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# Telling the Larger “Church History” Story

Review of Christopher Catherwood. *Church History: A Crash Course for the Curious*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books [a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers], 2007. 224 pp., with index. \$12.99 (paperback).

LOUIS MIDGLEY

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*To a large degree, history is autobiography—or perhaps one should say that it is the prolegomena to one’s biography. In any case, our view of who we are, both as individuals and as a community of faith, depends in large measure on what we understand our history to be.*

Justo L. González<sup>1</sup>

*One might wish for a neutral account of the [Christian] story, but there really can be no such thing.*

Roger E. Olson<sup>2</sup>

**I**t is likely that when Latter-day Saints encounter the words *church history*, they will immediately

think of the story of Joseph Smith’s initial encounters with divine beings, the recovery of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of priesthood keys, the hounding of the fledgling Church of Christ by Gentiles, the eventual migration of the Saints to a new desert home, and so forth. But such words also have a much broader meaning. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the expression *Latter-day Saints*, which by contrast calls attention to the biblical story of the covenant people of God and their failure to keep the commandments, followed by the incarnation of the Messiah, or Christ, whose deeds set in place a new covenant community of Saints (or “holy ones”). Despite waves of intense persecution, this community spread through missionary endeavors in lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, but it soon fell into apostasy. One turning point came when Constantine gained control of the mighty Roman Empire, built a New Rome (Constantinople), and

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1. Justo L. González, preface to the second English edition of his work *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 2:6, and found in each of the three volumes.

2. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 279.

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made Christianity the official servant/consort of this subsequent bloody imperial Roman regime.

### “Church”?

The word *church* is ambiguous. It now often identifies a “house” that believers visit to worship God as well as an extended “household,” or assembly, of believers. But this word has several other meanings. For example, one can ask what the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches on some issue. In such instances, the word *church* identifies not an assembly of believers but the governing officials of an institution such as a denomination or movement. Understood as both an institution and a community of believers, the Christian church has a history of its own particular faith community. There is simply no generic Christianity, but only “Christianities”—each faction having a story. These stories are primarily accounts of internecine squabbles both within a larger movement or denomination and with powerful, meddling government officials. There is a sense in which such partisan factions also share a much larger “church history,”<sup>3</sup> which is unavoidably also the story of contention over the grounds and content of Christian faith. Each story has a place in a still larger story. Historians often focus attention on disputes over forms of church government, salvation, worship styles, the end times, authority, gifts of the Spirit, rituals, divine attributes, and so forth. In this sense, church history is a tale of competing opinions about virtually every topic even peripherally connected to the faith among those who choose to self-identify as Christians.

3. This is Catherwood’s term, subsequent instances of which will not appear within quotation marks in this essay despite the term’s ambiguity.

### “History”?

The word *history* is also ambiguous. Some have conjectured that the word *historia* was borrowed from the Greek medical vocabulary, where it identified the symptoms and suffering (*pathos*) of a disease and then applied to the sickness and decline of the body politic. Be that as it may, the word has come to refer to what actually happened in the past, and also, by extension, to the texts<sup>4</sup> that happened to have been recorded and then somehow preserved. These writings were interpretations of what was believed to have happened (or what their authors wished others to believe had happened). The writers were selective in what they recorded and often highly partisan. More often, however, when we use the word *history*, what we have in mind are not the textual sources themselves but the stories told later by historians about some portion of the past. These add interpretations to interpretations. The narrator/storyteller provides the emplotment<sup>5</sup> for the tale being told by selecting, in addition to the textual sources, the explanations or interpretations of the textual sources. The historian likewise chooses what to omit or lightly pass over, further shading the tale being told.

The questions I wish to address in this essay include whether a neutral story of Christian faith has been or even can be fashioned—one that somehow rises above, transcends, and encompasses all actual or possible factional disputations that constitute the vast, spoiled, complicated, and now mostly lost history of Christianity. Or are we

4. Or text analogues such as burials and buildings and their accompanying symbolic and artistic furnishings and other embellishments.

5. I borrow the term *emplotment* from Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). The term refers to a historian’s assemblage of historical events into a narrative with a plot.

faced, short of God providing his full version of the story, with competing and even incommensurate church histories, each essentially autobiographical (that is, rooted in experiences and events that constitute what González describes as our own history, which is a kind of “prolegomena to one’s own biography”)? And what can we Latter-day Saints learn from the efforts of other Christians to tell their particular stories?

### Catherwood’s Calvinist “Crash Course” . . .

I have chosen to address these and related questions by examining a book entitled *Church History: A Crash Course for the Curious*,<sup>6</sup> which is a highly autobiographical tale of competing and quarreling communities of Christian faith told by Christopher Catherwood (b. 1955),<sup>7</sup> an English historian who “has written or edited more than twenty-five books” (back cover). Several of his books are either collections of sermons or reflections on the theology of his Calvinist/Anglican maternal grandfather, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981). Many of Catherwood’s other publications focus on the interplay of politics and religion—that is, both between and within Christian and Muslim communities—in the Balkans and the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> His venture into what

he calls “church history” is a brief sketch, from a Reformed (that is, strictly Calvinist) perspective, of the variety and complexity of Christian faith. He is not shy about revealing his Calvinist confessional biases and how these provide the plot for the story he tells.

