

Editorial: Evangelicalism, Mormonism, and the Gospel

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There is probably no American religious group that has had a more interesting, complex, and confusing history than the Mormons. Since its founding in the mid-nineteenth century by Joseph Smith, Mormonism—officially known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—has been in constant conflict with historic, biblical Christianity. In fact, historically Mormons have viewed themselves as the only true and living church on earth, the restoration of a true Christianity from the apostate churches represented by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Today, however, in order to appeal to the larger public, many Mormon leaders often portray their faith as merely another form of Christianity that, unlike other subsets within the larger Christian world, preaches the *entirety* of Christ's gospel. That is why Mormons are often indignant when they are excluded from the confines of traditional orthodoxy and viewed by orthodox Christians as a cult or a contrary religion that proclaims *another* Christ and a *false* gospel.

But regardless of Mormon claims, it is difficult, nigh impossible, to maintain that Mormonism is just another version or subset of historic Christianity. Why? Because at point after point, if we compare and contrast Christian orthodoxy with Mormon theology, we have to conclude that Mormonism represents an entirely different theology, an alien worldview—*another* gospel, which is no gospel at all. In this regard, we need to heed the warning

of Paul that even if an angel from heaven preaches a gospel other than the one proclaimed by the apostles, let him be eternally condemned (Gal 1:8-9). That is why evangelicals historically view Mormons as those who need to hear and respond to the true gospel found in Scripture alone, and as standing outside a saving relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, though, there is a growing, even raging debate among some within the evangelical world over the status of Mormons vis-à-vis the gospel. Most evangelicals view Mormonism as a false religion, but due to recent writings of some within the Mormon body, some evangelicals are beginning to wonder whether there is a shift occurring within the LDS church that is making it more compatible with historic Christianity, something akin to what occurred in the World Wide Church of God a number of years ago. In fact, some evangelicals even want to tone down the language that speaks of Mormons as a false religion so that more friendly relations may be established between us.

No doubt, we must always be careful of our language and guard our attitudes regarding those with whom we disagree. Furthermore, we must ensure that our assessment of Mormonism is true and accurate. But we must also be careful that we do not reduce or marginalize the differences between historic Christianity and Mormonism, especially given our pluralistic and postmodern cultural milieu that seeks to tolerate all viewpoints. After all,

it is highly questionable whether much has changed regarding the official teaching of the LDS church. And if that is so, then there is much at stake in this debate and discussion—namely, life and death, heaven and hell. Our understanding, assessment, and ultimate interaction with Mormons and LDS theology are no small matter.

It is for this reason that this issue is wrestling with the subject of Mormonism. In both the articles and the *SBJT* Forum, we are attempting to update the reader as to what is going on in recent Evangelical-Mormon discussion, present a critique of a number of points of Mormon theology, and to encourage all of us to take seriously the challenge of taking the gospel, in love, humility, and conviction, to our Mormon friends and neighbors—precisely because they believe in a god who is not the triune God of Scripture.

Chad Brand begins our discussion by introducing the reader to some of the current debate over recent perceived changes in Mormon thought. He addresses some important questions, such as—What are Mormon theologians such as Stephen Robinson and Robert Millet saying today as compared to the previous teaching of the LDS church? Has there been a change in viewpoint? How have evangelicals responded? How should we respond? Francis Beckwith continues by providing a helpful discussion regarding the ground rules of debate between evangelicals and Mormons. He reminds us, in response to Mormon philosopher and apologist, David Paulsen, that genuine dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons must allow for serious critique and analysis. Instead of seeking refuge under the banner of theological pluralism that refuses to allow competing religious claims to be

seriously critiqued, Beckwith calls us to robust argumentation that exposes the points of disagreement between us and argues for our position in the marketplace of ideas. Paul Copan and Carl Mosser conclude our articles by giving us two specific apologetic critiques of Mormon claims. Copan evaluates the Mormon rejection of the biblical teaching of creation *ex nihilo* with a biblical defense of the doctrine. Mosser responds to a popular Mormon apologetic claim that argues that a Mormon finite conception of God who does not create *ex nihilo* is a better answer to the so-called problem of evil. Mosser rejects such a claim and argues for the superiority of the orthodox, biblical presentation of God.

Obviously much more needs to be said in terms of a full-blown apologetic response, but these articles move us in that direction as we seek to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Finally, the *SBJT* Forum finishes our discussion by focusing not only on issues of current debate but also on some practical advice on how to witness to our Mormon friends and neighbors for, at the end of the day, this is where all of this discussion must lead. It is never enough merely to dialogue endlessly with Mormons. We must be convinced that Christianity and Mormonism are not just different versions of the same religion, but different gospels, hence the need to take the unsearchable riches of Christ to those who do not know the Jesus of the Bible, who alone is Lord and Savior. May this edition of *SBJT* lead us to the goal of seeing many Mormons come to salvation in him who is life eternal.