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Abstract Review of “Is Mormonism Christian?” (2002), by Craig L. Blomberg.

OF COURSE MORMONISM IS CHRISTIAN

Benjamin I. Huff

To be a Christian, in the most important sense, is to repent and come to Christ. One might also say that one becomes a true disciple of Christ by being reborn, being converted, or, as Blomberg says, “by sincerely trusting in the Jesus of the New Testament as personal Lord (God and Master) and Savior and by demonstrating the sincerity of that commitment by some perceivable measure of lifelong, biblical belief and behavior” (p. 329).¹ I take these expressions as essentially equivalent when properly understood.² For an institution, to be

1. Blomberg picks out this sense as the one evangelicals normally have in mind when they ask whether a person is Christian (p. 328). It is also the one Christ picks out as defining membership in his church in Doctrine and Covenants 10:67.

2. I also take them to be equivalent to Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks’s “commitment to Jesus Christ,” in *Offenders for a Word* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 27. Blomberg suggests that Peterson and Ricks do not account for the possibility of insincere commitment. He misunderstands, though. When they say, “If anyone claims to see in Jesus of Nazareth a personage of unique and preeminent authority, that individual should be considered Christian” (ibid., 185), they are not changing their definition. Commitment involves reform in behavior as well as verbal profession of Christ. Their point is that it is rarely appropriate for us mortals to accuse someone of insincerity in that very important claim. Peterson and Ricks’s criterion may differ from Blomberg’s by not requiring the belief that Jesus Christ is God (though the Latter-day Saint scriptures clearly teach that he is). On this point I sympathize with Peterson and Ricks. I do not hold these characterizations of what it takes to be a Christian as equivalent to Blomberg’s “saved.”

Review of Craig L. Blomberg, “Is Mormonism Christian?” In *The New Mormon Challenge*, 315–32.

Christian in the most important sense is presumably to bring persons to become Christians. In this sense, then, is Mormonism Christian? Does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints bring its adherents to repent and come to Christ? Or, in other words, does Latter-day Saint belief and practice involve accepting the Jesus of the New Testament as one's Lord and Savior and showing one's commitment to him by some perceivable measure of lifelong, biblical behavior? Of course it does. Of course Mormonism is Christian.

Each week, by sharing bread in similitude of the last supper, Latter-day Saints individually reaffirm their commitment to take upon themselves the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and keep his commandments.³ They read, ponder, and endeavor to live Christ's teachings together as congregations, as families, and as individuals. They serve each other, for example, by visiting sick members or providing for their needs, by helping new arrivals within a congregation with the heavy work of moving in, and by finding wholesome ways to fellowship. They serve in their communities by preparing meals for the homeless, by laboring honestly in the workplace, by serving on school boards, and by lobbying against the peddling of pornography and other unsavory practices. They cultivate the virtues of patience, forgiveness, humility, and compassion. They sing hymns with titles like "I Believe in Christ" and "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me."⁴ Every active and committed Latter-day Saint accepts Christ as his or her Lord and

I believe salvation presupposes some degree of what evangelicals call *sanctification*, and I believe I agree with most Latter-day Saints on this point, although Stephen Robinson might disagree. Leaving it to God to say who is or will be saved, I do not attach any comment on salvation as such to my use of the word *Christian*.

3. The prayer offered weekly over the bread, in front of the congregation, reads, "O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them." This prayer appears in the Book of Mormon (Moroni 4:3) and in Doctrine and Covenants 20:77.

4. *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, nos. 134 and 104.

Savior and to a significant degree follows Christ's biblical teachings in belief and in behavior. That is what being a Latter-day Saint is all about.⁵

Why, then, does Blomberg not conclude that Mormonism is Christian? Simply put, he does not address the question in its most relevant and important sense. He does not address whether the Church of Jesus Christ normally brings persons to become Christians. In the section of his essay considering Mormonism as a system or institution of belief and practice, he discusses various meanings one might attach to the claim that Mormonism is Christian, but not this one. In the section asking whether individual Latter-day Saints may be Christians, he gives the definition of *Christian* I quote above and questions whether Mormonism leads persons to be Christians in this sense. He says he cannot answer this question affirmatively but does not explain why: the brief discussion that follows wanders off the point. I will first explain how Blomberg fails to address whether Mormonism is Christian in the most important sense. Then I will consider his discussion of other, more taxonomical senses of the question.

