

Apostasy #1

Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent,” *Ensign*, Nov 2007, 40–42.

We declare it is self-evident from the scriptures that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are separate persons, three divine beings.

As Elder Ballard noted earlier in this session, various cross-currents of our times have brought increasing public attention to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Lord told the ancients this latter-day work would be “a marvellous work and a wonder,”¹ and it is. But even as we invite one and all to examine closely the *marvel* of it, there is one thing we would not like anyone to *wonder* about—that is whether or not we are “Christians.”

By and large any controversy in this matter has swirled around two doctrinal issues—our view of the Godhead and our belief in the principle of continuing revelation leading to an open scriptural canon. In addressing this we do not need to be apologists for our faith, but we would like not to be misunderstood. So with a desire to increase understanding and unequivocally declare our Christianity, I speak today on the first of those two doctrinal issues just mentioned.

Our first and foremost article of faith in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.”² We believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect imaginable *except* believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion never set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.

Indeed no less a source than the stalwart *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* records that “the formal doctrine of the Trinity as it was defined by the great church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries is *not* to be found in the [New Testament].”³

So any criticism that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not hold the contemporary Christian view of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost is *not* a comment about our commitment to Christ but rather a recognition (accurate, I might add) that our view of the Godhead breaks with post–New Testament Christian history and returns to the doctrine taught by Jesus Himself. Now, a word about that post–New Testament history might be helpful.

In the year a.d. 325 the Roman emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea to address—among other things—the growing issue of God’s alleged “trinity

in unity.” What emerged from the heated contentions of churchmen, philosophers, and ecclesiastical dignitaries came to be known (after another 125 years and three more major councils)⁴ as the Nicene Creed, with later reformulations such as the Athanasian Creed. These various evolutions and iterations of creeds—and others to come over the centuries—declared the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be abstract, absolute, transcendent, imminent, consubstantial, coeternal, and unknowable, without body, parts, or passions and dwelling outside space and time. In such creeds all three members are separate persons, but they are a single being, the oft-noted “mystery of the trinity.” They are three distinct persons, yet not three Gods but one. All three persons are incomprehensible, yet it is one God who is incomprehensible.

We agree with our critics on at least that point—that such a formulation for divinity is truly incomprehensible. With such a confusing definition of God being imposed upon the church, little wonder that a fourth-century monk cried out, “Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me, ... and I know not whom to adore or to address.”⁵ How are we to trust, love, worship, to say nothing of strive to be like, One who is incomprehensible and unknowable? What of Jesus’s prayer to His Father in Heaven that “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent”?⁶

It is not our purpose to demean any person’s belief nor the doctrine of any religion. We extend to all the same respect for their doctrine that we are asking for ours. (That, too, is an article of our faith.) But if one says we are not Christians because we do not hold a fourth- or fifth-century view of the Godhead, then what of those first Christian Saints, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the living Christ, who did not hold such a view either?⁷

We declare it is self-evident from the scriptures that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are separate persons, three divine beings, noting such unequivocal illustrations as the Savior’s great Intercessory Prayer just mentioned, His baptism at the hands of John, the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, and the martyrdom of Stephen—to name just four.

With these New Testament sources and more⁸ ringing in our ears, it may be redundant to ask what Jesus meant when He said, “The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do.”⁹ On another occasion He said, “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.”¹⁰ Of His antagonists He said, “[They have] ... seen and hated both me and my Father.”¹¹ And there is, of course, that always deferential subordination to His Father that had Jesus say, “Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God.”¹² “My father is greater than I.”¹³

To whom was Jesus pleading so fervently all those years, including in such anguished cries as “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me”¹⁴ and “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me”?¹⁵ To acknowledge the scriptural evidence that otherwise perfectly united members of the Godhead are nevertheless separate and distinct beings is not to be guilty of polytheism; it is, rather, part of the great revelation Jesus came to deliver concerning the nature of divine beings. Perhaps the Apostle Paul said it best: “Christ Jesus ... being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”¹⁶