### . . . Based on Secondary Sources

In 1998 Catherwood confessed that *Crash Course* is “not a book for academic specialists” since it is “based on what historians call *secondary* sources.” He seems to think that this poses no problem since his intended audience is the “ordinary, intelligent, non-specialist reader who wants a general overview of what has happened in Church History.”<sup>9</sup> His version of “church history” is thus a popularized account that does not seek to advance the scholarship on the history of Christianity. In telling an abbreviated social/political story of Christian faith, he avoids probing the more difficult, recondite story of Christian theological speculation and providing a detailed intellectual history of Christianity. If one wants a simple, straightforward account from one whose confessional biases are clearly set out, then the book achieves its stated objective.

### The Plot behind the Story

Catherwood did not fashion the emplotment he employs. In a simple, naive way he proclaims a traditional, creedal, Augustinian, Protestant, and strictly Reformed history of Christian faith. There is nothing subtle or complex about the story he tells. This is, from my perspective, actually a virtue. Since no one can command even a very tiny portion of the primary textual materials

6. See Catherwood, *Church History: A Crash Course for the Curious*, 18. This is a major revision of his *Crash Course on Church History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), which will be cited and footnoted as *Crash Course*, while its 2007 revision will always be cited parenthetically in the text by page number alone.

7. Catherwood holds an MA in modern history from Balliol College, Oxford; an MLitt in modern history from Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge; and a PhD in Middle Eastern history from East Anglia.

8. Catherwood has been a tutor at Cambridge University’s Institute of Continuing Education, operated at Madingley Hall, which is a conference center near Cambridge where he has taught a course for adults based on *Church History*. He has also been an instructor at the University of Richmond’s School of Continuing Education, and he sometimes lectures on politics in the Middle East at the Cambridge-based INSTEP program (p. 11). This is not, however, a part of Cam-

bridge University, but an independent program catering to American Semester Abroad students with lectures on politics and economics.

9. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, unpaginated preface.

that just happen to have been preserved, his reliance on (perhaps both dated and inferior) secondary sources is not, in and of itself, a fatal flaw.

As a staunch “Bible Calvinist,” Catherwood finds at the heart of the Reformation “the key Protestant distinctive, *sola scriptura*, or ‘Scripture alone’” (p. 19). No attempt is made to hide what is entailed in slogans like *sola scriptura*. He shows how this notion tends to order the way he pictures the events constituting the gradual apostasy from the presumed original *regula fidei* of Christian faith. This eventually leads to the efforts of the magisterial Protestant reformers to set things right again. He does not avoid mentioning the contests, competition, and quarrels that constitute the story of Protestant faith communities. The root cause of the contention and controversy that constitute the core of much Christian church history is explained in his emplotment as a failure to draw only on the Bible, and hence a willingness to rely on various sorts of merely human traditions. His Protestant ideology also explains why “church history,” as he understands that label, began only “after the unique revelation of Scripture came to an end” (p. 18).

“Scripture alone” (pp. 19, 33)<sup>10</sup> is the controlling rule because it alone provides access to “core doctrines” (p. 31) of “genuine Christians” (p. 18).<sup>11</sup> He thus refers to “the core doctrines of Christian faith upon which all God’s redeemed children inevitably agree with one another” (p. 31). “There *are*,” he also maintains, “key things upon which all Bible-

believing Christians do and have always agreed and united” (p. 19, emphasis in original). These “key things” that “genuine Christians” necessarily hold in common include “a belief in absolute truth” (p. 21), “final truth” (p. 22), or, following Francis Schaeffer’s tautology, “true truth” (p. 20).<sup>12</sup>

There are, however, different and competing Christian faith traditions, each of which claims in different ways to be grounded on truths, to possess “true truth,” or to embody in some sense an “absolute truth.” Those within Orthodoxy<sup>13</sup> and the Roman Catholic Church, in addition to the different brands of Protestantism, can claim to “believe” in truth. Each of these competing versions of Christian faith holds that the truth is to be found in large measure in their own faith tradition. In addition, believing that there must be truth is not the same as possessing such a thing, especially given the fact that both the grounds and content of Christian faith are profoundly historical and hence open to the vicissitudes of history. Even or especially the dogma that only the Bible contains the final, sufficient, infallible, divine, special revelation, which Catherwood claims is the “key” Protestant distinctive, is not itself self-evident. It has, instead, a complex, jaded, contested, problematic history. Which, if any, faith tradition embodies or possesses a “final truth”?

### Spectacles and the Reformed Lens

What exactly are the “core beliefs” set out in the Bible? Whatever their content, they must be clearly identified, especially if Catherwood’s

10. *Sola scriptura* is one of the five *solas* that over time came to identify Protestant distinctives. The other four catchwords include *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (in Christ alone), and *soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).

11. In *Crash Course*, Catherwood refers to “core doctrines or beliefs” (p. 3), “core belief” (p. 11), “core beliefs” (pp. 28, 30, 31), “core Christian belief” (p. 17), “core doctrines” (p. 31), and “the core scriptural teaching” (p. 38).

12. Francis Schaeffer (1919–1984) appears to have had a profound influence on Catherwood. Schaeffer’s influence on conservative Protestantism was primarily through L’Abri, a Calvinist study center in Switzerland. He is cited or quoted in *Church History* seventeen times; only Calvin and Luther receive more attention.

