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Widening the Divide: The Countercult Version of Mormonism

Russell C. McGregor

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WIDENING THE DIVIDE:
The Countercult Version of Mormonism

Russell C. McGregor

“The Horror! The Horror!”
Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

A first, quick reading of Roberts’s chapter on salvation might suggest that it is a reasonable, basic-level discussion of Latter-day Saint soteriology. The seeming reasonableness of this discussion results, perhaps, because of its use of Gospel Principles, a course manual for new members, which does not go into any real depth. A second look, however, reveals numerous problems. Roberts offers an “evangelical” view of salvation doctrine, but his views differ considerably from those of many other evangelicals. More important, the teaching he presents as Latter-day Saint doctrine, although composed mostly of authentic Latter-day Saint elements, is virtually his own creation.

The chapter is structured as a mirror-image of the corresponding chapter in How Wide the Divide? That is, in the earlier volume, Robinson presented the Latter-day Saint view first, and Blomberg followed with the evangelical view. Roberts, brave soul that he is, feels adequate to present both views: the “Christian/evangelical answer”


(see pp. 141–52) followed by what he is pleased to call “The Mormon Doctrine of Salvation” (see pp. 152–77), although he accepts only the former.

Before getting into the details of problems with his chapter, it is worth turning to the back of the book to discover Roberts’s qualifications for this work. The description tells us of his Ph.D., his years as dean of theology at the Institute of Biblical Studies in Romania, and the churches he has pastored in four different countries. This all sounds impressive, but one rather serious blot remains on his copybook; he claims conspicuous credit on his curriculum vitae for the polemical video *The Mormon Puzzle*. This fact may warm the hearts of Southern Baptists, most of whom are probably not aware of its problems, but it does not inspire confidence among those of us who are.²

In *How Wide the Divide?* Craig Blomberg discusses the two main strands of evangelical thought—Calvinism and Arminianism. (In simple terms, Calvinism insists upon salvation of a predestined few by an act of unconditional, irresistible divine grace, while Arminianism holds that salvation is offered to all, but that each individual retains the choice of whether or not to accept it.) This is vital information for anyone seeking a true and fair understanding of Protestant beliefs on the subject of salvation. Roberts, however, makes no effort to address this division. Rather, he offers his (Arminian) view of salvation and calls it “The Evangelical View” (p. 141, emphasis added), as if it were the only one. Now, although Roberts is unlikely to return the favor, I certainly accept that he genuinely believes the doctrine he offers; I also do not dispute that it is *an* authentic evangelical position. However, it is a little presumptuous of him to call it *the* evangelical view, as if his Calvinist brethren were not evangelical—or their views did not count. Roberts’s view, for example, would most emphatically not be accepted by James White, an old-line, “absolute-sovereignty” Calvinist who is also a Baptist.

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Roberts begins by quoting Acts 16:31 and claims that this passage, “in the opinion of evangelicals, says all that needs to be said about the issue of salvation” (p. 142). Having said all that needs to be said, Roberts then expounds and enlarges upon it for ten and a half pages.

Putting aside Roberts’s essay and sticking to “all that needs to be said,” what are we to make of other statements about salvation found in the New Testament, including those in the writings of Paul? While they by no means contradict Roberts’s proof text, neither do they support his use of it. Presumably he believes that these, as well as other relevant passages, can all be harmonized in some way to agree with the surface meaning of his favorite text. If that is the case, he does not share that harmonization process with us; instead, he effectively dismisses those passages as irrelevant.

A point that Roberts emphasizes more than once is his dictum that church membership has no influence on the matter of salvation. “Never,” he avers, “is heavenly reward seen to be tied to a church or denominational identity [in the evangelical view] ... as it so clearly is in Mormonism” (p. 142). However, Roberts severely overstates his case. The New Testament does not address the question of “denominational identity” for the simple reason that the early Saints had no denominational choices. Some have argued that the primitive church was nondenominational, but this argument simply avoids the issue. The reality is that no denominations are mentioned because the church was all one: a single, centrally directed organization operating with the ideal of a living body, whose parts (the actual meaning of “members”) each functioned in perfect harmony with all the others.

