

Former LDS President Hinckley – was God once a man?

<http://www.irr.org/mit/hinckley.html>

Dodging and Dissembling Prophet?

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President Gordon B. Hinckley seemed to dodge and dissemble in an August 4, 1997 *Time* cover story when veteran religion writer Richard N. Ostling asked him about the distinctive Mormon teaching that humans can become gods, and that God the Father was once a man (p. 56).



"At first Hinckley seemed to qualify the idea that men could become gods," according to *Time*, "suggesting that 'it's of course an ideal. It's a hope for a wishful thing,' but later he added, 'yes, of course they can.'"

On whether the LDS Church holds that, "God the Father was once a man, he sounded uncertain, 'I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it,'" Hinckley told *Time*.

But is it possible that President Hinckley is not intimately aware of these distinctive doctrines of Mormonism that trace back all the way to Joseph Smith? We at the Institute for Religious Research could not imagine this, so we wrote a letter to the Office of the First Presidency seeking an explanation. In his letter of reply to us, F. Michael Watson, Secretary to the First Presidency had an explanation: *President Hinckley's words were taken out of context.*

Here is the text of our letter to the Office of the First Presidency, and their response, followed by our correspondence with *Time*, which sent us a transcript to prove they did not take Hinckley's words out of context:

August 27, 1997
Office of the First Presidency
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
50 East North Temple Street
Salt Lake City, UT 84150

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am inquiring about a statement attributed to President Gordon B. Hinckley in the August 4, 1997 issue of *Time* magazine.

In response to *Time's* question as to whether or not it is a teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that "God the Father was once

a man," President Hinckley is quoted as replying, "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." (page 56)

Would you please confirm for me whether or not in this statement President Hinckley was accurately quoted? The Institute for Religious Research and Gospel Truths Ministries is frequently asked about the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It would be most helpful to know whether this statement is reliable.

Sincerely,
Luke P. Wilson
Executive Director

In a letter dated September 3, 1997, the Office of the First Presidency replied to the above letter as follows:

Dear Mr. Wilson:

I have been asked to acknowledge your letter of August 27, 1997, with regard to statements reported as made by President Gordon B. Hinckley on the topic of eternal progression in the August 4, 1997, issue of *Time* magazine.

The quotation you reference was taken out of context. The statement was made in response to a question about the actual circumstances and background surrounding remarks given during the funeral services of a man named King Follet, not the doctrine of exaltation and the blessings that await those who will inherit the celestial kingdom.

The Brethren appreciate your interest in this matter and have asked me to extend their best wishes to you.

Sincerely yours,
[signed]
F. Michael Watson
Secretary to the First Presidency

Since, the Office of the First Presidency attributed President Hinckley's puzzling statement to sloppy reporting on *Time's* part, we sent a copy of the First Presidency's

letter to the lead author of the *Time* article, David Van Biema, and asked for his explanation. Here is our letter to *Time*:

September 9, 1997

David Van Biema
Time Magazine
Time & Life Building
Rockefeller Center
New York, NY 10020

Dear Mr. Van Biema:

I am writing to seek clarification regarding a quotation attributed to Gordon B. Hinckley in your cover article on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Day Saints in the August 4, 1997 issue of *Time*.

In response to your question as to whether or not it is a teaching of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that "God the Father was once a man," President Hinckley is quoted as replying, "I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it ... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." (page 56)

Because successive Presidents of the LDS Church, going back to Joseph Smith in 1844, have clearly taught that God was once a man who progressed to become God, I found President Hinckley's answer to your question remarkable. I wrote the Office of the First Presidency to seek clarification, and received a letter stating that President Hinckley was quoted out of context (see enclosed correspondence).

Would you be so kind as to tell me whether you accept as accurate the explanation offered to me in the letter from F. Michael Watson of the Office of the First Presidency, namely, that you quoted President Hinckley out of context.

Sincerely,
Luke P. Wilson
Executive Director

In a telephone conversation, Van Biema told us that *Time* stood by its story as written, and that he had asked *Time* senior correspondent Richard N. Ostling, who conducted the Hinckley interview, to reply to our letter. Here is the text of Ostling's reply, along with

Time's transcript of the relevant part of the recorded interview, which Ostling included (copies of this correspondence is available on request):

Dear Mr. Wilson:

Here's the transcript of my question and President Hinckley's response to me. This came just after a long discussion on whether men can become gods, which the President affirmed. You can judge Mr. Watson's "out of context" assertion for yourself.

Best,
[signed]
R. N. Ostling

Here is the relevant excerpt from President Hinckley's interview with *Time*:

Q: Just another related question that comes up is the statements in the King Follet discourse by the Prophet.

A: Yeah

Q: ... about that, God the Father was once a man as we were. This is something that Christian writers are always addressing. *Is this the teaching of the church today, that God the Father was once a man like we are?*

A: I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it. I haven't heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don't know. I don't know all the circumstances under which that statement was made. I understand the philosophical background behind it. But I don't know a lot about it and I don't know that others know a lot about it.

Notice that President Hinckley's answer, "I don't know that we teach it . . ." comes in direct response to the question, "Is this the teaching of the church today, that God the Father was once a man like we are?" Thus, the statement in the letter from the Office of the First Presidency that President Hinckley's words were quoted out of context — that these were made "in response to a question about the actual circumstances and background surrounding remarks given during the funeral services of a man named "King Follet, not the doctrine of exaltation," — is clearly false.

What Joseph Smith declared proudly and unambiguously — that God the Father was once a man — President Hinckley apparently now wishes to conceal from the public.

For those who are not familiar with Joseph Smith's King Follet Discourse, made in April 7, 1844, here is the text as it appears in the *History of the Church*:

I will prove that the world is wrong, by showing what God is. I am going to enquire after God; for I want you all to know him, and to be familiar with him; and if I am bringing you to a knowledge of him, all persecutions against me ought to cease. You will then know that I am his servant; for I speak as one having authority.

I will go back to the beginning before the world was, to show what kind of being God is. What sort of being was God in the beginning? Open your ears and hear, all ye ends of the earth, for I am going to prove it to you by the Bible, and to tell you the designs of God in relation to the human race, and why he interferes with the affairs of men.

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible, — I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form — like yourselves in all the person, image and very form as a man . . .

. . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see.

. . . he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible.

Here, then, is eternal life — to know the only wise and true God; and 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 before you" (*History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 304-306, see also, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith, pp. 345-347).

It is clear that this doctrine is still taught today. The first chapter of the current edition (1992) of the Latter-day Saint teaching manual, *Gospel Principles* (Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints, 1992 ed., p. 9.), quotes from the above passage under the heading **What Kind of Being Is God?**:

The Prophet Joseph Smith said: "If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all

things by his power, was to make himself visible — I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345). *God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones* (see D&C 130:22).