

What's Going On in Salt Lake City?

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The excitement began in the fall of 2004. For the first time in over a century since D. L. Moody spoke there, the story line ran, a leading evangelical was asked by representatives of the LDS Church to address an assembly of religious leaders and assorted members of the general public in the historic LDS Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.¹ On a Sunday evening in November, Ravi Zacharias took the podium in the famed venue to speak on the particularly appropriate topic of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ. This unique event was the brainchild of “Standing Together”—an ad hoc ecumenical Mormon-evangelical alliance led by former LDS member and Baptist pastor, Greg Johnson, and BYU religion professor, Robert L. Millet. Millet and Johnson have been traveling the country together for some few years hosting town hall meetings and listening sessions together with LDS and evangelical audiences. Their stated purpose has been to increase understanding between the two groups and aid in improving relationships.

The big evening came in Salt Lake City. Ravi Zacharias, his usual articulate and passionate self, made a presentation on Christ’s uniqueness which was apparently well-received with a large number of evangelicals in the audience urging him on. If anything, however, it appears that his presentation avoided the particulars of just how and in what ways the Jesus Christ of evangelical thought differed or contrasted with the Jesus of Latter-Day reckoning. But in the context, others argued, it was the best that could be done without appearing inflammatory and overly provocative. Perhaps so.

The real headliner for the event, however, was stolen by Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary. Prior to Zacharias’ presentation, Mouw came to the podium to make a surprise statement. He proceeded to apologize and offer lamentations on how Mormons and the teaching of Mormonism had been abused, misrepresented and caricatured by evangelicals, particularly those involved in counter-cult ministries. The cat was in among the pigeons now with varied responses,

¹ A similar article by Roberts appeared in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2005): 72-76.

expressed by numerous evangelicals, ranging from mild approbation to hurt, disappointment and rage. On further reflection, Mouw issued a statement of clarification stating that he knew of only two persons that he had in mind when he apologized and those were the late Walter Martin, author of *The Kingdom of the Cults*, and Dave Hunt, Christian apologist and author.

The *LDS Church News*, when reporting the event, however, gave almost its entire attention to Mouw's comments while largely ignoring those of Zacharias. It appears that an apology for apologetics by a leading evangelical seminary president was more important news than a presentation of the Christian gospel.

So just what's going on in Salt Lake City? Are Mormons coming to their theological senses? Is there a doctrinal seismic shift afoot akin to what occurred with the Worldwide Church of God just a few years ago when that group renounced its heretical views and embraced evangelical theology? In this writer's opinion, while hoping in some sense that he is wrong, that is hardly the case.

In a highly centralized, bureaucratic and secretive religious structure like the LDS Church, Robert Millet is a very long way from the levers of power and influence. While the Church is obviously in some ways supportive of his efforts and values the public relations spin-off of a leading evangelical seminary president's apology, the purpose for its support is probably purely public relations and not due to a serious search and desire for theological truth. This *modus operandi* falls in line with the entire approach taken by the Church over the last 25 years to lower the "cult" profile of the movement while working hard to gain a measure of acceptance and recognition among Christians generally and evangelicals particularly. It is probably believed by the LDS leadership that the recasting of their image will greatly assist in their proselytizing efforts.

Other signs tell us that nothing much has changed in Salt Lake City. Here are a few considerations:

First, there are no substantive doctrinal changes in any official LDS publication. "Well," someone might say, "What about the publication of Robert Millet's most recent book, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-Day Saints?* Interestingly, this tome was released by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and contains endorsements by several evangelicals including Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary, David Neff of *Christianity Today* and Craig Hazen of Biola University, as well as both a foreword and afterword by Mouw. It is heralded as a breakthrough volume signaling, if not a shift, then perhaps an opening to a consideration of a shift by the Mormon Church.

A bit further reflection, however, calls for less effusiveness. In fact, it is just the kind of volume the LDS public relations moguls love to see surface. Why? Because it provides just enough public relations credibility for the LDS Church to begin to be thought of in more mainstream, even distantly evangelical, terms without giving away anything of substance. Millet toys enough with familiar evangelical terms and concepts to sound convincing to the uninformed. Without being an official publication of the Church, it also allows church leadership plausible deniability if what Millet writes rankles some church members or causes a crisis of faith among the less stable.

Allow me to risk being termed “hard core” and “abrasive” by saying that at least some of what Millet says has the appearance of actually misleading the reader. For instance, when he discusses that Jesus and Jesus alone “saves,” and nothing else, he fails totally in elucidating the point that, in fact, salvation or “immortality” in Mormon thought is provided for all in either the terrestrial or telestial kingdoms except for murderers, apostates from the LDS Church, the devil and his angels. An evangelical might think that Millet is speaking of salvation as an evangelical does—that a Christian gets it all, receives the “fullness” of salvation through, by and because of the work of Christ alone. Not so. It is only through the “ordinances and rituals” of the “fullness” of the Gospel provided by latter-day revelation and the “latter-day,” i.e. Mormon, restoration that all of salvation is possible. In other words, except for those who were baptized by proxy after death, only “Temple-worthy” Mormons will enter the celestial kingdom and become gods. They will be the only ones to experience the fullness of salvation. It is omissions like these which make Millet’s book such a possibly misleading dynamic in the supposed rapprochement of evangelical-Mormon relations. After all, remember that, in addition to being a religion professor at BYU, Millet is also manager of Outreach and Interfaith for the LDS Church and as such serves in its public affairs office.

