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As Latter-day Saints, we talk of Christ, rejoice in Christ, and preach of Christ.

Latter-day Saint Christianity

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During the last fifteen years, a substantial percentage of my time has been devoted to interactions and dialogues with persons of other faiths, particularly with what have come to be known as traditional Christian religions. This effort has resulted in some of the most enriching hours of my life as I have read and compared and contrasted and spoke and listened and corrected and been corrected. My heart has opened and expanded in ways that I never would have supposed, and my curiosity has ripened into appreciation and respect for men and women whose theological positions differ from my own. It has been an effort to better understand doctrinal similarities and differences between Christians who *insist* they are Christian and Latter-day Saints who *profess* to be Christian. I have been willing to take seriously the writings and sermons of those not of my faith and to follow the counsel of President Gordon B. Hinckley, former President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Note some of his messages to the Latter-day Saints:

We must not become disagreeable as we talk of doctrinal differences. There is no place for acrimony

We can respect other religions and must do so. We must recognize the great good they accomplish. We must teach our children to be tolerant and friendly toward those not of our faith. We can and do work with those of other religions in the defense of those values which have made our civilization great and our society distinctive.”¹

We must never forget that we live in a world of great diversity. The people of the earth are all our Father’s children and are of many and varied religious persuasions. We must cultivate tolerance and appreciation and respect one another. We have differences of doctrine. This need not bring about animosity or any kind of holier-than-thou attitude.²

Now, brethren and sisters, let us . . . do a little better than we have done in the past. We can all be a little kinder, a little more generous, a little more thoughtful of one another. We can be a little more tolerant and friendly to those not of our faith, going out of our way to show our respect for them. We cannot afford to be arrogant or self-righteous. It is our obligation to reach out in helpfulness, not only to our own but to all others as well. Their interest in and respect for this Church will increase as we do so.³

I am persuaded that President Hinckley meant what he said and said what he meant. I am simple enough in my faith to believe that one of the most significant endeavors with which we can be involved is the sweet labor of love, of conversation, of give and take, of sharing and comparing and contrasting and learning—the work of religious dialogue, the effort associated with coming to better understand others and thereby better understand ourselves. I have learned much about Christian history and theology through building friendships and bridges of understanding with men and women throughout and beyond this country, and, in the process, have learned half as much about Mormonism. One cannot seriously engage the thought and heart of another without being touched and, in some cases, transformed. My friend John Stackhouse of Regent College in Vancouver, BC, has written the following in his book, *Humble Apologetics*:

If I go no further than to think that it’s okay for you to do your thing and I to do mine, then where is the incentive to seriously consider whether I should adopt your thing and abandon mine?⁴

Our objective as those called to love God and our neighbors—to seek their best interests—is to offer whatever assistance we can to our neighbors toward their full maturity: toward full health in themselves and in their relationships, and especially toward God. Our mission must be as broad as God’s mission, and that mission is to bring *shalom* to the whole world. In short, when it comes to our neighbors, our goal is to help our neighbors to be *fully converted* into all God wants them to be.⁵

It may be that we disagree religiously because one of us has a superior interpretation of the same reality we’re all talking about. It may also be, however, that we disagree because we are talking about different parts of a complex reality. And

it may conceivably be a matter of both problems. The skillful apologist tries to sort that all out with her neighbor as well as she can.⁶

If one is not sufficiently sympathetic, not sufficiently vulnerable to changing one’s mind, not sufficiently willing to entertain the idea that these people might just be right—then it is most unlikely that one will enter into that religion far enough to understand its essence.⁷

Defining Ourselves

I am wholly persuaded that it is appropriate and fair-minded for a people or a religious body to be permitted to define themselves. Stephen Robinson and I sat with three representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention in Kansas City in 1997. After six or seven hours of conversation, questions, answers, misstatements, and rebuttals, one of their number turned to us with great earnestness and said: “Steve, Bob, if we could only convince you to give your lives to Jesus. Turn to him now. He will receive you with open arms.” It’s hard to describe what I felt at the time: How do I kindly but firmly proclaim, “Oh marvel of marvels and wonder of wonders, as a Latter-day Saint I have already found Jesus Christ, have tasted of the sweet fruit of his gospel, have experienced firsthand his cleansing and transforming power, and I have a hope in him that has banished doubt and fear from my soul”? I have wondered how those three might have felt if Stephen or I had said: “Bill, Ted, and Eric, if we could only convince you to accept the truthfulness of the Bible, to receive it as the word of God, to study its pages and allow it to enlighten your minds and hearts and bring you closer to the Master.” It would be like turning to a devout Roman Catholic and pleading with her to acknowledge Mary as a critical part of the Catholic faith or like bearing testimony to a Muslim of the significant role of Muhammad.

