“Shall They Not Both Fall into the Ditch?” What Certain Baptists Think they Know about the Restored Gospel

Daniel C. Peterson

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Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

"Shall They Not Both Fall into the Ditch?"
What Certain Baptists Think They Know about the Restored Gospel

'Taint what a man don't know that hurts him, it's what he knows that just ain't so.

Frank McKinney Hubbard

A series of editorials in the Baptist Religious Herald is especially revealing. The April 9 issue for 1840 has an editorial under the heading "The Mormons": "A correspondent requests information as to the peculiar tenets of this modern sect. We have never seen a copy of the book of Mormon, nor any abstract of their creed upon which we could fully rely, as a fair exposition of their opinions." This frank admission does not, however, preclude a summary verdict: "The book of Mormon is a bungling and stupid production... It contains some trite, moral maxims, but the phraseology..."

This review reflects the personal opinions of its author. It was not commissioned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nor does it claim to represent the official view of the church on any issue. I am grateful to Deborah Peterson for her help in gathering materials for this review, and to Malin Jacobs, Steve Mayfield, Eugene Seaich, and John A. Tvedtines for assistance on specific questions.
frequently violates every principle and rule of grammar. We have no hesitation in saying the whole system is erroneous.”

“Don’t be puzzled by Mormons,” reads the glossy poster. “Be prepared.” Against a background of hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces, the poster announces a program entitled “The Mormon Puzzle: Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints.” Date, time, and place of the program are to be filled in by the local administrators of the program.

According to a February 1998 Associated Press article, 45,000 kits for this program, which include the poster, had been distributed by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) since the materials became available last year. Nearly 38,000 have been disseminated to Southern Baptist churches across North America. The rest, presumably, have gone to interested individuals. The kit has been created in conjunction with the Southern Baptist Convention’s plan to hold its 1998 annual national meeting in (of all places) Salt Lake City, Utah, in early June. In February 1998, Jim Harding, executive director of the Utah-Idaho SBC, called upon Baptists everywhere to pray intensely for the success of the meeting, along with the evangelistic efforts and church mission trips to Utah that will accompany it. For the Salt Lake City meeting, he told the SBC’s Executive Committee in Nashville, Tennessee, is much more than a mere convention. It is “a divine appointment.”

The “Introduction and Instructional Guide” that accompanies the materials suggests that “pastors,” “education ministers,” and various other “study leaders” consider using them in small group discussions or in large classes, on Sunday or on Wednesday evenings or in a concentrated six-to-ten-hour retreat over one or two days (for which sample schedules are provided), or that

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individuals be encouraged to use them for private study.4 “Materials in this package are designed to assist discerning Christians trying to put together the puzzle of Mormonism. These materials will equip them to be more effective witnesses to the true gospel of Jesus Christ to any Mormons they may encounter.”5

The package consists of several items:

• First is a brief survey of the enclosed materials, entitled “The Mormon Puzzle: Introduction and Instructional Guide.”

• The most ambitious item in the package is described in the “Introduction and Instructional Guide” as a fifty-minute video (it is actually substantially longer), entitled The Mormon Puzzle: Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints.6 According to its accompanying materials, it “provides in-depth evaluations by Christian scholars and experts who provide practical ways for effective Christian witness to Mormons.”7 Says the video’s narrator, “Let’s put the puzzle together, piece by piece.” (One of the experts is Mike Gray, pastor of Southeast Baptist Church in Salt Lake City, who told the Baptists’ Denominational Summit on Mormonism, held on 27–28 June 1997 in Ridgecrest, North Carolina, that the state of Utah is “a stronghold of Satan.”)8

• Next is a manual, The Mormon Puzzle: Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, designed for personal study or for group instruction. It is divided into five lessons.9

• Another small manual, “written by a team of knowledgeable writers,” “compares and contrasts LDS beliefs and practices to those of historic Christianity and evaluates them in light of biblical

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5 Ibid.
7 “Introduction and Instructional Guide.”
It is entitled *The Mormon Puzzle: The Challenge of Mormonism*. The back cover identifies its authors as “prominent Christian experts.” “We have attempted to call on people from around the country with the highest integrity in interfaith witness and counter-cult ministries.” “We hope,” writes its editor, Michael H. Reynolds, “that the information in this book will aid in understanding that Mormonism is not Christian.” (Note that, for Reynolds and his fellow “experts,” the non-Christian character of Latter-day Saint faith isn’t an argument to be made or a conclusion to be reached. It is a fact, an objective reality, to be recognized and understood.)
• "The Mormon Puzzle: Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity" contains a detailed "point-by-point comparison of historic Christian doctrines with those officially stated by the LDS Church."14

• The brochure "Belief Bulletin: Mormons" offers a one-paragraph summary of Latter-day Saint history and briefly surveys several "Major Beliefs" of the church, taking care to follow each one with a "Biblical Response."15

• "Patterns in the Cults" purports to survey the commonalities that "cults" share, as opposed to true religion. Of course, the notion that a group of religions can be termed "cults" because of their shared attributes is a highly problematic one. It naively fails to take into account "the constructed, artificial, and highly malleable nature of categories like heresy and orthodoxy."16 One can, in fact, mount a serious argument that the term cult, in the sense used by these materials, is so vague and so manifestly pejorative that it should be retired as simply useless.17

• Francis J. Beckwith's "A Closer Look at the Mormon Concept of God" draws on the kinds of arguments that Beckwith, with a colleague named Stephen Parrish, advanced some years ago in a book entitled The Mormon Concept of God.18 That book drew heavy criticism from Latter-day Saint thinkers.19

14 "Introduction and Instructional Guide."

15 "Belief Bulletin: Mormons" (Alpharetta, Ga.: Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1997).

16 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 76.


• Also included is “A Closer Look at the Mormon Plan of Salvation.” This pamphlet “delineates the LDS dual concepts of salvation (resurrection) and eternal life (exaltation) and the legalistic plan Mormons believe is necessary to attain them. It contrasts these beliefs with the biblical concept of salvation by grace through faith alone.”

• The most famous peculiarly Latter-day Saint volume of scripture is quickly disposed of by the Southern Baptist Convention in a little brochure entitled “A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon.”

• The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints enjoys a reputation for successfully cultivating and encouraging strong family relationships among its members. The Southern Baptist Convention attempts to neutralize the attractiveness of this reputation in “A Closer Look at the Truth about the Mormon Family.” “The LDS church projects an image of fostering ideal wholesome families that are intended to last forever. This pamphlet analyzes the unbiblical theological reasons why the LDS emphasizes [sic] family issues and exposes the all too human realities of Mormon family life.”

According to the Associated Press, Philip Roberts, who is the director of the Interfaith Witness Team for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, says that the Baptists sought an “objective look” at the differences between Mormonism and conservative Protestantism. That, he explained, is

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21 “Introduction and Instructional Guide.”
24 “Introduction and Instructional Guide.” One might have expected, from this characterization, a revealing exposé of the fact that, despite their alleged claim to be perfect, Mormons are, well, not. Such polemic is very popular among precisely the anti-Mormon circles that played a leading role in the creation of these materials. Oddly, though, “The Truth about the Mormon Family” never goes that route and thus never really delivers the sordid details on “the all too human realities of Mormon family life.”
the reason they filmed scholars from Brigham Young University on video, along with believing Mormons from other walks of life: to lay out the doctrines of the church.25

And indeed, even for one of the authors of the SBC materials the “Mormon Puzzle” video is entirely too nice to the Latter-day Saints. In early April 1998, a Denver-area member of the church received the set of Mormon Puzzle materials he had ordered. Included in his kit was a note from Rev. John L. Smith written on the letterhead of Utah Missions, Inc., entitled “To Anyone Planning to Show The Mormon Puzzle to a Group Of People” and marked “Read This First.” The note runs as follows:

The beginning of this film is Great! I marvel that BYU professors would be so willing to present such teachings to a Christian audience!

Even BYU Professor Dr. Stephen E. Robinson, the infamous author of Are Mormons Christian? and Mormon Co-author of How Wide The Divide? comes out with the plain but unbiblical teachings about God that Mormons seldom mention in the presence of non-Mormons. That portion of the video is Great! Great! Great!

However, almost at the end of the film two Mormon families are shown in a “Family Home Evening” situation. They come across in a very positive, wholesome manner.

Thus, it is my fear (after almost 50 years of intensive interest in the subject), that out of 100 people in any Christian congregation—several would relate to those events in a way complimentary to Mormonism—and directly contrary to the purpose of the film.

Therefore, if I were showing this film to my congregation—I would stop the film well before these scenes!

See the film yourself (I would stop it just before the fellow with the mustache and red tie, Herb Stoneman, begins his statement about 50 minutes into the film). Of course it is your prerogative to do as you

25 Moulton, “20,000 Baptists Prepare for Polite Scrutiny of LDS Beliefs.”
choose. I believe the remainder of the film will be counter-productive to your intentions.

The film is really too long to show in most services. It could easily be stopped short of the end and not take the chance of harming the relationship of some in most congregations! Some new Christians, as well as those uninformed about Mormonism, may well respond in a way that you do not intend.

I hope you will take my advice!

Sincerely,

[signed] John L. Smith

But is the video really "objective"? Do the curriculum materials provided by the Southern Baptist Convention for its people really offer an unbiased look (let alone a positive or flattering one) at the faith of the Latter-day Saints? Scarcely. Yes, Stephen Robinson, the chairman of the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University at the time of filming, and Robert Millet, the dean of Religious Education, do appear several times in the video. But Phil Roberts and Sandra Tanner are always there to critique, to show how illogical and unbiblical and outrageous Latter-day Saint doctrine is. The Mormons are allowed merely to state their beliefs; the anti-Mormons are then unleashed to assault them. The bibliography of "Suggested Readings" given at the end of Michael H. Reynolds's *Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends* cites only polemical materials critical of the Latter-day Saints and their faith. Not a single item by a Latter-day Saint makes the list, nor does a single serious historical work, nor does any other scholarly book.26 This is still, admittedly, a huge advance over earlier productions by critics of the church. *Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints* is neither hateful, paranoid, nor sensationalistic, as is Ed Decker's infamous pseudo-documentary film *The God Makers*. (Happily, Decker and his cronies are absent from these materials.)

Nonetheless, although far more subtle, the old familiar hostility continues to be apparent. The Mormon Puzzle material is

intended not only to warn conservative Protestants against accepting the restored gospel, but also to help Latter-day Saints "to realize the mirage of Mormonism and to receive the true Christ." The declared purpose of this material, according to the video, is to prevent people from being "entangled in the Mormon net," for Latter-day Saints worship merely a "god" with a small "g." Thelma Geer, sounding like a writer of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon melodrama, even offers up a chapter on "the deep dark secrets of Mormonism." Her chapter assaults the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham. Sandra Tanner dismisses Joseph Smith, the revered founder of the faith of the Latter-day Saints, as "something of a scoundrel." (By contrast, the great and astonishingly erudite German scholar Max Weber, one of the principal creators of modern social science, thought that Joseph Smith "resembled, even in matters of detail, Muhammad and above all the Jewish prophets.") And, although she would be extremely hard pressed to find a single passage anywhere saying so, Ms. Tanner confidently tells her video audience that Brigham Young "said that Adam was the God we pray to."

Baptists studying these materials are taught to treat their Latter-day Saint neighbors with suspicion and with what many of those neighbors will surely regard as disrespect. When dealing with Mormon missionaries, for instance, Baptists are advised to "Try to determine their first names and refrain from calling them 'elder' whenever possible." In speaking with a Latter-day Saint, "Be careful not to call his or her testimony Christian." After all, Mormons belong to a "cult." And, although they are smitten with "their own spiritual superiority," they are, at

27 Ibid., 3.
28 Ibid., 17, 25.
29 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 55-61.
30 For a very different view, by an eminent American historian, see Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).
32 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 9.
33 Ibid., 19, emphasis in the original.
34 Ibid., 11, 24.
35 Ibid., 12.
bottom, typically evasive, illogical, and intellectually dishonest. You just can’t trust ’em.

“Regardless of what the Mormon missionaries or television commercials say, the Mormon church is anti-Christian,” writes Robert McKay.36 “The Jesus of Mormonism,” announces John L. Smith, “was not born of a virgin (though Mormons will say he was).”37 “It should be clear that from what Mormons say concerning the Bible . . . they have a very low opinion of it,” reports Michael Reynolds. “In public they claim the Bible is authoritative and in practice they quote from it. Yet they obviously do not believe it.”38 The video, too, operates on this assumption that Latter-day Saint spokesmen habitually misrepresent their own beliefs. For instance, in a brief, featured comment on the conception of Jesus, Brigham Young University’s Robert Millet declares that “how that was accomplished, we don’t know”; however, the narrator waits only a few minutes before confidently telling his audience that Mormons believe Jesus to have been conceived through “God’s literal, physical relationship with Mary.” So deep and, indeed, so paranoid is the suspicion of Mormons that pervades these materials that, in recounting Joseph Smith’s story, one writer in The Challenge of Mormonism cannot even bring himself to admit that Joseph Smith claimed to have had a first vision. Apparently, he only claimed to claim to have one, for Lavoid Robertson rather oddly refers to “his first ‘alleged’ encounter with messengers of God.”39

Habitual dishonesty, however, is not the only trait characteristic of the Latter-day Saint personality. “In trying to witness to Mormons, one frustrating problem is their tendency to change the subject,” says Michael Reynolds. “Whenever you get to a difficult place, they wish to alter the conversation to suit themselves.”40 Of course, they have little choice. For “they are ignorant of what the Bible actually says and of sound principles of biblical interpretation.”41 “Anyone that knows their [sic] Bible

36 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 68.
37 In ibid., 5.
38 In ibid., 53.
40 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 12.
41 Ibid., 17.
cannot be converted into Mormonism,” reports an anti-Mormon featured in the video. “No matter how practical a Mormon is,” says Reynolds, “he or she does not rely on rationality when it comes to his or her faith.” 42

In view of their manifold idiocies and depravities, as portrayed in the Mormon Puzzle material, the Latter-day Saints are ripe for judgment. And the Southern Baptist Convention hastens to pronounce it. “People who follow the gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” says the video narrator, “will walk a path which will lead to eternal condemnation. . . . Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not biblical Christians, and [are] therefore lost.” “Mormon people are lost people,” says a videotaped “soulwinner,” comparing them in their deception to similar categories of the lost, such as “drug addicts,” “drunkards,” and other sinners. A major portion of the video features an attractive Latter-day Saint family who are shown reading the scriptures and singing hymns during a family night. The Leathams, who live only a few miles from Salt Lake City, apparently opened up their home to the Southern Baptist film crew. They are a friendly, and obviously loving, family. The Leatham children are adorable. No matter—their doom is assured. “Unless we present to them the true gospel of the Bible,” observes the narrator, “they will be lost for eternity.”

The Mormon Puzzle material deals in gross overstatement. Purportedly designed to increase the understanding of one faith by the adherents of another, this approach is sadly irresponsible. “Putting the pieces of the Mormon puzzle together, one by one,” the narrator of the SBC video hyperbolically remarks, “a picture of a faith emerges which has very little if anything in common with biblical Christian faith.” “Little if anything”? One might have thought that shared belief in a benevolent personal God who answers prayers, common acceptance of all the narratives of both the Old and New Testaments, and parallel professions of trust in Jesus of Nazareth as the redeeming Son of God whose atoning sacrifice opens the way to salvation, to mention just a few noteworthy items, would count for something.

