in Eph 2:9 “is accurate at the outset of discipleship but is plainly less true as one’s responsibilities grow before the Lord.” The phrase “at the outset” indicates that Anderson seems to perfect incongruity in regard to the initial reception of grace. Anderson, moreover, remarks about Paul that “this persecutor was not worthy of a vision by mortal standards, yet God ‘called me by his grace’ (Gal. 1:15). What he preached for all was especially true for him; grace was first freely given by God (Rom. 5:15–16).”⁴⁸ Anderson here perfects incongruity in relation to the initial bestowal of grace.

Ephesians 2:10, in particular, for Anderson implies that the church must produce works in order to remain in the realm of God’s favor. In line with this, Anderson elsewhere emphasizes that it is the response to grace that keeps one in grace. Putting Paul in dialogue with Joseph Smith, Anderson points out that “Joseph

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 159. Given the way in which Robinson quantifies achievement of perfection in *Believing Christ*, as we saw above, it is arguable that he does espouse a form of synergism. At any rate, it is hard to imagine a genuine Arminian affirming such a schema for salvation.

⁴⁷ Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 154.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 181.

Smith taught that forgiveness (justification) came through Christ alone but that retaining this marvelous blessing was dependent on the actions of men and women.⁴⁹ Turning back to Paul, Anderson opines that “God’s offer of grace through Christ is incomplete until men and women grow by acting upon it.”⁵⁰ Grace is given “initially not of works, but then works are required to stay in the realm of God’s favor.”⁵¹ As a result, Anderson suggests that any configuration of Paul’s doctrine of election must be considered conditional by nature.⁵²

Although we saw that Anderson makes a brief remark about initial incongruity in Eph 2:8, Anderson argues that grace is not incongruous at every point. Anderson sets forth two arguments against incongruity. First, he combats the notion of incongruity by arguing that Paul cared deeply about individuals responding to God in obedience, and thus Anderson, like McConkie, uses the rejection of circularity to reject incongruity (or, inversely, he believes that incongruity necessarily leads to non-circularity).⁵³ Second, according to Anderson, the incongruity of grace naturally leads to the charge of God acting in pure arbitrariness.⁵⁴ If no works contribute to our initial salvation (and only act as a response, or fruit, of that salvation), then “This leads to the idea that God arbitrarily saves those whom he will.”⁵⁵ Hence, Anderson explicitly objects to reading Romans 9 as describing the unconditioned election of Jacob over against Esau.⁵⁶ Rather, Anderson appeals to his reading of Origen on Romans 9: God selected by foreseeing the good and bad works of Jacob and Esau in their future lives.⁵⁷ In this regard, it therefore also appears that Anderson rejects priority.

Thus, Anderson emphasizes circularity and equivocates on incongruity. Similar to Bruce McConkie above, Anderson is uncomfortable with emphasizing the perfection of incongruity, as it may lead to non-circularity or to the charge that salvation is arbitrary. In his reading of Romans 9, it appears that he rejects priority as well. Anderson sets forth the necessity of the grace of God briefly when he writes, for example, “No one can fully merit salvation without Christ.”⁵⁸

4. *Robert L. Millet.* Robert L. Millet, professor of ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, has played a significant role in the interfaith dialogue, having contributed to two counterpoint volumes: *Claiming Christ* and *Bridging the Divide*. In addition to these he has also written a book directly addressing evangelical concerns about Mormon Christology in *A Different Jesus?*

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁵¹ Ibid., 274.

⁵² Ibid., 191.

⁵³ Ibid., 163–68.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 166–68.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 190.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 180.

Typically, in his writings, Millet clearly articulates the distinction between the lower and higher gifts. In his book *Grace Works*, Millet perfects superabundance, incongruity, and non-circularity for the lower hierarchy of salvation, stating,

No works or labors or mortal deeds are necessary to bring these eventualities [the elements of the lower hierarchy of salvation] to pass. They come from a gracious Lord who desires to save all the children of the Father. Truly we are recipients of grace without number and are the beneficiaries of the Lord's love and condescension, of gifts that are beyond our power to work for, earn, or even adequately express gratitude for.⁵⁹

With regard to the higher gifts, however, which he refers to as "individual salvation," Millet states in *A Different Jesus*, "Though all salvation is available through the goodness and grace of Christ, there are certain things that must be done in order for divine grace and mercy to be activated in the lives of individual followers of the Christ."⁶⁰ These "certain things" are coming to Christ, accepting him, and believing in him. Millet then places as a subset to faith and as a "product" of faith the following items: repenting, being baptized, receiving the Holy Spirit, and lifelong obedience.⁶¹ These points imply a rejection of non-circularity and an affirmation of congruity for the higher gifts.

In the counterpoint volume *Bridging the Divide*, Millet responds with "an unequivocal Yes and No" to the question of whether Mormons believe in salvation by grace alone. He explains that "salvation ... is the greatest of all the gifts of God. You don't earn a gift."⁶² He unpacks this further by saying that salvation is part of a "two-way" covenant between God and humans. God promises things such as forgiveness, resurrection, and glorification, which Millet calls "matters of pure grace."⁶³ Surprisingly, by referring to glorification—"glorify us for heaven hereafter"—alongside the resurrection as "pure grace," he has conjoined the lower and the higher gifts, which we have seen Millet separates clearly in both *A Different Jesus?* and *Grace Works*. He continues by placing an emphasis on the efficacy of grace, stating, "For us grace is not just that final boost into the celestial kingdom that comes at the end of one's life but also an enabling power that assists us to do things we could not do on our own."⁶⁴ The other side of the covenant agreement is the promise to exercise faith in God and his promises, which in turn leads to a life of faithfulness. Thus, obedience is a "necessary but insufficient condition for salvation."⁶⁵ The insufficient nature of obedience underscores the *necessity* of grace. Millet goes on to speak of how "our works will evidence the kind of people we have become."⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 2003), 16.