Not only has Roberts overstated his argument, but he has failed to see its implications for his polemical enterprise. For if an individual’s salvation does not depend on what his or her “denominational identity” is, neither can it depend on what that identity is not. If one’s heavenly reward doesn’t depend on being in the (or a) “right” church, then it cannot depend on being out of a “wrong” one either.

3. See, for example, Matthew 24:13; Mark 16:16; John 10:19; Acts 2:21, 47; Romans 8:24; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 3:15; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21.
This means that a Latter-day Saint who accepts Roberts’s arguments has no valid reason to leave the Church of Jesus Christ.

As mentioned above, Roberts’s view of salvation is Arminian; that is, he believes that God offers salvation to all but actually gives it to those who freely respond correctly. His exposition of this view is a well-organized one: he first defines “man’s need,” then “Christ’s work,” and “man’s response.” Having dealt with these issues from an evangelical standpoint, he discusses—or rather, performs an exposé of—the Latter-day Saint view of these matters (not, however, before giving a thoroughly hostile presentation on the apostasy and the restoration of the gospel).

Roberts labors to show that the gospel as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ is “A Different Gospel” (p. 153). However, he is not content to show that it differs from the views of contemporary Protestantism; he also attempts to show that it differs from the teachings of the primitive church. However, he does this almost entirely without any serious attempt to come to grips with Latter-day Saint sources; in fact, when he does refer to a Mormon source, he almost always abuses it. For example, when he cites Doctrine and Covenants 1:23 to demonstrate that the church claims to teach the fulness of the gospel and Joseph Smith—History 1:34 to show that we believe the Book of Mormon contains that fulness, he interprets these as a snub against the Bible. The Bible, however, is not mentioned in those passages; Roberts is being unnecessarily defensive. He asks the rhetorical question, “If the Gospel contained in the pages of the New Testament is not complete, why is it that the Apostle Paul would give such a dire and serious warning as he delivered in Galatians 1:8?” (p. 154).

However, his logic begs two questions: first, who says that “the Gospel contained in the pages of the New Testament is not complete”? If any Latter-day Saint has said so, Roberts has not cited such a statement. Roberts arrives at this conclusion by loosely and inaccurately equating his interpretation of the Bible with the Bible itself, and certainly we would say that the Roberts interpretation of the Bible, as presented in his chapter of The Counterfeit Gospel, gives an incomplete and inadequate version of the gospel. To Latter-day Saints,
the primary problem lies not with the Bible but with the trouble men have finding the truth—unaided by revelation—in its pages.

The second question Roberts begs is, what does Galatians 1:8 have to say about the Bible? The answer: nothing at all. The passage refers only to what Paul had *preached* to the Galatian Saints—that is, what he had delivered to them verbally. On no other basis than the breathless assumptions of unquestioning bibliolatry, Roberts assumes that this passage refers to the New Testament—something that did not exist at the time—when it actually pertains to something else altogether.

Further examples of Roberts’s misuse of his sources abound. On the same page as the above example, in one of a number of resentful barbs directed at *How Wide the Divide?* Roberts says, “Stephen Robinson claims that the Gospel of Mormonism sheds ‘additional light’ (100-watt bulb) and is superior to the light (40, 60, maybe even 80 watts) of the Bible” (p. 154, emphasis added). But Roberts’s statement is a serious misrepresentation. Robinson actually says, “Where most Evangelicals think of themselves as being in the light and all who disagree with them as being in the darkness, Mormons think of themselves—or at least should—as being one-hundred-watt bulbs and other denominations as being, say, forty-, sixty-, or eighty-watt bulbs.” Robinson is explicitly *not* talking about the Bible, as Roberts claims, but about other denominations.

