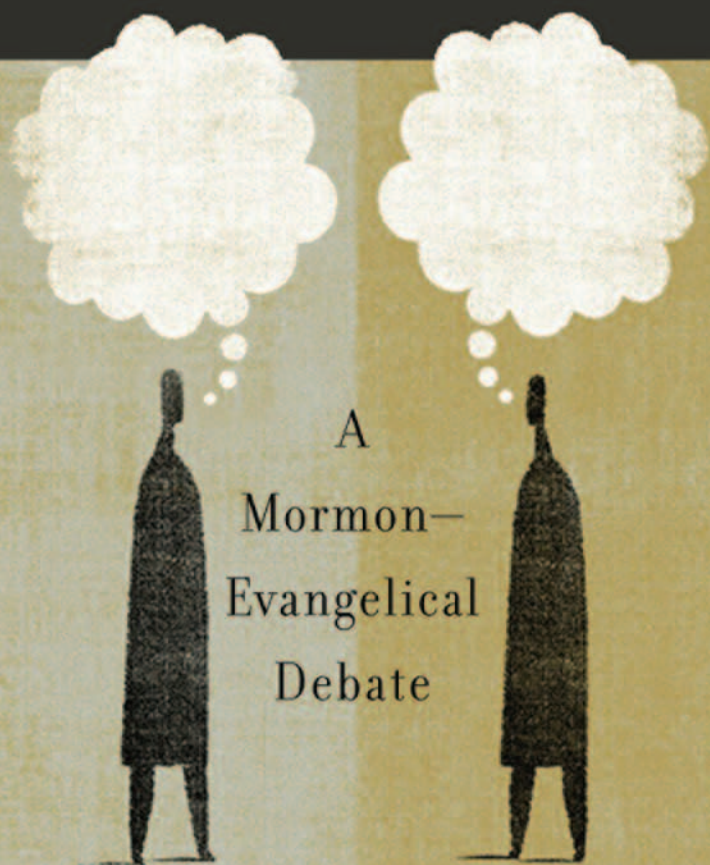


# CLAIMING CHRIST



A  
Mormon—  
Evangelical  
Debate

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# INTRODUCTION

## Friendship Without Compromise

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Gerald McDermott and Robert Millet

### Gerald McDermott

I am embarrassed to tell this story.

Some years ago I invited a Mormon historian to my class on New American Religions. Before class started I told him he would have 30 to 45 minutes to share about LDS beliefs and history, and after that I would open it up for Q&A. But shortly after he began, I decided to challenge something he said. Then a few minutes later I asked a question that implicitly tried to refute his second point. Before too long my students, following my lead, fired one question after another, often moving into flat-out argument. Some of them seemed happy to finally explain to this polite Mormon scholar why they believed he was not a Christian. The LDS historian was never able to finish his presentation because of all the interruptions from my students and their professor.

I had no idea I had done anything wrong until I received a letter from the speaker the following week. He said that in all his years of speaking on his faith to non-Mormon audiences, he had never been treated so rudely. He thought he would have an uninterrupted chance to present his own views, but discovered that he was barely able to finish a thought before he was interrupted by a question or assertion. The result was that instead of learning something new, the class was simply reinforced in its (and my) prejudices. We never allowed ourselves to listen. Not only were we disrespectful and insensitive, but we went away with many false impressions uncorrected.

About five years later I was invited by Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw to a small meeting of evangelical and Mormon scholars

for the purpose of learning more about each other. I remember being impressed by the erudition and piety of the Mormon scholars I met. Robert Millet, whom I now consider a close friend, was particularly articulate and open. He, Grant Underwood, and other Mormons at the conference showed what to me was remarkable familiarity with evangelical theology and history, not to mention central principles of historic Christian theology.

I invited Bob Millet to come to Roanoke College the following fall and debate me in public at the college chapel. Our subject was “Mormon and Mainstream Christian Similarities and Differences.” We spoke before a packed house. Most of the traditional Christians and Mormons in attendance, who were in roughly equal numbers, said they enjoyed and profited from the exchange. In the fall of 2005 we had another debate at Roanoke College, but this time focused on the person of Jesus. We used Bob’s landmark 2005 book from Eerdmans as our focal point: *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*. Bob argued that the LDS view of Jesus was not essentially different from that of traditional Christianity. I contended that it was.

Because we received such a good response from these debates, we thought we might try to do something similar, but more extensive, in print. Thus, this book. We wanted to try to model what has been in short supply in the more than 175 years since Joseph Smith’s first vision—love and respect in the midst of serious theological differences.

