

Who Is This Jesus? An Examination of the Christology of the Latter-day Saints

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INTRODUCTION

Although Latter-day Saints¹ are found in all fifty states and in most countries around the world, most people, including Christians, know very little about them.² However, given the worldwide influence of the Latter-day Saints and their strong missionary endeavors, a better understanding of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine is becoming increasingly necessary. As Christians we need to know more about the theological convictions of those we are called to minister to, and as such, the purpose of this article is to introduce evangelicals to the basic theology of the Latter-day Saints and especially their Christology.

As noted, even though Latter-day Saints have

been a part of the American landscape since the LDS Church was first founded in 1830, the Saints may be some of the most misunderstood persons in contemporary life. Indeed, for some in our society, Mormonism and Christian theology are some-

times identified, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the LDS Church often finds herself answering questions about multiple wives, secret rites inside temples, and racism. Indeed, a poll released in January, 2012 by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life indicates “62% of Mormons say the American people know little or nothing about Mormonism and about two out of three Mormons say the American people as a whole do not see Mormonism as a part of mainstream American society.”³

Mainstream Americans, though, are not the only persons who misunderstand Latter-day Saints. Some in the academy have misunderstandings as well. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen concluded in their landmark work, *The New Mormon Challenge*, “The traditional LDS theology described in many books on Mormonism is, on many points, increasingly unrepresentative of what Latter-day Saints actually believe.”⁴ One scholar at Brigham Young University, Daniel Peterson, agrees. Writing about works concerning other religious groups,

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Peterson argued,

Now, this leads to another rule. It seems to me that one of the rules of doing comparative religion stuff is that when you restate someone else's beliefs, that restatement ought to be recognizable to the person whose beliefs you are restating. You ought to be able to go to that person and say, "Now is this what you believe?" and the person say, "Yes." The person might say, "That is not exactly how I would phrase it, but yeah, OK, given the change in language, that is what I believe." But if your intended target is always screaming, "But I don't believe that!" then the proper response is *not*, "Oh, yes you do!" This strikes me as a really, really illegitimate tool of comparative religion.⁵

It is clear from both a mainstream and an academic perspective, that misunderstanding is a significant problem in the study of the Latter-day Saints. Richard Mouw, in his recent work, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals*, offered a poignant reminder. He observed, "Yes, we must contend for the truth against all those who oppose the gospel. But that means we must be rigorous in making sure that we've discerned the truth about those against whom we contend."⁶ Further, and better, understanding is needed.

THE PROBLEM OF SOURCE AUTHORITY

When seeking to understand any subject, primary source material (when available) is the best place to turn. The subject of Latter-day Saint Christology is no different. However, when approaching Latter-day Saint theological issues, a considerable problem comes quickly to the forefront: Can one discern official LDS Church doctrine and build an LDS systematic theology? For example, Brigham Young University professor Robert L. Millet proclaimed, "One meets with great difficulty in categorizing or rubricizing Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet, or for that matter Mormonism as a whole."⁷ He continued,

It is not so easy to determine what is "traditional" or "orthodox" Mormonism. Orthodoxy has to do with a straight and proper walk, with appropriate beliefs and practices. In our case, it may or may not be a course charted by Joseph Smith or Brigham Young or some Church leader of the past. Some who claim to be orthodox on the basis of following the teachings of Brother Joseph—for example, members of polygamous cults—are not in harmony with the Church's constituted authorities and are therefore not orthodox. "When the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred," President Harold B. Lee said in 1964, "there were many saints who died spiritually with Joseph. So it was when Brigham Young died; so it was when John Taylor died. We have some today willing to believe someone who is dead and gone and to accept his words as having more authority than the words of a living authority today."⁸

Millet added further, "The Church is to be governed by current, daily revelation."⁹ In attempting to determine how one might utilize the words of a past leader, Millet commented, "To fix ourselves too tightly to the words of a past prophet-leader—even Joseph Smith—is to approximate the mindset of certain fundamentalist Protestant groups who reject modern divine communication in the name of allegiance to the final, infallible, and complete word of God found between the covers of the Bible."¹⁰ Similarly, James Faulconer wrote, "the church neither has an official theology nor encourages theological conjecture."¹¹ He continued,