The errors described above all tend in one direction, and they have the cumulative effect of poisoning the well, that is, to prejudice his readers in advance against anything the Latter-day Saints might say on their own account. By the time the otherwise uninformed reader reaches page 159, wherein Roberts rips into our beliefs on the subject of salvation, that reader will be sufficiently softened up to accept, without surprise, the dictum that “Like a counterfeit 50-dollar bill which has many similar characteristics to the real thing, the

4. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”

Gospel of Mormonism bears similarities to the biblical Gospel.” This argument appears to say that similarities are just as much evidence of our false position as differences are, a remarkably inflammatory—and logically unsound—position to take.

While it would be possible to fill many pages with an analysis of Roberts’s errors—his mistreatment of the apostasy and restoration of the gospel alone could occupy as much space as this entire section of the review—it is time to move on to his treatment of salvation.

Wouldn’t a Divine Plan Succeed?

Man’s condition, as seen by Roberts, is that we are cut off from God as a consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve (see pp. 143–44). He claims no belief in original sin or inherited guilt. In this, his views are remarkably similar to the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ; however, in keeping with the polemical purpose of the book, he finds it necessary to create a “divide” between his beliefs and ours. He widens this divide over two points: the first is the question of what is meant by the biblical statement that humanity has been created in the “image of God.” Roberts argues, on no other authority than the opinion of a “renowned theologian,” that this “image” has nothing to do with what we look like but relates to the human intellect and personality.

The second point concerns the nature of the fall. Roberts’s list of the consequences (pp. 143–44) could easily have been compiled by a Latter-day Saint; however, Roberts is unable to see any redeeming features in that important event at all. It is not enough for him to argue that the fall has serious consequences, a point with which we certainly agree; it must, instead, be an unmitigated disaster. In contrast, the Latter-day Saint view, which fully recognizes the seriousness of the fall, nevertheless finds comfort in the fact that it happened in accordance with the wisdom of God and made salvation not only necessary but possible for the human race. Roberts, however, insists that these positives do not exist.

6. Carl F. H. Henry, an odd source of ultimate authority for one who evidently holds to sola scriptura.
Roberts makes two blinding errors in his treatment of LDS doctrine relating to the fall. The first is that “the Bible claims clearly that Adam’s existence began with . . . [the] creation” (p. 159). In support of this assertion, Roberts cites Genesis 1:26–28, which passage, he boldly claims, “contradicts [Adam’s and Eve’s] existence prior to creation” (p. 159, emphasis added). This claim is plainly wrong; the passage in question simply does not mention the premortal existence. It also does not mention World War I, but Roberts is unlikely to argue that this passage contradicts that event as well.

The second error lies in his claim that Mormons believe that the fall had the effect of embodying Adam and Eve. “As a result of their transgression, according to Mormonism, Adam and Eve left their purely ‘spiritual state’ and became physical beings” (p. 159). Mormonism teaches that? He cites two passages of scripture that do not support his claim and do not contain the phrase spiritual state. It is difficult to determine whether these errors arise from external factors preventing a proper proofreading of the chapter or from the pressure of having to create a polemical case ex nihilo.

Perhaps Roberts’s greatest difficulty with the fall, however, is his dogged insistence that it was in all respects contrary to the will of God. He insists that the Latter-day Saint view of this event makes God “morally duplicitous,” an odd complaint for someone who presumably believes that the same God gave the sixth commandment and ordered the destruction of the Amalekites. Although Roberts is less than forthcoming with his beliefs about the human condition without the fall, he apparently subscribes to the view that we would all have been living perfect, endless lives in a paradise on earth. If this was God’s original plan, then the fall defeated it, and Christ’s redemption through the cross, which saves only a subset of the human race after millennia of suffering, is therefore a less-perfect “plan B.” Evidently God, having perfect foresight and all power, nevertheless could not prevent the ruin of his original plan; once it was ruined, he

7. See 2 Nephi 2:22, which simply says that Adam would have stayed in the garden, unchanged, had he not fallen, and Moses 3:5–7, which talks about the spiritual creation preceding the physical one, but says nothing about the fall.
could not replace it with something equally successful. Since any parent who has ever had a four-year-old could have predicted the outcome of placing that tree in the middle of the garden and then telling the incumbents not to eat from it, it would seem that Roberts credits God with a remarkable lack of common sense.