Just before the end of his essay Blomberg asks, "Can a person who has had no religious influence on his or her life except the teaching and practice of the LDS come to true, saving faith *within* the LDS Church, if he or she is exposed to the full range of official Mormon doctrine and sincerely believe[s] all of that teaching?" (p. 330). This is (almost) a careful way of saying, "Does Mormonism lead its adherents to become Christians?" which I take to be the most natural construal

5. There are also more mundane senses of the term *Christian*, such as those in my copy of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1976). In reference to a person: "one who believes or professes or is assumed to believe in Jesus Christ and the truth as taught by him" and an array of similar alternate senses. In reference to an institution: "professing or belonging to Christianity," among others, where *Christianity* is "the religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus Christ," which is certainly the focus of Latter-day Saint teaching and practice. Any moderately committed Latter-day Saint fits a whole battery of *Webster's* definitions of *Christian*, and so does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blomberg does not consider any of these, nor does he say why he does not.

of “Is Mormonism Christian?”⁶ Thus Blomberg seems to have raised the important question. Why does he not give a positive answer?

At first he seems to offer an explanation by stating, “There still remain major contradictions of fundamental doctrinal issues between historic Christianity and official LDS teaching that make it impossible to *consistently* believe all of the Bible and simultaneously believe all official Mormon doctrine” (pp. 330–31). This statement is problematic as an explanation for at least two reasons.⁷ For one thing, Blomberg seems implicitly to concede that the reading of the Bible he finds to conflict with official Latter-day Saint teaching is one that takes historic Christianity for granted—that is, one that makes extra-biblical assumptions that conflict with Latter-day Saint teaching and hence begs the question.⁸ More importantly, believing all of the Bible is hardly involved in his definition of what it is to be a Christian. I suspect a huge number of Christians don’t even know all of the Bible, let alone believe it. Nearly all Christians misunderstand parts of the Bible, even though they have read them in sincere faith, and Christ at the last day is unlikely to ask those who visit the widows and the fatherless in their affliction whether they also know and believe the writings of Habakkuk.

6. Actually, beginning the question with “Can” rather than “Does” makes a difference. Blomberg has already closed his discussion of whether Mormonism as an institution is Christian with a negative conclusion. Hence at this point he presupposes that it would be exceptional for a Latter-day Saint to become a Christian without the influence of some other Christian system of belief and practice. Still, his “Can” question is close to the important question, and as close as he gets, so in what follows I will overlook the difference.

7. As a third problem, one could dispute Blomberg’s five-point summary of Latter-day Saint doctrines he finds “objectionable,” delivered in a footnote to this passage (p. 489 n. 69). I would particularly dispute points three and five. Still, as Blomberg acknowledges, it is not clear whether these teachings conflict with the Bible, and so a dispute over what Latter-day Saints officially or commonly believe on these points should wait for another occasion.

8. In a similar vein, on the preceding three pages, Blomberg answers several questions about how being a Latter-day Saint relates to being Christian simply by appealing to what “most evangelicals” (p. 329) would say, without offering any objective basis.

To his credit, Blomberg himself seems unsatisfied with this explanation. He acknowledges that consistency in belief is not of paramount importance and that it is debatable whether or not official Latter-day Saint teaching is consistent with the Bible. He then spends several lines expressing his desire that every professing Christian be joined to the fold of true Christianity, including Latter-day Saints. One might expect that what would come next would be another attempt at explaining why he does not believe that Mormonism leads its adherents to become Christians. Yet instead of an explanation he simply offers what appears to be a restatement of the conclusion: "I cannot, as of this writing, therefore, affirm with integrity that either Mormonism as a whole or any individual, based solely on his or her affirmation of the totality of LDS doctrine, deserves the label 'Christian' in any standard or helpful sense of the word. But my fervent prayer is that, through whatever developments God may wish to use, I will not always have to come to that conclusion" (p. 331). With this he ends the section and the main body of the essay. In the remaining half page he simply addresses whether it is uncharitable to claim that Mormonism is not Christian.