⁶⁰ Millet, *Different Jesus*, 95.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Cf. pp. 100–101.

⁶² Millet and Johnson, *Bridging the Divide*, 50. Cf. Millet, *Different Jesus*, 81–82.

⁶³ Millet and Johnson, *Bridging the Divide*, 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

In another book formatted with counterpoint discussion, *Claiming Christ*, Millet explains that his soteriology is both synergistic and Arminian.⁶⁷ Using Phil 2:12–13 as evidence, Millet states that synergism is “a concept that is embraced by a huge segment of Christianity today.”⁶⁸ Thus, Millet here supports the notion that divine and human agency are equal contributors to the common effort of salvation. Grace is one element of salvation; it is necessary, but not sufficient in such a way as to exclude human action. From here Millet suggests, “Latter-day Saints are like Arminians in that we believe that man has a role to play in salvation.”⁶⁹ The peculiar phrase “man has a role to play” probably means that humanity has a *significant* and *meaningful* role to play which, in a model different from synergism, would not in Millet’s eyes be meaningful or considered a real “role to play” at all. Thus with his predetermined definition of what should be considered a “role” (i.e. a significant or meaningful role) in salvation he can bracket out other systems that support a notion of efficacious divine agency that animates humans to respond to grace. Nevertheless, Millet sets forth a definition of grace as unconditioned by the prior worth of the recipient: he states that “salvation is free” and that “it comes by grace, through God’s unmerited favor.”⁷⁰ Millet summarizes his position: “Truly we are saved by grace alone, but grace is never alone.”⁷¹ This appears to end on the note of necessity. Grace may *ground* salvation as necessary element, but there are other equal (and necessary) co-contributors to this process.

Taken as a whole, in Millet’s works we see the perfection of priority and necessity for all of God’s gifts, superabundance and incongruity for the lower gifts, a synergistic approach to efficacy, and a rejection of non-circularity. Furthermore, in regard to the higher gifts, Millet’s explanations of grace, particularly in the rejection of non-circularity, suggest that the gift *begins* as incongruent but *ends* as congruous at the final judgment. This differs from that of McConkie, who held to a strict notion of congruity for the higher gifts (though incongruity for the lower), or Robinson, who perfected incongruity on both levels of the salvific hierarchy, even at the final judgment.

5. *Louis Midgley*. Emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, Louis Midgley, offers a response to evangelical critiques of Mormon soteriology in an editorial introduction to an issue of *FARMS Review*.⁷² Midgley starts off his exposition by affirming the necessity of grace by stating that “no one imagines that they can somehow save themselves from death or forgive their own sins,” but he wishes to contextualize this.⁷³ For Midgley, using the phrase “salvation by faith alone” necessarily implies non-circularity.

⁶⁷ Cf. Robinson (2.2) who argues that Mormonism is Arminian, but *not* synergistic.

⁶⁸ Millet and McDermott, *Claiming Christ*, 185.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Louis Midgley, “Editor’s Introduction: The Wedding of Athens and Jerusalem: An Evangelical Perplexity and a Latter-day Saint Answer,” *FARMS Review* 21.2 (2009): xi–xliv.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, xxi.

When this happens [when “alone” is attached to “salvation by grace”], faith is often not seen as a choice or decision but instead as something entirely predestined by God. What is contested is whether God’s mercy is in any way conditional. If it is conditional, what are those conditions and how are they satisfied? By faith without repentance? Without baptism and subsequent signs of faithfulness? Without a genuine desire and hence striving to keep the commandments? Is sanctification necessary or merely optional? Is sanctification, if necessary, also something predestined, or does it require human effort? If sin is forgiven by God—that is, if righteousness is imputed to the depraved one—is it possible to fall from grace?⁷⁴

Note here that Midgley implies that holding to priority in predestination and a perfection of incongruity of grace necessarily leads to the conclusion that works are not demanded, necessary, or expected at all from the recipients of grace. In line with the trend we have seen above, incongruity, for Midgley, necessarily entails non-circularity.

Therefore, Midgley sets forth a particular notion of the congruity of grace. Only after “all must eventually ‘come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny [themselves] of all ungodliness, and love God’ (Moroni 10:32)” is “his grace ‘sufficient’ for us.”⁷⁵ However, this is contextualized within the (partially) efficacious grace of God in Christ who “sanctifies us.”⁷⁶ Midgley defines his doctrine of congruous grace clearly when he says that after sanctification, “Through his grace—*his gift given to us in return for our gift of diligently striving to love and obey him*—we can be declared ‘perfect in Christ’ (v. 32) at the final judgment and allowed to enter into his presence and peace.”⁷⁷ Grace is sufficient—real, efficacious, and applied—when one has “denied [oneself] of all ungodliness, and love[s] God” (Moroni 10:32). He rejects the notion of divine priority: God’s grace is given to us only *after* we provide for him the gift of obedience. Although this may sound as if Midgley rejects the efficacy of grace, he still leaves room for some efficacy. In order to learn obedience, people must have “been sanctified by yielding to the purifying, cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, whose influence we seek as we renew our covenants.”⁷⁸

Similar to McConkie, Midgley’s doctrine of justice circumscribes his construal of grace. As he emphasizes twice, “Mercy, which is entirely necessary, simply cannot rob justice.”⁷⁹ He uses this notion to establish a strict doctrine of congruity. God cannot declare the unrighteous as righteous precisely because of the restrictions of justice: “Only if we have been true and faithful will the Lord declare to the Most High God that we are justified. All will receive what they truly deserve.”⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Ibid.; cf. p. xxvi.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xxxv.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid. (italics original).