Any Sinner But . . .

According to Roberts, salvation, in the evangelical view, depends on the grace and mercy of God. The work of Christ, his suffering for our sins on the cross, makes possible the salvation of all who will accept God’s mercy, regardless of what sins they may have committed. In his best Sunday sermon style, Roberts intones:

Yes, even a guilty criminal or a thief on a cross may be forgiven of each and every sin. Such forgiveness is not based on human deserts, but on Christ’s work. A guilty and condemned criminal or a self-righteous but unforgiving and ill-deserving hypocrite may be saved completely and totally. Because Jesus died for each and every sin of the world, no one stands outside the possibility of complete redemption. He may save any person and take him or her straight to heaven into the very presence of God Himself. (pp. 146–47)

This statement apparently ignores the Savior’s teaching on the unpardonable sin (see Matthew 12:31–32; Mark 3:28, 29; and Luke 12:10) but, apart from that oversight, poses few problems for Latter-day Saints. However, in light of this statement it seems odd that Roberts takes us to task for apparently believing the same thing—believing enough, in fact, to act on the possibility that even Hitler could be saved. For later in the chapter, when talking about the LDS view of eternal consequences, Roberts unveils this tabloid-style announcement:

One startling example of Mormonism’s open-ended approach . . . is the baptism, ordination to [the] priesthood, and marriage (to Eva Braun) [who else? they were married in life] of Adolf Hitler at the Jordan [River] Temple, South
Jordan, Utah, on September 28, 1993. If he accepted this temple work, Adolf Hitler was promoted to paradise and is well on his way to the celestial kingdom. (p. 174)

If, as Roberts avers above, there is no “condemned criminal” or “ill-deserving hypocrite” who “stands outside the possibility of complete redemption,” then Hitler, criminal and ill-deserving as he was, can be redeemed too. Roberts evidently thinks that his own noble gospel ideal becomes “startling,” a cause for scandal and derision, when translated into faith-motivated action in a Mormon context. Such inconsistency is hard to explain without reference to the remorseless demands of a polemical agenda.

Furthermore, this paragraph highlights a major problem that recurs throughout the chapter: Roberts continually oversimplifies. The statement “If he accepted this temple work, Adolf Hitler was promoted to paradise and is well on his way to the celestial kingdom” is so oversimplified that it is untrue. Temple work provides no guarantees, only opportunities. The actual forgiveness of sins, and therefore the salvation of individuals, remains at the Lord’s absolute discretion (see D&C 64:10). While everyone is free to speculate, no informed Latter-day Saint would venture to dogmatically declare Hitler’s present or final state, as Roberts has so presumptuously done on our behalf; all we can say is that we have done all we can for him; the rest is between him and his Maker. If Roberts is serious about explaining Latter-day Saint doctrine, he needs to make an effort to get it right.

Roberts’s discussion of Christ’s work (the evangelical view) is light on analysis and, frankly, big on gush. It ends by quoting the first verse of “Amazing Grace.” (The song’s scholarly weight was previously unknown to me.) It is at times hard to work out what Roberts is trying to accomplish; it is almost as if he has taken a nice, cozy, feel-good homily or sermon and expanded it into a polemical piece by larding in copious layers of anti-Mormon venom.

His treatment of the LDS view, by contrast, bristles with barbs. When we speak of Christ and the atonement, something the Book of Mormon recommends (see 2 Nephi 25:26), we are using “jargon and clichés”; furthermore, focusing on Christ is something we are only
doing “now” (p. 162), despite the doctrine’s rather conspicuous presence in the volume regarded as “the keystone of our religion.” Our view of the fall is “shallow and insufficient”; of course, we are “actually speaking of a different Jesus than the biblical Christ.” Roberts labors mightily to minimize the Latter-day Saint dependence on Christ for our salvation, yet for all his zeal, he cannot disguise these two facts of Latter-day Saint doctrine: (1) that the atonement saves all men from physical death, and (2) that that same atonement places a whole range of eternal opportunities before the human race.

