



Doc Christensen, *The Atonement*.

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Understanding and Being Understood

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It is difficult for me to find adequate words to express how thrilled I am to be here this evening. Here we are, evangelical Protestants and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gathered together in this Salt Lake Tabernacle, for an event that is described as “An Evening of Friendship.” I am not being melodramatic when I say that this is surely an historic occasion. To be sure, there have long been friendships between some evangelicals and some LDS folks. But they have not appeared on the public radar screen. Public relations between our two communities have been—to put it mildly—decidedly unfriendly. From the very beginning, when Joseph Smith organized his church in 1830, my evangelical forebears hurled angry accusations and vehement denunciations at the Mormon community—a practice that continues from some evangelical quarters even into this present day. And I think it is fair to say that some Mormons have on occasion

responded in kind. Friendship with each other has not come easily for our two communities.

But in recent times, things have begun to change. Evangelicals and Mormons have worked together on important matters of public morality. Here in Utah, the Standing Together ministry has been willing to take some considerable risks in countering the more aggressive and disruptive evangelical attacks against the LDS Church. And Pastor Greg Johnson's well-attended dialogues with Professor Bob Millet have done much to model a new spirit of frank but friendly exchange about important faith topics. And now this evening we are experiencing the gracious hospitality of the LDS leadership, who have welcomed us all into this meeting place that has played—and continues to play—such an important role in the life of the Mormon community.

On a personal level, over the past half dozen years, I have been a member of a small group of evangelical scholars who have been engaged in lengthy closed-door discussions about spiritual and theological matters with a small group of our LDS counterparts. We have not been afraid to argue strenuously with each other, but our arguments have been conducted in a sincere desire genuinely to understand each other—and in the process we have formed some deep bonds of friendship. I know that I have learned much in this continuing dialogue, and I am now convinced that we evangelicals have often seriously misrepresented the beliefs and practices of the Mormon community.

Indeed, let me state it bluntly to the LDS folks here this evening: we have sinned against you. The God of the scriptures makes it clear that it is a terrible thing to bear false witness against our neighbors, and we have been guilty of that sort of transgression in things we have said about you. We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to ask you what you believe. We have made much of the need to provide you with a strong defense of traditional Christian convictions, regularly quoting the Apostle Peter's mandate that we present to people like you a reasoned account of the hope that lies within us—but we have not been careful to follow the same Apostle's counsel that immediately follows that mandate, when he tells us that we must always make our case with "gentleness and reverence" toward those with whom we are speaking (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, we have even on occasion demonized you, weaving conspiracy theories about what the LDS community is "really" trying to accomplish in the world. And even at our best—and this is true of both of our communities—we have talked past each

other, setting forth oversimplified and distorted accounts of what the other group believes.¹

I have formed some wonderful friendships with Mormons in the past few years. These friends have helped me to see the ways in which I have often misinterpreted Mormon thought. To be sure, as a result of those conversations, I also remained convinced that there are very real issues of disagreement between us—and that some of these issues are matters of eternal significance. But we can now discuss these topics as friends. And tonight many more of our friends have come together in this place for a very public and large-scale "Evening of Friendship." God be praised!

In just a month and a half we will greet the year 2005, which marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith. During this year there will be many occasions to pay special attention to Joseph's life and teachings, and I hope many in the evangelical community will take part in those events. But this evening we are not here to talk about Joseph Smith but about the one whose birth we will celebrate again just before the bicentennial year of Joseph's birth makes its appearance.² This is the one about whose birth we sing in words, I should add, that many of us love to hear sung by that great choir that sings these words in this Tabernacle—"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."³

What a wonderful thing it is that we can meet together to talk about the Lord Jesus and about who he is and what he has done on our behalf. There is much here to talk about. I personally take great encouragement from words that Joseph Smith uttered on the occasion of the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April of 1830: "We know," Joseph said, "that all men must repent and believe on the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God." And then he added: "And we know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true; and we know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength" (D&C 20:29–31).