13. I capitalize the term *Orthodoxy* to refer to the Eastern Orthodox religious tradition, not to theological correctness in general.

schema is to be coherent. According to Catherwood, “throughout [church] history there have been *brave Christians* who have attempted to *work out the core doctrines, or beliefs*, that all Christians can and should hold.”<sup>14</sup> Apparently those core doctrines are not set forth emphatically in the canon of scripture, perhaps because the Bible is mostly stories. Instead the core beliefs must be “worked out” subsequently by quarreling theologians and powerful churchmen struggling to fashion creeds or dogmatic or systematic theology. One of these “brave Christians” was St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who “was regarded in the Middle Ages as the greatest of all the Fathers of the Church, and because of the way in which Calvin rediscovered so much of his thought—on predestination, for instance—[Augustine] is given due reverence among Protestants today as well, especially those of Reformed persuasion” (p. 51, compare pp. 115, 134). In Catherwood’s Calvinist scenario, the magisterial Protestant Reformers—especially John Calvin (1509-1564) but also Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Martin Luther (1483-1546)—with the help, of course, of many other “brave Christians,” somehow managed to rediscover what Augustine had previously worked out before the church underwent a dismal decline into serious apostasy. Eventually, when elements of Augustine’s theology were rediscovered, the church was reformed—that is, the Protestant Reformation took place.

Readers of *Church History* are told that “honest historian Catherwood informs us straightaway that he views the Christian story through the lenses of Protestant, Reformed, evangelical, baptistic, free-church spectacles. His telling of the tale, *journalistic in style* while scholarly in substance, then proves the point” (back cover,

emphasis added). This endorsement for *Church History* was provided by J. I. Packer, a prominent Calvinist theologian.<sup>15</sup> Packer is quoted or mentioned five times in *Church History* (see pp. 113, 163, 167, 197, 213). Another Reformed endorsee, the Reverend John MacArthur, who is fulsome in his praise for *Church History*, is quoted or mentioned six times by Catherwood (see pp. 18, 115, 142, 145, 184, 187).

These endorsements indicate that Catherwood has not obscured the Reformed emplotment of the tale he tells. This may, of course, have helped to yield ebullient blurbs from his conservative Calvinist colleagues. I do not, however, object to the mutual admiration seemingly behind these endorsements, especially because it is all transparent and aboveboard. Neither Catherwood nor those who endorse his work are trying to hide their confessional commitments. What is significant is that the somewhat symbiotic relationship between the author of *Church History* and prominent Reformed theologians demonstrates that Catherwood’s opinions fit snugly within an essentially contemporary Calvinist story of the Christian past. Rarely does he even hint that there are alternative ways of telling the story of Christian faith.<sup>16</sup> Precisely because *Church History* is a “crash course” (and hence not grounded in original sources), as well as “journalistic in style,” from my perspective the tale that is told—and the way that it is told—is interesting and instructive.

15. J. I. Packer (b. 1926), who taught theology at Regents College in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a controversial Calvinist theologian and author of numerous books.

16. For example, he mentions that Catholics would disagree with some opinions he has set out (see p. 55). But their voices are essentially mute since he does not indicate why they would disagree, how these disagreements would affect the tale he tells, or how he would respond to their disagreement.

14. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 3, emphasis added.

In his endeavor to tell the story of Christian church history, Catherwood also shows the way in which confessional commitments, formal and informal background assumptions, and presuppositions play a crucial and even controlling role in the way a contested story is told. Since the author provides the plot, his endeavor illuminates what is entailed in a Reformed understanding of the Christian past. Without, of course, wishing to do so, Catherwood has fashioned a history of the Christian past that reveals why there are competing and contrasting ways in which the story is told. Thus it is also possible to identify the assumptions underlying alternative accounts of the Christian past.

It is fruitful to consider alternative understandings of what Catherwood calls “church history.” That the author must tell these competing stories from either inside or outside a particular circle of faith, or from some form of unfaith, accounts for the numerous incommensurable alternative understandings of the Christian past that have been and can be written, each based on the same events and same sources. Merely complaining, as he often does, about what he calls “a postmodern world, in which the whole concept of truth is denied, with all the repercussions that so negative a worldview has for us” (p. 206), does not address the crucial issue of which, if any, of the radically different versions of the same story is true.

### Being “Scrupulously Fair”?

Regarding Catherwood’s insistence on core beliefs grounded in the Bible alone, there is an important corollary that should be of special interest to Latter-day Saints: “I trust,” he opines, “that we would agree, as evangelicals, whatever our denomination, that *God does not reveal to us*

*new things not contained in the Bible*” (p. 18, emphasis added). Put another way, the heavens were permanently closed with the death of the original apostles since only the Bible contains divine special revelation. If Catherwood is correct about the Reformed stance on this matter, and I believe he is, then Protestant/evangelical accounts of the history of Christianity will also have a different emplotment of the story being told than would either a Roman Catholic or a Latter-day Saint account.<sup>17</sup>

It is presumably from the Bible alone that Catherwood attempts to sort and assess all the subsequent quarrels, contests, differences, and disagreements that turn up in the jaded history of Christianity, including especially those within and between the various faith communities or religious movements spawned by the Protestant Reformation. It is also from his Calvinist perspective that he identifies what he considers the flaws in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. He is aware of and a bit annoyed by the existence of those who reject or resist a strictly Calvinist way of understanding Christian faith. He is especially annoyed by the variety of Christian faiths found in the United States, as well as the partisan political orientation of American evangelicals. He holds that “our political prejudices are man-made, however strongly we believe in them, and I am always careful,” he claims, “to try to weed out such opinions from my analysis of the past” (p. 22). This is rubbish; his version of church history is larded with observations about partisan politics. For example, he complains about “crass

17. Roman Catholics restrict divine special revelation, or what they designate “public revelation,” strictly to the Bible. What is called “private revelation” is, however, possible only for the encouragement of individuals. Thus God does not reveal new things not contained in the Bible or already present in tradition as fleshed out from time to time by the magisterium.

