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

AM I A CHRISTIAN?

Kent P. Jackson

In the summer of 1968 when I was a young man, I made the decision to commit myself to Jesus Christ. After struggling for several years to find myself and not living the kind of life I knew I should live, I finally surrendered my will to that of the Lord and put my future into his hands. I changed friends, discarded old behavior and beliefs, and set my life on a new course that has guided me to the present time. That new course has led me to much happiness—a happiness I had never felt before and was unaware that I was missing. It is a joy in God through Jesus Christ, “by whom [I] now received the atonement” (Romans 5:11).

Although at the time I knew very little about scriptural language and absolutely nothing about theological definitions, I believed then and still believe today that I was spiritually reborn. I experienced the sensation of having the heavy weight of my previous life lifted from my shoulders. I felt lighter, safer, and happier. I felt a “joy and peace in believing” that was brought into my life by “the God of hope” (Romans 15:13). Above all else, I felt more free. Indeed, the immediate and lasting sensation was one of liberation. I had been freed from the things that had bound me. I had been liberated from falsehood, confusion, and doubt. And thus having been “made free from sin,” I was both able and determined to become a servant of God and to do

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

his will for the rest of my life (Romans 6:18, 22; see 1 Corinthians 7:22). Paul describes well the process by which my old self became dead and my regenerated self walks “in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). I felt changes take place in my life by which I was “quickened” and “forgiven” (Colossians 2:13), and my interests and desires became increasingly set “on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:2).

I was spiritually reborn, according to these descriptions and definitions in the Bible. I experienced “a change of heart” (Alma 5:26) “through faith on his [Christ’s] name,” and I was “born of him” (Mosiah 5:7). So why, then, do I ask, “Am I a Christian?”

Latter-day Saint Christians

In his chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge*, “Is Mormonism Christian?” (pp. 315–32, 483–89), my friend Craig L. Blomberg concludes with regret that I cannot be a Christian because I exercise my faith within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and sincerely believe all its teachings (p. 330).¹ Blomberg’s regret is real. In the most courteous and thoughtful chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge*, he analyzes the Latter-day Saint claim to Christianity from a variety of angles. He concludes that neither we as a church nor we as individuals can be Christians while holding to our uniquely Latter-day Saint beliefs.² I have observed elsewhere that one person’s

1. Craig L. Blomberg is a respected New Testament scholar and the author of several important works, including *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990) and *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002). His commitment as a defender of the Jesus of the Gospels and of the historicity of the New Testament is evident in these and other books and in his published articles. He showed great courage to coauthor with Stephen E. Robinson *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), for which he has paid a heavy price within his own faith community. I admire both his work as a scholar and him as a good person.

2. This conclusion is not unique to Blomberg. See also Carl Mosser, “And the Saints Go Marching On,” in *The New Mormon Challenge*, 66 and 412–13 n. 25. The common theme of this book is that Latter-day Saints believe X, but *Christians* believe Y.

definition of a Christian may well differ legitimately from another's.³ I agree, for example, that as a Latter-day Saint I am not part of the historic Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant tradition of Christianity that has descended from antiquity. But are there no other definitions of a Christian that include me? Blomberg rejects as too simplistic the definition proposed by Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks: "What made a person a Christian in the first century, and what makes a person a Christian today, is, simply, a commitment to Jesus Christ."⁴ He views this definition as insufficient because one can profess a commitment to Christ while falling short in other matters (citing Galatians 1:8–9 and Matthew 7:23). Blomberg's own definitions are more specific: What makes a person a Christian, he writes, is whether that person "is genuinely *regenerate*." The question to be asked, he argues, is "Is such a person *saved*?" (p. 328, emphasis in original). Indeed, "Christian means 'converted'" (p. 328). To be a Christian, "one must personally accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and allow him to transform every area of one's life" (pp. 328–29). "*Anyone* can become a Christian 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, emphasis in original).

I agree with Blomberg's straightforward and evenhanded definitions. They make good sense. And I believe that most other thoughtful evangelicals would use similar words to describe what it means to be a real Christian. Significantly, but not surprisingly, those definitions are also consistent with the teachings of the Book of Mormon (see, for example, Mosiah 4:1–5:15; Alma 5:2–62; 7:14–16).

But Blomberg's definitions create a serious problem: they make *me* a Christian too. They make me a Christian because my own life is

3. Kent P. Jackson, "Are Mormons Christians? Presbyterians, Mormons, and the Question of Religious Definitions," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 4/1 (October 2000): 52–65.

4. Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Aspen Books, 1992), 27.

governed by the very processes that he cites as evidence for one's Christianity. I am a personal witness of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I have been regenerated, I have been saved,⁵ and I have been converted. I have personally accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and I have allowed him to transform every area of my life. I trust in Jesus as my personal Lord, God, Master, and Savior and have attempted to demonstrate the sincerity of my commitment since the time of my conversion by living according to Jesus' will. And there are many others like me. I am not the only Latter-day Saint who has "felt to sing the song of [Christ's] redeeming love" (Alma 5:26). Most of my Latter-day Saint friends and neighbors have been similarly changed by the same power. And there are millions more, in every corner of the earth, and each can testify as I have of the converting power of the atonement of Jesus. The problem for Blomberg's definitions is that they include faithful, believing Latter-day Saints. Although we may not describe the transforming process in the same words used by evangelicals, we know it nonetheless because we have witnessed it in our lives and have seen it in the lives of others.

