



STATEMENT DM-388

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **HOW WIDE THE DIVIDE? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation**

**by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson**

"Both Mormons and Evangelicals trust that they will be brought into a right relationship with God by Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of God and God the Son. Both believe in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, justification by faith in Christ, and salvation by grace."

This statement concludes the discussion of salvation in the newly published InterVarsity Press book, *How Wide the Divide?* For most Christians who have shared the gospel with Mormons, this conclusion seems downright shocking. Do Mormons and Evangelicals actually *agree* on such issues as the deity and substitutionary atonement of Christ, justification by faith, and salvation by grace?

If so, why do Christians and Mormons argue about these same issues every time they share their respective faiths? The answer is not far to be found. Note the book's Joint Conclusion regarding the nature of God: "This chapter may reflect where Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are farthest apart, though both Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints believe in an omniscient, omnipresent, infinite, eternal and unchangeable God" (pp. 109-10).

We agree on these things? So write the two authors of this book, Dr. Craig Blomberg (Ph.D. Aberdeen) and Dr. Stephen Robinson (Ph.D. Duke). Blomberg is a noted evangelical, who teaches at Denver Seminary, and Robinson is one of the leading LDS scholars, who teaches at Brigham Young University. Blomberg and Robinson each write half a chapter on the four major doctrinal issues that have proved most divisive between Mormons and orthodox Christians (Scripture, God and Deification, Christ and the Trinity, and Salvation). Each writer sets out his own position as he understands it, responds to what he believes are caricatures of his views by the other side, and then explains what misgivings he still has with the other person's views. Brief, jointly authored conclusions at the end of each chapter and a somewhat longer one at the end of the book then force the two authors to formulate statements together with respect both to their agreements and disagreements on the topics at hand. Their new book is truly ground breaking in that it represents the first cooperative effort of its kind, and yet it is also one of the most disturbing and troubling books I have read in a very long time.

How can Blomberg and Robinson say we *agree* on issues where, up until now, the vast majority on *both* sides thought we were in *disagreement*? They can do so because of the major flaw of this work: Robinson presents what can only be called a "minimalist" view of Mormon theology, refusing to affirm what has been taught publicly by the General Authorities of the LDS church for 150 years. In fact, the vast majority of Mormons do *not* hold his unique perspective. Robinson claims to be speaking only for himself (14). Over and over again, however, his position is contrasted with that held by "uninformed members" (71). Thus, in the end, the enlightened LDS view ends up being that presented by Robinson, while the "grassroots" level of Mormonism is put off to one side. The result is quite troubling. The "Joint Conclusions" that close each of the four sections consistently speak of "Evangelicals and Mormons" as if the positions articulated by Robinson represent the historic LDS view, when, in fact, they do not.

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A few examples are necessary to point out how Robinson makes his version of Mormonism more "acceptable" to evangelical ears. (Incidentally, Robinson's earlier work, *Are Mormons Christians?* has been widely used as an apologetic resource by LDS.) It should be remembered that Robinson is one of the few LDS scholars trained in New Testament at a non-LDS university (Duke). His academic training has influenced him and he views himself as one of the "few" who have "learned to speak your [evangelical] language and adjust accordingly" (163). As a result, he refuses to affirm anything not found in the Standard Works (i.e., the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, along with the KJV Bible), or in an official pronouncement by the First Presidency, or the Quorum of the Twelve (15, 140). He takes an almost *sola scriptura* position (in Mormon terms), rejecting the clear and consistent interpretations provided by the General Authorities of the LDS church on a number of issues. For example, when speaking of the idea of the deification of humans (i.e., exaltation to Godhood, as most Mormons put it), he writes,

