

# Stephen H. Webb (1961–2016)

## Universal Scholar and Personal Friend

*Alonzo L. Gaskill*

For many Latter-day Saints, their first awareness of the Roman Catholic scholar Stephen H. Webb came through his 2012 *First Things* article, titled “Mormonism Obsessed with Christ.”<sup>1</sup> In that piece—which surprised Latter-day Saints and non-Latter-day Saints alike—Webb pointed out that “what gives Christianity its identity is its commitment to the divinity of Jesus Christ. And on that ground Mormons are more Christian than many mainstream Christians. . . . Mormonism is obsessed with Christ, and everything that it teaches is meant to awaken, encourage, and expand faith in him.”<sup>2</sup> Within a week of that article’s publication, my inbox was flooded with emails from friends and acquaintances asking me things like “Have you seen *this*?!” or “What do you know about Steve Webb?” and “Wow! I love this guy! *He gets us!*”

In rapid succession, Steve published several books and other materials of considerable interest to Latter-day Saints, and he spoke twice on campus at Brigham Young University. A chapter from his Oxford book *Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* was published in *BYU Studies* in 2011, under the title “Godbodied: The Matter of the Latter-day

---

1. See Stephen H. Webb, “Mormonism Obsessed with Christ,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (February 2012): 21, available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/02/mormonism-obsessed-with-christ>.

2. Webb, “Mormonism Obsessed.” It wasn’t until he was working on his book *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) that Steve began to look seriously at Mormon theology. He began, for the first time, to consider Joseph Smith as a serious theologian.

Saints.”<sup>3</sup> In 2012, he delivered the Truman G. Madsen Lecture on Eternal Man for the Wheatley Institution,<sup>4</sup> and in 2014 he was a keynote speaker at the annual BYU New Testament Commentary conference on S. Kent Brown’s *The Testimony of Luke*.

The story of Steve’s lifelong spiritual journey is too complex and lengthy to tell here. But, suffice it to say, he was a man who surveyed the landscape—and who thought deeply about the teachings of many traditions. He was reared as an independent Christian—part of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.<sup>5</sup> As an undergrad, Steve attended Wabash College,<sup>6</sup> and there he evolved, becoming quite liberal for a time. During his undergraduate years, he joined the Disciples of Christ Church. According to his former research assistant, Adam Brasich, when he returned to Wabash (as a professor), Steve even tried to start a Disciples of Christ Church in the Indianapolis area.<sup>7</sup> Steve later became a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;<sup>8</sup> and, finally, in 2007, he converted to Roman Catholicism.<sup>9</sup> He once noted, “Becoming a Roman Catholic opened the door for me to begin appreciating Mormonism, while becoming immersed in Mormonism has helped me to retrieve the value of my evangelical youth.”<sup>10</sup>

---

3. Stephen H. Webb, “Godbodied: The Matter of the Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies* 50 no. 3 (2011): 83–100.

4. See Wheatley Institution, “Truman G. Madsen Lecture on Eternal Man,” November 15, 2012, <http://wheatley.byu.edu/events/individual.cfm?id=101>.

5. The Restoration Movement or “Campbellism” is a Christian tradition that began in the United States during the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840) and which originally sought to unify all Christians into a single body (after the pattern of New Testament Christianity). The movement is arguably the oldest ecumenical movement in the United States.

6. Founded in 1832, Wabash College is a small private liberal arts college for men located in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

7. Adam Brasich, interview with author, April 21, 2016.

8. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has about 4 million members in nearly ten thousand congregations in North America. It is a progressive denomination, rooted in Lutheran theology, but open to exploration and change. It often refers to itself as a religion that is ever being “made new.” See, for example, “About,” *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, <http://www.elca.org/en/About>; and “ELCA Presiding Bishop Says Church Is ‘Always Being Made New,’” *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, October 18, 2012, [http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7531?\\_ga=1.87639773.490311710.1477502010](http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7531?_ga=1.87639773.490311710.1477502010).

9. Steve was drawn to Catholicism, in part, because of the writings of Father Richard John Neuhaus, the founder of *First Things* magazine.

10. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

Steve's initial interest in the LDS Church began when his research assistant at Wabash College began investigating Mormonism.<sup>11</sup> Starting in the summer of 2009, Steve and Adam had frequent and deep conversations about Latter-day Saint theology and scripture, and Steve began to think in more serious terms about what practicing Mormons believe. He had known about the Church prior to that—and even taught about it at Wabash—but up to that time Steve never took the LDS faith seriously. He once confessed, “I . . . used to think of Mormonism as little more than an exotic and abnormal addition to Christianity. When I taught Mormon history to my students, . . . I regret to say that I did not try to hide my condescension. I have come to repent of this view, and not just because I came to my senses about how wrong it is to be rude toward somebody else's faith. I changed my mind because I came to realize just how deeply Christ-centered Mormonism is.”<sup>12</sup> Oddly, one who would not have initially classed himself as a “friend of the faith” turned out to be one of our greatest non-Mormon defenders. Like Saul before him in his conversion to Christianity, Steve was able to see the hand of God moving in his life to change his attitude about Latter-day Saints and their theology. I suppose one reason that Steve and I connected so well was that we shared a similar history in this regard. Neither of us were ever ardent anti-Mormons, but—in our younger and more naïve days—both of us failed to see the good in the LDS Church, and each of us made little effort to hide our condescension. We both found reasons to repent and to praise God for opening our eyes.

Steve was, on all accounts, very eclectic. He wrote on a variety of topics, from soccer to vegetarianism, and from environmentalism to Bob Dylan.<sup>13</sup> In one of his pieces, he warned about the dangers of cultural relativism—and the loss of moral education in the academy.<sup>14</sup> Steve

---

11. Adam Brasich, currently a PhD candidate in American religious history at Florida State University, was Steve Webb's research assistant during the summer of 2009. After that, Adam continued unofficially to work for Steve (reviewing his manuscripts, bouncing ideas off of each other, and so forth) for the next eighteen months. They remained good friends until Steve's untimely death in March 2016.

12. Webb, “Mormonism Obsessed.”

13. An effort is under way to create a repository, of sorts, of Steve's various pieces of research and writing, and to make them permanently accessible on the Internet and in a university archive.

14. Stephen H. Webb, “Christ against the Multiculturalists,” *First Things*, May 6, 2008, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/05/christ-against-the-multicultur>.

tackled movements that seek to erase any meaningful differences in gender, instead suggesting that gender is not simply an “accident of biology.”<sup>15</sup> He wrote about how, in heaven, you and I will most likely have the “freedom to move through time.” Steve conjectured that, there, “the past will become a land we can inhabit for as long as it takes to experience the healing power of God’s love.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, in one of his most moving pieces—written only two weeks before he passed—Steve wrote about the “God of the depressed.” Steve described depression as a “deeply religious experience, but it is an experience of God’s resistance to your most pressing personal petitions. The more you cry out for help, the more distant God can appear to be. This is negative theology gone deeply awry.” Steve added:

Jesus himself must have experienced depression while being famished for forty days and nights in the wilderness, praying while his disciples slept, and descending into hell.

He also spent many years hidden from public view, his mission kept secret, his life so obscure that the Gospels tell us nothing about them. He had a long time of waiting, and he knew what awaited him. It is this time of hiddenness, I think, that most captures the depressant’s emotional state. The depressed wait for the long night to end and the anguish to subside. The depressed, like Jesus during his so-called lost years, are hidden from sight, waiting for their lives to begin.<sup>17</sup>

Steve’s writings could be very deep and were often poignant. Some in the academic community liked what he wrote,<sup>18</sup> while others attacked

---

15. Stephen H. Webb, “Theological Stakes of Sexual Difference,” *First Things*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/01/theological-stakes-of-sexual-difference>.

16. Stephen H. Webb, “How to Tell Time in Heaven,” *First Things*, April 29, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/04/how-to-tell-time-in-heaven>.

17. Stephen H. Webb, “God of the Depressed,” *First Things*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/02/god-of-the-depressed>.