⁷⁸ Ibid., xxxvii. Midgley then concludes (p. xxxvii) this thought with his own confession: “I testify that we must all rely on God’s tender mercies as we strive to love and obey him as obedient children to their parents, or as servants are wont to do to gain favor in the sight of their masters.”

⁷⁹ Ibid., xxxiii.

⁸⁰ Ibid., xxxv. Cf. Hafen, “Grace,” 562.

Thus the notion of *final* congruity is used to reject the notion of *initial* incongruity of God's grace in justification. This is similar to the proposal of McConkie above.

6. *John Gee*. The William (Bill) Gay Research Professor at Brigham Young University's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, John Gee, seeks to provide a theological definition of grace (χάρις) by doing a word study primarily through *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* in his 2010 *FARMS Review* article.⁸¹ In an exegetical section on the use of the word χάρις in the Gospel of John, he explains,

The Gospel of John uses the term grace (χάρις) four times, all of which describe Jesus. John describes Jesus as “the only begotten of the Father, full of grace (χάριτος) and truth” (John 1:14). John the Baptist describes his situation with respect to Jesus: “We did not [*sic*] receive of his fullness, but favor in return for favor (χάριτι ἀντί χάριτος), since the law was given through Moses, but grace (χάριτι) and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16–17, my [Gee's] translation). The notion that John the Baptist promulgates is that grace, or the favor of God, is received in proportion to that which is given. Man does a favor for God and receives one in return.⁸²

Setting aside the translational issues in this proposal, what should be highlighted is the particular construal of grace that is taken from this text.⁸³ Gee connects the notions of congruity (it is “received in proportion to that which is given”) with the rejection of divine priority (“Man does a favor for God and receives one [grace] in return”). Again, the rejection of incongruity is used to reject the priority of grace. For Gee, the divine gift is not given first precisely because it must be congruous with (prior) human worth.

The rejection of divine priority of grace shows up throughout the article. According to Gee's reading of Luke 6, “Grace (χάρις) comes to those who love, do good, or give money to those who do not or will not return the favor.”⁸⁴ Expounding on Ether 12:26–27, Gee concludes that “grace is sufficient for those who are humble and thus conditional to all those ‘that humble themselves before [God],’” and grace “therefore comes as the result of the actions of individuals.”⁸⁵ Moreover, “The grace of God comes as a reward or payment for labor.”⁸⁶ Most explicitly, “Grace comes after repentance and good works.”⁸⁷ The initial step in salvation is to be “reconciled unto God,” and then subsequently salvation becomes a reality “through the grace of God (2 Nephi 10:24).”⁸⁸

The language of “reward” and “payment” draws on the notion of congruity that we saw above, which was connected to the rejection of divine priority—in fact,

⁸¹ John Gee, “The Grace of Christ,” *FARMS Review* 22.1 (2010): 247–59.

⁸² Gee, “Grace,” 253 (italics added).

⁸³ There is no negation in John 1:14 in NA²⁸ or any extant variant (cf. “We did *not* receive of his fullness” in the quotation above).

⁸⁴ Gee, “Grace,” 252.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

we might actually say that he actually perfects *the rejection of divine priority*. In tandem with this, Gee does not perfect the non-circularity of grace: not only is individual action required to elicit grace in the first place, but also, although “one cannot earn one’s way into heaven,” a person’s “individual action is still required” after the reception of grace.⁸⁹ The rejection of the non-circularity of grace is highlighted when Gee mentions, “It is interesting to note that the earliest definition of *χάρις* is ‘good works’” (citing an instance from the 8th century BC as the “earliest definition”).⁹⁰ Though one may object to Gee’s use of the diachronic priority fallacy,⁹¹ what is important for our analysis is that he chose to *highlight* this aspect of the data, suggesting that he wanted to bring to the attention of his readers that *χάρις* and good works are inseparable (and for Gee, possibly identical, as suggested by his language), thus supporting his rejection of non-circularity.

Gee’s comments on efficacy are lacking for affirmation or denial, but in saying that grace “comes after ... good works” we may expect that grace is not uniquely efficacious in bringing about the obedience of its recipients. Thus, Gee rejects incongruity (and perfects congruity), which then logically results (for Gee) in rejecting priority. He rejects non-circularity, and appears to reject efficacy. The only perfection Gee employs is the necessity of grace in saying that human work alone is not sufficient for salvation.

7. *Brad Wilcox*. Brad Wilcox, associate professor of education at Brigham Young University, gave a BYU devotional talk on grace in 2012 that he later gave again at a General Conference meeting in 2013 in which he aimed to establish the sufficiency of grace. He noted that grace is sufficient to “cover us” to “transform us” and to “help us.”⁹² These three areas become the three major sections of the talk.