Most anti-Mormon polemic is filled with statements and declarations from our own people in the past that are at best an anomaly and at worst a distortion of what the Church believes and stands for today. While Mormonism will forevermore be linked to a past containing visions and revelations and angels and golden plates, we must, if we truly admit to being a “living church” (D&C 1:30), focus more and more upon *what the Church is now and what it is becoming*. My friend Joseph McConkie made an observation once that I think I will never forget. He said: “We have the scholarship of the early brethren to build upon; we have the advantage of additional history; we have inched our way up the mountain of our destiny and now stand in a position to see things with greater clarity than did they We live in finer houses

than did our pioneer forefathers, but this does not argue that we are better or that our rewards will be greater. In like manner our understanding of gospel principles should be better housed, and we should constantly be seeking to make it so. There is no honor in our reading by oil lamps when we have been granted better light.”⁸

This mirrors the sentiments of Elder James E. Talmage, expressed in 1932: “The revelation of fundamental truths,” he explained, “through the prophets is progressive, and additional light is given through successive revelations.”⁹ In that light, I would ask simply that those who wish to discuss or investigate or even challenge Mormonism to engage the twenty-first-century Church. Some things have changed, and that’s just as it should be. Some things are taught differently, but that’s just as it should be. Is it not the case that our understanding, our grasp, our focus, or our emphasis upon a given doctrine may change over time? I hope so, for that is what members of a living church do.

I have very happy memories of attending church as a little boy. I loved the people in the Hiawatha Street chapel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I enjoyed being with them. I loved our fun activities, our dance and speech festivals, our trips to the stake farm in Kentwood. I loved being taught by the people there, and I still have warm and tender feelings associated with what I was taught by those dedicated (and now deceased) Latter-day Saints. But I don’t remember learning much about the scriptures, except for a few Bible stories. In fact, I don’t remember ever reading the scriptures in church or at home when I was young. I do remember many uplifting talks on the Word of Wisdom, on chastity, on missionary work, on being honest and faithful. To quote Elder Neal A. Maxwell, one Church leader: “In my Primary days, we sang ‘Give, Said the Little Stream’ (*Children’s Songbook*, 236)—certainly sweet and motivating but not exactly theologically drenched. Today’s children, as you know, sing the more spiritually focused ‘I’m Trying to Be like Jesus’ (*Children’s Songbook*, 78–79).”¹⁰ In my boyhood congregation and in my home, doctrinal teachings weren’t discussed too often; that is in marked contrast with things today. The doctrines were there in the scriptures all along, but only in recent decades have we begun to talk of Christ, rejoice in Christ, preach of Christ on a regular basis. Why? Because we want to be accepted into mainstream Christianity? Hardly. No, more than ever before we sense the need, so that we and our children “may know to what source [we] may look for a remission of [our] sins” (2 Nephi 25:26). “In recent years,” Elder Bruce C. Hafen observed,

“we Latter-day Saints have been teaching, singing, and testifying much more about the Savior Jesus Christ. I rejoice that we are rejoicing more.”¹¹

Latter-day Saint Christianity?

Who, exactly, is a Christian? The outcry that Latter-day Saints are not Christian is a relatively recent phenomenon. I don’t remember reading that the nineteenth-century attackers of the Mormons in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, or even the Great Basin referred to us as non-Christian. They disagreed with us, of course. They thought the idea of a First Vision or of angels or gold plates was bizarre. But I don’t remember reading that the early Saints were called non-Christian. Nor do I remember ever being called a non-Christian as a boy growing up in the Bible Belt. I really did not hear much of this kind of rhetoric until the 1970s, when Walter Martin was in his heyday and published his *Kingdom of the Cults*. Well, what are some standard definitions of a Christian?

From the 1828 Webster’s dictionary:

A believer in the religion of Christ.

A professor of his belief in the religion of Christ.

A real disciple of Christ; one who . . . studies to follow the example, and obey the precepts, of Christ.

Relating to Christ, or to his doctrines, precepts and example.

From *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*:

A member of a particular sect using this name.

