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Title Study of Early Christianity Vindicates the Restoration

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Abstract Review of *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (1999), by Barry R. Bickmore.

STUDY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY VINDICATES THE RESTORATION

Robert L. Garrett

One might expect a book comparing the early Christian church to the church which Joseph Smith restored to conclude that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the ancient church of Christ are identical. They are, however, noticeably different. Barry Bickmore tells us that the purpose of his book is not to compare the two churches but to identify and locate some of the early characteristics of the primitive church of Christ and to investigate whether or not the beliefs and practices that Joseph Smith restored were truly found in early Christianity (see p. 24).

In his book, Bickmore directs his comments and research to the Latter-day Saint reader, while at the same time presenting the material in a way that could be of interest to the non-LDS reader. He does this by giving a simple historical background and basic theology of the Latter-day Saints, as well as some history of today's other Christian denominations. To appeal to these two theologically different groups is not a simple task since most non-LDS do not fully understand the Prophet Joseph Smith nor the doctrines and truths that he restored. On the other hand, I rarely meet a Latter-day Saint who has

Review of Barry R. Bickmore. *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*. Ben Lomond, Calif.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999. xxiv + 391 pages, with appendix, bibliography, and subject index. \$19.95.

ever heard of or read the writings of the early Christian fathers such as Origen, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, or Ignatius. I applaud Bickmore for trying to bring a better understanding to both LDS and non-LDS readers and believe the book could be of value and benefit for those who wish to expand their knowledge of the doctrinal origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In order to illustrate the doctrinal change that took place in the church over the years, Bickmore finds it necessary to discuss some of the current doctrines of the Catholic and Protestant churches. Although he tends to focus mainly on Catholic tradition when discussing Christian denominations, since Catholicism was the primary organization that emerged from the early Christian church, he must occasionally mention some of the doctrines of the Protestant churches in order to clarify the points he is trying to make.

Bickmore's impetus for writing this book came when he saw that early Christianity was a virtually untouched subject for Latter-day Saints and that an understanding of early Christianity and early Christian writings could aid us in our study of the scriptures and the foundation of Christianity. Indeed, Bickmore's analysis of the changes in early church doctrine helped me to understand the ease with which truth can be lost without the continuing guidance of revelation. Overall, I concur with what Bruce R. McConkie said regarding the study of early Christianity and the early Christian fathers and its application to the Latter-day Saint: "The *apostolic fathers* . . . did not write by way of revelation or commandment, as the apostles did, and their writings are not scripture. But because they had opportunity to record their views on church government, organization, and doctrine in a day when the apostasy was not yet complete, such views are of real value in the study of primitive Christianity."¹

Since many of Bickmore's Latter-day Saint audience is unfamiliar with the subject of early Christianity, he is only able to just scratch the surface of the possible research and information that could educate people about this important period. In addition to his own ex-

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), s.v. "Apostolic Fathers."

planations, Bickmore's research notes are considerable enough to create a good base from which individuals could further study early church structure and doctrines. He has put together a book that is easy to understand and is logical in its flow of ideas and can serve as a valuable research and reference tool.

Unfamiliar terminology, language, and names contribute to the difficulty of understanding early Christian writings, so Bickmore includes an appendix listing unfamiliar words, writings, and people. Along with the appendix, he provides a very thorough bibliography and a substantial number of endnotes.

The book begins by establishing, through scriptural evidences, that the process of the apostasy began even while the apostles were still alive. Bickmore identifies three of the main movements that arose from apostolic Christianity: Jewish Christianity, Gnostic Christianity, and Catholic Christianity (see p. 42). Of these three movements, only Catholicism survives today. He describes the Hellenization of the Christian church: its leaders began to absorb Greek thought and culture, especially the Greek penchant for philosophy. As philosophy became ever more popular with the learned, the Christians resorted to using man's philosophical language and ideas to teach the doctrines of the church. As a result, the simple messages of the gospel were adapted to critical thinking methods used by the philosophers, especially Plato. Aristotle's philosophic teachings also filtered into Christian theology. Recognition of this imbibing of philosophy by the church is essential for understanding the entrance of apostate doctrines into Christian thinking. Bickmore does a fine job researching the steps that essentially led to the Hellenization of the church. This progression of philosophical thought led to the great apostasy, resulting in the loss of spiritual gifts and revelation and the closure of the canon. When pondering the extent of the doctrinal changes that took place in just a couple hundred years, one can see how vital the restoration was in giving us back the knowledge lost during this period of church history.