18. See, for example, Mark A. Kellner, “Scholar Delves into Mormon ‘Lessons’ for Christians,” *Washington (D.C.) Times*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/12/kellner-scholar-delves-into-mormon-lessons-for-chr/>; Richard J. Mouw, “Mormon Catholicism: A Review of *Mormon Christianity*,” *First Things* (May 2014): 51–53, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/05/mormon-catholicism>; John G. Turner, “Mormon Envy: A Provocative Reappraisal,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, January 2014, <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2014/january/mormon-envy.html?paging=off>; John Turner, “Stephen Webb’s Mormon

his work with vigor.<sup>19</sup> Because he enjoyed a good debate, he largely took the criticisms in stride—but, where he felt he was misunderstood or misrepresented, Steve was very comfortable pushing back.<sup>20</sup>

Sadly, Steve passed away on March 5, 2016.<sup>21</sup> While attending his funeral in Indiana, I was approached by several non-Latter-day Saints to

---

Christianity,” *Patheos*, January 25, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxious-bench/2014/01/stephen-webbs-mormon-christianity/>.

19. See, for example, Thomas M. Cothran, “What Is Classical Theism?” *Strange Notions*, <http://www.strangenotions.com/what-is-classical-theism/>; Thomas M. Cothran, “A Bad Case against Classical Theism,” *Strange Notions*, <http://www.strangenotions.com/a-bad-case-against-classical-theism/>; Thomas M. Cothran, “Understanding Who God Really Is,” *Strange Notions*, <http://www.strangenotions.com/understanding-who-god-really-is/>; John W. Morehead, review of *Mormon Christianity*, in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 47 (Summer 2014): 158–63.

20. See, for example, Stephen H. Webb, “Response to Critics,” *A Journal for the Theology of Culture* 11, no. 1 (2015): 93–102. Steve’s widow, Dr. Diane Timmerman, shared this about how Steve felt he was perceived in Catholic scholarly circles: “He felt like longtime Catholic theologians did not take him seriously as a Catholic theologian. (An exception to this is the wonderful David Tracy, from the University of Chicago, who wrote me the nicest things about Steve, his work, and his mind back in March of 2016.) Steve tried for several professional opportunities (grants, fellowships, professorships) at Catholic institutions, but to no avail. A small piece of this was even Notre Dame Press not taking the book he wrote. So, for professional and personal reasons, he moved away from the Catholic church. But I can’t say he moved away for theological reasons. . . . Among some of the last books he purchased were some that had a Catholic foundation.” Diane Timmerman to author, September 21, 2016.

21. The wide circulation of his death notice only serves to show how very influential Stephen Webb was. See, for example, “Stephen Howe Webb,” *Indianapolis Star*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/indystar/obituary.aspx?pid=177969609>; “Stephen H. Webb,” *Matthews Mortuary*, [http://www.matthewsmortuary.com/fh/obituaries/obituary.cfm?o\\_id=3619382&fh\\_id=13052](http://www.matthewsmortuary.com/fh/obituaries/obituary.cfm?o_id=3619382&fh_id=13052); “Wabash Mourns Stephen Webb ‘83,” *Wabash College*, March 7, 2016, [http://www.wabash.edu/news/displaystory.cfm?news\\_ID=10773](http://www.wabash.edu/news/displaystory.cfm?news_ID=10773); Samuel D. Rocha, “The Excess of Stephen H. Webb,” *First Things*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/03/the-excess-of-stephen-h-webb>; “Stephen H. Webb, 1961–2016,” *The Interpreter Foundation*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/stephen-h-webb-1961-2016/>; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon Scholars Laud Late Catholic Thinker Who Probed LDS Theology,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.sltrib.com/news/lds/3640037-155/mormon-scholars-pay-tribute-to-late>; Mike Parker, “Stephen H. Webb, 1961–2016,” *FairMormon Blog*, March 7, 2016, <http://blog.fairmormon.org/2016/03/07/stephen-h-webb-1961-2016/>; David Klinghoffer,

let me know that Mormonism was the *only* subject that Steve ever chose to write more than one book on.<sup>22</sup> It was unusual for him to stay focused on one subject in his research and writing. Thus, his fixation on LDS theology was a curious thing, noted by many. There were many aspects of Mormon theology that drew Steve, chief among them being the idea of a material, embodied God. He was also enamored with Joseph Smith's native genius, in addition to the power he found in the Book of Mormon's witness of Christ. Where many non-LDS scholars scoff at the shallowness of LDS theology, Steve saw a depth, and that drove him to delve deeply into Mormon thought. One of his associates pointed out, "In his final works he reached out to the LDS community with gusto and sincere goodwill."<sup>23</sup> "Mormonism [might be] obsessed with Christ"<sup>24</sup> (to borrow a line from Steve), but those who knew him best knew that in the last few years of his life Stephen Webb was quite "obsessed" with all things LDS. He could not get enough of it. He had developed a great love for the Church's doctrine, history, and people.

