

***HOW WIDE THE DIVIDE?
A MORMON AND AN EVANGELICAL
IN CONVERSATION***

A REVIEW

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One of the evident characteristics of the late-twentieth century religious scene, which has only intensified in the new millennium, is the desire of disparate confessions to find common ground. While the spirit of ecumenism has often been little more than a euphemism for the dissolution of any distinctiveness in theological expression, it need not be so. Some, to be sure, are interested only in finding the lowest doctrinal common denominator, a “peace at any cost” approach. But others have used an exchange of theological perspectives to better define where each stands.

Confessional clarity strengthens all of us for the tasks which lie before us, and provides the way to further dialogue by exposing our real differences. A debate on the basis of Scripture, which ends in disagreement, but which produces distinct statements on both sides, is far more fruitful than a document which is open to arbitrary interpretation.¹

For those who are particularly attuned to the issues surrounding the doctrine of salvation, there is an added interest. Since the most essential and practical expression of any theological position is in its articulation of the way of salvation, we are progressively discovering more clearly who is truly allied with whom, and where basic distinctions lie. For example, recent joint declarations between Lutherans and Catholics,

¹Mark Seifrid, “‘The Gift of Salvation’: Its Failure to Address the Crux of Justification.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42:4 (December 1999), 688.

and Evangelical–Roman Catholic statements such as “The Gift of Salvation”² have borne out the truth of Earl Radmacher’s warning over a decade ago that Reformed and Lordship Salvation teachings were “not paving the road back to Wittenberg but, rather, paving the road back to Rome.”³ It has become a source of discomfort among some in the Lordship Salvation camp to discover that their evangelistic summations are indistinguishable from that of moderate Roman Catholics.

They now have a new source of agreement to rue.

In their book *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*,⁴ Craig Blomberg, a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Stephen Robinson, a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, have published a wide-ranging dialogue on the agreements and differences between Mormon and Evangelical doctrine.

At the outset, it should be noted that Blomberg has been taken to task by some conservative evangelical reviewers for basically “giving away the farm” theologically.⁵ Frankly, this writer finds it odd that the book’s conclusions have not been universally condemned in the evangelical community. Most galling are comments that seem to attack the attempts of Evangelicals to convert Mormons to a true faith in Jesus Christ. For example, in their joint conclusion, the authors write:

Might we look forward to the day when youth groups or adult Sunday school classes from Mormon and Evangelical churches in the same neighborhoods would gather periodically to share their beliefs with each other in love and for the sake of understanding,

²“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation,” *Christianity Today* (December 8, 1997), 35-38.

³Earl D. Radmacher, “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.” *JETS* 33:1 (March 1990), 40. It is noteworthy that John MacArthur, in a book predating recent agreements between Protestants or Evangelicals, and Roman Catholics, characterized Dr. Radmacher as a “radical” for this statement (John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993], 91). In light of recent events, might we expect MacArthur to recant his accusation and admit the prophetic nature of Radmacher’s assertion?

⁴Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

⁵For example, see Hank Hanegraaff, “The Mormon Divide,” *Christian Research Institute Newsletter* (December 1998), 4.

not proselytizing?... Surely the God who brought down the Berlin Wall in our generation is capable of such things.⁶

That any evangelical would suggest such a thing, not to mention a highly respected teacher in a major evangelical seminary, is testament to the doctrinal vacuum in Evangelicalism today.

What many will find most interesting, however, is not Blomberg's obscure theological moorings, but the clear statements by Robinson. As evasive and self-critical as Blomberg is, Robinson is inversely lucid and succinct.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his discussion of Mormon soteriology. In a concise statement summarizing the Mormon position, he writes:

Christ invites *all* human beings, not just a select few, to enjoy the salvation he has prepared. In the LDS view, we accept the offered salvation by believing in Christ, repenting of our sins and being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21)... In accepting the gospel covenant we agree to make Jesus Lord of our lives and in our lives. To deny him his lordship and our subsequent obedience is to deny *him*, regardless of what we might profess to believe about him (Mt 7:21).⁷

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Reformed and Lordship Salvation teaching will immediately hear echoes in Robinson's statement.⁸ It is enlightening, then, that in the ensuing discussion, Robinson declares that Mormon soteriology is in many points thoroughly Arminian.⁹ His candor in recognizing the reciprocity between Arminian and Reformed teaching in this area is actually quite refreshing.

⁶ Blomberg and Robinson, 191-92.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145. Italics his.

⁸ See R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 24-26, 155ff; John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, "Follow Me"?* Revised & Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 28-29, 36-39, etc., and *Faith Works*, 23, etc. Comments by Robinson like "In accepting the gospel covenant we agree to make Jesus Lord of our lives," and "To deny him his lordship and our subsequent obedience is to deny him" are virtually identical to Reformed-Lordship Salvation language.