42 Ibid., 8.
In the eyes of Michael Reynolds, Robert McKay, John L. Smith, and their associates, however, such things count for nothing. "Mormonism is like a complex puzzle," says one of their leaflets. "To most people, its beliefs and practices are difficult to fit together in a coherent system."\(^{43}\) Most people, of course, know little or nothing about the restored Church of Jesus Christ, and we would expect them to have some difficulty. It should be the intent of materials like these to assist them in understanding. It is disheartening, therefore, to see that the chosen experts of the Southern Baptist Convention understand so little of a faith that millions regard as simply profound, logical, consistent, and deeply satisfying. The great Victorian explorer and linguist Sir Richard Burton—who entered Mecca in disguise, translated the 1001 Nights and various manuscripts from ancient India, and pursued the source of the Nile—wrote following his lengthy stay in Salt Lake City that "there is in Mormondom, as in all other exclusive faiths, ... an inner life into which I cannot flatter myself or deceive the reader with the idea of my having penetrated."\(^{44}\) Sir Richard was a brilliant and accomplished ethnographer, armed with a passion for understanding and hobbled by very few prejudices. What chance was there that professional anti-Mormons such as Reynolds, McKay, and Smith would be able to get it right?

As an example of the "in-depth evaluations by Christian scholars and experts" included in the Mormon Puzzle video, one could do worse than choose an item from the professional anti-Mormon publicist Sandra Tanner: "Mormonism," she declares to her interviewer,

is truly a different religion. It isn't just a brand of Christianity. Its theology is so radically different that it is [she pauses]. ... Its theology is as close to Christianity as Hinduism. It's a totally different view of man and God and creation. Everything about it is different. They just use the same terms.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{43}\) "Introduction and Instructional Guide."


\(^{45}\) Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints. Ms. Tanner has a propensity to make outlandish statements. To the SBC's 1997 Denominational
This is not a serious statement from a serious scholar. It is hyperbolic to the point of embarrassment. Mormonism is "totally different" from Christianity? Do the Latter-day Saints not believe in a personal God? Do they not believe in the narratives of the Bible? Don't Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus Christ is God's divine Son, who rose from the dead on the third day and in whom alone salvation is possible? (The list of agreements could be extended all day long.) Do Hindus believe any of these things? It is very unlikely that Sandra Tanner knows enough about Hinduism to entitle her to make such a remark, and her bizarre comment suggests that her understanding of Mormonism may itself be little deeper. As I have remarked elsewhere,

One would very much like to pose a few questions to Ms. Tanner: What, for example, is the role of the Vedas or of the Upanishads in Latter-day Saint devotions? How central is the concept of karma to Mormon theology? What have the leaders of the church had to say about reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls? Is there any passage in Mormon scripture that advocates a rigid and complex caste system? Has an atheistic form of Mormonism, analogous to the Hindu atheist movements, been a fruitful element in Latter-day Saint intellectual history? Which is closer to Hindu monistic teaching, the Mormon concept of the Godhead or classical post-Nicene trinitarianism? Can Ms. Tanner name any Latter-day Saint hymn devoted to Vishnu? Would she care to comment on the rising bhakti movement among the followers of Joseph Smith? On the chanting

Summit on Mormonism, in North Carolina, she said, "There is a racial ceiling in the [LDS] church and non-whites can only advance so far. This is a white man's church and if it continues to grow to [sic] non-whites, they're going to realize it." See Martin King, "Mormon Summit Preps for '98 SBC; Notes Christian, LDS differences," Baptist Press (2 July 1997) (www.religiontoday.com). Presumably the irony of her making such remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention—is anybody curious why there is a Southern Baptist Convention?—escaped Ms. Tanner.
of saffron-robed Mormon missionaries at American airports? (Hare Joseph!) \(^{46}\)

(As of yet—and these questions have been in print and available for many months—I have had no answer from Ms. Tanner. Perhaps she is still working her way through Whitney’s *Sanskrit Grammar* or Stenzler’s *Elementarbuch der Sanskritsprache*, and prefers to delay her response until she has a more secure command of the primary sources. \(^{47}\) I can sympathize. My copies of Stenzler and Whitney have lain largely untouched for years. Sanskrit is a difficult and intimidating language. Ms. Tanner can take whatever time she needs. I can wait. I am waiting.) Members of the Southern Baptist Convention who have been taught this sort of thing in Sunday School classes and church retreats have been victimized. Their trust in their teachers and pastors has been abused. Unfortunately, as we shall see, although little in the Mormon Puzzle material reaches quite the level of Ms. Tanner’s zany remark, there is much, very much, in these items that misleads and misinforms. Anyone whose grasp of Mormonism relies solely on the materials provided by the Southern Baptist Convention will find the Mormon “puzzle” impossibly difficult to solve. Too many pieces are missing, too many seem to belong in another box altogether, and far too many have been cut and reshaped by a hostile Protestant saw.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may well be surprised and perplexed that one church would devote its official resources to assaulting another. There is nothing remotely comparable among the Mormons. I teach Islamic studies at Brigham Young University, and I often lecture on Islam to Latter-day Saint groups across the country. I have written a book about Islam, directed to a Latter-day Saint audience, and have participated in other efforts of the kind. \(^{48}\) I have been involved in

Mormon-Muslim dialogues at Brigham Young and Idaho State universities, and in “trialogues” between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Austria and Israel. Never have I been asked to concentrate on the “errors” and “evils” of Islam, nor have I ever felt the slightest pressure from anybody to do so. Quite the contrary. I have sought always to treat the religion of the Muslims with sympathy and respect, and my efforts to do so have been well received at every level of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

To the best of my knowledge, not a single Latter-day Saint makes his or her living as a professional critic of anybody else’s faith. We don’t run anti-Protestant “ministries.” We don’t have a Sunday School curriculum focused on the errors of the Baptists. No Mormon tabloids exist that aim at refuting Calvinism. We don’t buy or sell books with titles like Forty Years an Evangelical Slave. We don’t produce sensationalistic videos devoted to attacking Protestant fundamentalism. I have never seen a Latter-day Saint cartoon lampooning, say, the Assemblies of God. We don’t flit around the world trying to disrupt the work of other religious organizations. We don’t picket them when they dedicate new buildings. We don’t haunt their meetings. We don’t distribute leaflets assaulting other faiths. We don’t sponsor lectures or seminars in our chapels assaulting the “evils” of our neighbors’ religions, and we don’t have television and radio programs “exposing” the stupidity or depravity of others’ beliefs.

Latter-day Saints can, I think, be quite happy that this is so.

The Mormons’ Deceptive Campaign

A recurrent theme of the SBC material is the insistence that Latter-day Saints are not only deceived, but deceivers. Thus, for example, Ken James says that natural human desires to do

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something for departed loved ones are “exploited craftily by Mormonism” with its doctrine of salvation for the dead.49 The video Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints notes that the Mormons are “maintaining a very carefully crafted image” and, later, that their radio and television spots are “carefully crafted.” “They present themselves in a Christian veneer,” says the “Introduction and Instructional Guide.” They “operate an extensive public relations campaign ... designed to promote the image of a traditional Christian church,” says the video, and are “striving to be seen as just another Christian denomination.”

“In the recent past,” says Michael Reynolds, “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . has claimed to be Christian.”50 He thereby manages artfully to insinuate, without actually asserting, that Latter-day Saints did not claim to be Christian in the less recent past. (His failure to say so explicitly presumably relieves him of any obligation to provide evidence for his insinuation.) Robert McKay concurs, pointing out that “the LDS church claims today to be part of the Christian religion . . . [although] the two are in fact entirely separate religions.”51 And Tal Davis sounds the same theme. “In recent years,” he writes, “the LDS has [sic] portrayed itself as a Christian denomination with a few distinctive emphases. Christian theologians, however, know that Mormonism is essentially different in its basic theological structure from that of historic Christianity.”52

And when did this deceptive campaign commence? The SBC’s experts have precise answers. Michael Reynolds says that it is “in the last 20 years or so The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has made a concerted effort to appear Christian”—by means of, among other things, “a redefinition of some LDS terms.”53 Lavoid Robertson explains that “Mormons have changed ‘in appearance’ in the last fifteen years, seeking acceptance by mainline Christianity.”54 “In the last twelve years or so,” declares Phil Roberts in the SBC video, “the Church of

49 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 48.
50 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 3.
51 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 23.
52 Davis, “A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon.”
54 Robertson, “Introduction,” in ibid., vii.
Latter-day Saints has become very public-relations conscious. They want to be thought of, not as a cult, not as a sectarian group, but as mainstream Protestants."55

The nefarious scheme seems to be working. Several times during the video, people in the street give their unrehearsed opinions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To the obvious horror of the video’s producers, these people manifest an unacceptably positive—or, at least, nonadversarial—view of the Mormons. One man goes so far as to say that “those who follow Christ and his teachings are Christians,” and then applies this to the Latter-day Saints. Needless to say, such opinions must be eliminated.

Part of this shifty campaign to convince their neighbors that they are respectable Christians, says the video, was the “unprecedented” permission recently granted by the Latter-day Saints to Catholics in Utah Valley to celebrate mass in the Provo LDS Tabernacle. But was this action really “unprecedented”? Hardly. A few nineteenth-century examples will make the point, although they could be multiplied manyfold:

By the end of the 1860s other denominations were beginning to establish themselves in the territory. The Church made no effort to keep out other faiths and sometimes cooperated by letting them use Mormon chapels until they could build their own meeting places.

Among the first non-Mormons in Utah were Jews, some of whom came as merchants and businessmen as early as 1854. Strong friendships grew between the Jews and the Mormons, and more than once Brigham Young made Mormon church buildings available for Jewish religious services.

Roman Catholics came to Utah in 1862 as members of the California Volunteers. In 1866 when the Reverend Edward Kelly was looking for a place to celebrate mass, he was allowed to use the old taber-

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55 I must say, incidentally, that I have never noticed this alleged craving to be a “mainstream Protestant” in myself, nor have I detected it in other Latter-day Saints.
nacle, and Brigham Young helped him obtain a clear title to land for a cathedral. Though the Catholics and the Latter-day Saints had little in common religiously, they maintained generally good will. The Reverend Lawrence Scanlan arrived in Utah in 1873 and on one occasion in 1873 was invited by Mormon leaders in St. George to use their tabernacle for worship. Fearful that some of the service would have to be omitted because it called for a choir singing in Latin, he learned to his surprise that the leader of the St. George Tabernacle choir had asked for the appropriate music, and in two weeks the choir would sing it in Latin. On May 18 a Catholic high mass was sung by a Mormon choir in the St. George Tabernacle, symbolizing the good will that existed between Father Scanlan and the Saints.56

So there is no evidence of any Latter-day Saint campaign, recent or in the distant past, to masquerade as, or pretend to be like, Christians. But it really doesn’t much matter what the evidence says, nor how many reasons for excluding them from Christendom turn out to be spurious. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, insists the SBC, is not Christian.57 Of course, says John L. Smith, “Mormonism claims that it is Christian because the name ‘Jesus’ is in the name of their church.” And, in fact, the name of their church would seem to offer at least a hint that Latter-day Saints are disciples of Christ. But Rev. Smith is not fooled. “Mormons do believe in a Jesus,” he grants. But it is the wrong one. It is not the same Jesus as depicted in the New Testament.58 And, as an anti-Mormon in the video points out, “If they have the wrong God and the wrong Jesus they have no salvation.”

“The recurrent charge of orthodoxy, even today,” writes scholar Terryl Givens, “is that Mormons are not Christian. Mormons, or members of ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

57 In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, viii, 23, 31, 48. This is a major theme of the video.
58 In ibid., 5.
day Saints,’ as they remind their orthodox critics, officially and personally find the accusation repugnant, erroneous, and hurtful.”59 I would add, for myself, that they also find it baseless and incoherent. Powerful counterarguments have been deployed by Latter-day Saints, to which fundamentalist anti-Mormons have, on balance, not so much as attempted to respond.60 Zealous critics, who suppose that their ad hoc tests for Christianity are as scientific as chemical analysis, labor under “the mistaken idea that categories like ‘Christian’ or ‘American,’ and the identities they imply, are objective realities, outside of negotiation or manipulation, rather than the products of political conflict and ideological construction.”61

In fact, Christianity is rather difficult to define. “Christians have argued, often passionately,” observes preacher David Steinmetz, “over every conceivable point of Christian doctrine from the filioque to the immaculate conception. There is scarcely an issue of worship, theology, ethics, and politics over which some Christians have not disagreed among themselves.”62 Although he himself rejected it, the great historian of doctrine John Henry Newman mentions the view of Christianity held by some that it “in fact is a mere name for a cluster or family of rival religions all together, religions at variance one with another, and claiming the same appellation, not because there can be assigned any one and the same doctrine as the common foundation of all, but because certain points of agreement may be found here and there of some sort or other by which each in its turn is connected with one or other of the rest.”63 As Givens notes, “Mormonism’s controver-

59 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 81.
60 See, for example, Stephen E. Robinson, Are Mormons Christians? (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991); Peterson and Ricks, Offenders for a Word; also Roger R. Keller, Reformed Christians and Mormon Christians: Let’s Talk! (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pettingill, 1986).
61 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 20–21. On page 78, Givens discusses one published standard of orthodoxy, designed by Rodney Stark and Charles Glock, according to which Latter-day Saints easily fit into the Christian mainstream.
sional status as a Christian sect may depend on whether 'Christian' is taken to refer to a historical tradition or a mode of Jesus-centered discipleship, however idiosyncratic its articulation. That is, does Christianity consist in discipleship, in accepting and attempting to follow Jesus Christ? Or does it require passing certain theological tests, devised by the Baptists or some other self-anointed arbiter, on matters such as the canon, the metaphysical Trinity, and the doctrine of original sin? It seems odd that, although our Baptist critics deny vehemently that human works are needed for salvation, they seem to make an exception in the case of the Latter-day Saints. To be saved, one must not only accept Jesus Christ as Lord, but one must forego Mormonism and develop a proper theological understanding, consistent with the principles of evangelical or fundamentalist Protestantism.

Such problems, however, do not deter the Southern Baptist Convention. "We... unequivocally reject Mormonism as not authentically Christian," proclaims Tal Davis. He repeats this verdict in his brochure on the Book of Mormon: "We cannot recognize... Mormonism as authentically Christian," he says. In an earlier article, Mormon Puzzle author Robert McKay set forth what seems to be the essence of the SBC's methodology in these materials: "Having assumed that what I believe is Christian doctrine," he wrote, "any doctrines which contradict mine are by definition not Christian." "Mormons... usually refer to themselves as a religion," reasoned John L. Smith, warming up for his Mormon Puzzle contributions. "Since Judaism and Islam are religions (and are, therefore, non-Christian), and Mormonism is also a religion, then it is also non-Christian." Three times in the video, Phil Roberts, Director of Interfaith Witness for the North American Mission Board of the SBC, pointedly misstates the official name of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "The

64 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 81.
66 Davis, "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."
68 John L. Smith, The Evangel 44/3 (May/June 1997): 1. I am grateful to Stan Barker, who located this quotation for me in the archives of the annual "Philastus" award competition, for which, at the time of writing, Rev. Smith's remark is a finalist.
Church of the Latter-day Saints,” he calls us, making a strategically helpful omission.

There is, throughout these materials, a palpable slipperiness in the use of certain terms. This is apparent in the brochure “The Mormon Puzzle: Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . professes to be a Christian church. However, a careful comparison of basic doctrinal positions of that church to those of historical, biblical Christianity reveal [sic] many radical differences.69

Is it the intent of the pamphlet to compare two utterly different religions (Mormonism and “Christianity”)? Or to compare a standard, historic Christianity to a nonstandard variant? Few knowledgeable Latter-day Saints, if any, would want to deny that the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is substantially different in a number of ways from the mainstream Christian sects, either today or in subapostolic times. Yet they would overwhelmingly insist that they are, indeed, Christians.