Evidence of that is found in the book we coauthored together: *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*. Time and again in that book Steve extolled what he loved about Mormon theology. I had to chuckle when we began writing the first chapter of the book. We mutually decided

---

"Remembering Stephen H. Webb," *Evolution News and Views*, March 17, 2016, [http://www.evolutionnews.org/2016/03/remembering\\_ste102696.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2016/03/remembering_ste102696.html); John Turner, "Stephen H. Webb," *Patheos*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2016/03/stephen-h-webb/>; "Stephen H. Webb Died," *Mormon Discussions*, March 8, 2016, <http://mormondiscussions.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=41345>; Christian Century Staff, "Stephen H. Webb, Theologian and Author, Dies at 54," *Christian Century*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-03/stephen-h-webb>.

22. Steve first examined Mormon theology in his 2011 text, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). His 2013 book, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), was entirely about LDS doctrine and the need for other Christian denominations to take seriously what the Latter-day Saints have to contribute. His last book on Mormonism was the one he coauthored with me: *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). In addition to these three books, Steve authored a number of articles on Latter-day Saint theology and practice.

23. Rocha, "Excess of Stephen H. Webb."

24. Webb, "Mormonism Obsessed."

that Steve would write the first section (describing Catholic views of authority), then I would write the LDS response, Steve would respond to that, and finally I would finish up the discussion. Steve got to work on his portion of the chapter, and emailed it to me. As I read it, I was puzzled. Much of his first installment on authority in Catholicism focused on how amazing Joseph Smith was as a spiritual leader and prophetic figure. After reading what Steve had written, I had to exclaim, “Steve, I thought I was going to write the LDS portion of the chapter!” Steve Webb had a gift for being able to see the good in Mormonism, Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and even in our unique culture. That showed in how he spoke about the Church, but also in what he wrote about it.

Steve was inordinately insightful. He saw what the average person missed. He found profundity in what others perceived as mundane. As a singular example, in a May 2014 lecture at Brigham Young University, Steve reviewed S. Kent Brown’s commentary on the Gospel of Luke.<sup>25</sup> In that lecture, he dwelt on the question of where Christ’s soul was during the three days in which his body lay in the tomb. Professor John W. Welch has reflected on Steve’s insights as follows:

Some scholars have argued that Christ descended, but only into the forecourt of hell, the so-called limbo of the fathers, but not actually into hell itself. Steve gladly pointed out his own previous argument that 1 Peter 3:19 “clarifies the descent by telling that Jesus preached to the spirits *in* prison,” and therefore he must have gone further and done more than just to unlock the gates of hell in its forecourts. Steve saw this preaching by Jesus to the prisoners in hell as “the culmination of Jesus’ ministry,” and not simply as a “prolongation of his crucifixion.” Having spent time, as he did, ministering in jails to incarcerated prisoners, Steve was sure that “Jesus would have felt right at home in hell, and the prisoners would have been glad to welcome him. The sharing of the good news is a joyful event, especially in a place where its message is most needed.”

At the end of his self-revealing comments two years ago, Steve went on to embrace the even more expansive idea offered by Mormon

---

25. Stephen H. Webb, “Luke and Mormonism,” paper presented at the Second Annual Conference of the BYU New Testament Commentary Project, Provo, Utah, May 14, 2014, in response to S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2015), transcript available online at <http://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com/conferences/may-2014/transcripts/luke-and-mormonism-by-stephen-h-webb/>.

doctrine. “Imagine my joy in discovering, after I worked on von Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s descent into hell, the Mormon understanding of spirit prison and the idea that Jesus indeed preached in hell, but he did more than that. He organized the righteous to preach in his absence. This is an astounding claim that has no precedence, as far as I know, in traditional theology, and yet it makes absolute theological and exegetical sense. To me, it means that even in hell the church is active in carrying out God’s plan. The Catholic Church believes that salvation comes through the church, and thus it makes sense that Jesus would not have left the spirits in prison without access to the church. The Mormon explication of the descent thus gives me a new delight in the passage from Matt. 16:8, where Jesus says he will build his church and not even the gates of hell will prevail against it.”<sup>26</sup>

What a testament this insight is to the inspiration of our friend and to the goodness of the God whom Steve and all Latter-day Saints worship.