⁹ Blomberg and Robinson, 146.

Calvinist Evangelicals insist that a “backslider” was never really converted, while Mormons and other Arminians say that the backslider “fell from grace.” But both agree in principle that genuine Christian conversion must somehow be associated with Christian behavior.¹⁰

Having noted the similarity between Calvinist (Reformed) and Arminian approaches to the role of works in salvation, Robinson seeks to paint himself, and Mormons, as being part of the evangelical mainstream. In doing so, he makes it abundantly clear with whom he is allied, and where basic distinctions lie in Mormon theology. He writes:

The real sticking point between LDS and Evangelicals is not whether we are saved by grace (both affirm this) but whether we are saved by grace *alone*, that is, without individual, personal involvement or participation. Latter-day Saints find “salvation by grace *alone*” to be unbiblical and, borrowing C. S. Lewis’s analogy, like cutting cloth with only half of the scissors. We would agree with Bonhoeffer and MacArthur that one cannot “have eternal life yet continue to live in rebellion against God.” I would judge the terms “being saved,” “coming to Christ,” “accepting the gospel,” “entering the covenant,” “making Christ Lord in my life” and “serving Christ” as being roughly equivalent. It follows, then, that saying “I have come to Christ, but I refuse to serve him” is self-contradictory. How does one accept Christ without accepting Christ *as Lord*? And to accept Christ as Lord is to accept myself as his vassal, and vassals do the will of their Lord, not their own will.¹¹

The endnote attached to the citation of John MacArthur reads as follows:

John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 15-16; but read the whole introduction—*with which the LDS would heartily agree.*¹²

Even considering the problems with other areas of LDS theology, this statement is amazing! Of course, it isn’t always fair to judge theologians or their theology by those who claim to agree with a portion of their doctrine,¹³ but when the doctrine is so central to the faith, as

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

¹¹ Ibid., 148-49. Italics his.

¹² Ibid., 221, italics added.

¹³ One example would be the way Jehovah’s Witnesses echo parts of

soteriology is, and the connection so unambiguous, the endorsement is far more serious. MacArthur might argue (correctly) that the Mormon God and Jesus aren't the biblical God and Jesus,¹⁴ but most Mormons I've talked with don't know this; they just follow the church's faith-and-works-will-get-you-there teaching.

No one is going to suggest that *all* Reformed or Lordship theologians are soft on Mormonism (even if Blomberg *is*)! But it should be disconcerting for these theologians, who loudly and often claim that they teach justification by faith *alone*,¹⁵ to find that those who openly include works in the salvation formula enthusiastically endorse their writings.

In his introduction to *Faith Works*, MacArthur notes some of the criticisms evoked by his earlier book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. The most grievous to him, he wrote, was the accusation that he was "a teacher of works-salvation."¹⁶ No longer can it be said that

dispensational eschatology. This is of little concern to dispensationalists, however, since the differences between them and JW's in essential areas of doctrine (Christology, Soteriology, and Pneumatology) are so clear.

¹⁴Indeed, Mormon theology is bizarre in these areas. While the first Mormon "Article of Faith" says, "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost," this statement is intentionally written *not* to tell what Mormons believe, but to make Mormonism seem to be the same as fundamental Christianity (see John L. Smith, *Has Mormonism Changed... Now?* [Marlow, Oklahoma: Utah Missions, Inc., 1979], 45). Robinson similarly "sugar coats" Mormon doctrine with orthodox terminology in an attempt to proselytize Evangelicals "softened up" by Robinson's benign approach to LDS teachings. Mormonism actually teaches that God is a glorified man (hence their famous statement: *As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become*), and Jesus Christ was the first of the "spirit children" of Elohim (God the Father). For a thorough and accurate assessment of contemporary Mormon teaching, see James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), and R. Philip Roberts, *Mormonism Unmasked* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).

¹⁵See Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 26, 155ff; MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 37, and *Faith Works*, 23-24, 87. Actually, these writings are not burdened with affirming justification by faith alone, since that is not in dispute. Indeed, it is the clear teaching of Scripture. Rather, their challenge is trying to explain the incongruent proposition that salvation is at the same time received by faith alone *and* by "a faith that works." Reformed and Lordship theologians have

this “accusation” comes only from those who wish to criticize him. A Mormon who makes no bones about the necessity of works for salvation has embraced his writings with hearty agreement.

One wonders if MacArthur and others in the Reformed-Lordship Salvation camp don’t lay awake some nights in a cold sweat with the realization that Roman Catholic and Mormon theologians are using their writings to support their teaching!

fused the “oil” of faith with the “water” of works in the syllogism, “You are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves you is never alone,” but the fusion doesn’t work, and it is the synergists themselves who are now making this clear.

¹⁶MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 13.