Roberts tries to prove by repeated assertion that salvation in the telestial and terrestrial kingdoms is secured by each person suffering for his or her own sins. He offers no reference to support this assertion, which is unsurprising, since, being false, it cannot be supported. He simply quotes Doctrine and Covenants 76:99–103 and points out that there is no mention of those persons having accepted Christ. He seems unaware that LDS eschatology places the final judgment after the time when “every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue confess” (Romans 14:11; see Philippians 2:10; Mosiah 27:31; and D&C 76:110), which of course means that those saved at that judgment will certainly have accepted Christ. That they will have accepted him at a point when they effectively have no other useful option does rather tend to limit their claim on his mercy, but it is not their own suffering that saves them. Rather, it is Christ the Lord who saves them (see Acts 4:12; 2 Nephi 25:20). It is necessary, however, for them to suffer, inasmuch as they are able, before they can claim the salvation the Lord offers them.

Roberts is, of course, perfectly free to discard this teaching, but he is not free to misrepresent it as he has done. In rejecting it, he might find it necessary to explain why Luke 12:46–48 does not support his reasoning.

Roberts might also like to explain why his presentation of Latter-day Saint soteriology seems to exclude what must be the single most explicit description of the role of grace in human salvation. I refer to Doctrine and Covenants 45. These are the words of Christ:
Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thou might be glorified; Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life. (D&C 45:3-5)

If this picture stands in vivid contrast to the contrived and hostile caricature drawn by Roberts, then it is probably no accident. Note that this definitive passage of latter-day scripture contains no mention at all of our merits, goodness, or obedience; the blood of Christ is all that we have in our favor. The Savior's only argument in our behalf is his sacrifice and nothing else.

Faith How Alone?

"What does man need to do? Believe and have faith in the Person of Jesus Christ!" Thus Roberts introduces his presentation of the evangelical view of "Man's Response" (p. 147) to Christ's work. He holds that the appropriate response is simply to have "genuine belief" (p. 148). There is a caveat, however; for him, this "genuine belief" has three parts: faith, repentance, and "confession" (see pp. 148-50)—that is, a confession of belief in Christ, not of a specific transgression.

Thus, according to Roberts, to be saved we must have faith alone. There is, he rather sarcastically remarks, no "God's 12-step program for heavenly progression" (p. 144), as if Mormonism has such a thing. (As we shall presently see, he does in fact claim that we do have such a thing.) However, his "faith alone" is not all that alone, because it also requires repentance and confession to be complete. Very well, so if faith can be "alone" with those elements, why not with others? Why not with baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to

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8. The expression appears in quotation marks, implying that it is a quotation of some kind, but no reference is given, and I am unable to find such an expression in any Latter-day Saint source. My provisional conclusion is that the quotation is bogus.
the end? Roberts seems to have an entirely arbitrary set of inclusions for "genuine belief," and it is not clear what criteria he uses to select some and exclude others. Clearly, whatever is less than Roberts's three requirements—faith, repentance, and confession—is insufficient; whatever is more presumably falls under the curse of "works-righteousness" or some such Protestant anathema. Yet it is hard to deny that if repentance is a genuine "about-face" (p. 149), including "behavioral alteration" (ibid., emphasis dropped), then it is going to involve both the leaving of certain things previously done and the doing of certain things previously not done. On what rational basis can Roberts insist that the truly repentant person should not make and keep sacred covenants, as in temple service, or join in an organized effort to help one another, as in home and visiting teaching? He does not say.

As mentioned above, Roberts thinks that Latter-day Saints teach that man's response consists of a "12-step program for heavenly progression" (p. 144). However, this "program" is an unfamiliar one, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is Roberts's own. When he introduces it with the bald statement, "Here are the steps to the highest level of salvation in the celestial kingdom" (p. 167), he again offers no reference to any source, although he does offer references for the individual steps.