Those who are exalted by his grace will always be "gods" (always with a small *g*, even in the Doctrine and Covenants) by grace, by an extension of *his* power, and will always be subordinate to the Godhead. In the Greek philosophical sense — and in the "orthodox" theological sense — such contingent beings would not even rightly be called "gods," since they never become "the ground of all being" and are forever subordinate to their Father. Any teaching beyond this involves speculation without support from either the Bible or the other LDS Scriptures, and these are waters I refuse to swim in. I grant that some LDS do indulge in speculation on this point (it is a favorite jumping off place for LDS fundamentalists) — but they go beyond the teaching of the LDS Church and the advice of LDS leaders when they do. (86)

According to this statement, even the First Presidency of the LDS church could be identified as "fundamentalist." Likewise, LDS leaders went against their own "advice" when, in 1909, they provided the following doctrinal statement that even by Robinson's standards would be considered "binding":

All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally sons and daughters of Deity....Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so that undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God.<sup>1</sup>

This same teaching was repeated in 1925, again over the signature of the First Presidency of the LDS church. Note in both instances that the capitalized form "God" is used. Yet, throughout this work, those who would hold modern Mormonism accountable for teaching this kind of doctrine *throughout its history* are told they have been shooting at a straw man all along.

We should also ask Robinson: In light of the phrase (even accepted as normative by Robinson, 85), "As man is, God once was, and as God is, man may become," if the future "gods" will be forever subordinate to their Father and are exalted only by "grace," does it not follow that the god of *this* planet is only a god "by grace" and is still subject to another Godhead elsewhere? Robinson avoids the problems with historic Mormon theology by ignoring these issues, not by repudiating the errors that have led to the problems in the first place. Nonetheless, he still places himself in direct opposition to many in the modern LDS church. Note his words: "Many evangelicals are convinced, wrongly, that Latter-day Saints believe in a finite, limited or changeable God, even though that notion is repugnant to us" (88).

Dr. David Paulsen, who also teaches at BYU, wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan (1975) in defense of finite godism. Following closely the teachings of B. H. Roberts, one of the greatest scholars Mormonism has ever produced (and equally important, a General Authority of the LDS Church as well), Paulsen states the following in his dissertation: "It is not the case that everything other than God is ontologically dependent on Him. He did not create everything *ex nihilo* [out of nothing]....God has revealed that He is a person with a corporeal body who exists in time and space....Perhaps most startling...is the Mormon view that God, the Father...once dwelled on an earth and earned the honorific title 'God' through a process of growth and development" (74-75).

This is followed by a lengthy citation of LDS founder Joseph Smith's King Follett Funeral discourse, a passage cited extensively by LDS authors when discussing the doctrine of God. Paulsen says, "[It] should be clear that Mormon theism is committed to redefining many of the attributes classically ascribed to God" (76). He goes on to quote Roberts, "The attribute of 'Omnipotence' must needs be thought upon...as somewhat limited." Indeed! Paulsen then says, "God, then, according to Mormon theology is not unconditioned or unlimited....Nor has he always been

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'God.' At some distant point in an infinite past, He earned the right to be 'God' through a process which men, as his children, are now repeating" (79). Here we have the frank words of a current BYU professor, citing a past LDS scholar and General Authority, B. H. Roberts. Yet we find Robinson saying that if an evangelical is convinced that Mormons believe in a finite or limited God, he or she is in error, for such an idea is repugnant to "us." I am glad to hear it is repugnant to Robinson. Nevertheless, Paulsen's view just happens to be LDS theology all the same.

If Robinson's presentation is misleading in regard to God, it is just as misleading in other areas. When speaking, for example, of the *Joseph Smith Translation* (JST), Robinson claims that it "does not make very many or very major doctrinal changes in the received text" (63). Yet a quick glance at such passages as John 1:1; 4:24; 6:44; and Romans 4:5, 16 show just how widespread and *doctrinal* are Joseph's "emendations." And when faced with Blomberg's concerns about a passage such as 2 Nephi 25:23, which states that we are saved by grace "after all we can do," Robinson is quick to say that Blomberg, "like many LDS" (222), "misinterprets" the passage. For Robinson, "all we can do" is repent and believe. Yet the *LDS Bible Dictionary*, published under the copyright of the Corporation of the First Presidency of the LDS church, and included in their own edition of the King James Version of the Bible, cites the same passage in these words: "This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts....However, grace cannot suffice without total effort on the part of the recipient. Hence the explanation, 'It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.' (2 Nephi 25:23)" (697).