As individuals, we may find a theology helpful to our understanding, but no explanation or system of ideas will be sufficient to tell us what it means to be a Latter-day Saint. For a Latter-day Saint, a theology is always in danger of becoming meaningless because it can always be undone by new revelation. Except for scripture and what the prophet reveals, there is no authoritative *logos* of the *theos* for Latter-day Saints, and given that the prophet can and does continue to reveal things,

there is no *logos* of what he reveals except the record of those revelations. For LDS, the *logos* is both in principle and in practice always changing, as reflected in the open canon of LDS scripture. In principle continuing revelation precludes an account of revelation as a whole. Thus, finally our only recourse is to the revelations of the prophet since, speaking for God, he can revoke any particular belief or practice at any moment, or he can institute a new one, and he can do those things with no concern for how to make his pronouncement rationally coherent with previous pronouncements or practices.¹²

As Millet and Faulconer have explained, determining a specific set of orthodox LDS beliefs is incredibly difficult. From which sources, then, can LDS beliefs be deduced?

In answering the question, “How do you decide what is your doctrine and what is not?” Millet offered one formulation helpful to answer our original question concerning source authority. Millet wrote, “In determining whether something is a part of the doctrine of the Church, we might ask: Is it found within the four standard works? Within official declarations or proclamations? Is it taught or discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders today? Is it found in the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today? If it meets at least one of these criteria, we can feel secure and appropriate about teaching it.”¹³

Gospel Principles, a work published by the LDS Church, parallels Millet’s assessment. In the chapter dealing with Scripture, *Gospel Principles* states, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts four books as scripture: the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. These books are called the standard works of the Church. The inspired words of our living prophets are also accepted as scripture.”¹⁴ Discussing living prophets further, *Gospel Principles* explains, “In addition to [the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants,

and the Pearl of Great Price], the inspired words of our living prophets become scripture to us. Their words come to us through conferences, the *Liahona* and *Ensign* magazine, and instructions to local priesthood leaders.”¹⁵ Similarly, Coke Newell wrote, “Revelations ‘pertaining to the Kingdom of God’ are recorded in the Scriptures—in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, *Doctrine and Covenants*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, in the General Conference talks given by general Authorities every six months; and in various other documents and official records of the church.”¹⁶

Therefore, in assessing official Church doctrine, the works attributed as officially binding and declarative, as the Church, its leaders, and scholars, have defined them, will be used.¹⁷ Also, when various LDS scholars or writers are surveyed, the opinions of those authors will be referenced as the opinions of those authors. For example, the works of Robert Millet will not be referred to as, and should not be thought to be, official statements of LDS Church doctrine. This line of thinking is even shown in the front matter of many books published by Latter-day Saint authors: “This work is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Church.”¹⁸ Let us turn, then, to the question at hand: For a Latter-day Saint, who is this Jesus and is the Mormon Jesus the same as the Jesus of the Bible?

WHY THE FOCUS ON CHRISTOLOGY?

When studying various religions around the world, Christians are always interested to hear what others think about the claims of Jesus. Even more: how one views and thinks about Jesus Christ is a life and death matter and it distinguishes Christianity from all other religious views in the marketplace of ideas. Importantly, Jesus himself was interested in how humans answer this question when he asked the disciples,