Roberts's twelve steps (see pp. 167–70) include:

1. Faith
2. Repentance
3. Baptism
4. The gift of the Holy Ghost
5. Priesthood ordination (for males only, as he correctly notes)
6. Temple endowment
7. Celestial marriage
8. Observing the Word of Wisdom
9. Sustaining the prophet
10. Tithing
11. Attending sacrament meetings
12. Obedience to the church
While everything on this interesting list is an authentic point of Latter-day Saint belief—although he seriously distorts several of these points—the list itself is something of a novelty. While any LDS list of requirements for exaltation would presumably include the first seven items, the last five look remarkably like padding. It appears that Roberts simply wants to make the list look as long as possible. Its organization is also suspect. Why are items 8 to 12 placed where they are? Converts commit to doing these things before they are baptized, and a fairly determined effort at keeping these commitments is required before a person can gain a temple recommend and receive his or her endowments—item 6 in Roberts's scheme. This makes items 8 to 12 logically prior to item 6—not a very sensible arrangement, one would think. And why those five items in particular, anyway? Why not dealing honestly with our fellowmen, obeying the law of chastity, bearing one another's burdens, sharing the gospel with our neighbors, or working to provide the ordinances of salvation for our kindred dead, all of which are equally important?

The fact is that Roberts is simply wrong on the last five items. None of them is, strictly speaking, essential for salvation or exaltation, and items 9 and 12 really have to do with our citizenship in the kingdom here and now rather than our eternal reward. Of course, if we choose to ignore the counsel of the church and its inspired leaders, we do put ourselves at serious risk of falling into apostasy, but that is an indirect consequence of failure to observe safeguards, not a direct result of missing a "step" that is intrinsically necessary. We go to sacrament meeting (item 11) to partake of the sacrament in remembrance of Jesus, as he enjoined his followers to do. Would Roberts rather have us disobey this injunction?

Roberts even has problems with the items on the list that are acknowledged as essential. The very first item, faith, is tendentiously mishandled. He avoids—perhaps deliberately—calling it "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ," as we do (Article of Faith 4); however, he knows full well that this is what our faith is about, since he tries to vitiate that belief in Christ by falling back on a standard polemical word game: "Mormonism . . . calls for faith in a Jesus who is not the Jesus of the Bible, but who is our spiritual brother from heaven, born like
us as a spirit child of heavenly parents” (p. 167). The only point of strictly christological doctrine in that sentence that differs between Mormon and “orthodox” belief is that Jesus had a spirit birth before his mortal birth. Granted that this is an actual difference of belief and not merely a contrived one, how on earth does believing in Christ’s spirit birth manage to generate an “alternative, unbiblical Christ?” Is Roberts seriously claiming that there actually exist two ontologically separate beings called “Christ,” one of whom has the characteristics of Jesus as recorded in the Bible, fused with those described in the creeds, while the second has the characteristics of Jesus as recorded in the Bible as well as in the Book of Mormon and latter-day revelation? The notion is an amusing one, but it does not in any way add to our understanding either of what Latter-day Saints and evangelicals have in common or of what our differences are. Roberts has effectively squandered an opportunity to add to his own knowledge and that of his readers because he places his polemical agenda ahead of that opportunity.

Roberts argues his twelve steps as if they were something every Latter-day Saint takes for granted and constantly thinks about, but of course this is not the case. Moving on, we find that the errors continue. Roberts correctly finds that only those who have received the witness of the Holy Ghost can actually commit the unpardonable sin, but he then leaps to the erroneous conclusion that committing such sin consists of simply leaving the church. That his reasoning is completely and demonstrably false can be readily adduced from the fact that those who commit the unpardonable sin “shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come” (D&C 84:41; see 76:34), whereas people who leave the church can repent and come back. If they had their names formally removed from the records of the church, they must apply for rebaptism; if not, they can

9. See, for example, the following from page 170: “eternal life . . . is never a certainty. A Mormon may never be sure that he has fully qualified for exaltation. His hope is that he has adhered to the above 12 steps consistently and regularly enough for him to achieve the celestial kingdom.” An odd claim, since the only Latter-day Saints ever to hear of those “12 steps” are those few who have read The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism as far as Roberts’s chapter before finding more productive things to do.
simply return to activity. Since many of those who have strayed do return, it is manifest that these individuals are not those who have committed the unpardonable sin. Roberts has simply made an egregious and easily demonstrable error in this matter.