I greet you this evening in that spirit—as one who wants more than anything else to love and serve God with all my might, mind, and strength, in the power made available by the amazing grace that sent the Lord Jesus to Bethlehem's manger, and to the Garden of Gethsemane, and to the cross of Calvary, where he shed his blood to pay the debt of our sin—a debt that we

could never pay on our own. This is the spirit in which Ravi Zacharias is going to speak to us this evening—the spirit of devotion to the one whose name is above every name, the one who alone is mighty to save, and before whom someday every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord to the glory of the Father (see Philippians 2:9–11).

May this wonderful “Evening of Friendship” point us all to that great day. Thank you and God bless you. **RE**

Notes

1. Some folks have asked who the “we” is that I apologized on behalf of when I said that “we” evangelicals have sinned against Mormons by bearing false witness against them. I certainly did not mean to imply that every evangelical has sinned in this regard. Suppose I were to address an African-American gathering and say that we whites have sinned against you blacks. Who would deny that this is a correct assessment? But who would think that I was speaking about and on behalf of all white people?

There is no question in my mind that there has been a discernible pattern of sinning against LDS folks in this regard. I could show, for example, how Walter Martin oversimplified Mormon teachings in his much-read books. But here is an obvious example of more recent vintage: when Dave Hunt writes a whole book whose main thesis is that Mormonism is satanic in its inspiration and practice, I think this is bearing false witness. Another point: I have been told by many evangelicals that Mormons believe that the atoning work of Jesus Christ was accomplished in Gethsemane and not at Calvary. Bob Millet has demonstrated from Mormon writings that this is not true; if the cross had not occurred, he says, we could not be saved. Here, for example, is how the LDS writer Glenn Pearson described the requirements for salvation in a popular Mormon book of the 1960s: “There has to be down payment of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Who has a broken heart and a contrite spirit? One who is stripped of pride and selfishness. One who has come down in the depths of humility and prostrated himself before the Lord in mighty prayer and supplication. He has realized the awful guilt of his sins and has pled for the blood of Christ to be made a covering to shield him from the face of a just God. Such a one has made the down payment.” *Know Your Religion* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), 169.

In none of this am I saying that Mormons are “orthodox Christians.” But I do believe that there are elements in Mormon thought that, if emphasized while deemphasizing other elements, could constitute a message of salvation by grace alone through the blood of Jesus Christ. I will work to promote that cause. Most evangelicals will disagree with that approach. But at the very least, we must admit that we have not always been fair in our wholesale condemnation of Mormonism as simply a false religion.

2. Some folks are upset about what they took as a call from me for evangelicals to join in the celebrations of the bicentennial of Joseph Smith’s birth. I can see how people heard me say that we evangelicals should join in “celebrating” Joseph Smith’s birthday, but that is not what I intended to say. Instead, I said that I hoped that many evangelicals would participate in those events that would allow us all to “pay special attention to Joseph’s life and teachings” during this year. I was thinking and speaking too much as an academic on this point, and I know that doing so created unnecessary confusion. For example, I am going to take part in

a special conference at the Library of Congress, where I will respond to an LDS scholar’s views on the contribution of Joseph’s theology. Those are the kinds of events where there can be critical give and take, and I see this bicentennial year as a time when we evangelicals can try to sort out the good from the bad in Joseph’s thought. There are some of his writings, for example, that sound quite orthodox, and others—such as the King Follett Discourse—that have views that are far removed from anything in the Christian tradition.

But ordinary evangelicals do not have opportunities to engage in those kinds of serious theological panels; thus I was talking too much as an elitist. At the same time, I would think this would be a wonderful opportunity to put on some events in Utah, perhaps in cooperation with local LDS folks, where people talk together about some basic themes in Joseph’s thought. In our quiet dialogues, for example, evangelicals and Latter-day Saints together find many of his earliest statements to come close to a traditional Reformation (and Epistle to the Romans) emphasis on salvation by grace alone, the unique substitutionary work of Christ on the cross (and not just in Gethsemane) and so on. The statements from Doctrine and Covenants 20:29–31 that I quoted, for example, sound straight out of an evangelical sermon. My own view is that instead of arguing primarily about the things we find offensive in Mormonism, it would be good to spend some time reflecting together about what we mean when we both say that Jesus alone saves and that he paid the debt for our sin on Calvary.

3. Phillis Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”