American right-wing cultural imperialism,”<sup>18</sup> and he does not disguise his loathing of the “conservative” political ideology common among American evangelicals.<sup>19</sup>

### Protestant Ecclesiastical Anarchy and the Balkanization of Communities of Faith

When faced with the ecclesiastical anarchy that has characterized Protestantism from the beginning, Catherwood grants that genuine Bible-believing Christians have disagreed on many matters, “including issues such as baptism, church government, the continuation of the gift of tongues, or whatever other issues divide us. But as Christocentric Bible believers there are,” he insists, “certain *core truths*, such as the atonement, resurrection, and evangelism, upon which all of us *as evangelicals* do believe exactly the same thing” (pp. 19–20, emphasis added). He thus employs the usual Protestant ploy of distinguishing “indifferent matters” ( p. 111), or “inessential matters” (p. 121) and “secondary issues” (p. 112),<sup>20</sup> from essential “core beliefs.” Protestants disagree on such matters as worship styles,<sup>21</sup> the place and type of music in devotions,<sup>22</sup> the mode or meaning of baptism,<sup>23</sup> the continuance or cessation of so-called sign gifts such as speaking in tongues as an indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit,<sup>24</sup> whether there will be an actual second coming or whether this is merely a sort of

symbolic talk,<sup>25</sup> the details of creation and hence also especially the controversy over Darwin (pp. 187–89), whether there should be an established (or state authorized and financed) denomination or “church” (pp. 42–44), what constitutes the “church” and how it is to be governed (pp. 43, 149), and so forth.

Other than the elusive “core truths,” Catherwood allows a very wide variety of contending opinions within what he considers the authentic Christian church. A host of differences and disagreements can be found at the very beginning of its history, and “even in Paul’s lifetime there were genuine differences among believing Christians” (p. 31). “Even at the very dawn of the church itself, Christians were disagreeing with one another, and we have been doing so vigorously ever since” (p. 30). Christians “have disagreed among themselves even in Bible times—we are no different from the first disciples of Jesus.”<sup>26</sup>

How are such “secondary issues” that generated differences of opinion even in the apostolic age and much contention since that time distinguished from essential “core beliefs” that presumably have never been in dispute? Catherwood does not turn directly to the Bible for an answer to this question. Instead, he indicates that “throughout history there have been brave Christians who have attempted to work out the core doctrines or beliefs that all Christians can and should hold.”<sup>27</sup> The Bible is seen as the sole source from which churchmen and theologians must “work out” the essential elements of Christian faith. And yet he also insists that there are “things that all Christians agreed upon—whatever

18. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 186.

19. For some striking examples of Catherwood’s strong distaste for Evangelicals’ “conservative” political proclivities, see my review of his book *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Where They Are, and Their Politics* in *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 232.

20. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 11.

21. Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 69.

22. Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 55, 57, 153.

23. Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 54, 149.

24. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 19; and Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 21, 54, 153–54.

25. Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 111–12.

26. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 3.

27. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 3.



differences they had on other issues,”<sup>28</sup> though “Christians today diverge enormously on these issues.”<sup>29</sup> All of this is self-serving, circular, and vague. In addition, if there had not been profound differences over core beliefs, why would a Reformation have taken place?

In his effort to identify the crucial core beliefs,<sup>30</sup> Catherwood tends to read back into the earliest segment of Christian history his own Calvinist version of Protestant ideology. For example, in striving to locate a core belief, he claims that, “until AD 312, the Church consists of those individual Christian believers who have faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord.”<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere he objects to “reading back” current notions into the past (p. 71), though he also grants that he cannot avoid making this mistake: “One of the major problems we have unearthed regularly in this book is *anachronism*, reading the present back into the past. The other is to reinterpret the past according to our own views.” Catherwood warns the readers of *Crash Course*, “You must always bear in mind that I too can be guilty of just that myself—and so can you, the reader.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Catherwood, Protestant Christianity has always been fractured into competing factions. The story he tells is necessarily one of sects, factions, or movements even within denominations that, when they are not in open warfare, manifest a thinly veiled rivalry, especially between contending theologians and/or competing churchmen. Often in the past these struggles also heavily involved princes and other worldly powers. A Protestant account of Chris-

tian church history must also address the host of internecine conflicts generated by the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath. Much of Catherwood’s church history is thus an effort to sort out some of these conflicts and differences based on his understanding of what the Bible alone seems to say about core doctrines and secondary issues. In addition, from outside of strictly conservative Protestant circles, there are, of course, radically different versions of Christian faith and its richly checkered history, each vying for hegemony.

### The Principal Contenders for Hegemony

The idea that the message articulated by evangelicals is identical to what is found in the Bible “is of course a Protestant point of view. Catholics reading this,” Catherwood admits, “will not agree, since they see a direct continuity from the early church right through to the present day fulfilled only in the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>33</sup> This is an important insight into the competing accounts of the Christian past. In his book *The Story of Christian Theology*, Roger Olson asks, “How did the Great Church in the West become the Roman Catholic Church?”<sup>34</sup> Olson, who writes from a Protestant but not Calvinist perspective, is aware that there are alternative ways of telling the story of Christian faith. At least from one crucial perspective, asking when the Roman Catholic Church emerged “is an improper question.” Why?