Thus Blomberg does not explain why he does not consider Mormonism Christian in the sense that matters most. The only reason he offers is one that he himself recognizes is inadequate and that a clear-headed reader will recognize is beside the point. One might attempt to read his restatement as something of an explanation, but it is no more relevant than the explanation he himself sets aside. Since being a Christian involves behavior as well as belief, *no* affirmation of doctrine is enough for a person to deserve the label *Christian*, whether the doctrine be Latter-day Saint, evangelical, Catholic, or whatever. Blomberg's concluding restatement focuses on beliefs solely, as though there were any sort of belief that could suffice to make a Christian.

Thus he raises but does not address the pertinent question. Still, for any reader who takes the initiative to consider the question, Blomberg's essay includes all the ingredients for the correct answer. Two pages prior to stating what it takes to be a Christian in the sense of

being converted to Christ, he lists what he acknowledges to be good features of Latter-day Saint belief and practice:

a strong commitment to win people to Christ; a biblical emphasis on numerous fundamental moral values, including putting family relationships as a central priority in life; generous financial giving; a good blend of self-reliance and helping others who genuinely cannot care for themselves; all the strengths of classic Arminianism with its emphasis on human free will and responsibility; mechanisms for spiritual growth and accountability for every church member; . . . genuine community and warm interpersonal relationships; a desire to restore original Christianity and remove corrupting influences from it; social and political agendas often similar to evangelical counterparts; and so on. (p. 327)

These features are more than enough for Mormonism to lead its earnest adherents to become Christians, by Blomberg's stated criteria: "sincerely trusting in the Jesus of the New Testament as personal Lord (God and Master) and Savior and . . . demonstrating the sincerity of that commitment by some perceivable measure of lifelong, biblical belief and behavior" (p. 329). Indeed, the first two points of Blomberg's acknowledgment alone would suffice to make Mormonism Christian. Of course it is.

Since his essay includes more than adequate grounds for concluding that Mormonism is Christian in the sense of leading its adherents to Christ, and no wholehearted explanation for why it would not be, one may wonder whether Blomberg has quite thought the question through. That said, it is clear that he has many objections to Mormonism, and some of these may make him reluctant to acknowledge it as Christian even if they do not precisely bear on the question. After all, for someone who believes that following Christ is the key to righteousness and eternal happiness, the term *Christian* does not easily take a strictly taxonomical meaning. It inevitably implies some level of approval, and there is much about Mormonism of

which Blomberg does not approve. Yet if Blomberg wishes to use the word *Christian* in a “meaningful” way, as he claims (p. 331), he should be prepared to distinguish between calling someone or something Christian and giving it unqualified approval. As it is, I am unsure what meaning to attach to Blomberg’s unwillingness to call Mormonism Christian.⁹ Further, key aspects of his disapproval reflect misunderstandings of Mormonism, as I will explain.

Blomberg brings up a number of his objections in the course of considering three other senses for the claim that Mormonism is Christian, reflecting various ways of fitting Mormonism into the broader Christian picture. This taxonomy is important, though far less important than the question of whether someone is a disciple of Christ. Blomberg discusses the hypotheses that the Church of Jesus Christ (1) belongs to one of the three largest branches of the Christian tradition (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), (2) is the “restoration of the original Christianity of Jesus and the apostles,” and (3) is simply a new denomination (or a new branch) within the Christian tradition (pp. 317–18, 322). Blomberg finds each of these hypotheses untenable. He is right to quickly reject the first hypothesis, although his discussion of it is highly problematic. Only the second captures the Latter-day Saint self-understanding. Still, a charitable observer who is not a Latter-day Saint should carefully consider the third. Blomberg says a number of sensible things along the way to rejecting points 2 and 3, but his reasoning leaves substantial gaps. His discussion leaves ample room for the reader to conclude that Mormonism is Christian in a taxonomical sense.

