

Sept. 1, 1980

1775 Andrus Lane  
Provo, Utah 84601

Elder Bruce R. McConkie  
47 East South Temple  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

Dear Elder McConkie:

We have not met, but I have long felt I knew you in a special way because of the reports to me from my father and mother (G. Eugene and Dora England) of your visit to their mission home and field in Minnesota back in about 1955 when I was on my mission in Samoa. And I have had deep admiration for you because of the special power of your direct apostolic witness of Jesus Christ, which I have treasured in your writing and in your unique Conference addresses for many years. I was especially moved by your witness and psalm of praise in last April Conference.

I have written to ask for a very special favor, one that I know would normally be presumptuous to ask of an apostle, but which may be acceptable to you because of some special circumstances: Last fall I gave an address to a group of Honors students at BYU; it was about education and entitled, "The Lord's University." In it, I used the idea of eternal progression, even for God Himself (which I had been taught all my life in the Church and found expounded in the teachings of many prophets and other General Authorities), as an example of a unique and marvelous concept in the Restored Gospel; I felt the concept could increase our motivation at BYU for continued, vigorous education so we can become the "fully anointed" University of the Lord President Kimball has prophesied. I had learned that your son, Joseph, had seen an earlier version of the talk and disagreed with it, so I invited him to give a response at the meeting when I gave the lecture, which he did. I was surprised to learn from that response that he considered me out of harmony with the teachings of Hyrum Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, and yourself. I had certainly never intended to be nor thought I was. I knew those teachings (and teachings by the other prophets as well) emphasized the perfect knowledge and power of God in our sphere of existence and in relation to our salvation. But I also had always understood that the prophets from Joseph Smith on had taught--and it was particularly emphasized by Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, and John A. Widtsoe--that there are spheres of existence beyond ours, where God and his Father, etc., have advanced to and where they are continuing to progress in ways we do not fully understand but can look forward to enjoying ourselves if we are faithful; and I had understood that this doctrine does not contradict or endanger our absolute confidence in God's perfect knowledge and power (especially power to save us) in our sphere.

Some Mormon and most non-Mormon historians in recent years have professed to see an "evolution" in the Church's teachings about God, from more absolute, traditional Christian categories to the plurality and progression of Gods, and then in the past few decades some have seen a "return" to more traditional, orthodox Christian ideas. And indeed some LDS writers and teachers in recent years have claimed that there is no possibility of God progressing in any sphere because he is already omnipotent and supreme in an absolute sense, while some non-LDS critics have agreed with this position and attack the Church as heretical because of teachings about the plurality and progression of Gods. I have been perplexed by all these people because they seemed to ignore the teachings of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, referred to in consistent ways throughout our history by all the Church Presidents since: that God should be called "all-powerful" and "all-knowing" in reference to our sphere and our salvation, but He is not literally all-powerful because he cannot create the elements or intelligences out of nothing or force intelligences to salvation--and, in fact, there is a God above God, presumably supreme to our God. I knew, for instance, that President Joseph Fielding Smith had, like Joseph and Hyrum Smith, used the passage in I Corinthians 8:5-6 about "gods many and lords many" to explain how there are ultimately many progressing gods, but pertaining to us and our salvation there is

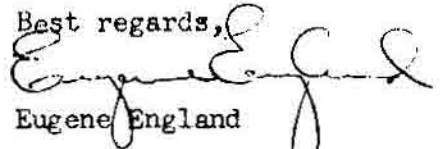
but one perfect "God, the Father." I had understood your own strong statements about God's perfections and his no longer progressing as applying only to our God, the Father, and only to our sphere of existence, and thus I had seen no disagreement with my understanding of earlier prophets who have emphasized God's progression in knowledge and power beyond our sphere.

After last fall's lecture, I got a copy of your son's response, studied it carefully, and decided that his strong feeling that I was out of harmony required that I rethink the whole matter. So I have, this past year, carefully and prayerfully gone back over all the pertinent sources I could find and have written the enclosed paper about my findings. The key to harmonizing both God's perfection and His progression seems to me the concept developed by Brigham Young, I think from Doctrine and Covenants 93:30, that there are many spheres of existence, of different advancement (possibly involving different dimensions), and if we are talking only about ours certain truths and language are appropriate (such as perfection), but if we are considering spheres of existence far advanced beyond ours then other truths and language about God are equally appropriate (such as progression). But I recognize that I could certainly be wrong, that I could be interpreting Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and others incorrectly, or that subsequent revelation has invalidated what they said. I accept the authority of the living prophets and not only want to be but assume I am in full harmony with them, including, of course, with you. If not, I want to be put right.

It would be gracious of you to read my paper and give me some response if you feel there is need. If you have any question about my ability or good faith before you take the time to read my work, you could check with Elder Boyd K. Packer or Elder David B. Haight, both of whom know well my mind and spirit.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

  
Eugene England

cc. Elder Boyd K. Packer  
Elder David B. Haight  
Joseph F. McConkie