The main problem with the book can be traced to the fact that Robinson does not accurately represent Mormonism. He does not reflect the "mainstream" LDS view on key issues, nor the position exemplified by volume after volume of the sermons and writings of the General Authorities of the Church, nor still the doctrinal understanding so clearly presented in the LDS Temple Ceremonies (which many LDS see as authoritative and even "canonical" in the sense of being "revelatory"). Yet the conclusions to the book consistently say "Mormons and Evangelicals," while they *should* say "Dr. Robinson and Dr. Blomberg."

This problem is accentuated by the fact that Blomberg is unfamiliar with the finer points of LDS theology and history. I appreciated many of the things Blomberg attempted to communicate. He made some good points; and since he did not come into this dialogue with a background in Mormon studies, he proves himself a true scholar in coming to many of the same conclusions that others have arrived at with much more time to study the issues.

Nevertheless, I must be honest in noting some of my problems with his presentations. I have already noted the fact that Robinson gets away with many redefinitions that could have been challenged by the citation of the proper LDS sources. Blomberg does often point out that from his view Robinson is presenting a rather unique viewpoint, one that goes against the grain of the majority of LDS. Yet this is almost always followed by continued discussion of the same points as if Robinson's views represented LDS orthodoxy. For example, Blomberg writes, "At this point we find ourselves face to face with polytheism, which the Bible defines as idolatry. Robinson helpfully repudiates this popular misconception, but it is not clear how he can do so and *consistently* still believe in a finite man on his own becoming God" (105: emphasis in original).

I do not believe it is a "misconception" to accuse Mormonism of polytheism, and hence idolatry. Nevertheless, a few pages later Blomberg continues, "Despite all my misgivings with popular, unofficial LDS emphases, Prof. Robinson has successfully distinguished his type of Mormon orthodoxy from the stereotypes that concern Evangelicals the most" (108).

Here Blomberg acquiesces to Robinson, allowing a BYU professor to define what is and is not an "official LDS emphasis." Blomberg's statements, even when hitting upon the real issues and pressing home an important point, are often softened by phrases like "it appears" or "it seems to me" or "it is a concern to me." Further examples can be found on pages 109, 121, and 179.

In conclusion, the most troubling issue raised by this book is not its inaccurate portrayal of Mormonism, nor even the confusion that that portrayal will inevitably cause many who read it. The most troubling issue is this: Are we to be seeking this kind of dialogue? We look at a situation like the turnaround in the Worldwide Church of God and hold out hope that it might happen elsewhere. But those who have turned the WWCG from its heretical past to its orthodox present have been willing to repudiate past false teachings and teachers. They have not sought to *redefine* those teachings. Where, biblically, are we encouraged to lay out our areas of "agreement" with false teachers? Did Paul seek to minimize the gulf between himself and the false teachers in Galatia, or the gnostics in Colossae, by focusing on *similarities*?

At one point Blomberg remarks in a footnote, "This book does not intend to address the question of whether Evangelicals and Mormons are both, in certain instances, bona fide Christians, however worthwhile that issue might be to discuss" (199).<sup>2</sup> Might this really be the problem? How can a dialogue take place without answering that question right at the start? The result is that the massive gulf that separates orthodox Christians and Mormons is in danger of being seen as a mere interpretational gap, rather than the canyon that yawns between those who worship the one eternal God and those who promote the exalted man-become-God of Joseph Smith.

—Reviewed by James R. White

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), appendix 4, 1669.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Blomberg has informed me in no uncertain terms that he does not consider Mormonism a valid Christian faith, and that he actually wanted to discuss this issue in the book, but the editors did not feel such a discussion should be included. One cannot but question the editorial judgment shown by InterVarsity Press, a widely respected Christian publisher, in offering this volume to the reading public.