A Theology of Collective Sin and Communal Grace: 
Toward a Radical Soteriology
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The purpose of this paper is to provide the groundwork for a Mormon and communitarian approach to soteriology. Soteriology is the branch of theology that deals with salvation from sin. Traditional soteriology deals with questions about the nature of salvation primarily at the level of the individual. The question is how an individual will attain her/his salvation. Pelagianism claims that an individual can and must do good works to attain salvation and that Christ’s atonement and grace is necessary only for salvation from death. Semi-pelagianism claims that an individual can and must do good works but that Christ’s atonement is necessary to make up for where the individual will inevitably fail. Arminianism claims that Christ’s grace must enable any good works on our part but that we must also be willing to accept this grace. Calvinism claims that Christ’s grace saves us, good works are a by-product of this grace, and if His grace is aimed at us, then we have no choice but to accept it. These are just a few of the possible heretical and orthodox views about the nature of salvation from sin and the role played by grace.

These views share the perspective that salvation is distributed individually—i.e., whether or not one individual receives salvation is independent of whether or not another individual receives salvation. Sin is something that we do as individuals and each sin is a black mark against our individual names in the book of life. Grace is the white-out that erases the black mark, because Christ “pays” or atones for our sin in some other way. The point is that life is like high school. In the end, what matters are our individual “grades” (earned or not) and not what we can do as a group. This is soteriological individualism. The doctrines of the Restoration lead us to reject soteriological individualism and thus demand a radically communitarian perspective on the nature of salvation.

Additionally, soteriological individualism is associated with the anthropology of philosophical modernism and politics of classical liberalism. The pelagian version of soteriological individualism is associated with the economic ethic behind liberalism: namely meritocracy. Since soteriological individualism should be rejected, so should these latter views. In their place, Restored Christianity demands a radical politics that places priority on the flourishing of the community and constructs its economics on the interchange of the gift.

This paper is really a précis to a longer chapter on these issues in my forthcoming book Partakers of the Heavenly Gift: A Political Reading of Mormon Theology. I apologize if some of the arguments seem more like sketches of arguments.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First, I clarify the different manifestations of soteriological individualism and associate its doctrines with its counterparts in modernist anthropology and political liberalism. Second, I show that the most defensible version of an individualist soteriology is Pelagianism. Third, I entertain scriptural passages that are relevant to this issue and show that they point to a rejection of an individualist approach. Fourth, I advocate theological arguments against individualism.
Fifth, I formulate a purely philosophical argument against individualism. Finally, I briefly sketch a communal alternative to soteriological individualism and discuss what it means for our political stance.

_Soteriological Individualism, Modernism and Liberalism_

Soteriological individualism is the view that salvation is an event that (i) happens to an individual and (ii) does not rely in any essential way on what happens to other individuals, groups of individuals, or institutions. The concept of an _individual_ is fairly clear, as is the notion of a _group of individuals_. However, that _institutions_ are different from groups of individuals is probably not as clear. An _institution_ is a set of relationships that obtain between individuals where these relationships are all aimed at achieving a certain set of common goals. The use of the word ‘aimed’ implies that an institution has intentionality, but it is important to note that this is not necessarily the intentionality of one individual within an institution. In some important sense, it is a common intentionality, although it need not be entirely manifested in any particular individual.

Soteriological individualism is manifest in the idea of your own personal Jesus. When someone asks whether or not YOU have been saved by accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, she or he is assuming that soteriological individualism is true. Soteriological individualism privatizes salvation. Salvation is a personal matter between you and God. And since religion is essentially about salvation, religion itself is privatized by soteriological individualism. This has the effect of the separation of Church and State and more deleteriously it has the effect of separating the sacred from communal life.

Moreover, soteriological individualism makes morality, insofar as it is intimately linked with salvation, a matter of individual character. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are terms that apply primarily to individuals or their individual endeavors and only secondarily to groups or institutions. Sin is something that you or I do and only secondarily something that a group does. A group sins only because each member of the group sins.

Grace is something that happens to you individually. Miraculously you find that your past is blotted out of history and you remember your sins no more. It’s like someone comes alone and expunges your heavenly record like they do when juvenile offenders become adults.