According to the Roman Catholic account of the history of Christian theology, the Great Church catholic and orthodox lived on from the apostles to today in the West and all bishops that remained in fellowship with the bishop of Rome have con-

28. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 30.

29. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 32.

30. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 3; see also pp. 17, 28, 30, 31, 38.

31. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 37.

32. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 86.

33. Catherwood, *The Evangelicals*, 93.

34. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 278.

stituted its hierarchy. There was no break, as it were, of the Roman Catholic Church from something else. In this way of seeing and telling the story, the Eastern bishops broke away from the Great Church gradually throughout the centuries after Augustine and officially in 1054. Similarly, in this view all Protestant denominations are not true churches of Jesus Christ at all but religious sects that need to return to the mother church of Rome.<sup>35</sup>

From an Orthodox perspective, those who follow the bishop of Rome should repent and be reunited with the original apostolic faith from which they have strayed. Put another way, it was the Roman Catholic Church that drifted away from the original Orthodox universal church. And from an Orthodox and also Roman Catholic perspective, Protestantism is a rather new deficient religious movement. From a Protestant perspective, however, the Reformation is understood as a return to the essentials of the original apostolic faith. With these basic alternatives in mind, we can begin to identify a Latter-day Saint perspective, and we can also see exactly why this faith is cast in a negative light even by those observers who are noted for their civility and gentility.

In the chapter entitled “The Western Church Becomes Roman Catholic,” which is not the first but the eighteenth of thirty-five chapters of Olson’s fine book, he points out that

Protestants generally interpret the story of Christian theology as a gradual demise of true, apostolic Christianity during the time of Cyprian and then Constantine and afterward. This decline was continuous with the

rise of the penitential system, the authority of the great Christian patriarchs of the Roman Empire, and the loss of the gospel of free grace by faith alone and the priesthood of all believers. Only from a Protestant perspective, in other words, does the story of theology include an episode of “the rise of Roman Catholicism.”<sup>36</sup>

### From a Protestant Perspective: Sign Gifts and Cessationist Ideology

The so-called sign gifts have become a very divisive issue among conservative Protestants. This has made “writing on this issue . . . a theological minefield.” Why? “Few things still divide evangelicals more.” The most “miraculous sign gifts of the early church” included especially “speaking in tongues or using special heaven-sent language” (p. 199). The first Protestant revival of these “gifts” in America was on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California, in 1906, though something like it was known, according to Catherwood, in some sectarian circles in Britain for centuries. The Azusa Street event started what is commonly called the Pentecostal movement or family of “churches,” the best known being the Assemblies of God (pp. 199–200). “Today, in the twenty-first century,” according to Catherwood, “an enormous percentage of evangelicals would also call themselves Pentecostal or if they are in ordinary denominations, charismatics” (p. 199).<sup>37</sup>

“What makes Pentecostalism controversial is its theology that speaking in miraculous languages is a sign from God that a *baptism of*

35. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 278.

36. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 278–79.

37. Estimates place the number of Pentecostals worldwide at more than 500 million. See David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

*the Holy Spirit*, a special anointing from God subsequent to conversion, has taken place” (p. 200, emphasis in original). Why is this an issue for Catherwood? The reason seems to be that his hero, John Calvin, was “firmly cessationist” (p. 200)—that is, Calvin insisted that all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament were intended solely for the primitive church and ceased with the passing of the apostles. But the charismatic movement has infiltrated the Southern Baptist Convention and other denominations now also very much attracted to Reformed theology (see pp. 200–201). Can this controversy be resolved by relegating questions concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the category of secondary issues, about which it is presumably proper to disagree, sometimes in florid language and even with strange circular arguments? (see pp. 124–25 for an amusing description of such quarrels). A modest willingness to tolerate sign gifts does not seem to qualify or compromise Catherwood’s dictum that genuine evangelicals all agree that “God does not reveal to us new things not contained in the Bible” (p. 18).<sup>38</sup>

### Partisan Polemics and “Objectivity”

In 1998 Catherwood assured his readers that he was “certainly keen to be as objective as possible” (p. 19). What might compromise his objectivity? His five-point Calvinism (aka TULIP)<sup>39</sup>

provides the interpretive dogmatic backbone for his “church history.” Could this commitment compromise his objectivity? “It is hard,” he admits, “for someone of Reformed belief to write objectively about John Calvin, for to many of us he is the towering genius of the Reformation” (p. 113). But there are additional qualifications to his neutrality.

In 2007 he confessed that “in the original [1998] version of this book it was necessary, being produced by a secular publisher [Hodder & Stoughton], to be more *neutral* than I am in this new edition” (p. 202, emphasis added). With Crossway (a.k.a. Good News Publishers), which makes available a wide selection of primarily Reformed literature, appearing “neutral” would have been a mistake. But in 1998 it was useful for Catherwood to blur his largely Calvinist biases. It appears that “objectivity” and “neutrality,” however these concepts are understood, can be bent to fit circumstances. In 1998 he included in *Crash Course* somewhat favorable remarks about individuals and events that he deplores. The justification he provides is that both his intended audience and publisher required the appearance of neutrality. But in 2007, with a publisher fond of five-point Calvinism, he removed from the revised edition of his book, for example, praise for Mother Teresa (1910–1997) and also some faintly favorable remarks about Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a Lutheran pastor whose opposition to Adolf Hitler made him a martyr (see p. 202).<sup>40</sup> One reason he gave for dropping favorable comments about Bonhoeffer is that “before the war . . . he had already become well established as a liberal theologian.”<sup>41</sup> If there were cultural Protestants (or

38. Roman Catholics seem to agree since what they call “private revelation” does not add to the canon of scripture. Instead, modification and expansion of official dogma take place through an elaboration of “tradition” by the teaching authority (magisterium).