Those who knew Steve well knew that he was incapable of leaving religion alone. If he was invited to a party, he would turn it into a theological debate; and he really didn’t care which side of the argument he was defending, so long as there was an argument. He was really not a contentious man, but he was passionate and simply felt the need to think and challenge and discuss religion at all places and at all times. At his funeral, it was pointed out that some actually quit inviting him to social events for fear that he would turn a light-hearted get-together into a theological colloquium. It was his nature; and, for those of us who are similarly hardwired, this aspect of Steve’s personality was charming. For those other-minded souls, this could be quite annoying. Of course, that would be *their* loss!

There are certainly those within the ranks of the LDS Church who do not know the name Stephen Webb. However, a number of the General Authorities were certainly aware of him. On more than one occasion, I was inadvertently copied on an email to Steve from one of the Twelve Apostles or a member of the Seventy. (The “Reply All” feature has allowed me to eavesdrop on more than one intriguing conversation!) I joked at a lecture Steve and I were giving in Indiana that “I’ve been a member of the Church for more than three decades now and I have less access to the presiding Brethren than does my friend Steve.” In addition to several General Authorities he was friends or acquaintances

---

26. Adapted from John W. Welch to author, May 19, 2016, quoting Webb, “Luke and Mormonism.”

with, our brightest Latter-day Saint scholars have taken note of both his remarkable life and his untimely death. Thus, I thought I might share a few thoughts from various academics who have taken note of Steve's impact upon Mormonism.

Steve's former research assistant, Adam Brasich, described Steve's fascination with Mormonism this way:

In a way, I don't think any other theologian has taken Joseph Smith as seriously as a conversation partner as Steve—in terms of taking Mormon theology as an open possibility for other Christians. He treated it as an alternative version of Christianity that can teach Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants a lot about themselves and about the weaknesses of their own theology, particularly in a post-Christian world. For example, new discoveries in physics contradict 3rd and 4th century Christian ideas of matter. The Christian Church is stuck in those 3rd and 4th century views of the material. How are we to deal with this? Steve would say, well, you have Joseph Smith and Mormonism to help you resolve this. He saw Mormonism as a way of dealing with the post-Christian world and the breaking down of different orthodoxies. Here were some alternative ideas that Joseph Smith came up with that offer some solutions. I think Steve was unique in that particular way.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the LDS view on matter—and a material God and resurrection—were ideas that Steve saw as logical, ancient, and yet abandoned by the bulk of Christianity. He felt others could learn from what Joseph taught on these subjects.

Philp Barlow, the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, first met Steve in the mid-1990s and had become well acquainted with him and his writings. He described Steve as

transparently brilliant, articulate in an on-the-spot sort of way. . . . He was also a bit feisty in an appealing way, ready to stand up and hold his intellectual ground, without being sectarian, when religious belief was occasionally condescended towards by other equally rigorous minds. His mind operated on warp drive, at three times the pace of my own. The range of provocative, high-level, cogent, informed, imaginative, often experimental books that he produced—let alone his shorter works—leaves me slack-jawed. . . . Hence, when he became provoked by the richness and promise of Mormon thought and culture, and enamored of Mormon people in the latter years of his life, Mormonism received the

---

27. Brasich, interview.

attention of an extraordinarily knowledgeable, dramatically far-reaching mind. The result was a splash of illumination for Mormons and their observers, an implicit putting into context of more shallow and narrow attention to the Latter-day Saints, and a courageous, sometimes defiant reimagining of the Mormon and Christian past and present. He was an uncommon mind, an uncommon person. I will evermore miss a new Webb title on my shelf on an almost annual basis.<sup>28</sup>

Steve absolutely was an “uncommon mind” and “an uncommon person.” Writing with him was a delight. He wrote with passion and energy—and ideas seemed to burst forth from him like water from a hydrant. He was broad in his knowledge base, but he could see how all of it was interconnected. He was quite remarkable in this regard.