A civilized human being; a decent, respectable person.

From the *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*:

Although certainty is not possible, the term was likely coined by non-Christians. Whatever the origin, ‘Christian’ is the term that was increasingly applied to Jesus’ followers in the late first and early second centuries.

From the *Holman Bible Dictionary*:

A Christian is an adherent of Christ; one committed to Christ; a follower of Christ.

In the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* by Donald K. McKim:

Name applied originally in Antioch to followers of Jesus Christ (Acts 11:26) and now used to designate those who believe in Jesus Christ and seek to live in the ways he taught.

From The Amsterdam Declaration (2000):

A Christian is a believer in God who is enabled by the Holy Spirit to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in a personal relationship of disciple to master and to live the life of God's kingdom. The word Christian should not be equated with any particular cultural, ethnic, political, or ideological tradition or group. Those who know and love Jesus are also called Christ-followers, believers and disciples.¹²

More than any other single reason for exclusion, I have been told that Mormons aren't Christian because we do not accept the creeds that sought to define the relationship between the members of the Godhead, beginning with Nicea in AD 325. We do believe there are three members of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that each of the members of the Godhead possesses all of the attributes of Godliness in perfection; and that the love and unity that exist among these three persons—indeed, they are infinitely more one than they are separate—is of such magnitude that they constitute a divine community that is often referred to in scripture, including the Book of Mormon, as “one eternal God” (see 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:27, 36; 28:10; Mormon 7:7). Latter-day Saint teachings on this topic might be referred to as a variation on the concept of social trinitarianism.



Photo by Kent P. Jackson

Site of Constantine's palace in İznik, Turkey, ancient Nicea, where the Council of Nicea took place in AD 325.

Second, Mormons are not considered Christians by many within the Christian world because we are not a part of the Christian tradition, or the historic line of Christian churches. We are not Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. What is, then, the Latter-day Saint Christian genealogy? One only has to reflect for a moment to realize that Mormonism did not spring into existence *ex nihilo*. That is, most of those who followed Joseph Smith and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came from Protestant traditions—indeed, large numbers of Methodists converted to Mormonism—and so their link with Protestantism and thus Catholicism would be the same as that of a Protestant or Catholic today. Latter-day Saints hold in honorable remembrance such notables as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Clement, Origen, Jerome, Wycliffe, Tyndale, and so forth. They are “our people,” our Christian heroes as well as those of more traditional Christians, for they laid the foundation for the preservation of significant elements of Christianity.

In speaking of the primitive church, President Boyd K. Packer observed that “the flame flickered and dimmed But always, as it had from the beginning, the Spirit of God inspired worthy souls. We owe an immense debt to the protesters and the reformers who preserved the scriptures and translated them. They knew something had been lost. They kept the flame alive as best they could. Many of them were martyrs.”¹³ On another occasion he taught: “The line of priesthood authority was broken. But mankind was not left in total darkness or completely without revelation or inspiration. The idea that with the Crucifixion of Christ the heavens were closed and they opened in the First Vision is not true. The Light of Christ would be everywhere present to attend the children of God; the Holy Ghost would visit seeking souls. The prayers of the righteous would not go unanswered.”¹⁴ Similarly, Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, “We are indebted to the men and women who kept the light of faith and learning alive through the centuries to the present day. We have only to contrast the lesser light that exists among peoples unfamiliar with the names of God and Jesus Christ to realize the great contribution made by Christian teachers through the ages. We honor them as servants of God.”¹⁵

I am told quite often that another reason for the rejection of Latter-day Saints as Christian is because we do not believe in the sufficiency of the Bible. To be sure, Joseph Smith would have disagreed, for example, with the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy that declares: “The New Testament canon is . . . now closed, inasmuch as no new apostolic witness

to the historical Christ can now be borne. No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again.”¹⁶ For Latter-day Saints, such a statement about revelation is much more than the Bible itself reveals. As Joseph Smith taught, one would need to have received a modern revelation in order to know for certain that there will be no more revelation beyond the Bible.¹⁷ Further, Stephen Robinson has written, “When [traditional Christians] accuse Mormons of not believing the Bible, they usually mean that we do not believe interpretations formulated by postbiblical councils. If [Christians] are going to insist on the doctrine of *sola scriptura* [by scripture alone] . . . , then they ought to stop ascribing scriptural authority to postbiblical traditions.”¹⁸