as recorded in Matthew 16, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Furthermore, as noted, due to the exclusive nature of the teachings of Jesus and the focus of the entire Bible on Jesus, one’s Christology is vitally important. Passages like Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 make it abundantly clear that one’s knowledge and acceptance of Jesus, as presented in the New Testament, are of utmost significance. Kevin Giles noted, “If we do not meet and know God in Christ, then we are without hope.”¹⁹ Gregg Allison wrote, “The church has historically believed that ‘Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, and will be so forever.’ His deity is demonstrated by his own claims supported by his divine attributes and miraculous activities. His humanity is demonstrated by the virgin birth and his human attributes, activities, relationships, trials, and temptations. One peculiarity of his humanity was sinlessness, but this did not make him something other than human. Along with affirming the two natures of Jesus Christ, the church has also insisted that it was necessary for him to be fully God and fully man if he was to accomplish salvation for all of humanity.”²⁰ John Anthony McGuckin argued, “The essence of the Good News that is the Christian gospel is that freedom brought to the world in the community of Christ, by the Lord’s life-giving incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection, and the capacity this saving mystery (for it is a unified whole) confers on the redeemed for the true knowledge of God that illuminates, transfigures and vivifies the believer.”²¹ Put simply, Christians show ultimate interest in a person’s Christology because one’s Christology has eternal implications.

LATTER-DAY SAINT CHRISTOLOGY

We must first ask whether Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians agree or disagree over Christological matters. Where, if any, is there agreement? Both sides agree that Jesus Christ was indeed an historical figure who lived two thousand years ago. Both sides agree that Jesus Christ called

apostles, performed miracles, and offered specific religious and moral teachings. Both sides agree that Jesus Christ was tried by government officials, sentenced to death, actually died on a cross, and was literally raised from the dead on the third day. Both Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians share significant agreement on the historical nature of Jesus Christ. Is there, then, disagreement? If disagreement is found, over what issue(s) does the disagreement center? The disagreement found between Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians does not reside primarily over the historical person of Jesus—the disagreement resides primarily over the nature of Jesus.

Because the LDS Church is so often misunderstood and misrepresented and because Christology is so vitally important, the remainder of the present study will focus on the Christology of the LDS Church as it is presented by LDS Church leaders, by LDS Church approved curriculum, and by LDS scholars.²²

LATTER-DAY SAINT CHURCH LEADERS ON CHRISTOLOGY

As noted earlier, a Latter-day Saint systematic theology is nowhere to be found. The nature of the LDS faith resists synthesis. However, numerous statements, proclamations, and talks have been given by LDS Church leaders since the LDS Church was founded in 1830, and a number of those statements, proclamations, and talks deal with the nature of Jesus Christ.

The first major statement by LDS Church leadership dealing with the nature of Jesus Christ was released on June 30, 1916, and is entitled, “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.”²³ The editors of *Ensign* magazine noted some issues had erupted during the early twentieth century as to how Latter-day Saints should understand various scriptural passages in which God the Father and Christ the Son are discussed as one and this confusion prompted LDS Church leadership to issue a statement. The editors wrote,

“In the early 1900s, some discussion arose among Church members about the roles of God the Father and Jesus Christ. The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issued the following in 1916 to clarify the meaning of certain scriptures where Jesus Christ, or Jehovah, is designated as the Father.”²⁴ The statement lists four different meanings when the term “Father” is applied to God or to Jesus Christ: “Father as a literal parent,” “Father as creator,” “Jesus Christ the Father of those who abide in his gospel,” and “Jesus Christ the Father by divine investiture of authority.”²⁵ As a literal parent, the term “Father” is applied to God the Father in the sense that he “is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and of the spirits of the human race.”²⁶ As creator, the term “Father” is attributed to both God and Christ in varying ways. The leaders noted,

God is not the Father of the earth as one of the worlds in space, nor of the heavenly bodies in whole or in part, not of the inanimate objects and the plants and the animals upon the earth, in the literal sense in which He is the Father of the spirits of mankind. Therefore, scriptures that refer to God in any way as the Father of the heavens and the earth are to be understood as signifying that God is the Maker, the Organizer, the Creator of the heavens and the earth.²⁷