Soteriological individualism is related to some important ideologies of Modernity. I will identify two of them. First, Modernist philosophical anthropology is essentially Cartesian in a very important sense. It assumes that the world of humanity is composed of individuals that are mentally and consciously separate from each other and whose minds stand (in some sense) separate from the world. Indeed, in Kant’s or Wittgenstein’s hyper-modernism the self stands outside the world. Such a Modernism assumes that human beings are “atoms” that cannot be split without destruction and cannot be merged without loss of self. It assumes that the self/mind persists in an unchanged state behind the buzzing confusion of experience. It assumes that humans are primarily rationality machines that should act only after a reflective consideration of their propositional attitudes. This anthropology is not dependent on Descartes’ dualism, but can also be present in physicalist philosophies of mind.
Second, Liberalism is the dominant way of understanding the problematic of the theory of politics. Liberalism starts with Modernist anthropology and develops its political theories around this metaphysic. Society is atomistic, composed of a bunch of individuals. The central problem is how we should deal with conflict between individuals. The state is justified only insofar as it reduces these conflicts. Protection from other individuals is the main reason for the state. Moreover, the state should do what is minimally required to preserve the maximum amount of freedom for all. Hence, only minimal regulation of the economy is permitted. For the most part, private and egoistic interests drive the economy. Liberalism tells us that the individual is responsible to “save” herself or himself in a political and economic sense.

The economics implied by Liberalism is capitalism. This economics is justified by a view that says that each individual should get only what she “merits” through her own work. I will refer to this view as meritocracy.

Soteriological individualism, Modernism and Liberalism are related in fairly obvious ways. Modernism provides the metaphysics that supports our way of organizing society and our way of hoping for salvation. Soteriological individualism helps us to justify our politics since it encourages us to think of ourselves first. Behind all of this is a practical egoism not to be confused with psychological egoism. It is not that we always act in our own interests, it is that we take the actional stance of acting for ourselves as opposed to acting for or on behalf of a community.

**Individualism and Pelagianism**

I believe that the only plausible version of soteriological individualism is Pelagianism. This is the view that was dominant in Mormon discourse throughout the early part of the 20th century and is certainly tacit in contemporary Mormon practice. The most prominent example is the temple recommend interview. In this interview, the Bishop acts as a judge in Zion and determines whether the interviewee is “worthy” to receive a temple recommend. This judgment is based on the extent to which she keeps certain commandments such as the word of wisdom, the law of chastity, the law of tithing, etc. This implies that worthiness is based on one’s actions. It is completely within one’s power.

There are other versions of soteriological individualism in Christianity. These include Arminianism and Calvinism. But imagine saying to your Bishop that you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, even if you haven’t been paying your tithing. This is just not going to be enough. Moreover, these views are not plausible because they conflict with the tradition of individualist concepts of justice. Pelagianism is the only coherent alternative once you accept individualism.

In an article published in Faith and Philosophy (Vol. 20, No. 1, Jan 2003), I argued that Pelagianism must be correct, given individualist assumptions. Although the focus of that paper was different than this current article, it implies that either soteriological individualism is false or Pelagianism is true. The argument is simple. We can only be held individually morally accountable for those actions over which we have individual and complete control. Salvation should be justly distributed to individuals. So, it should be distributed to those who have done all that they can. Therefore, all you can do is enough for salvation. Hence, Pelagianism is true.
The problem with Arminianism is that it says that all we really need to do is accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Any good works that comes from this (even if necessarily) are superfluous. But surely salvation does not turn on such a minimal act, especially if this act is interpreted as the act of adopting the propositional attitude that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Of course, this fits well with the Modernist view that we are primarily contemplators of propositions and that we act only after having decided what to believe.

Calvinist soteriology is surely the most counter-intuitive view ever offered in philosophical theology. It says that no act that is under the control of the individual matters. How could God justly hold people responsible for what they cannot control? This position is so contrary to what any of us believe about justice that I am continually amazed that anyone takes Calvinism seriously.