The Mormon Puzzle material, by contrast, clearly assumes that if Mormonism does not match traditional Christianity, as the SBC defines it, it cannot be Christian at all. They offer no justification for this claim. “Historic,” mainstream Christendom is simply assumed, without authority and without argument, to exhaust the possible range of Christian belief.70 Yet it is not at all clear that fundamentalist or evangelical Protestantism has a right to stake an exclusive claim on “historic” Christianity. Nor even, some have said, to claim it at all. “And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism,” wrote the great John Henry Newman. “If ever there were a safe truth, it is this.”71 On 9 October 1845, the day after completing his classic Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine from which these words are quoted,

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69 “Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity.”
70 By contrast, powerful reasons exist to reject this naive equation. See Peterson and Ricks, Offenders for a Word.
Newman, who had been raised in a Protestant home that leaned in the direction of Calvinism, entered the Roman Catholic Church. "This utter incongruity between Protestantism and historical Christianity is a plain fact," he said, "whether the latter be regarded in its earlier or in its later centuries."\(^{72}\)

Carefully misunderstanding his sources and yanking them from their proper context, Robert McKay even portrays the restored gospel of Jesus Christ as "anti-Christian," and hostile to Christianity.\(^{73}\) Joseph Smith’s account of the first vision, as McKay helpfully distorts it, teaches that "all Christian doctrine was an abomination, and all Christian leaders were corrupt."\(^{74}\) The Latter-day Saints, laments the video, make three hundred thousand converts "from Christian denominations each year."\(^{75}\)

Like Phil Roberts with his "Church of the Latter-day Saints," the Mormon Puzzle material obscures and even denies the central role of the Savior Jesus Christ in the faith and practice of his restored church. The Southern Baptist curriculum packet seeks to convince its audience that Latter-day Saints do not look to Jesus for salvation, but instead to the church. We might coin the word ecclesiolatry to express the accusation. Latter-day Saint expressions of faith—as summarized by their Baptist critics—are said to provide evidence for this.

"A Mormon’s testimony has very little to do with Jesus," explains Michael Reynolds, "except as a side issue."\(^{76}\) "An LDS testimony may go something like this: ‘I bear you my testimony that I know that Joseph Smith is a true prophet, and that the Book of Mormon is true and that the LDS church is true.’"\(^{77}\) Reynolds even gives his students "an example of an LDS testimony"—which, of course, is not really "an example of an LDS testimony" at all, but a specimen devised by the anti-Mormon Baptist minister Michael Reynolds: "An LDS testimony can be on various subjects

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{73}\) In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 67–68.
\(^{74}\) In ibid., 17.
\(^{75}\) Since neither the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints nor anybody else gathers statistics on the previous affiliations of converts, this seems a highly dubious figure.
\(^{76}\) Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 7.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., emphasis in the original.
such as the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith, or the truthfulness of the Mormon church." "An LDS testimony typically encompasses all three: 'I bear you my testimony that the *Book of Mormon* is true and that Joseph Smith is a prophet and that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true.'"\(^{78}\)

It escapes me how anyone could possibly testify of the Book of Mormon, the prophethood of Joseph Smith, and the divine origins of the church without understanding that all of these point toward the redeeming Son of God and draw any salvific power and eternal significance that they might possess directly from him. Still, lest we think that we are obliged to take only Rev. Reynolds’s word for this, we also have the unbiased statement of Rev. J. E. Cook that "LDS testimony ... is not the testimony of a savior, but a church, a book, a man."\(^{79}\) And there is more. An anti-Mormon in the video assures his audience that "testimony is nothing more than you telling the person that you believe in Joseph Smith, that he was a true prophet, that you believe that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the one true church."

Thus, on the basis of such objective proof, the Southern Baptist Convention has demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that, as Rev. Reynolds puts it, "many Mormons think more of Joseph Smith Jr. than of Jesus."\(^{80}\) In fact, Reynolds discloses, in the Latter-day Saint view "eternal life is gained not through Jesus Christ but through the Mormon church."\(^{81}\) That, it would seem, is why, according to Robert McKay, "The LDS church’s missionary program is one of proselytizing, rather than evangelism. Its goal is not to lead lost sinners to faith in Jesus, but to detach people from their churches and attach them to the LDS church."\(^{82}\) For, says Rev. Cook, Mormons believe that it is the leaders of their church who will dictate who goes to heaven, and who goes to hell, who is saved, and who is damned. "Included in

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\(^{78}\) Reynolds, *Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends*, 18, emphasis in the original.

\(^{79}\) In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 37.


\(^{81}\) Ibid., 15; compare "Patterns in the Cults," a 1986 leaflet included in the Mormon Puzzle materials.

\(^{82}\) In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 22.
the keys [of the priesthood] are salvation and the right to bestow or remove it, according to the works of the individual."\(^{83}\)

This is, I must say, new doctrine to me. And well worth the price of admission. I had never before heard that my church teaches the possibility of salvation apart from Christ, and my copy of the Book of Mormon declares that "the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate" (2 Nephi 9:41). I suspect that, when he says that the priesthood has the right to bestow or withhold salvation, Michael Reynolds has confused the Latter-day Saints with medieval Roman Catholics. In fact, of course, this is all nonsense. Reynolds's portrayal of the priesthood savors less of Gordon B. Hinckley or Howard W. Hunter than of T. S. Eliot's Thomas Becket, responding to a tempter:

No! shall I, who keep the keys
Of heaven and hell, supreme alone in England,
Who bind and loose, with power from the Pope,
Descend to desire a punier power?
Delegate to deal the doom of damnation,
To condemn kings, not serve among their servants,
Is my open office. No! Go.\(^{84}\)

The pamphlet "A Closer Look at the Mormon Plan of Salvation" labors mightily to portray the faith of the Latter-day Saints as a religion of human works rather than of divine grace. As the "Belief Bulletin: Mormons" says of fallen humanity, in the supposed view of the Latter-day Saints, "The consequences of their sin are erased by their allegiance to the tenets of Mormonism." There is no mention of the atonement of Christ.\(^{85}\) Robert McKay plays a similar game with Latter-day Saint ideas about what happens immediately after death: "The dead go to either paradise or spirit prison," he writes, "depending on their faithfulness to Mormon teachings."\(^{86}\) But this cannot possibly be true, since the vast majority of those who die (in Europe and the Americas little

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\(^{83}\) In ibid., 36.


\(^{85}\) "Belief Bulletin: Mormons."

\(^{86}\) In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 40.
less than in India and Africa) have no notion of "Mormon teachings" at all. Still, the assertion, false though it is, undeniably furthers the intention, manifest throughout the SBC materials, of portraying the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as arrogating to itself the divine prerogatives and powers of the Redeemer.

The plan of salvation according to the "gospel" of Mormonism is not just a gospel of works—it is a gospel of obedience and obligation to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In Gospel Principles, an official publication of that church, a parable describing the Mormon plan of salvation is told. A debtor begs his creditor for mercy as his debts are large and long overdue. Just as the cruel creditor is about to cast the man in prison a friend intervenes who says to the creditor, "You will pay the debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible." The friend who intervened, not with a free gift, but with a loan to be repaid, is symbolic of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each devout Saint therefore is now working hard to pay off their debt to the church. Their gospel (good news) is no gospel. It is not the gospel of freedom through Christ, it is a gospel of servitude and obligation to a religious organization.87

This is, in manifold ways, a gross distortion of Latter-day Saint belief. And, candidly, it borders on dishonesty in its abuse of the evidence. The friend in the parable to which the Baptist pamphlet alludes is most emphatically not "symbolic of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." The parable occurs in a chapter of Gospel Principles entitled "The Atonement," in a "unit" or section of the book called "Jesus Christ as Our Savior." It is prefaced by a paragraph that reads as follows:

Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Council of the Twelve gave the following instruction to show how Christ’s

87 "The Mormon Plan of Salvation."
atonement makes it possible to be saved from sin if we do our part.\footnote{Gospel Principles (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 75.}

The parable is immediately followed by two sentences explaining that

Our sins are our spiritual debts. Without Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and Mediator, we would all pay for our sins by suffering spiritual death.\footnote{Ibid., 78.}

Where is there even the slightest hint that this parable refers to the church, rather than to our Savior, Jesus Christ? Where is there, anywhere in Latter-day Saint doctrine, any notion that we can ever pay off our debts to God? The Book of Mormon certainly knows of no such idea: “I say unto you, my brethren,” taught King Benjamin, “that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess . . . I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:20–21).

Robert McKay rightly informs his readers that, in the Latter-day Saint conception, this life involves a “preparation for the world to come.” But then he proceeds subtly to mislead them by saying that “Proper preparation, according to the Mormon church, includes membership in the church, accepting Joseph Smith as a prophet, accepting the Book of Mormon as scripture, participating in Mormon temple rituals, and a multitude of other works and ordinances.”\footnote{In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 39–40.} He has omitted the most important act of preparation of all: acceptance of Christ. If a person does not genuinely accept Christ, no ordinance will ultimately avail that person anything at all. It is deeply untruthful to pretend that there exists or could exist a genuine but truly Christless Mormonism. Like the ancient Nephite prophets of the Book of Mormon, “we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26).
Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is obtained only through baptism, wherein we take upon ourselves the name of Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:13 and innumerable other passages). The first of “The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” written by Joseph Smith and regarded as canonical scripture by members of the church, declares that “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” The fourth identifies “Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” as “the first principle of the Gospel.” Accepting Joseph Smith entails acceptance of the Savior to whom he testified, since, as Joseph himself taught, “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”91 Acceptance of the Book of Mormon, which, as its title page indicates, was written “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God,” necessarily includes acceptance of its testimony of Christ. The ordinances of the temple are expressly Christ-centered. To attempt to separate Jesus from Mormonism is both bizarre and disingenuous.

To make their task easier, though, the SBC’s experts attempt to separate the restored Church of Jesus Christ from its charter document, the Book of Mormon. The Baptist materials repeatedly contend that the Book of Mormon does not teach Mormonism, and that Mormon doctrines are not to be found in the Book of Mormon.92 This makes it easier to downplay the teachings of the Book of Mormon on such things as the atonement, the deity of Christ, and the necessity of grace—which are absolutely central to it and to the gospel.

In an interview in the SBC video, Sandra Tanner says of the Latter-day Saints that “their main doctrines” come from the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price rather than the Book of Mormon. While many of the distinctive doctrines of the church are found more clearly in the other scriptures than in the Book of Mormon, does it follow, because these doctrines are unique and distinctive, that they are more fundamental? Not necessarily. Perhaps an analogy will help: While skin and eye color, hair length, and accent are important for distinguishing one person from another, such “accidental” attributes must not be allowed to distract

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92 In, for example, Davis, “A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon.”
from the essential commonalities all humans share. Overemphasis on secondary characteristics is distortion. Failure to keep those shared features in mind allowed Southern slaveholders to feel that blacks were not fully human and helped justify Nazi abuse of the Jews. We must remember the fundamentals. And who will define those fundamentals for the Latter-day Saints? Will it be their professional critic, Sandra Tanner, or the Prophet Joseph Smith? "The fundamental principles of our religion," said Joseph, "are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."93 "The moment the atonement of the Savior is done away," Brigham Young taught, that moment, at one sweep, the hopes of salvation entertained by the Christian world are destroyed, the foundation of their faith is taken away, and there is nothing left for them to stand upon. When it is gone all the revelations God ever gave to the Jewish nation, to the Gentiles and to us are rendered valueless, and all hope is taken from us at one sweep.94

The fact is that Latter-day Saints do read and treasure the Book of Mormon. And its teachings about Christ and his saving atonement are at the vital core of their faith. As hard as the "experts" try, even the SBC’s propaganda materials cannot fully obscure this reality. The attractive Latter-day Saint family in the video is shown sitting together, reading from the Book of Mormon. And Robert McKay, ever eager to make a damning accusation against the church, even if it conflicts with his other accusations, charges that the Book of Mormon "supplants" the Bible among the Latter-day Saints.95 The eccentric Thelma "Granny"

93 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 121.
94 *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 27.
95 In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 13. Notwithstanding their supposed lack of interest in the Bible, the Latter-day Saints are strangely particular about which version of it they must ignore: Throughout the video and the accompanying materials, Baptists are told that Mormons accept only the King James Version of the Bible—which will come as a shock to the millions of non-English speaking Latter-day Saints in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.
Geer, who has made a stellar anti-Mormon career out of the rather uninteresting fact that she may have been born into a Latter-day Saint family, offers some unverifiable but dubious-sounding anecdotal evidence as evidence for the allegedly low status of the Old and New Testaments in the Church of Jesus Christ:

> Having been raised in the Mormon church, I was taught that the Bible was full of errors and contradictions. All my Mormon friends and family were taught that “the Bible causes ‘a great many to stumble and fall’ and is ‘part of the word of God, part of the word of man, and part of the word of the devil.’ Full of conflicts and errors with ‘much truth taken away and much error added,’ it had no real place in my life or in the life of any other Mormon I had ever met.”

But it is exceedingly hard to see how the Book of Mormon “supplants” the Bible among the Latter-day Saints if its teachings on the atonement of Christ play no role in their lives or thinking.

So, when John L. Smith and Michael Reynolds rebuke the Latter-day Saints, announcing that “The prophet is not the way, a restoration is not the way, Mormonism is not the way, the priesthood is not the way—Jesus said, ‘I AM THE WAY!’” knowledgeable Mormons can only agree. Without Jesus, in Latter-day Saint understanding, prophethood would have neither value nor meaning. Without Jesus, there could obviously never be any restoration of true Christianity. Without Jesus, Mormonism would have no more substance than Protestant fundamentalism. Without Jesus, the “Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God”—its true, formal name, according to modern revelation (D&C 107:3)—would have no power.

Latter-day Saints know this. So the SBC’s experts must undermine Mormon claims to knowledge. Once again, Latter-day Saint testimonies come under fire. “For the most part,” says Michael Reynolds, “the Mormon is merely repeating by rote what he or she has heard many times before. He or she may believe it,

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97 In ibid., 74–75.
but cannot prove it in any kind of objective way." 98 "This testimony is normally repeated as if by memory, with little inflection or emotion." 99 (In a richly ironic touch, this little falsehood is followed almost immediately by a specimen of a "Christian" testimony, and the class instructor is told to "Have participants write down their Christian testimony using the above structure and practice sharing it with a partner.") 100

Perhaps it would be useful to sample what Latter-day Saints—as opposed to their career detractors—actually say when they share their convictions with one another. During the period of writing the present review, I attended a "fast and testimony meeting," of the type generally held throughout the church on the first Sunday of each month. This is a time when members of the church come fasting, and many stand before the congregation to "bear their testimonies," which means, in Latter-day Saint parlance, to express and testify to their religious convictions and to share their "witness" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The ward or congregation that I attended—my own—is, I would imagine, typical of many thousands around the world, and there was no special theme or issue dominating the meeting.

The services began with an opening hymn entitled "Precious Savior, Dear Redeemer." 101 Following an opening prayer, business, and announcements, the congregation then sang the hymn "I Stand All Amazed," the words of which are as follows:

I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.
I tremble to know that for me he was crucified,
That for me, a sinner, he suffered, he bled and died.

I marvel that he would descend from his throne divine
To rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,
That he should extend his great love unto such as I,
Sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify.

98 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 8.
99 Ibid., 18. Ed Decker has claimed, repeatedly, that Latter-day Saints enter into a robotic or autohypnotic trance when bearing their testimonies.
100 Ibid.
101 H. R. Palmer, "Precious Savior, Dear Redeemer," Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, no. 103.
I think of his hands pierced and bleeding to pay the debt!
Such mercy, such love, and devotion can I forget?
No, no, I will praise and adore at the mercy seat,
Until at the glorified throne I kneel at his feet.