The sufficiency of grace to “cover us,” for Wilcox, means that Jesus “paid our debt in full. He didn’t pay it all except for a few coins. He paid it all. It is finished.”⁹³ These affirmations by Wilcox come in the midst of an anecdote about a private conversation he had with a student who was struggling with the nature of grace, specifically the relationship between her best efforts and the work of Christ on her behalf. This was particularly pressing because the student did not believe that she had really done her very best. In response to the affirmations by Wilcox about the sufficiency of grace, the student retorts, “Right! Like I don’t have to do anything?” Wilcox responds to this in the negative, “You have plenty to do.”⁹⁴ Once again the concern about non-circularity crops up in response to a major emphasis on grace. Wilcox affirms that obedience determines “how comfortable we

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Gee is referring to information he provided above in his article. Going over potential definitions of grace provided in TLG (and some lexicons), he relays, “These gifts [i.e. *χάρις*] may be in the form of ... ‘good works’ (*εὐεργεσίαν* [*sic*; author means *εὐεργεσίαν*], viii [century] BC)” (p. 249).

⁹¹ On this fallacy see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1983), 107–60.

⁹² Brad Wilcox, “His Grace Is Sufficient,” *Ensign* (September 2013): 35–37.

⁹³ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

plan to be in God's presence and what degree of glory we plan on receiving."⁹⁵ This points to the issue of congruity and circularity for the higher gifts as we have seen before.

Next, Wilcox transitions to the sufficiency of grace for transformation. He uses an analogy of a mother who pays for her child to receive piano lessons and as a result insists that her child practice. Wilcox notes that practice has nothing to do with the debt that has been paid: "Practicing is how the child shows appreciation for Mom's incredible gift."⁹⁶ Practice of the piano, in this metaphor, in turn is what changes one into a pianist, which corresponds to the way that obedience in this life is about learning to be heavenly.

Finally, Wilcox concludes with the sufficiency of grace to "help us." Here, Wilcox is concerned to emphasize that grace is an enabling power that is not merely received after some exerted effort, but is present from the very beginning. He states,

Grace is not a booster engine that kicks in once our fuel supply is exhausted. Rather, it is our constant energy source. It is not the light at the end of the tunnel but the light that moves us through the tunnel. Grace is not achieved somewhere down the road. It is received right here and right now.⁹⁷

This perspective on the efficacy of grace is unique within Mormonism, as we have seen. Even with this strong language here, however, Wilcox does not quite reach the level of perfecting the efficacy of grace since human agency would be undermined in the process. However, his talk does go further than most in its emphasis on efficacy: as a whole, it strongly underscores the incongruity and priority of grace. This is all affirmed alongside a clear rejection of non-circularity.

8. *Dieter F. Uchtdorf*. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, an apostle of the LDS Church since 2004 and presently second counselor in the First Presidency, presented a talk at the April 2015 General Conference entitled, "The Gift of Grace."⁹⁸ In his talk, Uchtdorf touches on a number of perfections of grace which largely deviate from other LDS treatises on grace (some of which we have seen above). He provides a definition of grace for his audience in terms of efficacy. "The grace of God," Uchtdorf sets forth, is "the divine assistance and endowment of strength by which we grow from the flawed and limited beings we are now into exalted beings of 'truth and light, until [we are] glorified in truth and [know] all things.'"⁹⁹ So Uchtdorf's definition focuses on the efficacy of grace in that it transforms individuals from one state to another.¹⁰⁰ As such, any system that excludes this grace must

⁹⁵ Ibid. In Wilcox's earlier BYU devotional on this topic, he stated "and how long we plan to be there" instead of "what degree of glory we plan on receiving." See Brad Wilcox, "His Grace Is Sufficient," *Brigham Young University 2011–2012 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2012), 2.

⁹⁶ Wilcox, "His Grace Is Sufficient," 35.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁸ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign* (May 2015): 107–10.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 107.

¹⁰⁰ This theme is picked up throughout the talk: "With the gift of God's grace, the path of discipleship does not lead backward; it leads upward" (ibid., 108); "His grace refines us. His grace helps us

be considered illegitimate, as “even if we were to serve God with our whole souls, it is not enough.”¹⁰¹

By identifying this definition of grace as within the realm of bringing about a state of exaltation, he reveals that this definition of grace does not merely pertain to the lower hierarchy of general resurrection and atonement, but rather to the upper hierarchy of theosis, exaltation, and the celestial kingdom.¹⁰² Given what we have seen above, this type of language applied to the upper hierarchy is unique.

In the upper hierarchy Uchtdorf identifies both initial incongruity—that grace comes to those who, when they are given the gift of grace, are unworthy to receive it—and continuing incongruity—that the response to the gift of grace will not be congruous with the worth of the gift itself, since we are often “imperfect, impure, mistake-prone, and ungrateful.” This continuing incongruity is more akin to Robinson than the other authors we have surveyed thus far.

Uchtdorf sets grace within the context of the legal demands of divine justice: “Because we have all ‘sinned ...’ ... and because ‘there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God,’ every one of us is unworthy to return to God’s presence.”¹⁰³ The result is a separation between God and man on the ground of legal requirements “which we are powerless to overcome on our own.”¹⁰⁴ The grace and mercy of God resolve the problem of legal separation: “Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the plan of mercy appeases the demands of justice ‘and [brings] about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.”¹⁰⁵ For Uchtdorf, grace, given through the atonement, both satisfies the demands of justice and is efficacious to turn people to holiness and sanctification. In contrast to other authors above, Uchtdorf, like Robinson, configures a notion of permanently incongruous grace for both the upper and lower hierarchy as appropriate within a system of justice.¹⁰⁶ Other authors, such as Gee and Midgley, found justice and incongruous grace to be fundamentally incompatible and therefore circumscribed their definitions of grace because of their commitments to justice.