Taxonomy: Is Mormonism Orthodox or Catholic or Protestant?

The section discussing the first hypothesis is confusing because Blomberg means to be employing a “definition” of *Christian*, but it is not clear what his definition is. On one reading, his definition is “a

9. As far as I can tell, in this essay Blomberg also refrains from denying that Mormonism is Christian.

member of an Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant church” (p. 317). According to this definition, clearly Mormonism would not be Christian, but it is an untenable definition, like defining an *American* as “a person from the East Coast, West Coast, or Great Lakes regions of the U.S.” The fact that these definitions cover the numerical majority of Christians or Americans does not make them plausible. They simply do not capture the common English meanings of the terms. Blomberg also quotes the *World Book Encyclopedia*, which does capture the common English meaning of *Christianity*—“the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ” (p. 317)—and indicates that not all (rather, “most”) Christians are Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant. A different locution might preserve Blomberg’s legitimate point, though. Since Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants are Christians, he might reasonably ask, “If we were to say that Mormonism is Christian, would we mean that it is Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox?” Or he might ask, “Is Mormonism Christian in the sense of being Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox?”

Of course, Latter-day Saints have never represented themselves as Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, and this fact might be enough to justify dismissing the first hypothesis. Seemingly to illustrate, though, Blomberg goes on to present an inflammatory view of Latter-day Saint teaching about these three major branches of the Christian tradition. Regrettably, some Saints take roughly this view, but it is not an official teaching, nor is it the teaching of Latter-day Saint scripture. Blomberg reads the Book of Mormon as teaching that “all of Christendom after the apostolic age prior to 1830” is a church founded by the devil (p. 317). This interpretation fits poorly with the context of the passages to which he refers. According to that discussion, “there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil” (1 Nephi 14:10).¹⁰ Since there are just two, these churches clearly do not correspond to

10. It may be interesting to compare Book of Mormon references to this “abominable” church with biblical references to “the mother of harlots and abominations” (Revelation 17:5).

any ordinary denominational divisions. Thus it is implausible to take Book of Mormon references to the “church of the devil” as references to traditional Christianity. My own view is that the church of the Lamb of God includes the humble righteous of all nations and denominations.¹¹ For a church that teaches that many who die without knowing the fulness of the gospel will be saved at the last day, it would be rather odd to teach that every Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant believer for a millennium and a half belonged to the church of the devil. Blomberg’s other paraphrases are also disputable.¹² In the spirit of such Book of Mormon teachings as 2 Nephi 29:7–11 and Alma 29:8, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* gives a more standard view: that non-Latter-day Saint forms of Christianity throughout history do “much good under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” though they are “incomplete.”¹³

Since the reading of Blomberg’s “definition” I consider above is so plainly untenable and clashes with the *World Book* definition he quotes, I consider another reading. This reading better explains why Blomberg brings up the Book of Mormon reference to the “church of the devil.” Perhaps Blomberg draws from *World Book* the idea that Christianity is a religion of which most members are Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant. Then his reasoning might go: But Mormons believe the religion of which most members are Protestant, Orthodox, or Catholic to be the church of the devil. Hence Mormons are not Christians. This reasoning uses a more sensible characterization of Christianity than the untenable one I criticize above, though it still does not reflect the primary *World Book* definition. Mormonism is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and so manifestly satisfies

11. My view on this point is similar to Stephen Robinson’s. Blomberg acknowledges Robinson’s reading in a footnote but does not explain why he rejects it. In addition, his quotation of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* on this point makes his inflammatory reading of 1 Nephi even more inexplicable.