Refrain: Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me
Enough to die for me!
Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!102

The emblems of the sacrament were then blessed and passed
to the congregation, as is done during every weekly sacrament
meeting in every Latter-day Saint congregation around the globe.
The bread and water of the sacrament represent the body and
blood of the Savior. The sacramental prayers, which are found in
both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, are
the only set, prescribed prayers in the church, and their Christ­
centered focus is unmistakable. The blessing on the water illus­
trates this plainly:

O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name
of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this
[water] to the souls of all those who drink of it, that
they may do it in remembrance of the blood of thy
Son, which was shed for them; that they may witness
unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do al­
ways remember him, that they may have his Spirit to be
with them. Amen. (D&C 20:79; compare 20:77;
Moroni 4:3; 5:2)

Following the administration of the sacrament, the bishop of
the ward rose to open the testimony-bearing portion of the meet­
ing. As is customary, he led out by expressing his own convic­
tions. On this particular Sunday, he said he had “a testimony of
many things,” but he bore special testimony of the Holy Ghost,
which he illustrated with a pair of personal experiences, and he
assured us of his deep conviction that the Lord cares about each
one of us as individuals.

Fourteen members of the ward, including the bishop and six
children, shared their testimonies. The remarks of the children, it

is true, occasionally did sound like the caricature presented in the Baptist materials, although several expressed their love for their parents and families, and they spoke also about such things as the truth of the scriptures, the love of Heavenly Father, and the guidance of the Holy Ghost. One small boy said, simply, “I love Jesus.”

The first person to speak after the bishop was a woman who thanked her Heavenly Father, very emotionally, for the experiences and struggles through which he has led her. She told of a recent trip to Egypt and Israel, and of how strongly she felt the Holy Ghost while in the Holy Land. As an example, she recounted crossing the Sea of Galilee on a boat. The captain turned off the engine in the middle of the lake, and those on the boat read their scriptures. She thought of Peter, walking on the water, and how he faltered when he paid more attention to the water than to the Lord. She concluded that, “if my eyes are riveted on Jesus, all will be well, and trials will be endurable.” She told, too, of a visit to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, and how she felt there, with powerful force, a spiritual witness to the truthfulness of the gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This had special impact on her because she has lost two babies, and because a neighbor and member of the ward recently lost a beautiful young daughter to cystic fibrosis.

Two women bore quite emotional witness that “Heavenly Father loves us,” and told of the peace, comfort, and assurance that they had felt during recent difficulties with childbirth, attributing this to the influence of the Holy Ghost. “Father in Heaven loves us,” said one, “and sent his Only Begotten Son to die for us, to help us.” “I am grateful for this knowledge,” said the other. “I don’t know what I would do without it.” A third expressed her gratitude that her house had lately been saved from fire, spoke of recent blessings of divine healing, and testified that “Heavenly Father loves us.” Yet another told the congregation of her gratitude for her children, who have taught her much, and bore record of what she called the “warmth” of the Spirit, which teaches us to yearn for the presence of our Heavenly Father.

A missionary from Mongolia, a convert of three years who is serving in Utah, declared that he was “so thankful to serve the Lord.” His comments focused on the account of the appearance
of the risen Savior among the Nephites, as it is preserved in 3 Nephi in the Book of Mormon. “Joy and happiness,” he said, “come through faith in Jesus Christ.” Finally, yet another member of the ward rose to thank the Lord for his many blessings, and to thank the congregation for their support following a recent death in the family. “Jesus is the Christ,” he concluded, “and our Redeemer.”

Following the testimonies, the congregation sang a closing hymn, entitled “When Faith Endures”:

I will not doubt, I will not fear;
God’s love and strength are always near.
His promised gift helps me to find
An inner strength and peace of mind.
I give the Father willingly
My trust, my prayers, humility.
His Spirit guides; his love assures
That fear departs when faith endures.103

In the benediction, or closing prayer, the person offering the prayer asked the Lord to help us become “better people and better Christians.”

This short account of a typical Latter-day Saint meeting in a typical Latter-day Saint ward seems to conflict with much of what the SBC’s experts want their audience to believe about the Mormons. When, in one of the most familiar and commonly used of all Mormon hymns, a member of the church sings praise to the Savior, recalling that he came to earth to suffer and atone “for me, a sinner,” it doesn’t fit very well with Rev. Smith’s and Rev. Reynolds’s confident declaration about the Latter-day Saints that “they do not understand themselves to be sinners.”104

In the SBC materials, John L. Smith offers up a gratuitous slur against the Latter-day Saints. “Mormons,” he tells his readers, “say they accept Jesus ‘as the savior of the whole world.’ This has nothing to do with His being one’s ‘personal Savior.’ That concept is totally foreign to LDS theology. Truly, the Mormons have

104 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 71.
another Jesus."105 With that charge in mind, I was very much struck when, one month after the testimony meeting just described, I was able to attend another such meeting in the Brigham Young University student ward in which I currently serve. Fifteen people came to the pulpit to declare their convictions. Of these, twelve bore witness of the role of Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer, one expressed his gratitude and love for the members of the congregation, another recounted his experience of the presence of God in a time of crisis and testified to the efficacy of prayer, and yet another, after reporting a story in which she had been involved, exhorted us to let the Lord lead and to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Directly relevant to Rev. Smith's allegation, though, was the testimony of a Latin American General Authority, visiting his son (a member of the ward) just prior to the April general conference of the Church. "Jesus is our Savior," he said, "and, in a personal way, my Savior." And he closed "in the name of my Savior." He was followed soon thereafter by a young German student, who testified that "Jesus Christ is in the details of our lives, and is our personal Savior." "I love Jesus Christ," he said. "He is my personal Savior." A student from South Africa, emerging from a very serious health crisis a couple of weeks before, told the congregation, "I am grateful for my knowledge that Jesus Christ lives," declaring that Jesus is "the bright and morning star" in the darkness of despair. "I love my Savior," he said. An older, Ecuadoran woman, mother to one of the students, bore her testimony mostly in Spanish, including a powerful declaration of faith in "nuestro Salvador." A student from Chile told of her sense of God's intimate presence in temple worship, saying, "I love my Savior very much." And, finally, an American student expressed his conviction of the kindness, closeness, and personal care of our Heavenly Father. Of "my Savior," he said simply, "He loves us, he loves us."

Thus it would seem on the basis of empirical evidence that the concept of Christ "being one's 'personal Savior'" is not "totally foreign to LDS theology." The Southern Baptist Convention's "experts" are wrong.

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105 In ibid., 6.
Well, no matter. We are on to other things. Mormon testimonies are merely subjective. "How does he or she 'know' these things are true?" demands Reynolds. "Is he or she in possession of facts, evidence, or hard documentation that prove his or her claim?" Not at all. Quite unlike the average Christian, who apparently has a doctorate in biblical archaeology, as well as advanced training in logic, "The Mormon possesses no evidence that will stand up under scrutiny. He or she has a vague reference to the 'Spirit of God' and the subjective demand in Moroni 10:4—and no objective evidence whatsoever."  

"Most LDS converts do not make an objective, scholarly investigation of Mormonism." But are we to conclude from this that most Christians do? Is this true today? Not likely. Could it conceivably have been true in, say, thirteenth-century France? In nineteenth-century Ghana? Among first-century Palestinian peasants? Among, say, Galilean fishermen? How long did Peter, James, John, Andrew, and the other apostles deliberate before they accepted Jesus' summons to follow him?

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fighers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fighers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him. (Matthew 4:18–22)

How much "objective, scholarly investigation" preceded Nathanael's decision, after initial resistance, to accept Jesus as the divine Son of God?

106 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 7.
107 Ibid., 7–8.
108 Davis, "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."
Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? (John 1:45-50)

Peter came to know that Jesus is the Christ, not through flesh and blood, but through divine revelation (see Matthew 16:13–17). Paul prayed for the Ephesian saints “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened” (Ephesians 1:17–18). For the Philippians, he prayed “that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment: That ye may approve things that are excellent” (Philippians 1:9–10). Timothy and he told the Colossians, “since the day we heard it, [we] do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Colossians 1:9).

But what is all this praying? Why didn’t Paul just cruise through Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse, and hand them a book? It is the clear teaching of the New Testament that knowledge of spiritual things comes from and by the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:10–16). Paul taught that “no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Corinthians 12:3). “No man can know Jesus the Christ,” agreed Brigham Young, “except it be revealed
from heaven to him." The Holy Ghost, Jesus promised his disciples, "shall teach you all things," and will testify of him, and, as "the Spirit of truth," "will guide you into all truth" (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). It is puzzling that Jesus would have thought it necessary to promise the coming of the Spirit if reason and the Bible were sufficient, by themselves, for the recognition of religious truth.

Nevertheless, and against the Bible, the SBC's experts insist that "objective, scholarly investigation" is the way to religious truth. "The discussions are an appeal to emotion," Robert McKay reveals. And the test of the Book of Mormon is pure "emotionalism," resting merely upon "some . . . subjective feeling." "Warn the Mormon about trusting in feelings (i.e., the burning in the bosom) for a validation of Mormonism's truth claim," advises the "Belief Bulletin: Mormons." "Without historical, objective verification, feelings are useless." In fact, says Michael Reynolds, "Investigators who look closely at the origins, history, and contents of The Book of Mormon usually come to radically different conclusions about the truth of Mormonism."

The Gold Bible Hoax

And, indeed, the Mormon Puzzle material specifically targets the Book of Mormon. "Certainly," says Robert McKay, "the book itself bears few if any marks of divine inspiration." It is said to contain "doctrinal errors, absurdities, anachronisms, and other problems." The pamphlet "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon" purportedly "shows why the LDS claims for the

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109 Discourses of Brigham Young, 37.
110 They clearly presume that "objective, scholarly investigation" supports their stance—an assertion that tempts comment, to be sure, but unfortunately well beyond the scope of this review.
111 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 22, 23.
112 "Belief Bulletin: Mormons."
113 Davis, "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."
115 In ibid., 17.
book are without historical, anthropological, or archaeological foundation.”

But the Baptist materials typically overstate the archaeological strength of the Bible, and grossly exaggerate the archaeological weakness of the Book of Mormon. “The Bible has withstood the attacks of skeptics for centuries,” announces one of the pamphlets. “Christians remain confident that it is the reliable, inspired Word of God. Historical research, archaeology, and textual studies have confirmed its veracity. The Book of Mormon, conversely, lacks even meager support for its historical or theological contents.” “It isn’t that we know nothing about the Americas,” the ever-immoderate Sandra Tanner says in the videotape, “it’s that everything we know about them doesn’t fit the Book of Mormon culture. So that it’s at total odds with everything we know about America.”

“Total.” “Everything.” “Nothing.” One would think, in view of the comments of our SBC experts, that those who believe in the Book of Mormon—not merely against the preponderance of the evidence but against all of it—must be manifest morons. Here are just a few of the things that such judgments fail to note:


116 “Introduction and Instructional Guide.”
118 Davis, “A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon.”


*FARMS Review of Books* (formerly *The Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*), published first annually and then twice annually by FARMS since 1989.


*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, published twice a year since 1992 by FARMS.
A personal experience with three of the SBC experts may shed some light on just how much they really care about the state of Book of Mormon evidence. In 1984, John L. Smith's *Utah Evangel* ran an article ridiculing the Latter-day Saints on the grounds that the name Alma—which, in the Book of Mormon, belongs to two men of Hebrew ancestry—is really Latin and can only be given to a female. I wrote to Rev. Smith, pointing out that Yigael Yadin had found a document in the 1960s down by the Dead Sea, referring to an early second-century Jew named "Alma, son of Judah." Rev. Smith responded in writing that, if I would send him the evidence, he would report on it. I did, and he didn't. But the story gets worse. Utah Missions, Inc., ran the same argument at least once or twice more in its publications thereafter, and referred to it on at least one other occasion. Moreover, although I have asked them to do the honorable thing many, many times in the years since I first contacted Utah Missions, Inc., on the subject,
both Michael Reynolds and Robert McKay expressly and repeatedly refused to tell the truth to their audience about Alma. In an unsolicited letter to me, dated 20 March 1998, John L. Smith declared that the matter of Alma is “unworthy of any extensive study or reply”—which is not only arguably untrue but fails to justify in any way his failure to keep his promise to tell the truth.\(^{119}\) In the April 1998 issue of *The Inner Circle*, the publication that Utah Missions, Inc., sends out to its donors, Rev. Smith boasted, “It is interesting that no effort is made to disprove the information that we provide. Mormons are unable to refute facts.”\(^{120}\)

“We have attempted,” says Reynolds of himself and his co-authors, “to call on people from around the country with the highest integrity in interfaith witness and counter-cult ministries.”\(^{121}\) It is difficult to convince hostile critics who, by all appearances, have never looked at the evidence, and who sometimes even make a point of pride of their refusal to do so.\(^{122}\)

Furthermore, in their curricular materials, the Baptists construct a test for the Book of Mormon that the Bible itself cannot


\(^{120}\) John L. Smith, “Criticisms of Our Work,” *The Inner Circle* 15/4 (April 1998): 9. Ironically, Rev. Smith then immediately cites as an example of his irrefutable “facts” a passage from my article cited in the previous note, which he grievously misuses. Perhaps he is unaware of the E-mail correspondence I have been conducting for several months with the new director of Utah Missions, Inc., the Rev. Dennis A. Wright, in which I have pointed out, and Rev. Wright has conceded, a number of errors in UMI’s recent publications. In 1997, I sent a lengthy and detailed E-mail to what was then called the Home Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, identifying fifteen indisputable errors in the most recent issue of UMI’s flagship tabloid, *The Evangel*. Within a few weeks, perhaps coincidentally and perhaps not, the SBC fired UMI’s then director, Michael Reynolds, along with his assistant, Robert McKay.

\(^{121}\) In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, v.

\(^{122}\) This attitude is amazingly common. As I write, someone who uses the name “Will Bagley” is loudly proclaiming, via the internet, his contempt for authors associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies—while boasting that he has never read anything they have written because they are so obviously incompetent and dishonest.
meet: "In order for Christians or others to accept these claims [for the Book of Mormon's historicity], Mormons must demonstrate that their version of the Book of Mormon's origin and story is historically accurate."¹²³ Why should this be so? While I am aware of no poll on the subject, anybody acquainted with the current state of biblical archaeology surely knows that a sizable number of the specialists in the subject are agnostics, and that very, very few of them can be classified as conservative Protestants, let alone biblical inerrantists. "Proof" of such crucial, large-scale biblical stories as the flood, the exodus, and the Conquest—let alone of the resurrection of Christ—has not been found. And yet biblical archaeology today is far more advanced than ever before. What of the Christians who lived before, say, A.D. 1800? Were they fools, because they believed in the Bible without a shred of archaeological proof? What of the peasant Christians of Mexico and Ethiopia, who know nothing whatever of biblical scholarship? Is their faith misplaced?

Tal Davis's pamphlet, "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon," suggests that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself. "Smith was literate," notes Davis, "and had access to several libraries near his home."¹²⁴ This is true, of course, but superficial and misleading. By today's standards, Joseph Smith was only marginally literate when he translated the Book of Mormon. He was not a reader. "He seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children," recalled his mother, Lucy Mack Smith.¹²⁵ And, while he may theoretically have had "access" to libraries, there is strong reason to believe that, for reasons compounded in large part of poverty (inability to pay library membership fees), lack of education, lack of time, and lack of interest, he never used them during that early period.¹²⁶ Emma Smith, the Prophet's wife, insisted to the end of her life that, unaided, her husband was incapable of having composed the Book of Mormon.