As to additional doctrines that Latter-day Saints accept but which are not a part of present-day Christendom, we might ask: Would the early Christians who for decades had access only to the Gospel of Mark have considered the deeper spiritual realities set forth later in the Gospel of John to represent a portrait of “a different Jesus”? Hardly. Thus the current mantra of “Mormons worship a different Jesus” is a misrepresentation of the facts. Latter-day Saints clearly worship the historical Jesus—the man who was born in Bethlehem, lived and ministered during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, functioned under the oversight of Caiaphas (Jews) and Pilate (Romans), gave his life as a sacrificial offering to atone for the sins of humankind, and rose from the grave in glorious resurrected immortality. That there may be differences on certain points of theology is not unimportant, but it does not merit the misleading concept that Mormons somehow worship a different Jesus.

A Double Standard?

I raise another question: Has modern Christianity unwittingly created a type of double standard in terms of (a) what is required to be saved and (b) what it takes to be a Christian? At the time of Paul and Silas’s miraculous release from prison, the Philippian jailer asked the question of questions: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:30–31). Paul wrote to the Roman saints that “if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:9–10, 13).

Could it be, therefore, that a Latter-day Saint who professes total faith in and reliance upon Jesus Christ and who seeks in gratitude to keep his commandments can be saved but at the same time not qualify to be called a Christian? If one can be saved but is not allowed to be called a Christian, then in fact a double standard is in effect. So while most professing Christian faith traditions believe that knowing the truth and keeping the doctrine pure are very important in one’s religious walk and talk, we ask: How much does precise, exact, and totally accurate theology matter? Must the man or woman in the pew be able to explain such matters as the Trinity as clearly and articulately as a theologian or pastor? Does salvation come through correct theology or one’s relationship with Christ? Will men or women be judged as to the depth of their Christianity and thus their commitment to the Lamb of God by the extent to which they understand or can explain theological concepts? How much “bad theology” can the grace of Jesus Christ cover? These are certainly questions deserving of continuing conversation.

It does not appear to me that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will fade from the scene and go away. We are here to stay, and I would propose that we and the religious world need to find more effective measures to deal with one another. President Hinckley offered an optimistic projection: “I see a wonderful future in a very uncertain world,” he declared. “If we will cling to our values, if we will build on our inheritance, if we will walk in obedience before the Lord, if we will simply live the gospel, we will be blessed in a magnificent and wonderful way. We will be looked upon as a peculiar people who have found the key to a peculiar happiness.”¹⁹

A Personal Aside

It does not do irreparable damage to my feelings of worth to have someone disagree with me, express that my position is weak or unfounded, or even state that my conclusions are downright false. I really am not troubled too much when people state that Latter-day Saints are not Christian, especially if the one making the judgment is the kind of person who would have historical or doctrinal reasons for doing so. The most difficult times for me are when persons of other faiths hear me speak or read my writings and conclude that I am a liar, I am deceptive, or I am a part of some grand Mormon conspiracy bent on convincing a naive public that Latter-day Saints are just like everyone else.

In that regard, some have suggested that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seems to be moving into the mainstream of Christianity, or

at least attempting to do so. What of this claim? For one thing, Latter-day Saint leaders have encouraged members of the Church to get to know their neighbors better; be more involved in community and civic and political affairs; show greater love, acceptance, and tolerance for those of other faiths; and in general help the world to know that we are not, strictly speaking, a weird bunch. Second, the Church is seeking to be better understood, to teach their doctrine in a manner that would (a) allow others to see clearly where we stand on important issues and (b) eliminate misperceptions and misrepresentations. While there is, for example, a greater stress in the present Church upon the divine sonship of Christ, the nature of his atoning sacrifice, and the vital place of his redeeming mercy and grace, these matters have been in LDS scripture since the days of Joseph Smith; what has changed is the emphasis, not the content.