As creator, the term “Father” is attributed to Jesus in the sense that, in creation, “Jesus Christ, whom we also know as Jehovah, was the executive of the Father, Elohim, in the work of creation.”²⁸ Further, the leaders asserted, “Jesus Christ, being the Creator, is consistently called the Father of heaven and earth in the sense explained above; and since His creations are of eternal quality He is very properly called the Eternal Father of heaven and earth.”²⁹ The third use of the title “Father” is applied to Christ specifically with reference to salvation. The leaders wrote, “If it be proper to speak of those who accept and abide in the gospel as Christ’s sons and daughters—and upon this mat-

ter the scriptures are explicit and cannot be gained nor denied—it is consistently proper to speak of Jesus Christ as the Father of the righteous, they having become His children and He having been made their Father through the second birth—the baptismal regeneration.”³⁰ The fourth way in which Christ is referred to as Father is by “divine investiture of authority.” Here, the members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles noted,

A fourth reason for applying the title ‘Father’ to Jesus Christ is found in the fact that in all his dealings with the human family Jesus the Son has represented and yet represents Elohim His Father in power and authority. This is true of Christ in His preexistent, antemortal, or unembodied state, in which He was known as Jehovah; also during His embodiment in the flesh; and during His labors as a disembodied spirit in the realm of the dead; and since that period in His resurrected state.³¹

In an extremely telling concluding paragraph, the leaders wrote,

Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them. He is The Son, as they are sons or daughters of Elohim. So far as the stages of eternal progression and attainment have been made known through divine revelation, we are to understand that only resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring. Only such exalted souls have reached maturity in the appointed course of eternal life; and the spirits born to them in the eternal worlds will pass in due sequence through the several stages or estates by which the glorified parents have attained exaltation.³²

What can be gleaned concerning the nature of Christ from this early statement of LDS Church leadership? First, Christ cannot be determined to be a literal parent as the first of the four uses

denotes. When Christ applies the title “Father” to himself, it must mean something different than that of a literal parent because only God (Elohim) carries that designation. Second, when Christ is referred to as Father in the context of creation, he is being referred to as the executive of the creation having been given the power, by God, to perform the act of creating/organizing the world. Third, when “Father” is applied to Christ, it is sometimes applied in terms of his being the saving father of those who follow him. Fourth, and the most telling for the present study, is the investiture of the title “Father” to Jesus Christ. From this fourth way the term “Father” is used, one must conclude that these Latter-day Saint leaders believed Jesus to be a being who was not, in the beginning, equivalent with God the Father. This is plain in the concluding paragraph (quoted above) to the entire exposition. God the Father is, in essence, greater than Jesus Christ because God has already undergone a resurrection and glorification, something Jesus had yet to undergo in his premortal existence.

The second major statement released by Latter-day Saint Church leadership came in the year 2000 and is entitled, “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles.”³³ Though shorter and much less nuanced than the 1916 statement, this proclamation has been distributed throughout the LDS Church and is cherished by its members. One of the first phrases in the statement is declarative of who Jesus Christ is and is helpful to the present study. The proclamation states, “He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. Under the direction of His Father, He was the creator of the earth.”³⁴ Though concise and seemingly straightforward, this sentence is telling, especially when combined with the teachings from the 1916 statement. When paired with the statement released nearly a century earlier, the 2000 proclamation declares Jesus and God the Father to be separate beings, united in purpose, but not in essence, which is another point of clear departure from historic Christianity’s affirmation of the Trinity.

In summarizing LDS Church leader statements concerning the nature of Jesus Christ, a few comments can be made. First, these two statements make Jesus Christ and God the Father two separate and distinct beings. Second, Jesus Christ and God the Father are not united in essence but only united in purpose. Third, Jesus Christ is subservient to (and less than) God the Father, not in terms of traditional intra-Trinitarian functional subordination, or, better, *taxis* (personal relations and ordering between the persons of the Godhead) but in terms of actual essence or nature. Because God the Father has existed longer than Jesus Christ and because God the Father had undergone resurrection and exaltation when Jesus Christ was born, God the Father is a greater being than Jesus in terms of his very nature.