¹²³ Davis. "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."
¹²⁴ Ibid.
¹²⁵ Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 82.
I wrote for Joseph Smith during the work of translation. . . . The larger part of this labor was done [in] my presence and where I could see and know what was being done. . . . During no part of it did Joseph Smith have any mss. [manuscripts] or book of any kind from which to read or dictate except the metallic [sic] plates which I knew he had. . . . 127 Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon. . . . [F]or one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.128

Aware that Joseph Smith almost certainly could not have authored the Book of Mormon, critics of the church have often resorted to explanations involving one or more mysterious co-conspirators, or pointed to various (usually lost) manuscripts from which Joseph Smith may possibly, perhaps, have cribbed his frontier yarn. These theories have not held up well under scrutiny.129 Nevertheless, Tal Davis informs his readers that Joseph Smith probably plagiarized from unspecified early nineteenth-century works to produce the Book of Mormon.130 Really? The church’s Brigham Young University has now published the two leading candidates, so that interested parties can judge for themselves the

130 See Davis, “A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon.”
likelihood that they served Joseph Smith as sources for the Book of Mormon.131

The SBC’s materials attack the Book of Mormon in other ways, as well. “It contains plain absurdities,” complains Robert McKay, referring to the story of the beheading of Shiz in Ether 15:31.132 But Dr. Gary M. Hadfield, M.D., professor of neuropathology at the Medical College of Virginia, surveying precedents in medical literature, has written that the story is entirely plausible.133 “The Book of Mormon denies its own inspiration,” McKay says, referring to 1 Nephi 19:6 and Ether 5:1.134 But in these verses the Book of Mormon simply fails to profess infallibility. It certainly does not “deny” its inspiration. (Note the fundamentalist Protestant assumption here, where inspiration and inerrancy seem to function, without the least argument or justification, as precise synonyms.) “Reformed Egyptian does not exist as a language,” declares the “Belief Bulletin: Mormons,” completely innocent of serious scholarship on the subject.135 “Mormonism claims that the church totally apostatized,” writes Robert McKay, “yet the Book of Mormon denies the possibility.”136 He is referring to 1 Nephi 11:36, which says nothing of the kind.

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134 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 14.
The Canon as a Weapon

Not content to argue, however weakly, that the Book of Mormon is false, the experts from the SBC seek to argue that it could not, even in principle, ever be true.

The authors of the Mormon Puzzle materials are mightily offended that Latter-day Saints believe in an open canon. "Christians," says Michael Reynolds "have historically held that the Bible alone represents the totality of God's revelation and no additional scripture is needed."\(^{137}\) Reynolds fails both to mention the ancient historical disputes about the canon and to note the disagreements between Christian groups on this issue that persist even today. For him, the Bible is the Protestant Bible. And anybody who accepts any more scriptural books than Michael Reynolds accepts is a non-Christian. One naturally remembers Henry Fielding's fictional Parson Thwackum: "When I mention religion," says Rev. Thwackum, "I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England."\(^{138}\)

"The Bible (Old and New Testaments) is the unique, revealed, and inspired Word of God," says the "Comparison Chart." "It is the sole authority for faith and practice for Christians (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21)."\(^{139}\) And the "Belief Bulletin: Mormons" concurs, even using the same scriptural passages to support its assertion (while, by the way, strangely seeming to reject the Hebrew Bible): "The New Testament...alone," it says, "claims to be fully inspired of God and usable for the establishment of doctrine (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21)."\(^{140}\)

But this is not true. The New Testament didn't even exist at the time 2 Timothy and 2 Peter were written. Paul's second letter to Timothy was probably sent from Rome in A.D. 64-65.\(^{141}\) The other Pauline epistles had already been composed, but "the

\(^{137}\) In ibid., 51; compare "Patterns in the Cults."


\(^{139}\) "Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity."

\(^{140}\) "Belief Bulletin: Mormons."

\(^{141}\) G. C. D. Howley, in The International Bible Commentary, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1098. It will be noted that I am using a conservative, evangelical Protestant commentary.
available evidence suggests that Paul's letters were not brought together and circulated as a collection before c. A.D. 90. And if Peter is really the author of 2 Peter, that epistle must also have been written in the mid-sixties, before his martyrdom under Nero. Conservative Protestant scholarship tends to hold that the gospels of Mark and Luke were composed during the same period. But Matthew (A.D. 75–80) and John (probably composed at Ephesus, late in the first century) still remained to be written, as did the book of Revelation (A.D. 69–96) and, almost certainly, other documents that would eventually be gathered up to form the New Testament.

Thus the only canon of scripture that the original audiences of 2 Timothy and 2 Peter knew was the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

The apostles themselves had no . . . written rule of faith and conduct. Their Bible, and that of the Jews to this day, consisted of the Old Testament; this was the Canon of Holy Writ accepted by Jesus Himself, and referred to simply as "the scriptures" throughout the New Testament writings. It was not until the year A.D. 393 that a church council first listed the 27 New Testament books now universally recognized. There was thus a period of about 350 years during which the New Testament Canon was in process of being formed.

If 2 Timothy 3:15–17 and 2 Peter 1:19–21 actually bar additional revelation or scripture, the New Testament is in serious trouble. But, fortunately, there is no cause for alarm. Neither passage says anything, anything at all, about a closed canon, or the end of revelation, or the all-sufficiency of the Bible. (And since, again, no "Bible" yet existed, it is difficult to see how they could have.)

142 David F. Payne, in ibid., 1564.
143 Stephen S. Short, in ibid., 1157.
144 Laurence E. Porter, in ibid., 1182–83.
145 H. L. Ellison, in ibid., 1121.
146 David J. Ellis, in ibid., 1230.
147 F. F. Bruce, in ibid., 1593.
148 David F. Payne, in ibid., 1005.
Moreover, the claim that the Bible is the only legitimate source of doctrine and practice for real Christians denies the Christianity of hundreds of millions of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers and excommunicates virtually all disciples of Christ from the first century to the time of Luther and Calvin. It is a brazen act of naked theological imperialism. It attempts to impose the post-Reformation theological prejudices of northwestern Europe on every other generation and nationality of Christendom. So why do it? John Henry Newman wryly observed that Protestants know Christian history does not support their position, which, he said, "is shown in the determination . . . of dispensing with historical Christianity altogether and of forming a Christianity from the Bible alone: men never would have put it aside, unless they had despaired of it." Indeed, it is really only a small minority even within Protestantism that claims to derive its doctrine and practices entirely from the Bible alone. As Hans Dieter Betz commented, in his 1997 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "Only the so-called left wing of the Reformation understood the Reformation to imply an apocalyptic repudiation of all ancient history, culture, and forms of Christianity [note the plural!], and the call to return to the New Testament with its plain and uncorrupted gospel of Jesus."

"Christians," says one of the SBC brochures, "regard the Bible as the sole final authority in God’s revelation to mankind and its meaning [as] clear. While most cults will regard the Bible as the Word of God, a major pattern in these sects is their addition to the Word of God." But, of course, this rule cannot possibly have been true of the earliest Christians, those who were closest to Jesus and his apostles, for they undeniably added to the canon they had received (the Old Testament) scriptural texts they themselves had composed. If the first generation of the disciples of Jesus had followed the SBC’s rule, there would be no New Testament. What Terryl Givens observes of uninformed mass opinion is true also of the writers of the Mormon Puzzle material: "Popular Christian thought seldom encompasses the notion that the Apos-


\[151\] “Patterns in the Cults.”
ties were Christian (that is, disciples of Christ) before there were councils, creeds, or even a New Testament."

Undeterred by historical facts, however, our experts press on. "Old and New Testament prophets were God’s spokesmen," says one of the brochures. "Their words were always consistent with the Bible." But how could Old Testament prophets be “consistent with the Bible” when the Bible didn’t yet exist? Occasionally, one is tempted to see in the extreme forms of Protestant fundamentalism something that might be termed bibliolatry, where allegiance to a book takes on disproportionate importance even against clear historical evidence. "It is possible," says the Protestant scholar Floyd V. Filson,

to stress the Bible so much and give it so central a place that the sensitive Christian conscience must rebel. We may illustrate such over-stress on the Bible by the often-used (and perhaps misused) quotation from Chillingworth: “The Bible alone is the religion of Protestantism.” Or we may recall how often it has been said that the Bible is the final authority for the Christian.

If it will not seem too facetious, I would like to put in a good word for God. It is God and not the Bible who is the central fact for the Christian. When we speak of “the Word of God” we use a phrase which, properly used, may apply to the Bible, but it has a deeper primary meaning. It is God who speaks to man. But he does not do so only through the Bible. He speaks through prophets and apostles. He speaks through specific events. And while his unique message to the Church finds its central record and written expression in the Bible, this very reference to the Bible reminds us that Christ is the Word of God in a living, personal way which surpasses what we have even in this unique book. Even the Bible proves to be the Word of God only when the Holy Spirit working within us attests the truth and divine authority of what the Scripture says. Faith must not give to the aids that God provides the

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152 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 89.
153 “Belief Bulletin: Mormons.”
reverence and attention that belong only to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Our hope is in God; our life is in Christ; our power is in the Spirit. The Bible speaks to us of the divine center of all life and help and power, but it is not the center. The Christian teaching about the canon must not deify the Scripture. 154

It is a warning that, I think, some of the critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would do well to heed. Ignoring it leads not only to theological error but even to logical fallacy: “The Christian,” says Michael Reynolds, “has chosen the Bible alone as the standard for faith; therefore, the LDS church is clearly wrong in its understanding of who and what God is.” 155 The “therefore” is misleading. The first part of Rev. Reynolds’s claim does not logically imply the second. Consider a statement of similar structure: “The Muslim has chosen the Qur’an alone as the standard for faith; therefore the Southern Baptist Convention is clearly wrong in its understanding of who and what God is.” Obviously, in order for this hypothetical statement to be true, certain things must be assumed, among them the truth of the Qur’an, the accuracy of the Muslim’s interpretation of it, and the incompatibility of Baptist doctrine with Qur’anic doctrine—at least one of which, I presume, Rev. Reynolds would dispute. As it happens, Latter-day Saints agree with the Baptists that the Bible is true. But no knowledgeable Latter-day Saint will grant that Rev. Reynolds holds the copyright on biblical interpretation, nor his complacent assumption that “the Bible and the LDS Church cannot both be correct.” 156

But it isn’t really accurate to say even of evangelical Protestants that they base their beliefs on the Bible alone, however much they may think so—as a cursory look at the Mormon Puzzle documents will serve to demonstrate:

155 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 2.
156 In ibid. “When the Bible is viewed as the Mormons see it, its effectiveness to lead men to Christ is destroyed.” Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 53.
• The pamphlet "A Closer Look at the Mormon Concept of God," we are told, "analyzes the beliefs of the LDS on the nature and attributes of God and evaluates them in relation to the Bible and philosophy."157

• Contrary to the claims of the SBC's literature, the doctrine of the Trinity is most definitely not "derived solely from the Bible."158 Nor, as the great John Henry Cardinal Newman pointed out, although he himself certainly believed the doctrine to be a true one, is the metaphysical Trinity even to be clearly found in the early fathers of the church.159

• "As a man," one of the brochures says of Jesus, "He possessed two natures—human and divine." But this language is also not "derived solely from the Bible."160 It belongs, rather, to such documents as the "Definition of Chalcedon," which was issued by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.

"Within the Bible," remarks Michael Reynolds, "God revealed all of Himself that He wished mankind to know, and no other revelation is necessary or pending."161 But it is passing strange, if this is so vitally central a biblical principle, that the Bible never says anything of the kind. Why would it omit so important a fact? And what were all those debates in the councils about, and all those creeds, if everything was clearly settled?

The Mormon Puzzle material informs its audience that "The Bible explicitly warns against adding to or detracting from its teaching (Rev. 22:18; Deut. 4:2)."162 (Is there any Latter-day Saint missionary, anywhere, who has not run into this hoary old chestnut? And is there any missionary who does not know the obvious answer?) This claim is not true. Revelation 22:18 does, yes, prohibit anyone from "adding" anything to "this book." But the words this book cannot refer to the entire Bible since, once again, the Bible did not yet exist as a book. They can only refer to the book of Revelation itself. And if Deuteronomy 4:2 bans additional scripture, then—manifestly, since they were composed in

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157 "Introduction and Instructional Guide," emphasis added.
158 "Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity."
160 "Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity."
161 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 51.
162 "Belief Bulletin: Mormons."
later periods—most of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament must be rejected.

**Exodus 20:16**

It is disconcerting and disheartening to see the level of distortion and mischaracterization that exists in these official Baptist curriculum documents.

**The False Dichotomy between Grace and Works**

The SBC materials emphasize that Latter-day Saints believe they earn their own salvation.\textsuperscript{163} “The Jesus of Mormonism only provided the resurrection,” explains Michael Reynolds. “His death made it possible for all men of every age to be resurrected. What we call ‘salvation’ must be provided by the person who hopes to receive it through good works.”\textsuperscript{164} “His atonement (death and resurrection) provides immortality for all people regardless of their faith,” says one of the Southern Baptist brochures. “Jesus’ atonement provided immortality for all people.” This is, of course, entirely true. And it is undeniably biblical (as attested by 1 Corinthians 15:22). But the brochure implicitly insists that, in the Latter-day Saint view, immortality is all that Christ provides. In “Christianity,” it says, “Salvation is release from the guilt and power of sin through God’s gift of grace.”\textsuperscript{165}

It is an utterly false and misleading implication, for Latter-day Saints have always believed, with their fellow Christians, that “Salvation is release from the guilt and power of sin through God’s gift of grace.”

Thus J. E. Cook grossly misinforms his trusting readers when he alleges that, for Latter-day Saints, “Exaltation is a works-based salvation, totally dependent on the efforts of the individual and not the grace of God. . . . The LDS view of salvation is based on the works of man rather than the works of God.”\textsuperscript{166} “Salvation

\textsuperscript{163} As at Reynolds, *Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends*, 14; compare “Patterns in the Cults.”

\textsuperscript{164} In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 6.

\textsuperscript{165} “Comparison Chart—Mormonism and Christianity.”

\textsuperscript{166} In Reynolds, *The Challenge of Mormonism*, 36, 37; compare 38.
in Mormonism,” Michael Reynolds says, “is entering one of three kingdoms of glory hereafter . . . and since all men will enter one of these kingdoms, all men are saved, including those who actively reject Jesus or the very existence of God.” But this is extremely misleading, for all will be obliged to acknowledge Christ. “Yea,” testified the prophet Alma, “every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess before him. Yea, even at the last day, when all men shall stand to be judged of him, then shall they confess that he is God” (Mosiah 27:31).

Specifically describing those in the lowest of the degrees of glory, the telestial kingdom, Doctrine and Covenants 76:110 says, “These all shall bow the knee, and every tongue shall confess to him who sits upon the throne forever and ever.” Brigham Young is far more to be trusted on this issue than the professional anti-Mormon Michael Reynolds: “The Latter-day Saints . . . believe,” said President Young, “that Jesus is the Savior of the world; they believe that all who attain to any glory whatever, in any kingdom, will do so because Jesus has purchased it by his atonement.”

In fact, though, even fundamentalist Protestants believe that individual salvation depends on human will as well as on divine atonement—that is, unless they believe in predestination or universalism (or, perhaps, in universal damnation!). For, to be saved, people must accept Jesus as their Savior. If they reject him, they cannot receive salvation. Thus most fundamentalist Protestants have already conceded that human initiative or action is required for salvation and, with that in mind, their ability to consistently attack the Latter-day Saints on this matter is seriously compromised.

And if most evangelicals unwittingly allow that at least one “work”—our assent—is required for our salvation, thus drawing closer to the position of the Latter-day Saints, the Latter-day

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167 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 29. The claim that, according to Latter-day Saint doctrine, “all men will enter one of these kingdoms” is, strictly speaking, untrue. The “sons of perdition” will be excluded from any and all kingdoms of glory, as Mr. Reynolds himself notes in the sentence just preceding the quoted passage.

168 Compare Doctrine and Covenants 88:104. The promise of this future event figures prominently in Latter-day Saint temple worship.

169 Discourses of Brigham Young, 30.
Saints in their turn certainly confess their dependence on the atonement of Jesus Christ. The Book of Mormon insists that "we are saved by grace" (as at 2 Nephi 25:23). But, as usual, our Southern Baptist guides refuse to admit the Book of Mormon as evidence for what Latter-day Saints believe. Accordingly, with almost unendurable chutzpah, as John L. Smith and Michael Reynolds outline a method for luring Latter-day Saints away from their faith, they suggest that would-be "soulwinners" have the Mormon read Mosiah 27:24–28. "Remind the Mormon that he or she must have a new birth in order to become a child of God (v. 25b)." So far so good. No knowledgeable Latter-day Saint has not read this passage, and no orthodox one would dispute it. "This strongly contradicts Mormonism," say Smith and Reynolds.170 They are absolutely wrong. Still, they advise their audience, "Remind him or her that this is his or her book."171 Precisely.