The problem with my argument in favor of Pelagianism is not, as Arminians or Calvinists might believe, that it assumes that we should only be held individually accountable for those actions over which we have control (Kant’s “ought implies can” principle). Instead, the problem lies with the claim that salvation should be distributed to individuals. Otherwise, Pelagianism must be true.

**Scripture against Individualism**

I believe that the foremost defender of individualism in Mormon scripture is Korihor. He also happens to be the foremost defender of pelagianism and (its economic counterpart) meritocracy. Korihor says,

There [can] be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fare[s] in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospers according to his genius, and ... every man conquered according to his strength ... (Alma 30: 17)

Korihor has to reject the atonement because he rejects the idea that one should receive anything that one cannot “earn” on his or her own. Korihor’s view of soteriology is that God offers no salvation. It’s every man or woman for him or herself and the only salvation is whatever you acquireon your own. Contrary to the comparisons made between Korihor and leftist thinkers like Marx, Korihor’s view is much more like defenders of capitalism such as Ayn Rand. He anticipates social darwinism: only the strong survive in the game of life. So, in calling Korihor an anti-Christ the Book of Mormon roundly condemns these individualist views of economy. Capitalism and Social Darwinism are anti-Christian.

King Benjamin says,

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the rich we have of every kind? (Mosiah 4:19)
This is not just an attack on pelagianism. Benjamin is talking to the community as a whole. His main criticism is the way the people fail to take care of the poor. The main downfall is a communal downfall.

Theology Against Individualism

According to traditional Mormon folk theology, exaltation is the state of being with or in the presence of one’s family and with God the Father. Surely, this relationship is a reflexive one: if I am in the presence of God and my family, then they are in my presence as well. Therefore, in order for me to be exalted, my family must also be exalted.

This raises all sorts of interesting problems. I am more or less exalted depending on whether more or less of my family are exalted. What if my sister makes it but my two brothers do not? What if I do everything that the Church tells me to do, but no one in my family does what she or he needs to do to be exalted. How could I possibly be counted as exalted then?

I know many Latter-day Saints who have wrestled with this problem—especially parents with wayward children. They believe that the promise of Mormonism is being with your family, but then they find that their family doesn’t live the Mormon life. They are left in a state of soteriological contradiction. The angst that results is not to be belittled and it is certainly not explored sufficiently in Mormon discourse. Indeed, I would venture that it is one of the most basic sources of religious angst in our community.

However, this whole way of thinking about the issue of exaltation is seriously misguided. It assumes that exaltation is distributed individually.

We might propose that it makes more sense to talk about the exaltation of a group than the exaltation of an individual. Suppose that a group of individuals are exalted if and only if they live together in the kind of community that causes each one of them to flourish and meet her or his potential through relationships with others. It is plausible to say that this is what it means to be in the presence of another: the possession of relationships that are mutually benefiting.

This view of exaltation solves the problem of conflict encountered by individualist soteriologies. I am saved because I live in the presence of my “family”. This does not mean that my biological brother is part of my community. My family just is that community that decides to live together as a community with God. Jesus says, “Who are my mother and brothers?” And looking at his disciples around him says, “Here are my mother and my brothers.” (see Mark 3: 31-35) “Family values” are community values. The community of disciples is the family that is forever. My exaltation doesn’t rely on my biological brothers, but it does rely on my being part of a community of Christ. Being part of a community is salvation. Salvation can happen only to a group of individuals and not to an individual alone.

1 “Exaltation” in Mormon theology is essentially a form of hyper-salvation (equated with being with God and one’s family). Everyone is saved in the sense of living in the type of world that is better than this one and is devoid of physical suffering and death.
In Mormon theology, are we radically dependent on Christ, but we are equally
dependent on each other. We are exalted to the extent that others are exalted. Exaltation
is not a personal, private, and individual quest. It is a collective adventure.

A second theological argument against soteriological individualism is based on
the fact that Mormonism, unlike Christianity, embraces materialism. This is not the view
that a person is a collocation of physical atomic parts. It is the view that persons
(including God) always had, have and always will have location in space and in
time/history. It is the view that they are within the world and not outside of it.

Just as a society has a history that helps to determine its identity, individual
persons are whom they are based on their histories, located in their memories. This
Lockean criterion of personal identity has radical consequences once we drop the implicit
Cartesianism in Locke’s account. Materialism implies that memories are themselves
located in space/time/history. They have their own histories and will change over time.