In common with other anti-Mormon commentators,10 Roberts seriously mishandles the Latter-day Saint view of divine grace and its importance in our salvation. He commits the common error of claiming that Nephi declares that we are saved by grace only after we have put in our total and sustained effort. He quotes the relevant passage: "Second Nephi 25:23 states: ‘It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do’" (pp. 170–71, capitalization per Roberts). The capital I beginning his quotation implies that the sentence starts there and that the whole thought is thus being given. However, Nephi’s actual statement is as follows:

> For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. (2 Nephi 25:23)

Nephi mentions salvation to explain why he focuses on Christ: he knows that he depends on Christ and on God for his salvation. Clearly the words after all we can do are there to emphasize the main point: no matter what we do or don’t do, it is still by grace that we are saved. Roberts, like his predecessors, has got the sense of this passage exactly backwards.

Continuing on, Roberts briefly summarizes “a parable describing the Mormon plan of salvation,” which he found in Gospel Principles:

> A debtor begs his creditor for mercy because his debts are large and long overdue. Just as the cruel creditor is ready to cast the debtor into prison, a friend intervenes. He offers to "pay the debt" for the [debtor]. The debtor is further encouraged by the friend, "You will pay the debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible." (p. 171)

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10. See, for example, James R. White, Letters to a Mormon Elder (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne, 1990), 268–69.
This is a well-known parable, first given by Elder Boyd K. Packer at the April 1977 general conference. Roberts does not tell us the title of this parable, which is "The Mediator." Perhaps he does not do so because the title clearly preempts the interpretation which Roberts offers in the next paragraph:

Is not the friend representative of the LDS Church? Each devout saint under the Mormon system is working desperately to pay off his or her obligation in order to enter the celestial kingdom. The false hope is offered that if he does all he can, at that point grace will take over. (p. 171)

That this hilariously overdrawn picture of terrified Latter-day Saints anxiously toiling away to "pay off" a debt—presumably receiving monthly statements telling them how much is still outstanding—fails to resemble any real church members is apparent to anyone who actually knows any. But notice that the friend in the parable unambiguously does not represent the church. He represents the Savior, Jesus Christ, who mediates for us. His intervention on our behalf pays a debt that we are entirely unable and unqualified to pay. What he asks in return is that we do all we can—not to benefit him, but to benefit ourselves by becoming more like him and to benefit others by blessing their lives with our unselfish service. Whether we live long lives or short ones, whether our talents are many or few, whether our opportunities for service are frequent or rare, however limited our means or our capacity, we do what we can. We do this because he to whom we owe everything and who has already repaid our debt for us has asked us to. And, as Christians, that's good enough for us.

Eternal Consequences

Roberts gives the conventional evangelical answer to the question of the afterlife: one heaven and one hell (pp. 151–52). While he is emphatic that hell is a place of dreadful suffering, he does not commit himself to whether the "fire and brimstone" is literal or figurative—surely an important question. He is even more vague about heaven, insisting that it is a place of "bliss" that may involve some "responsibilities" (p. 152), but he offers no detail beyond that.
His treatment of the Latter-day Saint view, while superficially accurate, is predictably full of problems. He reiterates his erroneous claim that the sons of perdition are those who leave the church. He thinks that those "who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him" (D&C 76:43, quoted on p. 176 with lowercase son) are simply those who lose their testimonies, although the passages he cites in support do not say this. He assumes that a testimony can come only from "psychosomatic, self-induced, or demonic" (p. 176) sources; this is perhaps the saddest statement in the entire chapter because he implies that personal communication with and from God (personal revelation) is impossible.