Rather oddly, Michael Reynolds uses the story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18–27 to argue that works are not required for salvation.172 Yet Jesus never said anything of the sort, in that story or anywhere else. Indeed, he asked the young man to do something that was, for that would-be disciple, very difficult:

And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?
And Jesus said unto him . . .
Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother.
And he said, All these have I kept from my youth up.
Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.
And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich. (Luke 18:18–27)

170 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 75.
171 In ibid., 74.
When the ruler asked Jesus what he had to do to be saved, the Savior told him to do something. This should not be difficult to understand. And when the final prayer in the SBC pamphlet “A Closer Look at the Mormon Plan of Salvation” directs its reader to call on Jesus, saying “Please become the Lord of my life,” Latter-day Saints can surely be pardoned for thinking that an invitation of this type implies a promise of obedience. What else could it mean to recognize someone as your Lord and Master, if it does not mean that you intend to follow that person’s orders?

And it is clear, frankly, that there is one work, one human action, that our Baptist critics do regard, however inconsistently, as essential for our salvation: “If for some reason you should trust a Jesus other than the one who is revealed in the New Testament,” says Michael Reynolds, “then your trust is in vain, even if by some chance the rest of your theology is intact. . . . [T]here is no hope for those who trust in this different Jesus.”

Obviously, in Reynolds’s view, theological error is the one unforgivable sin. And theological rectitude is the one indispensable work. In order to be saved, one must not only trust in Jesus, but one must reject teachings about him with which Michael Reynolds disagrees. For it would be impossible to mount a convincing argument that the Mormon Jesus is literally, physically, distinct from the Jesus of the New Testament. But does anybody have a fully adequate conception of Jesus? Did the ancient, illiterate Christian peasant? Does the modern Catholic, who believes that Jesus had no half brothers or half sisters? Which is the biblical view of Jesus? Is he the Byzantine pantocrator of the mosaics at Ravenna and Constantinople? The humble shepherd of the Roman catacombs? How much error is permissible? Will Jesus not save those who call on him in sincerity and faith, even if they misconceive him? Is it plausible to believe that he will save murderers and fornicators and greedy televangelists, but will thrust into hell those who, seeking to know him, misinterpreted a few passages in their Bible?

Not all evangelicals or fundamentalists are so exclusivist as to believe that he will. Consider, for instance, this statement, made on

1 June 1997 by one of the most beloved and wise of all conservative Protestants, Billy Graham:

The Body of Christ comes from all Christian groups around the world, or outside the Christian groups. I think everybody who loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the Body of Christ. . . . That’s what God is doing today: He is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their heart that they need something that they don’t have and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved and that they are going to be with us in heaven.¹⁷⁵

This generous and optimistic view of the love of God is completely, chillingly, absent from the curricular materials that the Southern Baptist Convention has prepared to deal with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Baptists among the Heathen

“As you attempt to witness [to] Mormons,” writes Michael Reynolds, “it is helpful to understand that even though they believe their god is the same as the God of the Bible, this is not so. . . . They claim to worship the God of the Bible but are, for the most part, ignorant of the God of Christianity.” Reynolds cites Paul’s sermon to the pagans on Mars Hill in Athens as a model for approaching “those who,” like the Latter-day Saints, “worship another god.”¹⁷⁶ (He badly misunderstands Paul’s remarks, though, for at Acts 17:23 the apostle expressly acknowledged that the people of Athens did worship the God he proclaimed, and he

¹⁷⁶ Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 17.
then went on to cite pagan Greek poets, with approval, as evidence for his argument.)

Of course, Reynolds realizes that his assertion will be offensive and insulting to many Latter-day Saints. "Many Mormons," he says, "will claim that you are attacking them because you maintain that Christianity has a different God from Mormonism." And indeed, Reynolds's claim instantly becomes a certainty, such that Latter-day Saint resistance to so obvious a cosmic truth can only be explained psychologically: "Many Mormons," Reynolds reveals, "are threatened by the fact that Christians have a different God."177

As evidence for their important claim that Latter-day Saints worship a different God than "Christians" do, the experts employed by the Southern Baptist Convention offer several very dubious reasons. Michael Reynolds declares that the restored Church of Jesus Christ worships a god who is nothing more than a man."179 But, of course, it is difficult to imagine any sane and informed Latter-day Saint who would agree to that statement. And it hardly seems plausible to describe a morally perfect, omniscient, holy, immortal being who can create worlds, raise the dead, and travel instantaneously across vast distances, the unmitigated glory of whom is enough to incinerate ordinary mortals, as "nothing more than a man."

Francis Beckwith sees the supposed difference in the manner of divine creation. "Unlike a god who forms the universe out of preexistent matter," he says, "the God of the Bible created the universe ex nihilo (out of nothing)." But Beckwith is almost certainly wrong, for the best recent scholarship on the doctrine of creation ex nihilo indicates that the notion that God created the universe out of nothing is postbiblical and not to be found in either the Old or New Testament.181

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177 Ibid., 18.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid., 25.
180 Beckwith, "The Mormon Concept of God."
Beckwith also wants to argue that the difference rests in the Mormon assertion of an anthropomorphic God, as opposed to the immaterial God of mainstream Christianity. But his careless phrasing gets him into trouble on this point: “God is . . . incorporeal,” he declares. “Unlike humans, God is not uniquely associated with one physical entity (i.e., a body).”¹⁸² But this seems to deny the incarnation of Christ. If God was not in some sense “uniquely associated” with the physical entity identifiable as the body of Jesus of Nazareth, one of the central claims of Christianity would appear to be false. Surely, though, Beckwith has not chosen a Southern Baptist pamphlet to announce his apostasy from Christian belief. He must have something else in mind. But it is difficult to know just what it might be. Does he mean to brand the earthly advent of Jesus as a mere charade? Is he claiming that the Son shed his body after his resurrection? What biblical evidence is there for such a claim? And what would be the point of an on-again, off-again resurrection?

Robert McKay says that, “According to Mormonism, the statement [that ‘There is one God, and only one God’] is simply not true.”¹⁸³ Here, some uninformed Latter-day Saints may unfortunately be inclined to agree with him. But to do so, they must not only ignore the clear testimony of the Bible but, with McKay, must avert their eyes from modern revelation, which declares with the Bible that, at least in a very important sense, there truly is only one God (see 2 Nephi 31:21; Mosiah 15:4; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:36; Mormon 7:7; D&C 20:28). “I and my Father are one,” said the Savior, declaring further that “the Father is in me” (John 10:30, 38). “Christians,” says Michael Reynolds, “believe that there is one God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁸⁴

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¹⁸² Beckwith, “The Mormon Concept of God.”
¹⁸⁴ In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 2.
But so do the Mormons—especially if the Book of Mormon is admitted as evidence for their beliefs—since they, too, are Christians. Even John L. Smith and Michael Reynolds recognize that the oneness of God is taught in the last sentence of “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” as well as in passages such as Alma 11:22, 28–29, 38–39 (although they seek to use this as a weapon against the faith of the Latter-day Saints).185 In this regard, as in all other respects, Latter-day Saints are manifestly Christians.

What evokes the wrath of the SBC’s experts is the fact that Mormons do not accept the doctrine of the metaphysical or ontological Trinity as it is found in the classical creeds, preferring, rather, to interpret the “oneness” of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in a different fashion. This is a freedom afforded them by the New Testament, if not by the Southern Baptist Convention. For “the formulation of ‘one God in three Persons’ was not solidly established, certainly not fully assimilated into Christian life and its profession of faith, prior to the end of the 4th century. . . . Among the Apostolic Fathers, there had been nothing even remotely approaching such a mentality or perspective.”186 “The formal doctrine of the Trinity as it was defined by the great church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries is not to be found in the NT.”187 Christian thinkers wrestled with this issue for many centuries. The classic solution, for most of mainstream Christianity, was reached via negotiations and debates in the great councils that were convened over several centuries following the death of the apostles and their disciples. Borrowing concepts from the era’s most advanced thought, Greek philosophy, Christian theologians attempted to describe the unity-in-multiplicity of the Godhead in terms of metaphysics and ontology. Latter-day Saints, by contrast, under the guidance of modern prophets and apostles, have seen the unity of the Godhead in the absolute oneness of purpose and will that characterize Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
which oneness Jesus sought to establish among his disciples generally. In his famous high priestly prayer, the Savior implored "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us . . . that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:21–23).

Robert McKay gets himself into trouble when he tries to spell out, for his unsuspecting audience, the supposed implications of the alleged Mormon doctrine he has just sketched for them: "Viewing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three gods, Mormonism of necessity does not regard all three Persons as God. When Mormons speak of 'God' they almost always mean the Father; only rarely is the term applied to the Son and never to the Holy Ghost." Still, his friend Michael Reynolds agrees with him on this point, saying that Latter-day Saints teach of "a Jesus who is less than God."

Here again, though, we have a case of the Southern Baptist experts ignoring the Book of Mormon, and then rebuking the Latter-day Saints for failing to believe what, on the basis of their belief in and study of the Book of Mormon, they in fact do believe. Its title page announces that the Book of Mormon was written "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God." Astoundingly, John L. Smith and Michael H. Reynolds attempt to use the Book of Mormon against the Latter-day Saints on this issue. They cite precisely that passage from the title page, as well as Mosiah 15:1–5 with its very "high" christology, and then offer the following advice to Baptists attempting to seduce a Latter-day Saint away from the restored Church of Jesus Christ: "Remind him or her that this is his or her book. It is supposed to contain no error. There is no problem of translation."

But Robert McKay does have a point when he notes that Latter-day Saints tend to use the term God rather differently of

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188 McKay, "Appendix I: The LDS Doctrine of God." 27.
189 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 25; compare "Patterns in the Cults."
190 By whom this is supposed, they do not say. The Book of Mormon makes no such claim.
191 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 74.
the Holy Ghost and of Jesus than they do of God the Father. Fortunately, in doing so, they are very much in accord with the Bible and early Christianity.

The New Testament Gospels record several statements from Jesus indicating that he saw himself as separate from, and subordinate to, God the Father (e.g., at John 14:28; also Matthew 20:23; 26:39; John 5:19; 8:17-18; 17:1-5). In its opening verses, John’s Gospel appears to distinguish between the Father, who is “the God” (ho theós), and the Son, who is “God” (theôs). The apostle Paul, indeed, occasionally reserved the term God uniquely for the Father (as at 1 Corinthians 8:6). Yet Jesus, too, is divine (John 1:1; 20:28). The apostle Paul wrote of Christ that “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9).

And what of the third member of the Godhead? Robert McKay devotes an entire chapter to Mormonism’s supposed misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, although, rather strangely, he admits that it isn’t important. “It is not common for this error to arise in witnessing or teaching situations. I cannot recall a single instance where it entered a conversation I had with a Mormon, and it certainly is not a crucial point in witnessing. However, it is an example of Mormonism’s non-divine nature.”192

But how clear is the Bible itself and the evidence of early Christianity on the precise nature of the Holy Ghost? “It must be asked . . . ,” wrote John Henry Newman,

how much direct and literal testimony the Antenicene Fathers give, one by one, to the divinity of the Holy Spirit? This alone shall be observed, that St. Basil, in the fourth century, finding that, if he distinctly called the Third Person in the Blessed Trinity by the Name of God, he should be put out of the Church by the Arians, pointedly refrained from doing so on an occasion on which his enemies were on the watch; and that, when some Catholics found fault with him, St. Athanasius took his part.193

192 In ibid., 11.
“The Latter-day Saints possess a small god,” says Michael Reynolds, “who can only be in one place at a time due to his physical limitations. Christians worship a God who is in control of the entire universe, yet cares about each person individually at the same time.”194 Note Reynolds’s loaded language. Mormons, he tells his readers, “possess” a “god,” while “Christians” are said to “worship” a “God.” And would any even moderately knowledgeable Latter-day Saint really accept his first statement, or disagree with the content of the second? There is no logical contradiction, nor any immediately obvious theological contradiction, between being spatially limited, on the one hand, and controlling the universe and caring for individuals on the other. If there were, Jesus could not be divine.

God Became Man So That Man Can . . . Play the Harp

“One of the least known doctrines of the Mormon church,” writes Robert McKay, “is eternal progression. Mormon missionaries will not tell you much if anything about it, because it is so contrary to Christian teaching.”195 As a matter of fact, of course, a doctrine of human deification has been common to many strands of Christian thinking, even if it is not commonly taught in the recent minority faction of Christendom called Protestantism.196 “One can think what one wants,” wrote the German Lutheran church historian Ernst W. Benz,

of this doctrine of progressive deification, but one thing is certain: with this anthropology Joseph Smith is

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195 In ibid., 39.
closer to the view of man held by the Ancient Church than the precursors of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin were, who considered the thought of such a substantial connection between God and man as the heresy, par excellence. 197

But, protests Tal Davis, “the Bible nowhere teaches that people can become gods. The only biblical character who even suggested such a notion was the serpent (the devil) in Genesis 3:5!” 198 Davis fails to mention to his readers that, just a few verses later, in Genesis 3:22, God himself confirms the accuracy of what the devil had said. “The Bible says nothing whatsoever about men becoming gods,” declares Robert McKay. 199 But McKay omits 2 Peter 1:4, which promises that believers will be “partakers of the divine nature.” Nor does he seem to remember that the Bible describes the followers of Christ as “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17) and offers them the prospect of sharing the throne with the risen and glorified Son of God (see Revelation 3:21; compare Galatians 4:7). 200 Still, even if the Southern Baptist Convention’s experts have failed to notice such language, not all Protestants have been so unobservant. As the seventeenth-century Anglican thinker Ralph Cudworth remarked,

The Gospel is nothing else but God descending into the world in our form and conversing with us in our likeness that he might allure and draw us up to God and make us partakers of his divine form, theos gegonen anthrōpos (as Athanasius speaks) hina hēmas en eautō theopoίēsetai; “God was therefore incarnated and made man that he might deify us”; that is (as St Peter expresseth it) makes us partakers of the divine nature. 201

199 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 40.
200 One might also mention Psalm 8:5; 82:6; Matthew 5:48; John 10:34; Acts 17:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2.
201 Cited in Allchin, Participation in God, 14.
“All is Well in Zion”

On the Latter-day Saint declaration that there was an apostasy of the early Christian church, Michael Reynolds tells his audience that “There is no historic evidence to verify this Mormon claim.”202 But this is a rather peculiar statement to come from a Protestant, since only an apostasy from primitive Christian belief and practice could possibly justify the Protestant Reformation, with all the blood, turmoil, social dislocation, and hatred that accompanied it. In claiming that there was no apostasy, Reynolds takes a position more consistent with Roman Catholic belief than with his own apparent ecclesiological views. And Catholic historians have made exactly the claim, against Protestants, that Reynolds now trots out against the Latter-day Saints. “So much must the Protestant grant,” wrote John Henry Newman (who would later become a cardinal of the church of Rome),

that if such a system of doctrine as he would now introduce ever existed in early times, it has been clean swept away as if by a deluge, suddenly, silently, and without memorial; by a deluge coming in a night, and utterly soaking, rotting, heaving up, and hurrying off every vestige of what it found in the Church, before cock-crowing.”203

Yet Newman certainly recognized important differences between the Christianity of the nineteenth century and the Christianity of the apostles and their first followers. The fundamental problem that he faced, and that his brilliant work in ecclesiastical history sought to solve, was what he acknowledged to be “a want of accord between the early and the late aspects of Christianity.”204

It is on this very “want of accord” that Latter-day Saint scholars have concentrated. But, characteristically, Michael Reynolds ignores a considerable and impressive body of Latter-day Saint writing on just this issue, including:

204 Ibid., 51.

“The true church of Jesus Christ has had an ongoing presence and witness in the world since Pentecost,” asserts one of the Mormon Puzzle brochures. “Jesus Christ promised that His church, true baptized and regenerate believers, would not fail (Matt. 16:17–18).”¹²⁰ The first sentence is a historical claim. It should be tested by historical means, yet no historical evidence is cited and the brochure fails to acknowledge the Latter-day Saint arguments mounted against the claim. The second sentence makes an assertion about Matthew 16:17–18 that can be checked against the actual text of that passage.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.
And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Even on the most generous reading, only the last portion of the second verse has any relevance to the brochure’s claim. And, even there, nothing supports a definition of the church as some vague, invisible group of “true baptized and regenerate believers” rather than an observable institution. But what does it mean

¹²⁰ “Belief Bulletin: Mormons.”
to say that “the gates of hell” will not prevail against the church? Is it really a guarantee against apostasy?