12. For example, Joseph Smith—History 1:19 does not use Blomberg’s phrase “hypocritical pretense” to describe Christian worship in Joseph Smith’s youth. I suggest a different gloss: *they employ my words, but they misunderstand me.*

13. This point appears in the passage Blomberg himself quotes from Roger R. Keller, “Christians and Christianity,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:270.

the *World Book* definition. Yet if Mormonism called his religion the church of the devil, Blomberg's reluctance to call Mormonism Christian would be at least psychologically understandable. Fortunately, on this point he just gets Mormonism wrong. This misunderstanding comes up again later in his essay, again seeming to block what might otherwise be the most obvious way for Blomberg to classify Mormonism as Christian.

Taxonomy: Is Mormonism a Restoration of Original Christianity?

The Latter-day Saints themselves claim that their church is a restoration of the original church Christ established in the time of the apostles. Blomberg offers historical arguments against this claim, and he questions the cogency of various LDS scholars' historical arguments for it. He raises points that a careful assessment of the history should address. Still, his arguments are less than compelling.

That Christ would need to restore his church in 1830 presupposes that the Christian tradition had gone astray. Blomberg objects to this presupposition: "the amount and suddenness of transformation [in the early Christian world] required to defend the Mormon view of apostasy simply cannot be elicited from the ancient sources available to us" (p. 318). He acknowledges that substantial change occurred in the first several centuries of Christian history but emphasizes that this change was too gradual to fit the Latter-day Saint view.

I see three main problems with Blomberg's contention. First, the Latter-day Saint view of apostasy does not require sudden change. It only requires that enough had changed by 1830 to make a restoration necessary. Second, certain early and crucial changes are consistent with the historical evidence. For example, if crucial authority was lost because the original apostles were not properly replaced as they died, that fact could make necessary a subsequent restoration, even if doctrinal error crept in very slowly thereafter. The nature and location of authority in the early church is thoroughly disputed, but the Latter-day Saint view that the apostles held crucial authority is consistent with the very incomplete historical evidence we now possess, and it

finds support in the New Testament. Third and most important, Blomberg's contention that a distinct entry into apostasy "cannot be elicited from the ancient sources" is simply not to the point. The fact is that the ancient sources we now have available leave in doubt a great many important questions about the early church. While historical evidence for a Latter-day Saint view is interesting and welcome, the legitimacy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its claims, including its claim to be Christian, does not depend on the existence of some unambiguous historical demonstration of them, any more than Christ's authority depended on scriptural exegesis showing that he was uniquely the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Where evidence either for or against is incomplete and subject to dispute, a lack of strong historical evidence for Latter-day Saint claims is not evidence against those claims.

Blomberg goes on to criticize in broad strokes various historical observations Latter-day Saint scholars have offered in corroboration of the claim that their church is a restoration of the original church. He is surely right that some Latter-day Saint citations of ancient authors involve misunderstandings that could be corrected by more careful study. However, his arguments are not developed enough to support his sweeping conclusions. He presupposes an extremely narrow view of what members of the Church of Jesus Christ would have to show in order to legitimately claim that Mormonism is Christian in the sense of being a restoration of the original church. He writes as though they must "demonstrate" (p. 320) on the basis of ancient sources that teachings and practices parallel with Mormonism were not only present but formed a "coherent doctrinal system" defined by Jesus and the apostles (p. 320), free of any Hellenistic influence (p. 319), and joined with a "monarchical episcopacy" (p. 321), and then were lost suddenly (p. 318), declining in "straight-line" fashion from orthodoxy to heresy (p. 319).

In fact, the Latter-day Saint claim is consistent with many other scenarios. For example, surely the real story involves heterodoxy present, ebbing and flowing, from the earliest days of the church. Surely

the complex Hellenistic culture was not a uniformly bad influence. What is crucial to the LDS claim is that correct teachings and authority to lead the church were present together in the time of the original apostles, whereas by 1830 this authority was no longer present and the teachings had changed enough to warrant a restoration. Moreover, whether or not Mormonism is Christian does not depend on anyone's demonstrating even this much from ancient sources.