John W. Welch—the Robert K. Thomas professor of law in the J. Reuben Clark Law School, and the founder of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS)—spoke of Steve’s contributions in this way:

The death of Stephen Webb, which is nothing short of tragic, leaves me and all who even remotely knew him weakened and diminished, wondering what might have been. . . . With meteoric brilliance he swept across the open skies of the Mormon intellectual landscape. . . . Steve contributed so much to so many people, and had so much more yet to offer to all of us on this side of the veil of mortality, that one can only have faith, with glowing hope, that millions of souls on the other side will enjoy and embrace his knowing smile and collegial companionship as much as we have here. . . .

Steve had a special knack for seeing virtuoso performances where lesser minds could see only trivial or marginal comments. This trait of Stephen’s no doubt explains his gripping fascination with Mormonism, the theology of which has been overlooked by so many others but which for Steve promised extraordinary usefulness to all the rest of Christianity. Steve recoiled against the unfortunate points of departure in modern scholarship that typically begins by doubting credible witnesses, dismisses God’s direct involvement physically in history, and

---

28. Phil Barlow, personal correspondence, April 22, 2016. Similarly, Adam Brasich said: “He was adventuresome—he was so full of a quest for truth, a quest for knowledge. There were no boundaries. And so that’s what allowed him to start digging into Mormonism to try to figure out what gems were in the rough there. He was willing to do whatever it took to lay hold on truth.” Brasich, interview.

that “claims, probably worst of all, an unearned sense of moral superiority over our spiritual and academic forefathers,” as Steve puts it.

. . . The ligatures that bind us together with God and with each other have the potentialities and actualities to save and exalt this world which fell but not without plan and purpose. Stephen Webb lived, and lives, as solid evidence that this is so. I consider myself blessed by God that our lives intersected.<sup>29</sup>

David Paulsen, emeritus professor of philosophy at BYU (and the contemporary Mormon theologian whose writings were most influential upon Stephen Webb) and Hal R. Boyd, special assistant to the president at Eastern Kentucky University, offered this tribute:

Latter-day Saints have made many friends and allies with scholars of different faiths. Some laud Mormon piety and our pro-social communitarianism. Stephen H. Webb, however, was the rare Christian scholar to go beyond cultural commentary and methodically evaluate LDS theology, publishing multiple books and articles on the subject. . . . Stephen saw the Latter-day Saint doctrine of divine *material* embodiment as a novel way to reintroduce the Christian God to those whose worldview rejects the existence of anything outside the material universe. Stephen was, in the words of Paul, an “example of the believers,” and his personal interactions among the Latter-day Saints were marked by Christian charity and goodwill. We are continually inspired by Stephen’s life as well as his theological legacy.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, few outside of Mormonism have treated us more fairly—or taken us more seriously—than Steve. He didn’t shy away from pointing out our warts; but he could see beyond those, as he plumbed the depths of Mormon thought and surfaced with what he perceived as the gems of this unique brand of Christianity.

Terryl Givens, who holds the James A. Bostwick Chair in English at the University of Richmond, shared this about Steve and his ability to see the good and valuable in the beliefs of others:

Krister Stendahl famously spoke of “holy envy” as a vital but rare capacity in religious understanding. As with politics, few persons deeply vested in religion can demonstrate the moral generosity of appreciating the beautiful in another’s belief system. Steve was a shining exception, who had the magnanimity to unabashedly admire much he loved in

---

29. Welch to author.

30. David L. Paulsen and Hal R. Boyd to author, May 2, 2016.

Mormonism, and the intellectual acumen to recognize its theological strengths and early Christian precedents. We all benefitted from his friendship as well as his scholarship. With Steve, interfaith dialogue was genuinely beneficial to both parties with no condescending, and he will be sorely missed.<sup>31</sup>