Joseph Smith’s memories/accounts of his First Vision changed over time and
were affected by different present interests. Think of your memories of childhood. No
one can doubt that these change over time. And it is not necessarily true that this means
that they lose their versimilitude. I can now remember how cruel I was to my siblings.
But when I was a teenager this cruelty was not part of my memory.

Memory is not primarily propositional. If it were then it would be enough for
someone to have a belief about the past to have a memory of it. I believe that Napoleon
was defeated at Waterloo, but I don’t have a memory of it.

Collective memories are primarily affective and not reflective. Parades and the
other public celebrations that constitute our collective memories involve the sensational.
They are presented to the eyes and ears. They do not make claims or assert propositions.
Different members of the celebration interpret it in different ways. They have different
beliefs about the propositional significance of the public re-enactment. However, the
public display unites nevertheless. It supplies us with a common imaginary and auditory
vocabulary.

Individual memory is not as different from collective memory as it would seem.
Individual memory is also primarily affective and not reflective. Sometimes it is not
even conscious. It is physical. When in London, I look to the left to see if there are any
cars. This happens even though I am well aware that they drive on the left side of the
road. I am almost hit time and time again because my physical memory is so strong that
it overpowers my conscious, reflective state.

Nostalgic memories flood into my mind when I inhale the fresh spring air in May.
Memories are closely connected to the way things smell. Olfactory memories are
primarily affective. The stench of our history lingers in the air and helps to determine our
personal identity.

This is far from what Locke had in mind. Lockean memories are merely mental
after-images on the screen of our mental theater. We view the world like a film critic
without any contact with the outside and without any sense of the real context of filming
or living.

But Locke is wrong and the veil of perception is a philosopher’s abstraction. We
are in the world not merely viewing it through mediated perceptions and memories of
perceptions. We are here in the thick of things. There is blood running through our veins
and ammonia on our skin. I shake your hand. It is pleasant or it is sticky. You can give
me a lobotomy and take part of my brain out of my head. I can even be splattered all over the highway in a car accident.

We are in the world in the most radical sense possible. My memories are in my head, for the most part. But this can change since my head is in the world. And memory extends far outside our grey-mattered skulls into notebooks and hard drives. Soon, we will be able to be more closely connected to computing devices. Thought is enough to move prosthetic limbs. Thought may soon be enough to throw switches in the hardware of computational devices attached to our heads. Access to computer memories will be virtually identical to access to skull-located memory. Your memories could soon become my memories. And computer hacking may soon become a way of violating someone’s personal mental space. This is and always was a possibility if radical materialism is true.

The mind is right here in the world. It is part of the world. It is vague and intertwined with other material stuff. Its boundaries aren’t clear.

What is the upshot of all this sci-fi philosophy? Lockean identity undermines Cartesian identity. Because of the materiality of memory, the atomistic self partially dissolves into its environment. Without this self, we have no basis for soteriological individualism. I act in my body. My body acts, or rather, inter-acts. But my body is vague and intertwined. It is constantly changing. It is primarily what it is only within a physical and historical context. It makes little sense to consider it (or me) independent of a material history and spatial location. Ultimately this ontological intertwining extends to other so-called individuals, just by being part of the material world. Resistance is futile. We are all part of this historico-material world. And ultimately, the sharp boundaries between our memories, personal identities, and individual acts are illusory.

**Philosophy against Individualism**

The main philosophical argument against soteriological individualism is the argument from moral luck. Most actions depend on one’s moral luck or lack thereof. Someone is morally lucky just in case she or he is able to engage in a morally praiseworthy action only because of circumstances that are outside her control. So, for example, a very ugly person is not going to have the same opportunities to fornicate as a very beautiful person—if both of them fornicate, then their actions cannot be considered to have the same moral weight. Or, more seriously, a person born with Same-Sex Orientation is morally unlucky from the perspective of a conservative interpretation of Mormon sexual theology. He or she certainly cannot be properly judged on a par with those whose attraction is to the opposite sex.