LATTER-DAY SAINT CHURCH APPROVED CURRICULUM ON CHRISTOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the LDS Church approved and printed curriculum *Gospel Principles* will be examined.³⁵ This manual is used for the purposes of adult Sunday school courses and is a standardized text throughout the entire LDS Church. *Gospel Principles* qualifies as an official statement of LDS Church doctrine because it is published by the LDS Church and is used in every local meeting house for teaching and instruction. It is not meant to be a statement of nuanced, systematic theology, but is meant to function as an adult Sunday school manual. Therefore, the statements found in *Gospel Principles* are purposefully succinct.

The discussion of Jesus Christ in *Gospel Principles* is set within the context of the premortal spirit world, a place Latter-day Saints believe all humans, including Jesus Christ, lived prior to being born on the earth.³⁶ Within this context, the manual reads, “When the plan for our salvation was presented to us in the premortal spirit world, we were so happy that we shouted for joy.”³⁷ This plan of salvation, however, accounted for sin and the need for payment for that sin: “We

needed a Savior to pay for our sins and teach us how to return to our Heavenly Father. Our Father said, 'Whom shall I send?' (Abraham 3:27). Jesus Christ, who was called Jehovah, said, 'Here am I, send me' (Abraham 3:27; see also Moses 4:1-4).³⁸ After Jesus Christ proclaimed his willingness to be the Savior, Lucifer stepped forward and made the same proclamation. *Gospel Principles* declares, "Satan, who was called Lucifer, also came, saying, 'Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor' (Moses 4:1)."³⁹ Continuing the storyline, the manual states, "After hearing both sons speak, Heavenly Father said, 'I will send the first' (Abraham 3:27). Jesus Christ was chosen and foreordained to be our Savior.... Heavenly Father chose Jesus Christ to be our Savior."⁴⁰ Similarly, a few chapters later, *Gospel Principles* devotes another section to its teaching on Jesus Christ. The manual notes, "Jesus is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal Father. That is why He is called the Only Begotten Son. He inherited divine powers from His Father."⁴¹ Further, *Gospel Principles* teaches,

[O]ur wise Heavenly Father prepared a wonderful, merciful plan to save us from physical and spiritual death. He planned for a Savior to come to earth to ransom (redeem) us from our sins and from death. Because of our sins and the weakness of our mortal bodies, we could not ransom ourselves (see Alma 34:10-12). The one who would be our Savior would need to be sinless and to have power over death. There are several reasons why Jesus Christ was the only person who could be our Savior. One reason is that Heavenly Father chose Him to be the Savior. He was the Only Begotten Son of God and thus had power over death.... Jesus also qualified to be our Savior because He is the only person who has ever lived on the earth who did not sin. This made Him a worthy sacrifice to pay for the sins of others.⁴²

From *Gospel Principles*, then, a limited (but important) set of beliefs may be drawn concerning Jesus. First, there was a time in history when Jesus was not the Messiah. Or, said slightly differently, there was a time in history when Jesus was not the Christ. Second, there was a time in history when Jesus and Lucifer competed for the title "Messiah." Latter-day Saints may argue that Lucifer would have never been chosen to be Messiah, so the competition was not completely open, however, the fact remains: Jesus and Lucifer both made requests of God the Father to be the Messiah. Third, God chose Jesus to be the Messiah at a specific point in the past because Jesus agreed to complete the plan for salvation according to God's determined means. Thus, Jesus is not the Savior by essence or nature but by but by God's choosing and, to use a phrase from the 1916 LDS Church leadership statement, by divine investiture.