I believe sincerely that many of my evangelical Christian friends, and countless others like them, have been reborn spiritually also.⁶ The fact that their "hearts are changed through faith on his name" (Mosiah 5:7) is clear in their honest efforts to show the example and teachings of Jesus in their lives. They reflect the character of their Savior, just as faithful Latter-day Saints do. Although I believe that the fulness of Christ's gospel is found in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I do not doubt for a moment that the transforming power of Christ is at work in many good people whose beliefs are different from mine. Thus I do not hesitate to call a good person like Craig Blomberg a Christian.

5. Latter-day Saints typically reserve the language of being saved for the last judgment and do not make claim to salvation in this life. At the same time, however, such language is used with respect to being rescued in this life from sin and evil. See Dallin H. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" *Ensign*, May 1998, 55–57.

6. In the most complete sense, being born again includes receiving baptism and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, ordinances that represent and fully activate the spiritual processes (see especially Romans 6:3–4).

So why, then, am *I* not a Christian? In order to say I am not a Christian, the authors of *The New Mormon Challenge* and every pastor or publisher who seeks to find fault with Mormonism must do one of the following two things: they must insist that salvation does not really come through Jesus after all, or they must insist that my own religious experience is not real. If I have been transformed through Jesus and live a life centered in his gospel but am nonetheless not saved because I believe the teachings of Mormonism, then salvation is not in Jesus but in correct thinking. Is this salvation by catechism, rather than salvation in Christ?⁷ The other option to exclude me is equally unacceptable. They must discount my religious experience and assert that my relationship with Jesus is not real. But I won't let them do that. I can testify of the redeeming power of the atonement because I am a witness of it in my own life and in the lives of people I love. I cannot deny the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. Do those who seek to disprove Mormonism really want me to deny that witness? I ask the authors of *The New Mormon Challenge* and others like them: Do *you* really want me to deny that witness? If not, then please take it seriously.

An Invitation

I say the following to every honest believer in Jesus Christ: I believe that the Holy Spirit has placed within your soul a true witness of Jesus. Can you believe the same about me? For me and for other Latter-day Saints it is not a doctrinal problem to believe that *your* relationship with Jesus is real and that he is at work in your life. We accept that and are pleased to call you our Christian brother or sister.

7. Stephen Robinson suggested the idea in *How Wide the Divide?* (see pp. 164–65). It seems to me that if proper, orthodox doctrinal thinking is the key to salvation, rather than a life transformed by and centered in Jesus Christ, then this would also exclude from salvation many other Christians, including evangelicals, who—however Christ-centered, faithful, and repentant they may be—hold mistaken ideas or otherwise do not know the proper protocol or vocabulary for being saved. In this there seems to be a fatal defect in evangelical theology. And it is a defect that favors the educated elites—the clergy and the academics—over Christ-loving, Bible-believing farmers and factory workers. See Blomberg in *How Wide the Divide?* (p. 186, first four lines).

And we believe that you will go to heaven. But for you it is a serious problem if *my* relationship with Jesus is real and if he is at work in *my* life. That is why people like the authors of *The New Mormon Challenge* resist the idea as vigorously as they can. There is very much at stake for you, and they know it. Here is why. If you believe that my spiritual rebirth is real and that the Holy Spirit has placed a witness of Jesus Christ in my soul—and I testify that I have that witness—then you need to be aware of some other things as well. The same spiritual processes and experiences that have brought about my spiritual rebirth have also brought about my conversion to the truthfulness of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The same Holy Spirit that has instilled in my heart a sure testimony of Jesus has likewise instilled in my heart a sure testimony that Joseph Smith was his prophet. The same workings that have changed my soul and regenerated me from a fallen man to a disciple of Jesus Christ have also converted me to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and the other Latter-day Saint scriptures.

Am I a Christian? Of course I am. Like you, I believe in Jesus as described in the New Testament and in the fact that there is “no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17). As yours has, my life has been changed through his saving power. But I believe more than this because I also believe the tremendous things that God has done in modern times. I believe that in 1820 the Lord called a new prophet, Joseph Smith, through whom he restored to the earth the *fulness* of the Christian gospel. This fulness of Christianity includes Jesus’ restored church—a community of people who have come to Christ in the manner described in the New Testament and who endeavor to do his will. The fulness of Christianity also includes the restoration of both the authority and the inspiration of living apostles. Thus the Lord’s church in our day has the same relationship to Jesus that the ancient church had under the ministry of men like Peter, James, and John. And thus the channel of revelation found among ancient apostles

is open again among modern apostles. The restored fulness of Christianity also includes the restoration of the Book of Mormon, an ancient record that, like the Bible, contains the word of God. It is a second witness of Jesus Christ that teaches in plainness the truths of his gospel and bears a clear and consistent testimony of him. Other books of scripture have been revealed as well. Is this not good news? Should not all Christians everywhere receive these blessings with eagerness and joy?

Blomberg quotes the invitation of Gordon B. Hinckley, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: "Bring all the good you have with you and let us see if we can't add to it" (p. 489 n. 68).⁸ Another modern apostle tells why we bring our message to you, and he invites you to join us in receiving it: "Through missionaries and members, the message of the restored gospel is going to all the world. To non-Christians, we witness of Christ and share the truths and ordinances of His restored gospel. To Christians we do the same. Even if a Christian has been 'saved' . . . , we teach that there remains more to be learned and more to be experienced. . . . We invite all to hear this message, and we invite all who receive the confirming witness of the Spirit to heed it."⁹

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Larry King Live" Christmas 1999 television special.

9. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" 57.