The third chapter of Bickmore's book discusses the doctrines of God, Christ, the Trinity, creation, and the origin and destination of man. Bickmore shows that earlier church teachings supported the

idea that God possessed a physically tangible body. This belief was challenged, and support for a new understanding of God emerged, until he became the nebulous Trinity of apostate Christianity. The process of remaking man's understanding of God's nature spanned several decades and underwent several revisions. With all these revisions, it is no wonder that the final outcome of the Councils was to declare that God was unknowable! Even today, the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult for Christian clergy to understand (see pp. 136–37 and 129n). Later in the chapter, Bickmore also addresses similar changes that took place in the doctrines of creation, premortal existence, and deification and explains how each was corrupted by individuals and councils. He concludes by examining the earliest teachings regarding these concepts and how very similar these are to those restored by Joseph Smith.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion on original sin and original guilt, coupled with the concept of predestination, and ends with a discussion of the spirit world, baptism for the dead, and the three degrees of glory. Bickmore demonstrates that these doctrines were not unknown at the time of the apostolic fathers. Although many early Christian theologians contended that such ideas were founded in apostate Gnostic teachings, Bickmore provides ample evidence that these were at one time part of true Christian doctrine.

Bickmore devotes chapter 5 to church organization and life, which naturally includes a discussion on priesthood authority. He concludes that the early church fathers knew and taught that ordained priesthood holders and designated priesthood offices were fundamental to the church. Some of the offices within the priesthood mentioned by the early Christians include priests, bishops, deacons, and evangelists. Bickmore acknowledges the possibility that some offices in the restored church may or may not have been present in the church of the former dispensation (see pp. 269–70). Following the chapter on priesthood, he discusses the doctrines of the early church regarding the Lord's day, tithing, fast offering, the united order, anointing the sick, and the sacrament. Although few references to these doctrines by early church writers provide sure evidence of their presence and their similarity to today's practices.

Preceding the conclusion of the book is a chapter that Bickmore devotes to the temple and temple rites. Intimations of sacrosanct, esoteric doctrines can be found in some Catholic rituals and in other religious rites of the world. Before studying the rites themselves, Bickmore emphasizes that because of the secrecy surrounding these rites and ordinances, they are only hinted at in the texts. Within the early church existed the tradition referred to as the mysteries, which included the ordinances of baptism and the Eucharist, as well as suggestions of other “mysterious” ordinances and rites.

I felt that the research for chapter 6 was not as thorough or well-thought-out as the previous material had been. For instance, the section subtitled “‘Orthodox’ Christian Rites: The Later Rituals of Baptism and the Eucharist” (p. 311) borrowed heavily from Marcus von Wellnitz’s article, titled “The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple,” to which Bickmore directed the reader for “a more complete treatment” on the subject (see p. 311).² This was just the beginning of the lack of solid references and research I found in this chapter.

I was also a little disappointed to find that, along with fewer footnotes and references, his topics became more speculative. For example, I found that almost the entire section on the “prayer circle” was borrowed from one single author. Because of the lack of information on the prayer circle, perhaps it would have been best for Bickmore to omit this section and place it in a footnote, until more substantial information can be found and explored. Another section that should possibly be omitted is the discussion on Heavenly Mother. I must admit that I was hesitant about what I might find in this section. I found Bickmore’s treatment of this topic to be so speculative and lacking in substance that I wonder why he chose to include it. I am just not sure why Bickmore feels a need to discuss Heavenly Mother, especially in light of what he himself states: “There is no strong evidence from the New Testament of any belief in a Heavenly Mother” (p. 340).

2. See Marcus von Wellnitz, “The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple,” *BYU Studies* 21/1 (1981): 3–35.

I found *Restoring the Ancient Church* to be of great value to any reader who has an interest in learning about Joseph Smith's role in restoring the ancient church. It is a great introductory resource for compiling the doctrines, teachings, and writings of the early Christian fathers and applying them to Latter-day Saint teachings. Bickmore shows, through an eclectic mixture of writings of the early church fathers, that, although some of the doctrines and rites of the present-day church are not identical to those of the early church, nor should they be, there are enough striking similarities to provide evidence of the truth of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the Prophet Joseph Smith in these latter days.