Other such basic and missionary-appropriate tools like *Gospel Principles*, which contain the essence of what a new or potentially new convert to Mormonism will learn about Mormonism, are left unchanged. These works are the official publications of the Mormon Church. More importantly, the primary sources of Mormonism, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrine and Covenants*, are left unchanged. Only when change appears in the canonized authorities or even official proselytizing, indoctrinating sources can one be assured that something more substantive than public relations spin is afoot.

Notably, the latest edition of the LDS missionary manual—2004—contains all of the “same old, same old,” including the notions of the

great apostasy, i.e. all forms of Christianity are corrupted, the concept that God is confined to a physical body and that the “fullness of salvation” is finally revealed in latter-day Mormon revelation. Additionally, missionaries are encouraged to be less than forthcoming, one might even say disingenuous, about the teachings of the Church. On the doctrine of the “Fall” they are instructed, “When first teaching this doctrine, do not teach everything you know about it.”² It appears that the official, sanctioned representatives of the Church to the world, the missionaries, have not changed either their style or substance.

Other issues might excite some persons, including a recent change in the LDS Temple ceremony. Nothing in the spoken content of the ceremony has been altered, however. The only adjustment is that the initiated no longer wear a poncho with open sides for their anointing. Rather, it is a covering with a zip-up front that is enrobed. Word had it that there was a high level of discomfort by initiates with being anointed near sensitive parts of the body by Temple workers. Consequently, a candidate is now just anointed on the forehead in order to receive their priestly, endowed blessing.

Further sense of a loosening of the reins by Church hierarchy was believed farfetched when Mormon author Grant H. Palmer was disfellowshipped early in 2005 for the publication of his work, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*. This volume seriously questioned the historicity of Mormon and *The Book of Mormon* origins. Parker has a year to reconsider his position and presumably withdraw his book before being excommunicated.

Do any of these developments carry the hope of possible change? Not at all. Remember that repentance and redirection in the Worldwide Church of God basically started at the top. Robert Millet, Stephen Robinson and company at BYU just aren't there. The LDS is a highly centralized, profit-driven religious entity which delights in doing all it can to bring in and develop Temple-worthy and tithing members of the Church. Its leadership is a totally atheological group of corporate administrators. Unless they are motivated to change with influences from a more practical direction, change will be impossible. LDS Church leadership doubtlessly is desirous, however, to see impressions altered. And one major change that they have worked hard on and spent substantial funding for is the hope of acceptance by mainstream Christianity. Dialogue and discussion to this end they welcome.

In June 1998, on the occasion of the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City, the Mormon President, Gordon B.

² *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*, 50.

Hinckley, was quoted in the LDS *Church Times* as saying that Latter-Day Saints

do not believe in the traditional Christ. No I don't. The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times. He, together with His Father, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith in the year 1820, and when Joseph Smith left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of the ages.³

I encouraged Dr. Paige Patterson, then President of the Southern Baptist Convention, to write President Hinckley. With a bit of my involvement, he did so speedily and enthusiastically. In his letter, among other points, Dr. Patterson stated the following:

I appreciate your acknowledgement of a point most evangelical theologians have been stating for some time and that is: that traditional Christians (including Baptists) and Mormons do not believe in the same Jesus. Many of your church's spokesmen in recent years have sought to minimize that distinction. Your candor is refreshing. In my opinion, that enhances your credibility and the fact that traditional Christians and Mormons believe in two different and distinctive views of Christ.

President Hinckley, the issue of who Jesus is, as well as that of the nature of His work, is absolutely critical. If one does not have their faith in the genuine, biblical Christ then we must acknowledge that they are not Christian. Sadly and regrettably, on this most critical issue our two respective confessional communities disagree.

Nonetheless, I appreciate your forthrightness in expressing your church's views. In my opinion, true dialogue among faiths begins with honest expression of both agreements and disagreements in doctrinal and practical issues. Regarding our disagreements about Jesus Christ, President Hinckley, I would be happy to meet with you for a respectful and personal conversation in a private setting at any time and place of your choosing.

Patterson concluded with an invitation for Hinckley and his counselors to be his guests at Southeastern Seminary if they wished. To the date of the writing of this column, Dr. Patterson has not heard back from President Hinckley.

In my opinion, Hinckley's response, or lack thereof, to Patterson's open-ended invitation says far more about the state of substantive

³ LDS *Church News*, June 20, 1998.

meaningful dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals than anything currently going on in Salt Lake City.