To be frank, it would be foolish for Latter-day Saints to stray from their moorings and seek to blend in with everyone else. People are joining our Church in ever-increasing numbers, not because we are just like the Roman Catholics or the Greek Orthodox or the Baptists or the Methodists or the Presbyterians down the street; they choose to leave their former faith and be baptized as Latter-day Saints because of distinctive LDS theology. Our strength lies in our distinctive teachings and lifestyle. In that spirit, President Hinckley said: "Our membership has grown. I believe it has grown in faithfulness . . . Those who observe us say that we are moving into the mainstream of religion. We are not changing. The world's perception of us is changing. We teach the same doctrine. We have the same organization. We labor to perform the same good works. But the old hatred is disappearing; the old persecution is dying. People are better informed. They are coming to realize what we stand for and what we do."²⁰

Conclusion

Given the challenges we face in our society, it seems so foolish for men and women who believe in God, whose hearts and lives have been surrendered to that God, to allow doctrinal differences to prevent them from working together. Okay, you believe in a triune God, that the Almighty is a spirit, and that he created all things *ex nihilo*. I believe that God is an exalted man, that he is a separate and distinct being from the Son and the Holy Spirit. One person believes in heaven, while another believes in nirvana. One believes that the Sabbath should be observed on Saturday, while her neighbor feels

that the day of corporate worship should be on Friday. This one speaks in tongues, and that one spends much of his time leading marches against social injustice, while a third believes that little children should be baptized. One good Baptist is a strict Calvinist, while another tends to take freedom of the will quite seriously. And so on, and so on.

Doctrinal differences, while important, need not result in suspicion or paranoia. It is hard for me to fathom that the God and Father of us all is pleased with name-calling, marginalization, or demonization on the part of those who claim to be his children and who delight in truth. It must cause great pain to our Lord and Savior, he who pleaded in his great Intercessory Prayer for the unity of his followers (see John 17:20–23), to witness the bickering and ill will that too often characterize the rhetoric and behavior of the religious. One can be thoroughly committed to her faith and way of life and still be kind. One can be completely convinced that he has the truth without tearing down another person or being sarcastic. And one can have no intention whatsoever of changing faiths and still be interested, curious, and respectful of what others teach and hold dear. I am inspired and motivated by the following statement from the Prophet Joseph Smith: "If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. Do you believe in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of salvation which He revealed? So do I. Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst; and they will do it before the millennium can be ushered in and Christ takes possession of His kingdom."²¹

Now, while I have spent a significant portion of my time in the last fifteen years involved in religious outreach, while I have sought to the best of my limited abilities to read and understand and grasp what it is exactly that men and women of other faiths believe, and while I have no hesitation admitting that I have learned a great deal from my friends of other faiths, matters that have done much to open new windows of gospel understanding to me, I profess that I am a believing Latter-day Saint, that I am as devoted to the restored gospel today as I have ever been, and that all that I have felt and learned and experienced since 1997 has contributed to my lifelong commitment to Mormonism. It is my conviction that not only is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the custodian of God's divine authority but that

it also provides a more complete, compelling, and consoling picture of the purpose of life and of God's plan for the redemption and glorification of his children than any other religious tradition. My ultimate trust is in God the Eternal Father and in his redeeming Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. My worship is reserved for them.

The same Spirit that affirms the reality of God and the salvation of Christ whispers to my soul that Joseph Smith was divinely called and that the keys of the kingdom of God have continued in rightful succession to the present day. These things I know, and I know them in the only way spiritual and eternal things can be known, by the power of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:11–14). Mormonism is as stimulating and satisfying to my mind as it is stirring and settling to my heart; the Lord has thus provided a reason for the hope within me (see 1 Peter 3:15). That the Father and the Son will bless honest seekers after truth with that Spirit that unites and welds hearts and minds together so that eventually peace may prevail among people of goodwill is my sincere hope. **RE**

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 3.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1999, 3.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1999, 116; see also April 2000, 110; April 2001, 4.
4. John Gordon Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41.
5. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 72–73; emphasis in original.
6. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 94–95.
7. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 101–2.
8. Joseph Fielding McConkie, “The Gathering of Israel and the Return of Christ,” Sixth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium, August 1982, Brigham Young University, typescript, 3, 5.
9. James E. Talmage to Leland E. Anderson, January 29, 1932; copy in author’s possession.
10. Neal A. Maxwell, “Remember How Merciful the Lord Hath Been,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 44.
11. Bruce C. Hafen, in Conference Report, April 2004, 100.
12. In J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 121–22.
13. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 7.
14. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 11.
15. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, April 1995, 113; see also the tribute paid to these great men and women by Robert D. Hales, in “Preparations for the Restoration and the Second Coming: ‘My Hand Shall Be Over Thee,’” *Ensign*, November 2005, 88–92.
16. Cited in Packer and Oden, *One Faith*, 42.

17. See *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 2:25.
18. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 72.
19. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1997, 94.
20. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 2001, 3–4.
21. *History of the Church*, 5:499; emphasis added.