Roberts makes an attempt to discredit the Latter-day Saint belief in exaltation with the following rhetorical question:

How can it be that God who possesses all power can share all power without having less-than-complete power Himself?] 
It is incomprehensible. Yet this is the claim of Mormonism. 
(p. 173)

Roberts has greatly overstated the problem, if a problem it is. He seems to be claiming that God lacks the power to share his power. Classical theism holds that omnipotence is the ability to do whatever is logically possible. Since the sharing of power is logically possible—mere mortals do it every day—it then follows that it is within God’s power to do so. Further, no logical limits restrict the amount of power that can be shared. The only limits are practical limits—the giver cannot share more power than he or she actually possesses, and the receiver cannot receive more than his or her capacity allows.

Roberts seems to imagine that if God were to share his power, the power he had left would somehow diminish. While diminished power might theoretically be possible, it can only be so if (1) the totality of God’s power is finite and (2) God’s power is somehow analogous to a physical force like electricity, which is drained as it is used. However, most believers—including Latter-day Saints and most Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox—would not agree that God’s power is finite. Most would hold that it is really infinite. God could exercise—or bestow—an infinite amount of power
and still have an infinite amount left; any amount of power shared does not actually diminish it. Further, if we view God’s power as analogous to prestige and authority, then sharing does not diminish it anyway. A general’s power is not diminished by any number of colonels under his command, even though those colonels actually operate by the general’s authority. We can consider yet another analogy: it is often said that knowledge is power. Yet a teacher does not lose knowledge as he or she imparts it to students. Many kinds of power exist, and there is no scriptural basis for assuming divine power to be either exhaustible or not shareable.

Because Mormonism contemplates an infinite number of people going through their mortal probation on worlds without number, Roberts concludes that the same proportion (one-third) of the spirits relating to other worlds rebelled, as did those relating to this world. From this non sequitur, Roberts imagines “an infinite number of premortal spirits in an infinite number of hells.” This, he claims, is an arrangement that is “clearly incomprehensible” and *infinitely* less compassionate (p. 175, emphasis in the original) than the evangelical view of eternity. However, his is a purely numeric definition of compassion. Roberts himself evidently believes that this world alone, of all the infinite universe, is actually inhabited, and that only the few billions of people who have lived and will live on this earth will inhabit eternity. He thinks his view of eternity is more compassionate because there are numerically fewer people in hell. But it seems unlikely that he would want to take this argument to its logical conclusion, for if the number of damned souls is the single measure of divine compassion, then God’s moral perfection would require him to create nobody at all, so that no one would suffer in hell. This numeric argument is in essence a smoke screen; it attempts to conceal the fact that the Latter-day Saint view of eternity, with a system of graded rewards and equal opportunity for all people to accept or reject the gospel, is not only much more compassionate but also more just than either version of the evangelical view. For, in both the

11. Roberts habitually labels concepts he dislikes as “incomprehensible.” However, as Inigo Montoya would put it, I do not think this word means what he thinks it means.
Arminian and the Calvinist view, those billions of people who have lived and died without ever hearing the gospel in any form—surely the overwhelming majority of God’s children—are utterly damned for all eternity, without ever having had an opportunity to choose anything else.

While considerably more space could be devoted to enumerating the errors Roberts has perpetrated, the foregoing should be more than sufficient. Considering the many problems in this chapter, it is hard to imagine that Roberts made any effort to check his reconstruction of our doctrine against any authoritative Latter-day Saint sources. Most of the problems are easily detectable by any well-informed Latter-day Saint. From the tabloid-style “did you know Mormons believe . . .” on the back cover to the “Terminology” chapter, everything about this book indicates that it is a purely defensive measure, intended only for an evangelical audience. This book is an attempt to draw support for the “countercult” fringe movement within evangelical Protestantism. In writing this chapter, Roberts had a priceless opportunity to learn more about a vibrant and growing form of Christianity, but he squandered that opportunity in a spending spree of disinformation, polemical clichés, and bad faith.