In order to use Matthew 16:18 as a prooftext against the Latter-day Saint teaching of a universal falling away of early Christianity, one must take it to mean something like “The powers of evil will not overcome the church.” The word hell, then, has to be taken as referring to a place of evil and torment, the realm and headquarters of Lucifer. But the word rendered in the King James Version as hell is the Greek Hades. However, Hades is not hell; it is simply the general destination of all the dead, the righteous and the unrighteous. It is exactly equivalent to the Hebrew Sheol, and denotes what Latter-day Saints term “the spirit world.” It is not evil, nor is it, as a whole, under the control of evil. In classical Greek, Hades was the name of the god of the realm of the dead, also known as Pluto, the son of Kronos and the brother of Zeus. He was a grim fellow, it is true, but he is never depicted as evil. In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word hades refers to “death” or “the grave,” and has no moral connotation one way or the other.

So the promise of Matthew 16:18 is not that the powers of evil will not overcome the church, since the spirit world is all-inclusive and thus is morally neutral, but that the powers of death will not overcome the church. And the peculiar reference to the “gates” of the spirit world indicates that the power resident in the church will extend through and beyond the portals of death. This promise is perfectly appropriate to the context of the verse, which relates the story of the granting of priesthood sealing keys to Peter. Thus, far from being an argument against Mormon belief in a “Great Apostasy,” Matthew 16 is a charter for the great work of redeeming the dead under the keys of the priesthood as they are granted to apostles and prophets.

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206 See the discussion on She'ol, in Laurentino J. Afonso, “Netherworld,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica, 12:996–97.
207 As at 1 Samuel 2:6 (which, in the Septuagint, is 1 Kings 2:6).
208 See my discussion on the harrowing of hell in “Skin Deep,” 131–38.
Miscellaneous Theological Distortions

• "The Jesus of Mormonism," Rev. John L. Smith suggests to his hapless readers, "was not necessarily sinless. . . . Perhaps . . . the Jesus of Mormonism was required to sin in order to progress to godhood."209 Perhaps! Perhaps my dog can do calculus too. Perhaps Elvis is hiding in your basement. Rev. Smith does not trouble himself to offer even one reference in support of this wildly irresponsible insinuation. And, while his allegation is so drastically inaccurate as, from a certain perspective, to merit no response, it will serve as a sparkling example of the carelessness—indeed, of the recklessness—with which the Southern Baptist Convention’s curricular materials on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been composed. Following is a list of a few Latter-day Saint sources—and, undoubtedly, there are many more—that expressly contradict John L. Smith’s baseless charge:

Doctrine and Covenants 20:22; 45:3–5.
Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nos. 188, 190, 195. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985.


- The Latter-day Saint view of Jesus, says the Rev. Smith, is that “He was no more the son of God than any of the other billions of God’s children.” But surely no informed Latter-day Saint would ever consent to such a statement.

- “Celestial marriage is a priesthood ordinance,” J. E. Cook observes, “making the woman dependent on her husband for exaltation.” The first part of his statement is correct, but the second part, though a nice try at anti-Mormon feminism, is both a *non sequitur* and entirely misleading. Celestial marriage is required of both men and women for entrance into the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, which logically entails that men are exactly as dependent on women in this regard as women are on men. As Paul puts it, “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11).

- “The doctrine of baptism for the dead is based mainly on the interpretation of two passages of Scripture,” writes Ken James, who identifies these passages as 1 Corinthians 15:29 and 1 Peter 3:19. But he is wrong. Although these two biblical verses provide useful corroboration for Latter-day Saint belief and practice, the restored Church of Jesus Christ does not rely on isolated

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210 In ibid., 6.
211 In ibid., 35.
212 In ibid., 47.
scriptural passages for its doctrine of salvation for the dead. It relies on and rejoices in modern revelation from God. "We must," says James, "discount any extra-biblical revelations as being false, and of no value to us in determining our beliefs and in shaping the expressions of our faith." Well, perhaps Ken James must. But, like the earliest Christians, the Latter-day Saints are willing to listen whenever God speaks.

- "Mormon scholars are divided," according to James, "on whether the person in spirit prison has the free will to either accept or reject the offer of salvation." A reference or two might have helped here. I have never heard any dispute on this question, in all my years of experience in the church. And I can think of no reason at all why people would forfeit their free will merely because of the accident of death.

- John L. Smith contrasts the Word of Wisdom, as it is observed by the Latter-day Saints, with "the fruit of the Spirit," as it is described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He supplies no reason for anybody to imagine that they are mutually exclusive, as if the Latter-day Saints deliberately choose the lesser benefits of health and sobriety over the gifts of the Spirit. Must one smoke to be gentle? Can one not be patient without whiskey?

- "Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us," writes Michael Reynolds, "that God used to speak through the prophets and now he communicates with His people through Jesus Christ." But Latter-day Saints understand that, at least since the fall, the Father has virtually always spoken to humankind through his Son. The unmediated voice of the Father heard at the baptism of Jesus and the Mount of Transfiguration, and the direct appearance of the Father in the grove in 1820, are spectacular exceptions to this rule that, by their very exceptionality, underscore the unparalleled significance of, first, the commencement of the earthly ministry of the Son of God and, second, the inauguration of the last gospel dispensation.

213 In ibid., 48.
214 In ibid., 47, emphasis in the original.
215 See ibid., 66.
216 Reynolds, Sharing the Faith with Your Mormon Friends, 21.
And Latter-day Saints see no reason, certainly none in Hebrews 1:1–2, to believe that he has ceased to use prophets to convey his message. Since there were prophets in the early Christian church during and after the period of the writing of Hebrews (see, e.g., Acts 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11), it seems very unlikely that the author of Hebrews meant to say that there could be no prophets after the coming of Christ. Unless, that is, we are supposed to jettison Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians from the biblical canon. And what about Amos 3:7?

- "The Jesus of Mormonism is a brother to Lucifer," says John L. Smith, repeating a currently fashionable anti-Mormon mantra.217 If Rev. Smith means to imply that Lucifer’s kinship with Jesus (and with us) leads Latter-day Saints to regard Satan with affection or sympathy, he is acting the part of a demagogue. Whatever his motive, however, he does not explain how—since, according to Job 1:6 and 2:1, Satan is apparently a son of God—a believer in the Bible is supposed to avoid the conclusion that, in some sense, at least, Jesus the Son of God and Satan the son of God are brothers. Moreover, although this item of Latter-day Saint belief is clearly used by Rev. Smith for its shock value, it isn’t clear how making Lucifer, the author of Auschwitz and the Cambodian killing fields, the voluntary creation of an all-knowing and all-powerful God is really an improvement over viewing him as a son of our Heavenly Father who went horribly, tragically wrong. To argue that the Father freely, knowingly, created Lucifer ex nihilo implicates God directly in all the unspeakable evils of the Gulag, the Ukrainian terror-famine, the Assyrian conquests, and the wars of Atilla the Hun. We do not hold a father legally or morally responsible for a properly raised child who goes astray. But we would certainly condemn an inventor who deliberately created a serial-murdering robot and then, having loosed it on the world, refused to throw the off switch.

- Responding to Latter-day Saint belief in the eternity of temple marriage covenants, Tal Davis writes that “LDS doctrine contrasts with Jesus’ teaching that marital relationships are not intended to continue past death, there being no need for such

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relationships in heaven (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–36)." But none of the passages he cites negates the need for family relationships in heaven. What they say is that, in the resurrection, no weddings will be performed—no "marrying" (the traditional male role) and no "being given in marriage" (the traditional female role). But that no more bars the continuation of marriage relationships in heaven than a ban on performing marriages in some sort of building (a meat-packing plant, say, or a nuclear power station) would forbid married people from entering it. It is precisely the Latter-day Saint understanding that marriage is an ordinance to be performed on earth that leads them, under guidance from modern revelation, to the practice of vicarious marriage sealings for the dead.

- "A test of genuineness for prophets," says one of the SBC brochures, "was that any prediction they proclaimed would come true (Deut. 18:20–22). For example, Joseph Smith predicted that the temple of the church would be built in Independence, Mo., within his lifetime (Doctrine and Covenants 84:2–5). No temple has been built there." What a difference accuracy makes! Doctrine and Covenants 84:4 does not say that the temple would be built within his lifetime, but, rather, "reared in this generation." The question is, What is meant by the term generation? If the SBC’s experts want to insist that it means a literal human generation of about thirty years or so, what will they do with the prophecies of the last days and the second coming of Christ in Matthew 24? For Jesus said of those events, "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Matthew 24:34). Remember, double standards are tacky.

218 In ibid., 28. The producers of the Mormon Puzzle material should be congratulated for avoiding the approach to this subject of Mark Coppenger, the president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, who told the SBC’s 1997 Denominational Summit on Mormonism that the faith of the Latter-day Saints is "a designer religion which appeals to today’s American lifestyle." “It’s bombastic,” he told his audience, “claiming ‘you can be a god’ . . . and it’s sensual . . . a religion of eternal sex, which is easy to sell in America.” See King, “Mormon summit preps for ’98 SBC.” Perhaps the emphasis in the missionary lessons has changed a bit since my days in Switzerland, but I don’t recall spending a lot of time on a doctrine of “eternal sex.”

219 “Belief Bulletin: Mormons.”
Miscellaneous Historical Distortions

- "With Smith’s death came disarray," says Robert McKay. "Sidney Rigdon and Brigham Young, two of Smith’s closest advisers, battled for leadership of the church."\(^{220}\) But it wasn’t much of a fight, and it didn’t last long. McKay paints a picture of chaos and strife that simply is not historically accurate. Moreover, there is clear and abundant historical evidence of dramatic divine intervention at Nauvoo to ensure that the Saints recognized Brigham Young as the legitimate successor to Joseph Smith.\(^{221}\)

- Lavoid Robertson says of the glorious beings whom the Prophet saw in his first vision that "whether they were angels, Jesus, or Jesus and God the Father, we don’t know—Joseph Smith seems to have been confused about this."\(^{222}\) He offers no evidence to back up this offhanded claim, and I would suggest that the confusion is his, rather than Joseph Smith’s.

- Acknowledging the presence of any truth in other religions is, Robertson tells us, directly contradictory "to the original teachings of Joseph Smith."\(^{223}\) This is completely false. He cites no reference to support his claim, and it is easy to see why. "The Catholics have many pieces of truth," said President John Taylor.\(^{224}\) "Have the Presbyterians any truth?" asked Joseph Smith. "Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes."\(^{225}\)

- Latter-day Saint belief in celestial marriage rests, says Tal Davis, on notions "concocted" or "designed by [Joseph] Smith to justify his personal moral failings."\(^{226}\) This is a very serious charge to make. Some supporting evidence and analysis would have been useful. But it isn’t immediately apparent in any case

\(^{220}\) In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 19.
\(^{223}\) In ibid.
\(^{225}\) History of the Church, 5:517.
\(^{226}\) In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 26, 27.
how belief in the eternally binding validity of marriage covenants could have been used to justify adultery.

- One of the SBC pamphlets declares, in passing, that "The Book of Abraham has been discredited by Egyptologists examining the Egyptian papyri from which Smith derived his 'inspired' translation." The pamphlet neglects to mention the fact that we almost certainly don't have "the Egyptian papyri from which Smith derived his 'inspired' translation," and that it is therefore unclear just how the Egyptologists managed to discredit it. Nor, needless to say, does the pamphlet mention Latter-day Saint scholarship on the issue.

"We were able to put the Mormon puzzle together," boasts the narrator at the end of the SBC's video. Sure. And I'm Napoleon.

Fuel on the Fire of the Auto-da-Fé

The Mormon Puzzle material consistently downplays the role and importance of anti-Mormon bigotry in the story of the Latter-day Saints—"a pattern of religious persecution and violence without parallel in American history." Perhaps the SBC

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227 Davis, "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."
229 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 42. The sordid and sometimes bloody story of anti-Mormonism is yet to be fully written. Worthwhile treatments to date include Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914: Cartoons, Caricatures, and Illustrations (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983); David B. Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," The
authors are embarrassed at the palpable link that connects them to the anti-Mormonism of an earlier era.

Regarding the flight of the Latter-day Saints from armed mobs in Jackson County, Missouri, in November 1833, for example, Robert McKay summarizes the situation by saying merely that "the Mormons had again proven incapable of getting along with their neighbors and had been driven from Jackson County." But, to put it mildly, this is not the whole story. (What would we think of a writer who, after mentioning the persecution of Jews in medieval Europe, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Russian pogroms, introduced the Nazis' "Final Solution" with a detached observation that "the Jews had again proven incapable of getting along with their neighbors and had been relocated to labor camps"?) Local Missouri clergy were hostile to the Latter-day Saints almost from the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries in the area in January 1831; Latter-day Saint proselytizing successes alarmed them. "Almost as soon as the members of the Church commenced settling in Jackson County [in 1833]," Joseph Fielding Smith summarizes,
Opposition began to show itself. The settlers were incited to violence by their ministers, who started a campaign of abuse and falsehood. They received ready aid from others of the citizens, which ultimately resulted in the expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from the state. The Rev. Finis Ewing publicly distributed the report that “the ‘Mormons’ were the common enemies of mankind,” while the Rev. Pixley circulated falsehoods among the religious papers of the east, and used his influence among both the Indians and the whites for the destruction of the Church in Jackson County.232

McKay is likewise coy in connection with the final expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from the state, five years later. “On July 4, 1838,” he writes, “Sidney Rigdon, a powerful Mormon orator, delivered a preapproved speech threatening Missourians with extermination. Three months later the governor responded in kind, issuing an ‘exterminating order’ which said that the church’s members should either be driven from the state or exterminated.”233 But this is misguided on many levels. Even if we grant that Sidney Rigdon’s speech—which may or may not have been “preapproved”—was intemperate, can it truly be said that a formal state decree ordering the expulsion or extermination of a whole class of its citizens was really a proportionate, “in kind” response to a piece of Independence Day bombast? And why doesn’t McKay tell his readers what kinds of provocations led up to the Rigdon speech? His brief summary implies that Rigdon simply offered, out of the blue, to exterminate the people of Missouri. But this is not so. What did Sidney Rigdon actually say?

We take God and all the holy angels to witness this day, that we warn all men in the name of Jesus Christ, to come on us no more forever, for from this hour, we will bear it no more, our rights shall no more be trampled on with impunity. The man or the set of men, who attempts it, does it at the expense of their lives. And

233 In Reynolds, The Challenge of Mormonism, 18.
that mob that comes on us to disturb us; it shall be be-
tween us and them a war of extermination; for we will
follow them, till the last drop of their blood is spilled,
or else they will have to exterminate us: for we will
carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own
families, and one party or the other shall be utterly
destroyed. . . .

We will never be the aggressors, we will infringe on
the rights of no people; but shall stand for our own un-
til death. We claim our own rights, and are willing that
all others shall enjoy theirs. . . .