I will linger a bit on one of Blomberg's oversimplifications. The Book of Mormon teaches that many "plain and precious parts of the gospel" were lost from the Christian community over time after the deaths of the apostles (1 Nephi 13:26–35). Such loss of truth is a key part of the LDS view that a restoration was necessary. Blomberg claims this must mean either that the texts forming today's New Testament were substantially miscopied or that other texts containing key truths were lost or discarded. He then casts doubt on both these scenarios. Despite Blomberg's doubts, both may have occurred. Textual criticism is hardly an infallible way to detect changes; there is no doubt that countless interesting early Christian documents have been lost; and there is no telling how much oral discourse was never fully captured in writing. Moreover, I urge a third scenario for the loss of truth. The Book of Mormon teaching may refer just as easily to how the texts are read and understood as to how they are worded. Books carry meaning by virtue of their being understood by people as language, and if the readers cease to recognize the same meaning in the words, then the meaning is in a real sense lost from the book.

An important example of this instability of meaning is the case of *spirit*, as appearing in John 4:24, "God is a Spirit." In the time of Origen, the fact that God was described as a spirit suggested that he is corporeal, having location and a sort of texture, like air, breath, or wind.¹⁴ Yet today many cite this passage to argue that God is incorporeal. The meaning of the word has changed, whether in Greek or in English, and so people see in the same text a very different meaning.

14. Origen, *De Principiis*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 4:242.

In some cases careful philology may recover the original meaning. In other cases it may not. Such words as *faith* and *truth* have evolved substantially through history. Phrases like *laying on of hands*, or Christ's claims that he and his Father are one, may have had a specific meaning that was not properly passed on. The significance of symbolic texts or teachings is especially vulnerable to loss via disruption of the tradition of readers.¹⁵

The New Testament itself attests to the importance not only of reading a correct book, but of having proper advice in its interpretation, as when Christ expounded the prophecies concerning himself (Luke 24:25–27) or when the eunuch appealed to Philip to explain Isaiah (Acts 8:26–35). Second Peter 3:16 warns that the unlearned may misunderstand Paul's letters, or indeed any scriptures, and the errors of the scribes and Pharisees who did not recognize Christ show that one can fail to understand despite much study. Indeed, precisely this problem of a text's being "plain" to a person with a certain preparation and not to others is the subject of a small discourse by the same author who records the vision of the book from which plain and precious things were taken away (2 Nephi 25:1–8).¹⁶ Thus a loss of truth from the Bible could occur at least as easily through a failure in the tradition of readers and interpreters as through a failure of a copyist or librarian.

Blomberg himself suggests that the most plain and precious truth of all is lacking from many nominally Christian denominations:

Sadly, in many liberal protestant congregations and in even larger numbers of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, it is possible to attend and be involved for years without ever

15. Consider praying or acting in Christ's name (John 14:13), eating his flesh (John 6:53), or sitting in his throne (Revelation 3:21).

16. This vision prominently features a book that "proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew," but references to "plain and precious things" being taken away "from the gospel of the Lamb" appear roughly as often as, and apparently interchangeably with, references to such things being taken away from the book (see 1 Nephi 13:24–29). Indeed, the book seems to be a representation of the whole gospel message as traced from the apostles, not merely of gospel writings.

hearing the message that one must personally accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and allow him to transform every area of one's life. It often requires some experience outside such congregations to lead to an individual's salvation. (pp. 328–29)

He does not suggest that they have removed passages from their versions of the Bible. Rather, he suggests that they fail to discuss the message and fail to see it in the scriptures. I myself suspect that Blomberg's impression is inaccurate, that these churches frequently express the same idea but in ways Blomberg does not recognize. In any church, a person may attend for years without truly hearing what is being taught. Still, my view of how plain and precious truths were lost from the tradition has interesting affinities with some of Blomberg's own views.