A related reason The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is excluded from the Christian category by some is because we believe, as did the ancient prophets and apostles, in an embodied—but certainly glorified—God.¹⁷ To those who criticize this scripturally based belief, I ask at least rhetorically: If the idea of an embodied God is repugnant, why are the central doctrines and singularly most distinguishing characteristics of all Christianity the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the physical Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? If having a body is not only not needed but not desirable by Deity, why did the Redeemer of mankind redeem *His* body, redeeming it from the grasp of death and the grave, guaranteeing it would never again be separated from His spirit in time or eternity?¹⁸ *Any who dismiss the concept of an embodied God dismiss both the mortal and the resurrected Christ.* No one claiming to be a true Christian will want to do that.

Now, to anyone within the sound of my voice who has wondered regarding our Christianity, I bear this witness. I testify that Jesus Christ is the literal, living Son of our literal, living God. This Jesus is our Savior and Redeemer who, under the guidance of the Father, was the Creator of heaven and earth and all things that in them are. I bear witness that He was born of a virgin mother, that in His lifetime He performed mighty miracles observed by legions of His disciples and by His enemies as well. I testify that He had power over death because He was divine but that He willingly subjected Himself to death for our sake because for a period of time He was also mortal. I declare that in His willing submission to death He took upon Himself the sins of the world, paying an infinite price for every sorrow and sickness, every heartache and unhappiness from Adam to the end of the world. In doing so He conquered both the grave physically and hell spiritually and set the human family free. I bear witness that He was literally resurrected from the tomb and, after ascending to His Father to complete the process of that Resurrection, He appeared, repeatedly, to hundreds of disciples in the Old World and in the New. I know He is the Holy One of Israel, the Messiah who will one day come again in final glory, to reign on earth as Lord of lords and King of kings. I know that there is no other name given under heaven whereby a man can be saved and that only by relying wholly upon His merits, mercy, and everlasting grace¹⁹ can we gain eternal life.

My additional testimony regarding this resplendent doctrine is that in preparation for His millennial latter-day reign, Jesus has already come, more than once, in embodied majestic glory. In the spring of 1820, a 14-year-old boy, confused by many of these very doctrines that still confuse much of Christendom, went into a grove of trees to pray. In answer to that earnest prayer offered at such a tender age, the Father and the Son appeared as embodied, glorified beings to the boy prophet Joseph Smith. That day marked the beginning of the return of the true, New Testament gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and the restoration of other prophetic truths offered from Adam down to the present day.

I testify that my witness of these things is true and that the heavens are open to all who seek the same confirmation. Through the Holy Spirit of Truth, may we *all* know “the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom [He has] sent.”²⁰ Then may we live Their teachings and be true Christians in deed, as well as in word, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Isaiah 29:14.
2. Articles of Faith 1:1.
3. Paul F. Achtemeier, ed. (1985), 1099; emphasis added.
4. Constantinople, a.d. 381; Ephesus, a.d. 431; Chalcedon, a.d. 451.
5. Quoted in Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (1958), 235.
6. John 17:3; emphasis added.
7. For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* 71–89; see also Robert Millet, *Getting at the Truth* (2004), 106–22.
8. See, for example, John 12:27–30; John 14:26; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:1–3.
9. John 5:19; see also John 14:10.
10. John 6:38.
11. John 15:24.
12. Matthew 19:17.
13. John 14:28.
14. Matthew 26:39.
15. Matthew 27:46.
16. Philippians 2:5–6.
17. See David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 83, no. 2 (1990): 105–16; David L. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1996): 7–94; James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (2003), xi–xii, 5–6, 104–6, 134–35; Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (2001), 33–34.
18. See Romans 6:9; Alma 11:45.
19. See 1 Nephi 10:6; 2 Nephi 2:8; 31:19; Moroni 6:4; Joseph Smith Translation, Romans 3:24.
20. John 17:3.