39. TULIP is the acronym used to identify five-point Calvinism. Thus T = total depravity, which presumably flows from the original sin of Adam; U = unconditional election (or predestination); L = limited atonement (or divine mercy only for those predestined for salvation by God); I = irresistible grace (the saving gift is available only to those predestined for salvation); and P = perseverance of the elect (or eternal security, which is available only for the predestined elect).

40. These remarks should be compared with Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 161 (for Bonhoeffer) and 180–81 (for Mother Teresa).

41. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 161.

“liberals”) among the Lutheran clergy in Germany during the Hitler regime, they tended somewhat to associate with the so-called German-Christian movement that saw National Socialism as providential. But Bonhoeffer was anything but German-Christian.<sup>42</sup>

Catherwood is also annoyed by Bonhoeffer’s complaint about the “cheap grace” then being offered by Lutheran pastors, a concept he set out in a book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1937,<sup>43</sup> and by his later enigmatic appeal for a “religionless Christianity.”<sup>44</sup> In both instances, Bonhoeffer was calling for genuine faithfulness—that is, a faith no longer cloaked in the trappings and traditions of addled, rancid religiosity. In addition, one must keep in mind that until the end of World War II, in the German language “religion” was often contrasted with either faith (*Glaube*) or revelation (*Offenbarung*), and hence was seen by one not at all pious, Karl Marx (1818–1883), and later by an entirely pious one, Karl Barth (1886–1968), as at least a skillfully administered narcotic.

Though he boasts of desiring to be as objective as possible, Catherwood doubts that “a present-day scholar can ever be truly ‘scientific’ or ‘objective.’” The reason he offers is that “an author’s preconceived ideas make an enormous impact on how he sees things, even if he tries to deceive himself that he is being completely unbiased and open-minded.”<sup>45</sup> While rightly skeptical of a thick version of the myth of detached, disinterested, balanced, neutral, objective historians and their scientific history, he retains a thin version

of this myth. This is typical of those in thrall to the myth of objective history or objective historians. Hence he grants that what he calls “complete objectivity of interpretation is, as many historians and others are coming to realise, rather difficult to achieve.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, and for reasons he does not specify, he also claims that “in our own time objectivity is all the more difficult, if not to say impossible, to achieve.”<sup>47</sup> The problem is not, however, merely the difficulty of achieving “complete objectivity,” but the very idea of objective history (and objective historians).<sup>48</sup> It is not that objectivity is a worthy ideal that is difficult to achieve; it is an essentially flawed, incoherent notion, though it serves as a powerful polemical weapon against presumed adversaries and for one’s own ideological preferences.

### “By Biblical Standards”

In 1998 in the first edition of *Crash Course*, Catherwood claimed, “I am writing this book as objectively as possible, attempting to be scrupulously fair to everyone in the process, whether or not I agree with them privately.”<sup>49</sup> In 1998 Catherwood did not mention the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and hence there was no commentary on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. But in his 2007 book he informs his readers that “Joseph Smith was the founder of Mormonism, the first of the unusual religious views to be invented in North America” (p. 165). He then adds

42. For a solid summary of Bonhoeffer’s deeds and thoughts, see Peter McEnhill and George Newlands, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2004), 70–80.

43. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 38.

44. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 161.

45. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 24.

46. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 4.

47. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 158–59.

48. For a detailed setting out of the incoherence of most ideological appeals by historians to objectivity, and its surrogates such as neutrality, detachment, balance, and so forth, see Peter Novick’s remarkable *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For additional commentary on Novick’s position, see Louis Midgley, “Knowing Brother Joseph Again,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): xlv–lx.

49. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 4.

that “strictly speaking the movement is called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [*sic*], though since it invented nonexistent golden tablets purportedly from God, the actual resemblance to genuine Christianity is fairly nonexistent” (p. 165). The reason Catherwood gives for this opinion is, “as Lawrence Foster has put it, the Book of Mormon, the basis of the religion, ‘is a highly complex work of the religious imagination’” (p. 165).<sup>50</sup> He adds that

Smith himself was murdered, and after various wanderings the Mormons ended up in Utah, especially Salt Lake City, which they dominate to this day. While Mormons tend to be moral and clean-cut, their theology, including their notorious acceptance of polygamy (technically abandoned in 1890 but still practiced by some), shows clearly that they are a false religion *by biblical standards*. By now they have moved well beyond their Utah base, with at least five million adherents worldwide. (p. 165, emphasis added)

The faith of the Saints, according to Catherwood, is “by biblical standards” a “false religion.” He unfortunately neglects to set out these standards. Instead, he argues by bald assertion. This is typical of virtually every claim made in *Church History*. In addition, the heavy lifting in his church history is done by the adjective *biblical* in one of its various polemical iterations. He claims that only the Bible is the “final revelation” and hence the ultimate authority on divine things. It fol-

lows that he is confident that his fellow evangelicals agree with him that there can be no divine special revelations outside the Bible. Protestants who complain about the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary, and hence also about what appears to be a steady increase in what amounts to “Mariolatry,” some of which is officially approved or encouraged, might take a closer look at their own underlying “bibliolatry.” Signs of this can perhaps be seen in Catherwood’s appeal to “biblical standards” (p. 165) to dismiss Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