Growing up in the wealthiest country in the history of the world gives us opportunities that we would not have otherwise. These opportunities include moral opportunities. We can do much more to alleviate suffering in the world than any people could have ever done in the past.

The range of life situations are so radically different across the spectrum of humanity that it would be very surprising if any of our actions were comparable at the individual level.

But this is exactly what is assumed by soteriological individualism, if we couple this view with the view that morality is reflected in God’s commands. A command-oriented perspective applies rules to individuals equally in all (or most) situations.
Compare this to the example of the temple-recommend interview. There is supposed to be very little flexibility with respect to who counts as temple-worthy. Moral luck will inevitably have a lot to do with whether someone is worthy. This supposes that, for the most part, our individual actions are comparable with respect to the individual moral weight.

There is no getting away from the fact that our religion is a religion of God’s commands. Obedience to commands is central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. But this is incompatible with our claims about moral luck and soteriological individualism. Therefore, soteriological individualism should be rejected.

If we assume that salvation is something that happens at the group level, then we can avoid these problems. It makes sense to compare the actions of two individuals with different moral luck if we are only comparing how these actions affect the group. It also makes sense to allow for some exceptions (which doesn’t make sense from an individualist perspective). Fairness of individual application no longer matters from a communal perspective.

**A Radical Soteriology**

The two great commandments are to love God and to love one another. This love is not the passive romantic love of Hollywood. It is not something that just happens to you. It is primarily relational and active. Being relational it requires another. It cannot be unrequited. God loves us and asks us to love him and each other in return. When we stand in these (necessarily) mutual relationships with God and each other we are in a community. We are no longer just a group of individuals. We have all things in common and are partakers of the heavenly gift (4 Nephi). This is salvation. It can happen right now and it has the effect of radically re-ordering society.

Producing a true community is necessarily a political act. It requires the rejection of institutions (the state, corporations, and even churches) that hinder community by producing divisions and rejecting love as the basis of society. Love can only happen among equals. So, this is the content of the Mormon doctrine of deification. We must become equal partners, members of God’s community in order to be saved. And this implies that such a society is radically egalitarian. The Kingdom of God can have no king. God had to become one of us as much as it is the case that we have to become gods.

Sin is alienation—or, in other words, the lack of a relationship of love. Adam and Eve’s actions take them out of the presence of God. They are alienated from God, and eventually from each other. Because of humanity’s state of sin, we are born into alienation and we need to be brought back together: we need an “at-one-ment.” Salvation from sin happens when we are brought back together. We participate in this salvation (it requires our cooperation), but we cannot go it alone. We need each other. And the whole community needs the miraculous act of Christ’s grace and condescension.

Grace is a gift. A gift is the primary act of our heavenly economy: both spiritually and materially. A gift is something for which there is nothing expected in return. In community, there is no exchange because all is common property and are equal partakers of the heavenly gift. I don’t expect you to paint my house just because I helped you brick your fireplace. In fact, it’s not “my” house and “your” fireplace. Grace is a name for the
currency of an economy that emerges from love. Christ’s grace is the gift that he gives and that we all give in every aspect of our lives in community.

This soteriology has radical implications for our practices. It implies that we cannot fetishize the concepts of righteousness or worthiness. It also implies that there is no personal religion or personal salvation separate from communal religion and salvation. By its essence, true religion cannot be purely private, since complete privacy implies alienation.

Moreover, a communitarian soteriology implies that we must be radically political and not neutral. We can no longer embrace the degeneration of western society. Capitalism is a fundamentally anti-Christian way of organizing economic exchange. We must reject it and place the gift at the center of our economy. Compassion cannot be conservative in a society where charity is seen as an economic weakness (or tax-break).

Family values are really community values as is made clear in the gospel of Mark and in the notion of exaltation in Mormon folk theology. And the radical egalitarianism implied by love’s place at the center of community means that we must tolerate radical diversity. Persuasion is the only way to influence others while maintaining this Christian relationship.

In short, we must become revolutionaries. John Kerry is right: Americans can do better. But he is wrong in thinking that this means a modest change or tinkering with the current system. Christianity requires nothing less than a complete overthrowing of the Empire, whether it is Roman or American.