With Uchtdorf’s perfection of the incongruity of grace, he contends against non-circularity by appealing to gratitude:

become our best selves” (ibid.); “It refines us, it improves us, it helps us to become more like Him, and it leads us back to His presence” (ibid., 109); “It is by God’s amazing grace that His children can overcome the undercurrents and quicksands of the deceiver, rise above sin, and ‘be perfect[ed] in Christ” (ibid., 108).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 108.

¹⁰² Thus, “It leads to exaltation in the celestial kingdom of our Heavenly Father” (ibid.).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Camille Fronk Olson similarly states that grace “is not fair” because Jesus “gives us his gifts of rebirth, repentance, forgiveness, enabling ability and perfect love when we did not earn or merit them.” This lack of fairness extends to a perfection of the incongruity of God’s grace because humans are “rebellious and proud.” See Olson, “How Great a Debtor,” 161, quoting from the LDS hymn, “I Stand All Amazed.”

Our obedience to God's commandments comes as a natural outgrowth of our endless love and gratitude for the goodness of God. This form of genuine love and gratitude will miraculously merge our works with God's grace.¹⁰⁷

That last comment concerning the "merging" of our works with God's grace is not likely to be a reference to a synergistic account of grace and obedience, especially with Uchtdorf's perfection of efficacy. It likely refers to a particular mode of relating grace and obedience, in which grace produces a response of obedience in gratitude.

To categorize Uchtdorf's presentation on grace, he primarily perfects grace in terms of efficacy: grace is the power that enables obedience. This grace is furthermore incongruous in that it comes to those who are unworthy before and after its bestowal. For Uchtdorf, incongruity does not negate the necessity of response. On the contrary, *the very fact of incongruity establishes the circularity of grace in that it naturally creates a response within the individual*. Thus non-circularity is not perfected. Priority is not necessarily affirmed or denied, but given the trajectory of incongruity, along with the comments that no human response can match the worth of God's gift of grace, priority seems to be evident in Uchtdorf's talk. The necessity of grace is also perfected in that, without grace, the barrier of justice remains between God and man. The colorful language about opening the gates of heaven perfects superabundance.

9. *Terryl L. Givens*. In *Wrestling the Angel*, Terryl L. Givens, professor of literature and religion as well as the James A. Bostwick Professor of English at the University of Richmond, devotes a chapter to the LDS doctrine of salvation.¹⁰⁸ Crucial to his proposal is that the work of soteriology happens within a universal law of justice. To define justice, according to Givens the bestowal of grace must happen within a system of "cosmic order whereby human agency is guaranteed by the unfolding of consequences in accordance with law."¹⁰⁹ Human agency is an inviolable principle that circumscribes the salvation wrought by Christ. It is not the law *per se* that warrants this, but rather "the sanctity of choice (the 'will' to *abide* by law or not) that constrains the consequences of Christ's grace."¹¹⁰ Therefore, the atonement is contained by other principles outside of itself (and outside of God, for Givens): "The spiritual fruits of Christ's atonement . . . salvation itself, can *only* unfold within the larger framework of human agency's inviolability [i.e. justice]."¹¹¹ Thus, how God is able to work through the atonement has been determined by a universal law of agency which constrains God's workings. Again, here we see grace being related to a larger theological system of justice similar to that of McConkie, Midgley, and Gee, though the definition of justice is unique.

¹⁰⁷ Uchtdorf, "The Gift," 109.

¹⁰⁸ Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

Givens opens his discussion on grace by noting the simple meaning of the word “grace” and its necessity within Mormon soteriology:

The simplest meaning of the Pauline word for “grace,” *χρητις* [*siti*], is graciousness, or goodwill, undeserved favor or gift. In that sense, Mormonism’s acceptance of the grace of Christ as the precondition of all human salvation is unambiguous. The Book of Mormon declares both the indispensability of Christ’s grace and the particular gesture to which it applies in its most transcendent form.¹¹²

The terms “indispensability” and “most transcendent form” indicate that grace is being perfected in a particular manner. Here is the perfection of necessity: Grace is a necessary constitutive participant in the drama of LDS soteriology. Givens goes on to fill in what particular role grace plays in salvation. In so doing, he also denies that grace is the only character at play:

Salvation by grace alone, however, as developed by the Reformers, is not a principle consistent with Mormon thought. Salvation by grace, as Nephi wrote, is “after all we can do.” This is because, again as the Book of Mormon says, “mercy cannot rob justice.” God’s generosity cannot overwrite the human right to choose.¹¹³

The appeal to the necessary structure of a law of justice (“Mercy cannot rob justice”) is once again utilized to determine the potential scope and construal of grace in salvation. Givens’s clearest statement about LDS soteriology is that “salvation is a natural consequence of compliance with law, just as God’s own standing as God is the natural and inevitable consequence of his compliance with law—*which eventual compliance is made possible by the gift of Christ’s atonement.*”¹¹⁴ As such, for Givens it is improper to characterize salvation in absolute terms as “gift” or “merit.”¹¹⁵ The gift (grace) of the atonement is such because it creates the *potential* for humans to act in accordance with law, and this action is the effectual and primary contributor to their own salvation.