But Catherwood also makes reference to “the biblical view” (p. 49), “biblical theology” (pp. 53, 210), “a biblical theology” (p. 54),<sup>51</sup> a “realistic biblical view of humanity” (p. 193), “biblical doctrine” (pp. 88, 96, 143), “biblical doctrines” (p. 216), a “biblical option” (p. 196), “biblical standards” (p. 165), a “biblical answer” (p. 145), “the biblical mandate” (p. 197), “biblical Christianity” (pp. 140, 197), a “biblical concept” (p. 97), “biblical form” (p. 97), “biblical freedom” (p. 120), “biblical grounds” (p. 122), “biblical stress” (p. 134), “a biblical balance” (p. 147), “biblical tradition” (p. 153), a “biblical basis” (p. 163), a “biblical lifestyle” (p. 209), “biblical truth” (p. 105), “the biblical truth” (p. 125), and “biblical truths” (p. 163), with the need for theologians to “systematize biblical truth” (p. 114). His readers are also introduced to “Bible-based evangelicals” (p. 202) and to, of course, “an evangelical, biblical, theological, and spiritually accurate standpoint” (p. 64). There is also “bible-based Christianity” (p. 202) and those who follow “the correct biblical pattern” (p. 151). One can also find

50. This remark appeared in an essay by Lawrence Foster in an anthology entitled *Eerdman’s Handbook of Christianity in America*, ed. Mark Noll et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 200. Catherwood, however, does not cite a source for the language he quotes. Neither edition of his sketches of church history has citations or a bibliography.

51. This label was applied by Catherwood to the post-World War II European theological movement called “Neo-Orthodoxy.” But evangelicals have mixed opinions about whether, for example, Karl Barth was in any sense evangelical. See Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth & Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), especially pp. 57–99.

references to “Bible-based Christians” (p. 36) or “Bible Christians” (p. 79), who are sharply contrasted with whatever is deemed “unbiblical” (p. 181). If expressions like “biblically speaking” (pp. 80, 142) are included, it turns out that argument by adjective can be found in at least fifty places in *Church History*. In virtually no instance is there a hint of even a proof-text or an allusion to the text of the Bible. Instead, he insists that access to all but the “core beliefs” that theologians or churchmen—those “brave Christians”—have “worked out” cannot be found by merely consulting the Bible. This can be seen in his waffling over the controversial “sign gifts” that Pentecostals (and charismatics) have made popular despite the cessationist ideology reaching back to near the end of the apostolic age.

In 2010, while trying to identify and situate contemporary evangelicalism, Catherwood claimed that his Calvinist brand of “evangelical faith goes right back to the beginning of the church itself, a theme” that he has, he points out, “followed elsewhere, in [his] *Church History: A Crash Course for the Curious*. Evangelicalism in this sense is not new at all: it was what the Christians at the time of the Bible thought, what the early church taught, and what the reformers of the sixteenth century also believed.”<sup>52</sup> This simply must be the case since the magisterial Reformers insisted on the “Bible only” as they appropriated much of Augustine’s theology. But this leaves a gaping hole in church history.

Catherwood admits that the Reformation, which he thinks influenced Roman Catholicism favorably, did not sort out all of these matters. The Reformers themselves were necessarily deeply beholden to princes and kings who were eager to use the Reformation to preserve their

own prerogatives and privileges in opposition to the Vatican and remnants of the Holy Roman Empire. Where the Reformation was dominant, it changed some things such as architectural and worship styles. But unfortunately, Protestants joined Roman Catholics in slaughtering Anabaptist peasants, whose undertakings threatened the power of both. Burning heretics was a vice practiced by Catholics and Protestants.<sup>53</sup> Such refinements as the legal preservation of freedom of conscience came only much later, when neither bishops nor kings could hold the reins of churchly or worldly power. The separation of what we call “church” and “state” is thus a new wrinkle in “church history” and not the product of the Protestant Reformation.

How can one account for all the earlier forging of alliances with or subordination to worldly princes, the veneration of relics and also Mary, the Inquisitions, the Crusades, monasticism, pilgrimages, the pomp of the Papacy, and a host of other things that Catherwood seems to abhor? These sorts of things leave the “church,” until the Protestant Reformation, in a kind of vacuum or worldly limbo. He is clearly aware of the problem. He even draws special attention to the fact that, from the perspective of “the part of the Christian Church from which” he comes—that is, “the Protestant wing of Christianity”—some may “dislike” what he has written because Protestants “tend to think that nothing happened” in “church” history “from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries.” Instead, they may conclude that “God was remarkably quiet” for all those years.<sup>54</sup> The “church” was either in deep apostasy or had simply

52. Catherwood, *Evangelicals*, 93.

53. When we remember that the Roman Inquisition burned Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) at the stake as a heretic, we should keep in mind that in Geneva the governing council (with Calvin’s approval) likewise burned Michael Servetus (1511–1553) at the stake for heresy.

54. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 4.

vanished. “Such views imply, in effect, that God abandoned his people who make up his creation, the Church, for at least twelve hundred years, or for three-fifths of the entire history of Christianity since Jesus came in the first century.”<sup>55</sup> He insists that Protestants must face the question of whether or not “God abandoned the Church from the time of Constantine in the fourth century up until the Reformation . . . , twelve hundred years later.”<sup>56</sup> He seems to believe that God did not entirely abandon the church during those twelve hundred years, despite all those silly relics that still fascinate the superstitious, the terror of the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions, the strange and sometimes brutal maneuvers behind the fashioning of the creeds and confessions, the quirkiness of monasticism, the power and wealth of religious orders, the borrowing of half-understood categories from pagan philosophy in an effort to patch together theological systems, the obsession with pilgrimages to supposed “holy” sites, the cynical brutality of papal power politics, the endless meddling of ecclesiastical authorities in worldly regimes, the kings and princes declaring the faith of their subjects by fiat,<sup>57</sup> and the corruption of ecclesiastical authorities, to say nothing of the strikingly worldly show that leaves especially Europe and Britain littered with magnificent religious art and monumental “church” architecture. I actually agree with Catherwood that God did

not entirely abandon his children even during their most intense spells of apostasy.

## A Personal Witness

These days older Latter-day Saints with disposable incomes sometimes avail themselves of tours, during which they are led around various places in Europe to gaze at its wondrous art and architecture, much of which is in various ways Christian. The venturesome might even visit Rome, and also the New Rome established by Constantine at what is now Istanbul, and even the third Rome in Moscow,<sup>58</sup> as well as various historic centers of protest against these older Christianities. Be that as it may, it is difficult for the Saints to go on holiday in various places in Britain, Europe, or the Near East without encountering a surfeit of antique “church history.” I have a way of seeing all of this, and much more, as part of the story of my own faith, and I believe that our Latter-day Saint scriptures provide a warrant for doing so.

Much of the Old Testament, especially Kings and Chronicles, but elsewhere as well, contains prophetic warnings about the consequences of failing to remember and keep the Lord’s commandments. To do so is to incur the cursing that eventually follows a departure from the terms of the covenant with God. In addition, the Book of Mormon begins with a story of a tiny colony fleeing from the spiritual Babylon then found in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, those people took with them tragic elements that ultimately brought an end to the covenant people of God cached in that far corner of the Lord’s vineyard. Hence I believe that despite the tragic loss of covenants

55. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 4.

56. Catherwood, *Crash Course*, 19.


57. The corrupting symbiotic relationship between bishop and king or pastor and prince, which has a long and terrible history, became the order of the day following the dreadful sectarian warfare in German-speaking lands. Following the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the subjects of princes or kings were forced to adopt either the Catholic or the Lutheran faith of the ruler (“Whose realm, his religion”—*Cuius regio, eius religio*). See *Crash Course*, 107, for Catherwood’s commentary on this matter.

58. Soon after the fall of Constantinople (now Istanbul) to the Ottoman Empire on 29 May 1453, some Russian Orthodox clerics proclaimed Moscow as the new or third Rome.

and priesthood keys and the later adoption of confusing ecumenical creeds crafted by councils of bishops intimidated by mobs,<sup>59</sup> God was still at work in various, essentially invisible ways. It was the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ that was lost, not God's involvement with and watch-care over his children; nor would faith, hope, and love entirely disappear among those who were somehow genuinely touched by the crucial story of the humble deeds of Jesus of Nazareth on their behalf. The apostasies were often great, but they were not absolute or complete. I am confident that many often-now unknown and unheralded heroic individuals, families, and perhaps even communities managed somehow to keep at least a flicker of the flame alive despite what now seems to have been either puerile or demonic episodes in the larger story of Christianity—which story I believe Latter-day Saints must come to share with others who genuinely self-identify as Christians. Others may not, for various reasons, choose to accept the founding narratives of the LDS faith, but I believe that the Saints must understand the danger signs of apostasy as well as strive to discern what appear to them to be signs of piety and faithfulness wherever they occur. The Saints find nothing problematic about singing hymns written by Martin Luther, Isaac Watts, Stuart K. Hines, Francis of Assisi, and, of course, Charles Wesley.<sup>60</sup>

Latter-day Saint scriptures provide accounts of portentous turning away from the genuine faith. These accounts are for me prophetic warnings. Hence I would like to know more about

my Christian cousins and their stories, which I believe are remote, fateful portions of our own larger story. A holiday in Britain, Europe, or the Near East should begin to make it possible for the Saints to pry open a bit the door to at least a tiny portion of what the Saints can and should see as part of the larger history of their own faith.

I am enthralled by even partisan efforts to tell the story of Christian faith, with all the rich details, including many wonders and unfortunate betrayals. From my perspective, the besotted Calvinist “crash course” of what amounts to a bitter-sweet story of Christianity is part of the larger story of, first, the confounding of genuine faith in Jesus Christ and, second, the urgent desire of those who marked its deficiency and desperately wanted it back again. Much like Catherwood, I am also confident that elements of faithfulness persisted despite all the more conspicuous and terrible faults and frailties that come to light. In this I remain, however, a consumer of the stories told by those whose faith was never stirred or has lapsed, as well as the stories told by devout Protestants, Orthodox, and Roman Catholics. These efforts are worthy of our close, critical attention, if not our entire admiration or credulous acceptance. And this is true despite their being, even at their very best, partial sketches and also, given their different confessional groundings, necessarily incommensurate, clashing stories. González is right—the stories we tell are in an important sense autobiographical since they are ultimately our stories and hence bear the marks of our own hopes and yearnings, including especially our faith in God or the absence of such. 

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59. Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

60. Some of my own favorite hymns were not composed by Latter-day Saints. One is “Brightly Beams Our Father’s Mercy,” by Philip Paul Bliss, and another is George F. Root’s “Come to the Savior,” which as “Koutou Katoa Ra” is sung by the Maori Saints.