LATTER-DAY SAINT SCHOLARS ON CHRISTOLOGY

The number of Latter-day Saint scholars has increased exponentially over the recent past, with the vast majority of contemporary professors and scholars receiving degrees from well-known and well-respected major universities. Non-members studying the LDS Church can be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of writing being produced by LDS scholars. Thus, choosing which scholars to survey is difficult. However, two scholars stand out in Latter-day Saint life as both well-known and well-respected: James E. Talmage and Robert L. Millet. Talmage served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1911 until his death in 1933 and is most well-known in Latter-day Saint circles for his works *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith*. Robert Millet is a professor at Brigham Young University, currently serving as Abraham Smoot University Professor and has previously served as dean of the School of Religious Education and as Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding. Millet has written over fifty books and hundreds of articles. Most Latter-

day Saints know of his work and likely have at least one of his works in their personal libraries. Millet's influence on contemporary Latter-day Saints cannot be overstated.

JAMES E. TALMAGE

In the introduction to his work *Jesus the Christ*, Talmage wrote, "Instead of beginning our study with the earthly birth of the Holy Babe of Bethlehem, we shall consider the part taken by the Firstborn Son of God in the primeval councils of heaven, at the time when He was chosen and ordained to be the Savior of the unborn race of mortals, the Redeemer of a world then in its formative stages of development."⁴³ This reinforces the ideas presented earlier, namely, that Latter-day Saints believe there was a time in the past when Jesus was not the Christ and that there was a time in the past when he was named the Christ. Concerning the entire event, Talmage argued,

Satan's plan of compulsion, whereby all would be safely conducted through the career of mortality, bereft of freedom to act and agency to choose, so circumscribed that they would be compelled to do right—that one soul would not be lost—was rejected; and the humble offer of Jesus the Firstborn—to assume mortality and live among men as their Exemplar and Teacher, observing the sanctity of man's agency but teaching men to use aright that divine heritage—was accepted. The decision brought war, which resulted in the vanquishment of Satan and his angels, who were cast out and deprived of the boundless privileges incident to the mortal or second estate. In that august council of the angels and the Gods, the Being who later was born in flesh as Mary's Son, Jesus, took prominent part, and there was He ordained of the Father to be the Savior of mankind.⁴⁴

Here, then, Talmage defines for readers his understanding that, at one point in the past, Jesus was not the Messiah and then at some later point, Jesus was made the Messiah. The natural question

here surrounds the Latter-day Saint use of the word "eternal" to describe Jesus as the Christ. Plainly, according to Latter-day Saint thought, Jesus has not always been the Christ, therefore how can he be described as eternal? Talmage answered, "As to time, the term being used in the sense of all duration past, this is our earliest record of the Firstborn among the sons of God; to us who read, it makes the beginning."⁴⁵ Similarly, in an interesting comment concerning John 1, Talmage argued,

The passage is simple, precise and unambiguous. We may reasonably give to the phrase 'In the beginning' the same meaning as attaches thereto in the first line of Genesis; and such signification must indicate a time antecedent to the earliest stages of human existence upon the earth. That the Word is Jesus Christ, who was with the Father in that beginning and who was Himself invested with the powers and rank of Godship, and that He came into the world and dwelt among men, are definitely affirmed.⁴⁶

Thus, it may be concluded that Talmage believed Jesus to be a being who existed "in the beginning with the Father," but understood in such a way that Jesus existed "at the beginning of the plans for the earth with the Father." Similarly, like the previously examined proclamations and *Gospel Principles*, Talmage is in agreement that, at some point in the past, Jesus was not the Messiah and then was made the Messiah because he showed a willingness to follow God the Father's plan.

ROBERT L. MILLET

Millet's writings are well-researched, nuanced, and heavily theological. Much of his writing focuses on explaining Latter-day Saint thought to both members and non-members. Of greatest interest to the present study is his work on the doctrine of the Trinity.