Thus, Givens denies efficacy because the gift of the atonement only creates the *potential* for the highest form of salvation. Givens’s treatment also denies non-circularity: the atonement is the very event that creates the potential *for* circularity. Priority is affirmed because grace is the initial step in the multi-step plan of salvation. Given perfects initial incongruity when he states that grace is “undeserved favor,” an “utterly undeserved and unearned gift,”¹¹⁶ or “not a gift that God can bestow or reward that humans can earn or merit.”¹¹⁷

10. *Alonzo L. Gaskill*. Associate professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, Alonzo L. Gaskill, contributed to another interfaith

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 238. For more on interpretations of 2 Nephi 25:23, see 2.11 below.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* (italics original).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

dialogue volume titled *Catholic and Mormon*. Although this volume cannot be said to represent the evangelical-Mormon dialogue, of particular interest here is the fact that both Catholics and Mormons are typically represented by Protestants as placing more emphasis on works rather than grace.¹¹⁸

In the chapter called “Grace,” Gaskill begins his short section of the chapter by noting the shared lack of allegiance to *sola fide* by both Catholics and Mormons.¹¹⁹ For Gaskill, this is because of a fear of non-circularity and the notion that “nothing is required of the ‘saved.’”¹²⁰ Although salvation comes through the atonement, “access to that spilt blood requires a degree of effort.”¹²¹ He expresses again this dynamic by saying, “We need God’s grace for salvation, but we need our own works to lay hold upon that grace.”¹²² Here we can see an emphasis on the necessity of grace. At the same time, the circularity and congruity of the gift are also expressed. This becomes more apparent when Gaskill states that although “nothing we can do makes us worthy of God’s grace or gifts,” at the same time, “Latter-day Saints believe that [works] qualify us for the receipt of God’s grace.”¹²³ The simultaneous affirmations of being unworthy of the gift *and* made to qualify for the gift through one’s own effort points towards the conclusion that, for Gaskill, grace is not given incongruously, but rather to those who “qualify.” For Gaskill, this further undermines both the efficacy of grace and its priority. In this regard Gaskill is similar to Gee, Anderson, and Midgley in not articulating any of the six perfections of grace as outlined by Barclay, but rather the *necessity* of grace.

11. *An interpretative test case: 2 Nephi 25:23*. Not only do the different perfections of grace express different structures of Mormon conceptions of salvation, as we have seen, but they also result in different interpretations of key texts. We will take one passage as a test case: 2 Nephi 25:23. This passage is worth addressing because in many ways it is the LDS counterpart to Eph 2:8–9 in the NT. This is the case not simply because the passage has a similar ring and touches on the same basic issue, but because of its prominent use when the topic of salvation by grace is broached. This important passage from the Book of Mormon reads:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

This verse has been traditionally understood to convey that grace is given congruously and with an expectation of circularity. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* addresses the passage in this way: “God bestows these additional, perfecting expressions of grace conditionally, as he does the grace that allows forgiveness of sin. They are given ‘after all we can do’ (2 Ne. 25:23)—that is, in addition to our best

¹¹⁸ As noted in Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), vii.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 39; cf. p. 47.

efforts.”¹²⁴ This passage has been understood by others to suggest a soteriology that is both synergistic and Catholic.¹²⁵

Similarly, John Gee (cf. 2.6 above) finds that the text communicates a particular form of circularity or congruity:

Nephi tells us that he delights in the grace, justice, power, and mercy of Christ (2 Nephi 11:5), presumably because “it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). On the face of it, Nephi says that one cannot earn one’s way into heaven but is still expected to do everything that one can. Individual action is still required.¹²⁶

He further mentions the verse when commenting on the condition that one must be “perfect in Christ” before God’s grace is sufficient for someone (Moroni 10:32–33): “Here Moroni lays down the most explicit conditions for obtaining the grace of God. His conditions are much more specific than Nephi’s ‘after all we can do,’ though no wit [*sic*] less demanding.”¹²⁷

In recent years, however, 2 Nephi 25:23 has been understood to convey incongruity rather than congruity. In Stephen Robinson’s understanding of the passage, he says that *after* is “a preposition of separation rather than a preposition of time.”¹²⁸ He paraphrases the meaning of the verse as “apart from all we can do” or “all we can do notwithstanding” or “regardless of all we can do” or “after all is said and done.”¹²⁹ He adds,

If grace could operate only in such cases, no one could ever be saved, not even the best among us. It is precisely because we *don’t* always do everything we could have done that we need a savior in the first place, so obviously we can’t make everything we could have done a condition for receiving grace and being saved!¹³⁰

Essentially, then, Robinson concludes from this passage that if grace is given congruously then it does not make much sense.

This view of the preposition “after” to convey incongruity is also held by Millet,¹³¹ Gaskill,¹³² Uchtdorf,¹³³ and Olson,¹³⁴ among others, and appears to be gaining popularity. Uchtdorf and Olson provide additional nuance to the verse that should be noted here separately. Uchtdorf states,

¹²⁴ Hafen, “Grace,” 562. Cf. idem, “Atonement,” 6–13.

¹²⁵ Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Comparing LDS Beliefs with First-Century Christianity,” *Ensign* (March 1988): 6–11.

¹²⁶ Gee, “Grace of Christ,” 257.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹²⁸ Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 92.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Millet, *Different Jesus*, 97; Cf. Millet and Johnson, *Bridging the Divide*, 51.

¹³² Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Odds Are, You’re Going to Be Exalted: Evidence that the Plan of Salvation Works* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 2015), 6; Webb and Gaskill, *Catholic and Mormon*, 38–39.

¹³³ Uchtdorf, “The Gift,” 110.

¹³⁴ Olson, “How Great a Debtor,” 167.