We therefore, take all men to record this day, that
we proclaim our liberty this day, as did our fathers.
And we pledge this day to one another, our fortunes,
our lives, and our sacred honors, to be delivered from
the persecutions which we have had to endure, for the
last nine years, or nearly that. 234

There is nothing here of any threat against the generality of
Missourians. Rather, it is a promise of nonaggression, coupled
with a warning to the violent mobs that sought to murder, rape,
and despoil the Latter-day Saints. Nonetheless, Colleen Raison, a
professional anti-Mormon who runs a “visitors center” in Nau-
vo and publishes humorless, insulting, inartistic cartoons in
Reynolds’s old tabloid The Evangel, recently offered her own
perspective in that periodical on the unparalleled declaration of
genocidal war by a governor against a portion of the citizenry of
his state:

The Mormons, since their inception, have been noted
for crying persecution as the root of much and many
of their problems. Some incidents the early Saints went
through, as many other people did, possibly or actually,
may have been wrong.

But only maybe.

Ms. Raison quotes the language of Gov. Lilburn W. Boggs’s
27 October 1839 extermination order as follows: “The Mormons

must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated as necessary for the public peace—their outrages are beyond all description.” She then hastens to provide sympathetic understanding:

The wording sounds very harsh and almost causes one to think the Mormons were indeed unfairly persecuted, as they claim. However, if one reads the actual history of the events that led up to this order, and not just Mormonism’s “faith promoting” materials, one would understand why it came about and why the leaders of the State, as well as the Governor, would think such an order necessary.

Ms. Ralson’s essay concludes by noting that the “extermination order” was finally rescinded by Governor Christopher S. Bond, on 25 June 1969, who also apologized on behalf of his state. “Now,” she says, “would it not be right for the Mormons to own up to their part of the wrong and ask the pardon of the people of the State of Missouri?”

(One is left almost speechless. Even if Mormon behavior on the frontier had been thoroughly obnoxious, would that have justified their annihilation? Do improperly clad women deserve rape? Do Jews bear, or even share in, the guilt of the Holocaust? Should Jews apologize to Germany? “You see everybody always talk about Hitler exterminating six million Jews,” says Khalid Abdul Muhammad, a leader in Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, “... don’t nobody ever ask what did they do to Hitler.”)

“It is not as if the Mormons were the innocent victims of a cruel governor!” concurs Rev. Dennis A. Wright, who has succeeded Michael Reynolds as editor of The Evangel and director of Oklahoma-based Utah Missions, Inc.

In October of 1838, the Latter-day Saints were forced to cede the town of De Witt, Missouri, to the mob forces. Seventy wagons filled with exiles and their possessions soon filed into Caldwell.

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County. But “violence again erupted a few weeks later, when a group of Caldwell militia led by Reverend Samuel Bogart raided a residence south of Far West and made off with three prisoners.” Early in the next year, it was, again, certain kinds of Christian clergy who played a leading role in the suffering of the Latter-day Saints, as Joseph Smith pointed out to Isaac Galland in a letter from Liberty Jail, Missouri, dated 22 March 1839:

The Judges have gravely told us from time to time that . . . if we will deny our religion, we can be liberated. Our lawyers have gravely told us, that we are only held now by the influence of long faced Baptists; how far this is true, we are not able to say: but we are certain that our most vehement accusers, are the highest toned professors of religion. On being interrogated [sic] what these men have done? their uniform answer is, we do not know, but they are false teachers, and ought to die. And of late boldly and frankly acknowledge, that the religion of these men, is all that they have against them.

In the view of Rev. Wright, who is an ordained minister in the Southern Baptist Convention, not even the murder of Joseph Smith was undeserved. He goes further, in this regard, than did the experts at the SBC’s Denominational Summit on Mormonism, which was held in North Carolina on the one hundred and fifty-third anniversary of the Prophet’s death. “Smith was killed while escaping jail,” they said, untruthfully. Responding to some remarks made by President Gordon B. Hinckley, Pastor Wright notes that

the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum on June 27, 1844, didn’t occur until after Joseph had fired upon the so-


239 Dean C. Jesse, ed., The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 418.

240 King, “Mormon Summit Preps for ’98 SBC.”
called "mob" with a pistol that had been secreted to him while in jail and had killed one man and injured several others.241

"Rage and persecution" may have followed the Mormons to Illinois, but the Saints of that day brought most of it upon themselves!242

Rev. Wright is wrong about Hyrum’s death, which occurred immediately prior to Joseph’s drawing the pistol.243 But he is almost certainly correct in his claim that Joseph’s firing of the pistol took place while Joseph was still alive. His description of the events at Carthage represents an important and novel historical reconstruction, and it is vital that we understand it with precision. Apparently, Rev. Wright feels that Joseph Smith was obliged—though he was unjustly imprisoned and had not yet been tried, let alone convicted of anything, much less convicted of a capital offense—to allow "the so-called 'mob'" to butcher not only himself and his brother Hyrum but his two friends, Willard Richards and John Taylor, whose only crime was that they had come to visit the prisoners. (John Taylor was, in fact, severely wounded by "the so-called 'mob.'")

241 Unfortunately, it is not likely that Joseph Smith really managed to kill one of his murderers. B. H. Roberts, ed., History of the Church (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 7:103, indicates that John Taylor had heard of two deaths; see also Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 390–91. But see also Brodie, No Man Knows My History; 393; Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 217–20; Donna Hill, Joseph Smith: The First Mormon (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 415–16. I put the question to several leading academic experts on the history of the church, and the unanimous answer was that there is simply no evidence and no credible contemporary claim that Joseph Smith killed anybody. Justice, alas, was not done that day at Carthage.


Rev. Wright’s revised version of the events in Carthage seems to run along the following lines: The wily criminal lunatic Joseph Smith, who had remained quiet throughout his captivity, deliberately chose the very time when the peace-loving Carthage Greys—fully armed and with traditional blackened faces—were innocently gathered about the jail for their annual June 27th Militia Picnic. Frolicking with their weapons and calling out the death threats that customarily accompanied that grand holiday in frontier Illinois—it was a simpler time, and June 27th had not yet been commercialized—the proto-Gandhian Greys had merely been playing the venerable party game known among these gentle rustics as “Eat Hot Lead, Mormon Scum!” Then, wholly without provocation, Joseph Smith opened fire on the revelers, using the “pepperbox” pistol that Cyrus Wheelock had smuggled into his cell. Naive historians, both Latter-day Saints and others, have always assumed that Joseph’s action had something to do with the fact that his brother Hyrum had just been shot to death. (Presumably, Hyrum was killed by a stray bullet from a local hunter, or perhaps from an evil Mormon assassin.) Rev. Wright, however, cannot be taken in by such sophistries. When Joseph continued to shoot at them as they mounted the jail’s interior staircase bearing a peace offering of cookies and punch, they had no choice. They killed him and his (already dead) brother in self-defense. It is true that they also shot John Taylor at least four times. But then, he had been very naughty to them with his cane, and needed to be taught a lesson.

Rev. Wright is likewise unimpressed by the Latter-day Saints’ westward migration. “No one,” he protests, “followed the Mormons holding guns to their heads.”244 (This is, I suppose, literally true.) The narrator of the video Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints takes a similarly bland view of Mormon history and of Protestant anti-Mormonism’s role in it. “The people came here,” he says airily, standing on a hillside overlooking Salt Lake City, “to isolate themselves from those who disagreed with their beliefs.” True, but not the whole truth. Rather, as the pioneer generation and their children used to say,

“we came here willingly, because we had to.”245 “Had not our neighbors in Missouri and Illinois made life intolerable to us,” said Nephi Morris, “we would have remained among them to this day. Had not the sharp and incisive argument of the bayonet and the musket been resorted to this great western country would have been peopled by others, and in a very different manner than that which has occurred.”246 Anybody who knows anything about Mormon history understands that the Latter-day Saints fled to the Great Basin because they were being slaughtered in Illinois. John Taylor, who, to the end of his life, carried lead in his body from the guns of the same murderers who shot the Prophet, put it well:

Joseph Smith . . . was persecuted and driven from place to place. He was malignecl, vilified, scourged, tarred and feathered, and finally murdered in cold blood, by a mob with blackened faces, in violation of the pledge of protection of the governor of the State of Illinois. It may be asked, why are we here to day in these valleys of the mountains? Because we had to flee from Missouri to Illinois; from Illinois into these mountains, to seek for that protection among the savages of the plains which was denied us by the civilization of the age under the auspices of a boasted Christianity; and the same spirit of vilification, falsification and abuse still follows us.247

It surely does. The Salt Lake City Ministerial Alliance opposed the seating of B. H. Roberts as a Utah congressman in the House of Representatives, and the seating of Reed Smoot in the

245 The comment seems to have originated with George A. Smith, a nineteenth-century counselor in the First Presidency and the grandfather of President George Albert Smith. See George Albert Smith, Conference Report, April 1948, 13; George Albert Smith, Conference Report, October 1950, 155; Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:347; compare Joseph F. Smith, in Collected Discourses, 2:342 (17 December 1891); Nephi L. Morris, Conference Report, April 1921, 91; Melvin J. Ballard, Conference Report, April 1921, 101; Melvin J. Ballard, Conference Report, October 1933, 19; Melvin J. Ballard, Conference Report, April 1938, 43.
246 Nephi L. Morris, Conference Report, April 1921, 91.
U.S. Senate. Certain members of the clergy have always been in the forefront of stirring up hatred against the Latter-day Saints:

On the second of October, 1881, the Reverend Thomas De Witt Talmage gave a sermon in the Brooklyn Tabernacle on the subject of President Garfield’s recent assassination. Attempting to console those shaken by the ineffectuality of their prayers for his recovery, he solaced them with the thought that “if the death of Garfield shall arouse the nation to more hatred of that institution of Mormonism, . . . he will not have died in vain.” For though Talmage couldn’t be sure of the assassin’s affiliation, the villain clearly “had the ugliness of a Mormon, the licentiousness of a Mormon, the cruelty of a Mormon, the murderous spirit of a Mormon.”

The most recent surge of Baptist concern about the evils of Mormonism may perhaps be traceable to the construction of the Washington D.C. Temple, which signified in dramatic fashion the church’s escape from the western deserts to which earlier anti-Mormons had attempted to confine it. Worried Baptists in and around the District of Columbia held a conference on Mormonism, invited “experts” and Baptist officials from across the country, and distributed a ninety-page booklet on how to thwart any Latter-day Saint missionaries who dared to trespass on their turf. As the Washington Post reported in the spring of 1974,

248 Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 40. In fact, of course, although Rev. Talmage’s suspicions were soon demonstrated to be baseless, a murderous spirit has often accompanied the enemies of the Latter-day Saints, as events in the years immediately prior to and immediately following his remarks vividly illustrate. On the killing of Elder Joseph Standing by a “so-called ‘mob’” (to use Rev. Wright’s phrase) near Varnell, Georgia, in 1879, see David S. Hoopes and Roy Hoopes, The Making of a Mormon Apostle: The Story of Rudger Clawson (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1990), 1–31. On the massacre of several missionaries and members by a “so-called ‘mob’” in the Kane Creek area of Tennessee in 1884, see Gary James Bergera, ed., The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 139–42. It would be uncharitable to note that the American South is disproportionately represented in such stories, and that a leader of “the so-called ‘mob’” that killed Elder Standing was the Baptist deacon Benjamin Clark.
Baptists have watched with growing apprehension the progress of the new Mormon temple just off the Capital Beltway near Kensington. With the completion of the temple, they knew would come expansion of Mormon activities in this area, where Baptists of all varieties have more members than any other religious group.249

It cannot be forgotten that Protestantism began as a protest. Polemics and interreligious disputes have long been a part of its history and culture. And these disputes have sometimes been very ugly. Martin Luther, for instance, said of the Roman Catholic church that “all who have the spirit of Christ know well that they can bring no higher or more acceptable praise offering to God than all they can say or write against this bloodthirsty, unclean, blasphemous whore of the devil.”250 The Reformation launched a century of brutal religious wars.

This same charming spirit manifests itself against the Latter-day Saints as well. It was incorporated in the placard-wielding hecklers who pestered people emerging from a friend’s stake conference on 15 March 1998, near Portland, Oregon. It was vocal in a young man who, at a recent ecumenical prayer service held in conjunction with an academic conference, notified God that there was a Mormon in their midst—a colleague of mine—and summoned the Lord to save him from the false and Satanic cult to which he belonged. It is visible in the anti-Mormons who haunt every temple dedication and who confront the Saints annually at the church’s historical pageants in Manti, Palmyra, and Mesa. It is uncomfortably present when Latter-day Saint women are barred from praying in parent and political groups in California and Texas because they aren’t “Christians.” It grows aggressive when it bans the use, by Latter-day Saints, of interdenominational chapels in Cairo, Egypt, and Vail, Colorado. It grows eerily reminiscent of the Nazis’ Kristallnacht when a dedicated anti-Mormon seeks

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250 Martin Luther, introduction to Robert Barnes’s History of the Popes, written in 1536. Cited in Givens, Viper on the Hearth, 113.
to destroy a young man's business through a religiously motivated boycott.251

Of course, intolerance and fallen humanity's zest for denigrating those with whom we disagree are not limited to Protestants. Although we do not wish to slip into the opposite error of relativism, we must, all of us, be on our guard against these self-aggrandizing temptations. Reviewing a recently published volume by the noted Egyptologist Jan Assmann, on the image of ancient Egypt in western religious thought, Ronald Hendel writes that,

In the Western tradition, Egypt is the counterimage to the austere truth of Biblical monotheism.

Yet this "Mosaic distinction," as Assman calls it, between false religion (connoted by Egypt) and true, revealed religion, has its own problems, not the least of which is the intolerance that is often generated by labeling the other as deluded or irrational. The Mosaic distinction, though basic to Judaism, was also applied by Christianity (and later by Islam) to characterize the other as contemptible and potentially evil. So it was that the Jews became subjected to the Mosaic distinction by this new turn, the ugly history of anti-Semitism being its legacy. For Assmann, a German scholar writing in the generation after the Holocaust, these ancient religious controversies seem all too modern.252

And indeed they do. As one leading professional anti-Mormon expresses it, "The very existence of the LDS Church is an insult to what I and millions of others hold dear."253 Just

251 Information on this case can be found in my "Skin Deep," 140–41.
253 William J. McKeever, director of Mormonism Research Ministry (El Cajon, California), in an E-mail message to Daniel C. Peterson (4 March 1998). In a similar vein, James R. White, of Phoenix-based Alpha and Omega Ministries, sent me an E-mail message on 15 April 1998 in which he explained that the sheer fact that Mormons accept the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which doctrines disagree with his version of Christianity, makes them "anti-Baptists" and "anti-Christians" and, by implication, legitimates his career as a professional disdainer and critic of their
under twenty percent of “Conservative Christians,” according to a recent sociological study, “would deny Mormons residence in their country.”

The curriculum materials prepared by the Southern Baptist Convention distort and misrepresent the restored gospel. It is regrettable that a large and wealthy American religious denomination would officially issue such misleading and antagonistic propaganda as this video and this literature and would encourage its members to use it in formal instruction. Although these products are indisputably an improvement over the more inflammatory charlatanism of such cranks as Ed Decker, the SBC has forfeited a marvelous opportunity to further understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints among American evangelical Christians. Worse, I fear that the Mormon Puzzle materials feed contempt, anger, and hostility. To have done so, unfortunately, seems both harmful to life in a democratic community and, more troubling still, fundamentally unchristian.

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faith. In his view, Latter-day Saints need not be particularly interested in Baptist or Protestant doctrines—very few are; I am not—and need never have campaigned against any other faith to be branded “anti-Baptist” and “anti-Christian.” That their beliefs differ from those of James White is a stench in his nostrils and, therefore, in the Lord’s.