In his article, "God and Man," Millet noted, "[Latter-day Saints] believe the doctrine of the Trinity represents a superimposition of Hellenis-

tic philosophy on the Bible and that the simplest and closest reading of the four Gospels sets forth a Godhead of three distinct beings and three Gods—not three coequal persons in one substance or essence.⁷⁴⁷ He added, “If the Nicene theologians meant to convey that the Father and Son are possessed of the ‘same substance’ or ‘same essence’ in the sense that they are both possessed of divinity, of an equal divinity, of a divine nature, then Latter-day Saints would agree. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ is God the Son. He was fully human and fully divine.”⁷⁴⁸ Similarly, he wrote,

[Latter-day Saints] believe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in that they constitute one Godhead. We believe they are one in that they possess all of the attributes of godliness in perfection. We believe they have the same mind, the same objective for humanity, the same purpose. We believe they are one in the sense that theirs is a covenantal relationship, a relationship established before the world was. Joseph Smith explained that this “everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth; these personages ... are called God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the witness or Testator.” Finally, they are one in the scriptural sense that the love and unity among the three distinct personages is of such a magnitude that they are occasionally referred to simply as “God.”⁷⁴⁹

He concluded, in agreement with James Talmage, “The one-ness of the Godhead, to which the scriptures so abundantly testify, implies no mystical union of substance, nor any unnatural and therefore impossible blending of personality. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are as distinct in their persons and individualities as are any three personages in mortality. Yet their unity of purpose and operation is such as to make their edicts one, and their will the will of God.”⁷⁵⁰

A question naturally arises here: is this covenant between the three persons an everlasting, or eternal, covenant? In another work, Millet responded to such questions. He wrote, “My colleague Stephen Robinson has pointed out further that ‘in both Hebrew and Greek the words for ‘eternity’ denote neither an endless linear time nor a state outside of time, but rather ‘an age,’ an ‘epoch,’ ‘a long time,’ ‘world,’ or some other such term – even a ‘lifetime,’ or ‘a generation’—always a measureable *period* of time rather than *endless* time or timelessness.”⁷⁵¹

In summarizing Millet’s view, a few points may be made. First, Latter-day Saints do not believe in the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Second, Latter-day Saints believe the three members of the Godhead to be united in various ways, but not in terms of union of being or a sharing of a common, simple, identical nature. Third, Latter-day Saints believe the three members of the Godhead are united through a covenant relationship, making them long-lasting promise keepers with each other, hence of union in purpose and aim but not a union in nature. Fourth, Latter-day Saints believe the Godhead to be eternally covenanted together, but not outside of time. The three members of the Godhead, and their relationship with each other, exist within time and the length of their relationship could, if such an instrument existed, be measured.

CONCLUSION

To say that Latter-day Saint Christology is complex would be an understatement. Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians can agree on the actual existence of an historical figure named Jesus of Nazareth and that this historical person lived, breathed, traveled, taught, was crucified, and was raised to life after death. About these issues there is no question. However, when it comes to the actual identity and nature of Jesus Christ, there is significant disagreement. Traditional Christianity understands Jesus Christ to be eternally one with the Father and the Spirit,

both in purpose and in being. Latter-day Saints understand that oneness to be in purpose. Traditional Christians believe Jesus to have always been the Messiah, in a timeless sense. Latter-day Saints believe Jesus was at one point in time past not the Messiah, and thus, likewise, Latter-day Saints believe Jesus was, at one point in the past, made the Messiah. Traditional Christians believe Jesus to be the second person within a Triune Godhead, a relationship characterized by more than mere covenant between the three persons. Latter-day Saints believe Jesus to be a member of the Godhead, a relationship, started at a point in the past, by covenant.

Thus, though there are points of agreement, there are significant points of disagreement. We disagree over the interpretation of scriptural passages, we disagree over what the early Christians believed, and we disagree over theological points. Of those disagreements, however, the disagreement over the nature of the central figure of the Christian faith is the most significant. Both Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians claim to follow Jesus. Both claim Jesus as their own. One has “Jesus Christ” in its church title. The other calls itself “the Christian church.” But, in the end, who is this Jesus? One’s answer to this question has eternal ramifications. Jesus is the second person of an ontologically united Trinity. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Jesus is the lion and the lamb, the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus is, as Peter answered, the Christ, the son of the living God.