I am certain Nephi knew that the Savior's grace *allows* and *enables* us to overcome sin. This is why Nephi labored so diligently to persuade his children and brethren "to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God." After all, *that is* what we can do! And *that is* our task in mortality!¹³⁵

So Uchtdorf takes this verse to lay out *one* condition for salvation, namely to simply be reconciled to God through faith. The last prepositional phrase is redundant to that which was said previously. Olson adds the additional interpretation that "after all we can do" in 2 Nephi 25:23 should be interpreted closely with Alma 24:11, where a similar phrase occurs.¹³⁶ She suggests that in the Book of Mormon the phrase adjures readers to "repent of our sins in faith that Jesus Christ will remit them."¹³⁷

Overall, it is clear that distinct LDS accounts of grace lead to unique interpretations of the relevant texts, and these interpretations, as seen above, are rather incommensurable. To adapt the words of Francis Watson regarding such a phenomenon:

Mormons read the same texts, yet read them differently. They interpret these normative texts in order to interpret the world of contemporary experience in and through them, and their readings of text and world are by no means the same.¹³⁸

Distinct theological commitments make these LDS writers read the same text differently, even though they are part of the same theological tradition. Evangelicals do not need to be reminded of this same phenomenon within their own ranks, but the diversity within Mormonism itself serves as an additional caution against common assumptions, cookie-cutter analyses, and one-size-fits-all approaches to the evangelical-Mormon dialogue.

III. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Given the considerable diversity in Mormon discussions on grace, it is apparent that Mormon conceptions of grace are not monolithic: grace is everywhere in Mormonism, but it is certainly not everywhere the same. Despite the vast diversity, we did notice three common trends in this material. First, Mormons generally do

¹³⁵ Uchtdorf, "The Gift," 110.

¹³⁶ "And now behold, my brethren, since it has been *all that we could do* (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all of our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was *all we could do* to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain" (Alma 24:11; italics added).

¹³⁷ Olson, "How Great a Debtor," 167.

¹³⁸ This is an adaptation of two quotes from Francis Watson: "Paul and his fellow Jews read the same texts, yet read them differently" and "[Paul and his fellow Jews] interpret these normative texts in order to interpret the world of contemporary experience in and through them, and their readings of text and world are by no means the same" (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004], iv, 1 (italics removed from both)).

not perfect efficacy since grace is accessed after a period of effort is provided.¹³⁹ The reason for this is both their optimistic view of human nature and their emphasis on free agency. Second, Mormons are generally concerned to avoid configurations of grace that may contain any sense of non-circularity, and incongruity (initial or final) is rejected because many scholars assume that it logically necessitates and results in non-circularity. Third, Mormons typically perfect incongruity for the lower gifts (i.e. resurrection and immortality) whereas the higher gifts (i.e. exaltation and eternal life) are given congruously. Even in noting these broad trends it is clear that not all of the figures that we analyzed above follow all of them.

We have seen here that Mormon authors perfect grace in different ways. *These different ways of perfecting grace are in many instances fundamentally incommensurable with each other.* Congruity in general was held by Anderson and Gee, but incongruity in general was affirmed by Robinson, Wilcox, and Uchtdorf. McConkie and Millet affirmed incongruity for the lower gifts, whereas Gee suggested that all gifts were congruous. Congruity for the higher gifts was supported by McConkie, but incongruity for the higher gifts was supported by Millet, Wilcox, and Uchtdorf. Anderson and Millet explicitly suggested that the gift begins as incongruous but ends as congruous at the final judgment, but this contrasts sharply with Uchtdorf who suggested a continuous incongruity throughout, even at final judgment. Priority was affirmed by McConkie, Robinson, Millet and Givens, but Midgley and Gee rejected priority. Millet affirmed non-circularity, but Gee, McConkie, Robinson, Wilcox, Givens, and Uchtdorf espoused a form of circularity in one way or another. Uchtdorf rather uniquely perfects efficacy, and, although some scholars such as Wilcox come close to do doing so as well, the other scholars generally do not perfect efficacy.

Grace may be everywhere in Mormonism, but it is certainly not the same. The differences are not simply ones of emphasis or point of view: they constitute fundamentally different, incommensurable configurations and perfections of grace in its relation to soteriology and the essential theological structures of each author. We do not point this out to be polemical, but we note these differences to encourage the participants in the evangelical-Mormon dialogue to acknowledge that LDS theology—or more appropriately *theologies*—of grace cannot be treated as a monolithic entity. In regard to the content of the beliefs of those who write as Mormons within the mainstream LDS church (not speaking of official doctrine), there is no singular Mormon doctrine of grace. If the evangelical-Mormon dialogue is to progress, this must be admitted by both parties.

¹³⁹ For additional expressions of this, see also, e.g., David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness* (compiled by Llewelyn R. McKay; Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1957), 129–30; Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Signature Mormon Classics 6; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature, 1965), 83; Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret, 1974), 213; Gene R. Cook, “Receiving Divine Assistance Through the Grace of the Lord,” *Ensign* (May 1993): 79–81; M. Russell Ballard, “Building Bridges of Understanding,” *Ensign* (June 1998): 62–68; Lund, “Salvation,” 16–23; Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 207; *True to the Faith*, 78; David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” *Ensign* (November 2004): 76–78.

We have also seen how the doctrine of grace is contextualized within certain theological structures which condition the definition and potential perfections of grace. With many authors (Gee, McConkie), a notion of justice necessarily limits the potential perfections of grace: justice demands that grace is not and can never be incongruous. Though the same point is made by Givens, his distinct definition of justice (the inviolability of human freedom) led him to define grace in a different way that allowed at least initial incongruity. In contrast to Mormon authors who propose that justice *limits* the potential perfections of grace (Gee), others (Robinson, Uchtdorf), found that grace must be incongruous *in distinction* from fairness or the demands of justice: grace overcomes the demands of justice and by definition cannot be fair. The disparity between these two different theological proposals demonstrates that LDS authors can configure grace within theological structures that can vary significantly from author to author. For the purposes of dialogue, evangelicals should note that part of understanding LDS doctrines of grace requires investigation into the larger theological structures within which grace is set.