As in his discussion of the claim that plain and precious truths were lost, Blomberg's remarks in other cases are not well enough developed to constitute a refutation of the Latter-day Saint claim that their church is a restoration of the original church. They are better read as a survey of his reasons for doubt. Of course, the Latter-day Saint case based on historical records is not exactly airtight. In the end Saints have always relied on the witness of the Holy Spirit—an eminently ancient source, but hardly a public commodity. Hence, Blomberg's choice not to endorse this Latter-day Saint claim is reasonable and shows no disrespect or lack of charity on his part. But where does that leave the question of whether Mormonism is Christian? Since Blomberg has not refuted the claim of the restoration, he has not refuted the claim that Mormonism is Christian in the sense of being a restoration. On the other hand, he (like others in his position) is not under a rational obligation to assent that Mormonism is Christian *in this sense*. So, declining assent here, he proceeds to consider another sense.

Taxonomy: Is Mormonism Simply a New Christian Denomination?

One would think that since Mormonism fits the *World Book* definition and standard dictionary definitions but is distinct from other

present denominations, this hypothesis would be the default. Blomberg's reasons for rejecting it are a bit confusing. First he enumerates numerous parallels between Latter-day Saint doctrines and practices and those taught by Alexander Campbell, who had strong ties with Sidney Rigdon. He also lists a set of potential nineteenth-century sources for differences from Campbell. His point is clearly to argue that Joseph Smith's ideas were not very new or unusual after all. Yet then he claims, "Mormonism appears to relate to historic Christianity much as Christianity came to relate to Judaism: it changes enough elements to be classified better as a completely new religion" (p. 324). One doubts he can have it both ways.

At first Blomberg's point in listing similarities with other movements of Joseph Smith's time seems to be to support the hypothesis that Mormonism might be a new nineteenth-century denomination within the restorationist tradition to which Campbell belongs. More often, though, his point seems to be to undermine the claim that the source in Joseph Smith's teachings was revelation.¹⁷ Evidently Blomberg's aims are not merely taxonomic.

The affinities of Joseph's views with other nineteenth-century views are interesting, but they hardly imply that there was no restoration. Many of the parallels Blomberg cites are not surprising, given that Smith and Campbell both read the Bible. Strong similarity with many Christian denominations is only to be expected of a restoration of Christianity and evidences a shared source in revelation rather than lack of revelation. Further, the Latter-day Saint view that God works by the Holy Spirit among all people fits well with the view that many teachings relatively distinctive to the restoration might have been brewing for some time before they came together in the restored church. Nephi reports that God often teaches his people incrementally, "line upon line" (2 Nephi 28:30), and Joseph Smith may

17. He says, "One might be forgiven for thinking" that these elements were revealed to Joseph Smith, but this hypothesis "overlooks all of these clearly documented influences on his early life and thought" (pp. 323–24). Blomberg for his part overlooks the stunningly fresh and systematic unity of the gospel message restored through Joseph Smith—hardly the hodgepodge Blomberg suggests it is.

have had inspired forerunners, as Christ had in John the Baptist. The parallels Blomberg cites with sources other than Campbell are again interesting but do little to undermine the claim that Mormonism is a restoration of the original church. Mormonism is quite distinctive on the whole, as Blomberg quickly admits.

Blomberg's allegation that Mormonism is so different from other Christian denominations that it should count as an entirely new religion is more interesting than his attempt to assimilate it to other nineteenth-century phenomena, but it relies on a dubious notion of what distinguishes one religion from another. It is true that in many ways Mormonism is to traditional Christianity as Christianity is to Judaism. Christianity involved different ideas, different ritual practices, and additional scriptures compared with Judaism, as does Mormonism compared with traditional Christianity. Yet Blomberg may be too quick to assume that this analogy implies that Latter-day Saint belief and practice constitute a different religion from traditional Christianity. There are difficulties with the idea that Christianity is a different religion from Judaism, however often we may talk as though it is. The distinction is nowhere near as tidy as the distinction between, say, Christianity and Buddhism.