We wanted to try to do for evangelicals and Mormons what N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg have done for orthodox and liberal mainstream Christians in their own debates and in the book they wrote together:

Within the bounds of friendship, and shared Christian faith and practice, we have both been puzzled, and even disturbed, by some of what the other has said. . . . Neither of us is content to let things rest with a cheap and easy suggestion that, since we are both practicing Christians, our two positions are equally valid—whatever that might mean. It might be that both of our positions are equivalent and fairly adequate expressions, from different points of view, of the same underlying reality. Neither of us quite thinks that. It might be that we are both wrong, and that some quite different position is truer. Neither of us thinks that, either. . . . Where we do agree, however, is on the following point. Debate about Jesus has recently been acrimonious, with a good deal of name-calling and angry polemic in both private and public discourse. . . . We hope, and indeed pray, that in this book we will be able to model a way of conducting public Christian disagreement over serious and central issues.<sup>1</sup>

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1. N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), viii, x.

We are not the first to try to forge a new way for Evangelicals and Mormons. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson are to be commended for courageously opening this conversation in *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity, 1997). But this book is different in some important respects from theirs.

First and most importantly, this book focuses on Jesus. While *How Wide the Divide?* discusses a range of issues across the evangelical-Mormon divide, this book relates most of those issues and several more besides to the person and work of the Redeemer.

Second, I write from an evangelical perspective that is somewhat broader than Professor Blomberg's. For example, while I am committed to the authority of Scripture for faith and practice, I am not overly concerned with the "inerrancy" debate that raged in the 1980s, so Professor Millet and I do not discuss that particular issue. When that word is used in debates over the authority of the Bible, it is often assumed that revelation is *primarily* propositional, a presumption I do not share.<sup>2</sup> While Blomberg and Robinson contend that "Scripture is literally true in its teachings, both historically and morally," I would say that Scripture is literally true only when its authors intend it to be read literally. When Jesus says, "I am the vine" (John 15:5), he does not intend to be taken literally. I think there is a legitimate debate over the extent to which the author of Genesis 1 and 2 intended those accounts to be taken as straightforwardly historical accounts. On the other hand, when it is clear that the author intends to present straightforward history, as does Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, then I believe we are obligated to read it as such.

I do not believe, as do Blomberg and Robinson, that "supplementary material" beyond the Bible "ought not to be presented as . . . authoritative beliefs."<sup>3</sup> I argue in chapter 1 not only that creeds and tradition are justifiably authoritative for a religious community, but that it is impossible for them not to be. But at the same time, I insist that Scripture is the touchstone for all creeds and traditions.

A third difference between this book and Blomberg and Robinson's is that this one is more theologically oriented. Both Robinson and Blomberg are scripture scholars, first and foremost. Professor Millet, on the other hand, is trained in psychology and religious studies, and has broad

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2. "Propositional" means having to do with words and concepts used in ways that affirm or deny something. I hold that revelation is both propositional and non-propositional, both word and event. For more on the nature of revelation, see McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), chapter 2.

3. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 76.

interest in Christian theology. I am trained in the history of Christianity and for years have written in historical theology and systematic theology. Both of us have primary interest in the theological meaning of this debate. The focus on Jesus Christ is a result of this theological concentration.

We need to define our terms, especially *Mormon* and *evangelical*. The most important thing I can say about “evangelical” is that it is not the same as “fundamentalist”—despite the conflation of the two by most media and academics.

Fundamentalists tend to read the Bible more literally, while evangelicals tend to look more carefully at genre and literary and historical context. Fundamentalists question the value of human culture that is not created by Christians or related to the Bible, whereas evangelicals see God’s “common grace” working in and through all human culture. Fundamentalists tend to restrict their social witness to protests against homosexual practice and abortion, but evangelicals also want to fight racism, sexism, and poverty. Fundamentalists often want to separate themselves from liberal Christians (which sometimes means evangelicals), while evangelicals are more willing to work with other Christians toward common religious and social goals. While both groups preach salvation by grace, fundamentalists tend to focus so much on rules and restrictions (do’s and don’ts) that their hearers can get the impression that Christianity means following behavioral rules. Evangelicals, on the other hand, focus more on the person and work of Christ, and personal relationship with him, as the heart of Christian faith.

More positively, evangelicalism has four distinctives: cross, Scripture, conversion, and evangelism. Evangelicals believe that the cross is the center of the Christian life because it was at the cross that God reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). Hence, preaching on Christ’s substitutionary atonement is a regular feature of evangelical sermons. Evangelicals also have a distinctive emphasis on the supreme authority of the Bible. They teach that God has chosen to reveal himself through Scripture. Therefore, to submit to biblical authority is to receive God as God has chosen to be known, not as we would like God to be. Such submission frees us from the slavish demand that we follow every cultural trend and provides a framework from which to evaluate those trends.

Like Mormons, evangelicals are best known for their insistence on conversion and evangelism. This does not mean that evangelicals believe conversion needs to be an emotional experience. But they do assert that faith requires personal repentance and trust, not simply intellectual acceptance of Christian doctrine.

In this book I also refer to “traditional” and “orthodox” Christians and Christianity. By “traditional” I mean those within mainstream Christian traditions, such as Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. I

consider “orthodox” to be a subset of “traditional” Christians. Orthodox Christians and movements hold to the classical, 2000-year-old teachings of the faith, such as the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, justification by grace through faith, the necessity of sanctification, and the authority of Scripture for faith and practice. There are some Christians and movements within traditional Christian churches today who question one or more of these doctrines.