Furthermore, different Mormon authors relate certain perfections in incommensurable ways. McConkie and Anderson suggested that incongruity necessarily entails non-circularity, but Robinson rejected this sort of reasoning, and Uchtdorf inverted it by suggesting that incongruity in fact necessarily entails circularity. Midgley uses the notion of final congruity to reject initial incongruity of God's grace, but Anderson and Millet allow there to be differences between the initial and final stages of grace. Gee uses congruity to reject the priority of grace, but McConkie did not find this to be a proper outworking of congruity because he affirmed both congruity and priority.

In light of this, in the Evangelical-Mormon dialogue, evangelicals should be careful to state that because one perfection is accepted or rejected by a Mormon, that therefore another one is implicitly accepted or rejected. Evangelicals should not, for example, take an LDS writer's emphasis on final congruity and use it to propose that such a writer rejects priority.¹⁴⁰ Mormons not only believe in different perfections of grace but configure the relationship between these perfections in different and incommensurable ways.

By utilizing Barclay's six perfections (and one of our own) it is hoped that those engaged in dialogue will be able to recognize what a given Mormon means by grace on their own terms. We suggest that this taxonomy should be used in the future to facilitate dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals. Certainly this taxonomy can also be extended to ecumenical discussions and interfaith dialogues of other sorts. As we hope readers will recognize by applying the taxonomy to this dialogue, the issue is not *if* Mormons believe in grace, but *how*. Future participants in the evangelical-Mormon dialogue would do well to acknowledge the *existence* of grace in Mormon theology, irrespective of whether they agree with this or that configuration. Polemical rhetoric regarding grace should be avoided if we hope for the dialogue to be fruitful. It is our belief that such clarity will strengthen the dialogue

¹⁴⁰ As suggested by Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 75–78.

and ultimately make it more charitable and substantive on the question of salvation by grace. Our goal is not to prescribe the content of future dialogues or to provide solutions, yet we are concerned to commend a mode of dialogue.

The 8th article of “The Articles of Faith” (LDS) provides the common ground for dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals on the interpretation of our common scriptures. As the first half of the 8th article states, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” Future dialogue about the role of God’s grace in salvation should proceed based on the interpretation of the relevant texts in the original languages, asking how the biblical authors appear to be perfecting grace. Thus, we suggest that the dialogue should proceed by focusing on the exegesis of scripture and by acknowledging the different respective interpretations of grace that result from Mormon and evangelical exegesis. Additionally, our exegesis must be conducted with awareness of our broader theological commitments, including the unique ways we may perfect the notion of grace.

Though the present article focuses on analyzing differing configurations of grace in Mormon discourse, the dialogue should never focus its attention solely on the doctrine of grace *to the exclusion of the gift giver*, since often the authors we surveyed configure their doctrine of grace in light of their theology proper. As we saw above, at times Mormons have appealed to trends within Protestantism or Christendom more broadly in order to show their basic similarities to traditional Christian expressions of grace. For example, we have already seen how Robinson and Millet, in particular, appealed to Arminianism,¹⁴¹ and similarly how some have appealed to Catholic understandings of salvation.¹⁴² Even if such appeals were accurate (and there are good reasons to be suspicious of these claims) the dialogue about grace should be understood in direct connection to the nature of God. Configurations of the gift and configurations of the gift-giver go hand in hand; they are distinct but inseparable in this discussion. Ernst Käsemann puts this point nicely:

The gift ... is never at any time separable from its giver. It partakes of the character of power, in so far as God himself enters the arena and remains in the arena with it.¹⁴³

Indeed, though the evangelical-Mormon dialogue should contextualize its discussion of grace, the gift of grace inherently includes the one who bestows it. It is not enough to appeal to common trends within LDS and evangelical doctrines of grace to the exclusion of the doctrine of God. When one speaks of the gift or grace *of God*, naturally a particular configuration of God comes into play in the discussion. Grace is *divine* grace, and even if Mormons and evangelicals find common ground

¹⁴¹ Cf. 2.2 and 2.4 above.

¹⁴² Peterson and Ricks (“Comparing LDS Beliefs,” 6–11) appeal to Catholicism as a legitimately Christian expression of synergism, which is to be contrasted with Millet (cf. 2.4), who appeals to Arminianism to support synergism in Mormon theology, and also with Robinson (cf. 2.2), who appeals to Arminianism to suggest that Mormonism is *not* synergistic.

¹⁴³ Ernst Käsemann, “Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus,” *ZTK* 58 (1961), 371; idem, “The Righteousness of God,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969), 174, as cited in Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 499.

on their the “perfections” of grace,¹⁴⁴ each doctrine of grace is qualified by potentially radically different conceptions of God himself. Thus, as both parties would agree that God is intimately wrapped up in the gift he gives, grace should never be discussed without dialogue about nature of the giver.

¹⁴⁴ Camille Fronk Olson suggests that of all doctrinal topics explored in the interfaith dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals the understanding of grace might be the closest in agreement. Olson, “How Great a Debtor,” 161, 169. However, she laments the fact that evangelicals do not take her articulation of grace as honest or forthright. See Olson, “How Great a Debtor,” 161–62, 165–68.