ENDNOTES

¹Variouly referred to as, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Mormons; and, the Latter-day Saints, in this article the abbreviation “LDS Church” will be used in general reference to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For members of the LDS Church, the terms “Latter-day Saints,” “Saints,” or “LDS” will be employed. The term “Mormon” will be used only when found in direct quotations from source material.

²The branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints being studied in this article is the largest of the Latter-day Saint groups and is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. Other Latter-day Saint groups include the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (now renamed the Community of Christ) headquartered in Independence, Missouri; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Strangite headquartered in Burlington, Wisconsin; the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquartered in Independence, Missouri; and the Church of Christ with Elijah Message headquartered in Blue Springs, Missouri. For a short discussion of some of the various Latter-day Saint groups, see Frank S. Mead, Samuel S. Hill, and Craig D. Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (12th ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 346-53. For a more extended discussion see Newell G. Bringham and John C. Hamer, eds., *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer, 2007).

³Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Infographic: Mormons in America” [cited 25 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/mormons-in-america-infographic.aspx>.

⁴Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 22.

⁵Daniel C. Peterson, “Easier than Research, More Inflammatory than Truth” [cited 7 October 2004]. Online: <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2000PetD.html>.

⁶Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24.

⁷Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 29 (1989): 65.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹James Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 19 March 2003).

¹²Ibid.

- ¹³Robert L. Millet, *What Happened to the Cross? Distinctive LDS Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2007), 56. Millet also argued for the same sources of authority in another work co-authored with Gerald R. McDermott. Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 31-32.
- ¹⁴The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 45.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 48.
- ¹⁶Coke Newell, *Latter Days: An Insider's Guide to Mormonism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: St. Martins, 2000), 259.
- ¹⁷The use of Millet's system for the classification of material as authoritative does not lend authority to Millet. His system is being referenced due to his agreement with *Gospel Principles*, an official publication of the LDS Church. In a private discussion with a former LDS Mission President, two former LDS bishops, and three former LDS Stake Presidents, all six men agreed that the explanation of *Gospel Principles* and Millet concerning LDS source authority was also their personal understanding of the sources from which official beliefs may be gleaned. The names and geographical locations of service of the six men will be kept private per their request. Unless official church material is used for scriptural commentary, any commentaries referenced dealing with the four standard works should be understood to be the opinion of only the author(s) of the commentary and not official LDS Church statements. Although they are not official statements of belief, they nonetheless, at the very least, represent a popular understanding of official beliefs.
- ¹⁸Millet, *What Happened to the Cross?*, iv.
- ¹⁹Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 15.
- ²⁰Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 365.
- ²¹John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), xvii.
- ²²The standard works, in a direct fashion, are being purposefully left out of this study. Statements by LDS leaders, LDS Church publications, and LDS scholars are replete with references to the standard works, therefore, the standard works will be consulted indirectly rather than directly.
- ²³This statement was originally printed in the *Improvement Era* newspaper in August, 1916, but has been reprinted in a number of different publications. The most recent publication to reprint the doctrinal exposition was the April 2002 edition of *Ensign* magazine. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Father and the Son", *Ensign* (April 2002): 13-18.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 14, 17.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 14.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*
- ²⁸*Ibid.*
- ²⁹*Ibid.*
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, 17.
- ³¹*Ibid.*
- ³²*Ibid.*, 18.
- ³³See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles" [cited 28 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.lds.org/study/living-christ>.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*
- ³⁵The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009).
- ³⁶*Ibid.*, 9-12.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, 13.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*
- ³⁹*Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, 59-61. Another manual used by Latter-day Saints, though in their homes instead of the local meeting house, is entitled *Gospel Fundamentals*. This manual contains the same teachings as *Gospel Principles*. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Fundamentals* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 5-20.

⁴³James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1915), 3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷Robert L. Millet, "God and Man," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper* (ed. Robert L. Millet; Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2011), 352.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 353.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 354-55.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 356.

⁵¹Robert L. Millet, *Getting at the Truth* [cited 29 June 2012]. Online: <http://gospelink.com/library/document/131982>.