## Robert Millet

There’s a movement afloat, one that both thrills and sobers me. That movement is an effort toward better understanding on the part of two faith traditions who have a history of confrontation, two faith groups who have often been eager to point up doctrinal differences but less enthusiastic about acknowledging doctrinal similarities. I suppose that many within the counter-cult element of evangelical Christianity will always be opposed to any and all efforts at civil conversation or deeper understanding, as will Latter-day Saints who feel that serious engagement with a practicing and believing evangelical is at best a concession and at worst a compromise. During the last decade a great deal of my time has been devoted to building friendships with evangelical church leaders and academics around the country. While there have certainly been more than enough people on both sides of the religious spectrum willing to criticize and accuse us of some form of diluting ecumenism, there have also been men and women of integrity who know that what’s tough is not always bad: stretching beyond our spiritual comfort zone may prove to be extremely worthwhile.

I have served on a religion faculty at a major university for a quarter of a century now, and I cannot imagine being employed in anything that would have brought greater satisfaction. I would have to admit, nonetheless, that the last ten years in which my mind has been stretched and my heart soothed in the pursuit of truth and understanding—the hundreds of hours spent in interfaith dialogue—have been the most personally and professionally rewarding hours of my life. I’ve come to know, in spite of what the generality of society may think, that religion is indeed an area that can be discussed seriously without dispute, name-calling, categorizing, or demonizing. Indeed, I believe Jesus meant what he said when he said that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

It has been my pleasure and delight to become friends with Professor Gerald R. McDermott, to come to know him as an extremely bright and

articulate representative of the evangelical tradition, a deeply devout follower of the Christ, and a warm human being. I have come to know him as kind, open, patient, persistent, and temperate. There's no question about where he stands on certain issues, but that dedicated dogmatism is couched carefully in a breadth of perspective that makes him an entertaining and enlightened conversationalist. It has simply been fun to get to know Gerry as a person and to better understand evangelical Christianity through his writings and our own conversations.

This book is an example of what can happen when two people first become friends, learn to trust one another, pay the price of reading and reflection and lengthy chats, go to the proper sources for information, and then engage challenging issues without rancor or defensiveness. As the reader will soon realize, there are, to be sure, doctrinal differences between the Mormon and evangelical communities, and the two of us have sought earnestly to discuss those in a climate of what our mutual friend, Richard Mouw, calls "convicted civility." But if we have done our work properly, the reader will also recognize that there are a number of areas about Jesus Christ—his person, powers, and plan—on which we agree completely and in which we both rejoice. Successful interfaith dialogue involves much more than winning an argument. It also entails building and enhancing a friendship. People across the globe may disagree in regard to many aspects of the life and mission of Jesus Christ, but no one who is slightly acquainted with the four Gospels can deny that our Savior was and is in the business of people; for him, people and people's feelings matter very much.

One of the priceless values of continuing and ongoing dialogue is that the participants are able to jettison what they thought to be true about the other person and her faith, and to learn instead what she really does believe. The last thing we need in our confused and confusing world is a collection of misinformation and a bag of misperceptions about those with whom we disagree. We can disagree without being disagreeable, but let's at least disagree about the right stuff! We could all use a dose of informed curiosity. We can be completely committed to our faith and way of life, and still be open to the possibility that interaction with this other person can result in novel thoughts, broadened perspective, and treasured new insights into the gospel.

I mentioned earlier that there is a movement afloat between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. It is not a huge movement, certainly not anything like what has gone on between evangelicals and Roman Catholics since Vatican II. The number of people on both sides of the spectrum has, however, increased with the passing of years. To some extent, this growing interest has come about because of the awareness that both religious groups have strong and unyielding views relative to

the importance of morality and decency, the institution of marriage, the importance of family, and in general, the need for a major spiritual transformation of our culture. Because God's ways are not our ways and because his thoughts and intentions are infinitely higher than our own (Isa. 55:8–9), we cannot always tell what God is bringing to pass, even through weak and simple people like ourselves. Our trust is in him—in his sovereignty, in his capacity to bring peace to troubled souls and resolution to damaged relationships, and in his ability to unite the hearts of people who profess a belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and a reliance on his atonement and resurrection.

One day each of us will stand at the bar of judgment and make our profession before the Almighty. I rather doubt that the Master will give to us a theological exam (although I certainly believe in the importance of correct doctrine). Rather, God will want to know what we have done with his Son and the extent to which we have been conformed to his image (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18) and have begun to embody his divine attributes and qualities. In that great day, charity will matter far more than cleverness; character will be treasured far more than charisma. Who and what we have become, how we have come to mirror our Lord and Savior in his treatment of people, and the extent to which we have become instruments and ambassadors of his peace—these are the things that will matter most.

*All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version, since that is the official Mormon Bible and is acceptable to most evangelicals.*