Christ did not offer the Jews the comforting idea that he was starting a new religion irrelevant to their own. He claimed that if they did not accept his message, they were not truly following the authorities they already accepted: Moses "wrote of me" (John 5:45–47); "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham" (John 8:39); "it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: Yet ye have not known him; but I know him" (John 8:54–55). While he called for deep changes to existing Jewish practice, he persistently referred to the Jews' own scriptures to support his teachings. As we see from the Sermon on the Mount ("I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill"; Matthew 5:17), Christ did not come to replace the Jews' religion, but to correct and fulfill it.

Thus if Christ is to be believed, following their own religion required the Jews to follow Christ. Paul specifically calls the Mosaic law

a “schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ” (Galatians 3:24). Designed to bring its followers to Christ and delivered by prophets who knew and wrote of him, Judaism as originally delivered was evidently a form of Christianity, although an incomplete form.

Of course, in everyday discourse it is convenient to speak of contemporary Christianity and contemporary Judaism as two different religions. They do have substantial differences in both belief and practice, and on most occasions it is not appropriate for Christians to press their view of the situation on Jews who do not recognize Christ as their Messiah. Still, from the Christian perspective, Judaism can only be regarded as independent from Christianity insofar as it is a human tradition, out of touch with its origin in revelation. Christ recognized this aspect of Judaism, calling it “the tradition of men” in contrast with “the commandment of God” (Mark 7:8). His comment on this tradition was the same as his comment on the Christianity of Joseph Smith’s day. In both cases he quoted Isaiah: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8–9, paralleling Mark 7:6–7 and quoting Isaiah 29:13; compare Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

Thus Blomberg’s analogy holds rather closely, perhaps more closely than he realized. Mormonism relates to traditional Christianity much as Christ’s teaching related to traditional Judaism. In both pairs, the first member claims to restore the original from which the second has strayed. Of course, Christ also presented much more than had been present in the original Mosaic teaching. Indeed, Christ himself was the greatest revelation.¹⁸

Mormonism differs from the traditional branches of Christianity, but not in the way Buddhism differs from Islam and Zoroastrianism.

18. Blomberg also offers a more colorful analogy, this time comparing the Latter-day Saints with an imaginary group claiming to represent a restoration of Islam. While it makes an amusing caricature, this imaginary group fails to be analogous to the Saints in key respects (pp. 324–25).

Rather, it differs in being a rival view of the same original teaching and the same original teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. These differences are reflected aptly by distinguishing Latter-day Saints from Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, all as branches of Christianity. Blomberg understandably declines to call Mormonism a restoration of original Christianity. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, have no interest in calling themselves a new, nineteenth-century denomination of Christianity. Yet both they and Blomberg should agree that the Church of Jesus Christ is either one or the other: if it is not a restoration, then it is a new, nineteenth-century denomination—and either way, it is Christian.

Mormonism has important differences from the traditional branches of Christianity—on the nature of God as our Father and creator; on the nature of his unity with his Son, Jesus Christ; on the nature of the authority required to lead his church and administer saving ordinances such as baptism; and on the nature and terms of salvation, including the kind of unity we may hope to attain with the Father, the Son, and each other. While such differences as our additional scriptures, our modern prophets, our temple ceremonies, and our belief in eternal marriage are more conspicuous, we also have a unique perspective on the nature of the conversion Blomberg emphasizes as the key to true Christian discipleship. Indeed, perhaps the choicest feature of the Book of Mormon is its moving account of the change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit on those who humble themselves and wish to be freed from sin—the process of being (re)born of God (Mosiah 5:1–7; Alma 22:15; 36:5–26; 3 Nephi 9:16–21). Yet Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Latter-day Saints all look to Jesus of Nazareth as the author of our salvation. We all believe that he was the Son of God, that he died and rose again the third day, that he prepared the way for us to receive eternal life through faith in him; and we all seek to show that faith by obedience to his teachings. We all accept Christ as our Lord and Savior and strive to show our commitment to him by walking in newness of life. We are all Christians.