Scott Petersen, former director of the Rollins Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology at Brigham Young University, said of Steve that he “was a very spiritually aware person who cherished the Savior.” Scott added that Steve

recognized that not everything from early Christianity was as neat and tidy as many churches wanted to make it. Accordingly, his open-minded approach allowed him to build bridges with many faiths and many individuals, even when they differed somewhat from his own personal beliefs. Steve’s authentic approach allowed him to explore Mormonism objectively. He passionately shared his view that Mormons were sincere Christians who contributed significantly to the Christian community of believers. He was willing to stand firm against the popular culture that Mormons were not “orthodox” Christians. Steve engaged and collaborated openly with Mormon scholars, and he took seriously the Savior’s directive to seek Christian unity (John 17). He will be greatly missed.<sup>32</sup>

As the greatest minds of Mormonism attest, Stephen Webb’s passing is a loss for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—not simply because he was such a wonderful defender of our faith, but also because he was such a Christian man. Steve loved the Church, but each of us who knew him also felt his love for us as individuals. And so, at his passing, I look back on his life in solemn contemplation. I wonder how I might adequately summarize the remarkable life and contributions of this most extraordinary friend. Steve’s own words summarize what he believed was the reason he was so drawn to Mormonism.

One day, as Steve and I walked across the campus of Brigham Young University, he said to me, “Alonzo, I think I have a mission—a calling from God—to write on behalf of the Mormon Church. I can say things as an outsider that no Mormon could say or write; and people listen

---

31. Terryl L. Givens to author, April 29, 2016.

32. Scott R. Petersen to author, April 26, 2016. Steve wrote the foreword to Scott’s 2014 book, *Do the Mormons Have a Leg to Stand On? A Critical Look at LDS Doctrines in Light of the Bible and the Teachings of the Early Christian Church* (Orem, Utah: Millennial Press, 2014).

to me because I'm a Catholic—not a Latter-day Saint.”<sup>33</sup> I remember thinking he just might be right about that. There was nothing casual about this declaration from Steve's lips. It was not something he had just thought up; it was something that he felt deeply. It was something the Spirit of God had revealed to him—and he was faithful to that calling. I will never forget an experience we had as the two of us knelt in the basement of his Brownsburg home to invite the Spirit to be with us as we prepared to leave for a lecture we were giving that evening in Indianapolis. Steve asked that we pray before we left and requested to offer the prayer himself. Without going into details, I will simply say—if I ever doubted before—I knew *then* that this was a man who felt deeply that God had called him to do something sacred, and he wanted desperately to magnify that calling in a way that was pleasing to his Father in Heaven. In his book *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*, Steve wrote: “I am not a Mormon, but sometimes I wish I were one.”<sup>34</sup> Each of us who knew him could feel that about Steve.

Finally, in a tribute to Stephen, one of his former colleagues wrote: “He left his mark wherever he went.”<sup>35</sup> That he did. Steve certainly left his mark upon my soul, and upon the minds and hearts of many Latter-day Saints. The scholarly world will never see Mormonism quite the same because of the teachings and testimony of our friend, Stephen H. Webb. And so, I close with Steve's own words regarding Christ, Joseph Smith, and the Mormons—a personal testimony he penned only a few months before his passing:

I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, and I would not intentionally believe anything that detracts from that. I also believe that

---

33. Adam Braisch told me that Steve had said almost that exact same thing to him in April of 2005. Adam classed Steve among the likes of Harold Bloom and Jan Shippo, all three being outsiders who have developed an appreciation for Mormon history or theology—and who have been reasonably kind to the Church. For Steve, it wasn't the history or origins of the faith that drew him; it was the theology. In our recent interview, Adam said to me, “I hope that his legacy would be something along the lines of bringing Mormonism into conversation with other traditions in a way that is not arguing about the definition of Christian but, rather, actually takes a look at the ideas themselves—the doctrines—the teachings of the Church; and to what degree are Mormons a potential conversation partner with other denominations.”

34. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 11.

35. Rocha, “Excess of Stephen H. Webb.”

surely many, perhaps most, maybe all of the things I believe about Him are incomplete, distorted, maybe even untrue, but that I will grow in the truth of Him and about Him in heaven. I would never say or do or believe anything that takes away His honor and glory as my God, the Messiah of the Jewish people, the source of the whole world's salvation, who took upon Himself our sin on the cross, and indeed, the one who is the very reason and purpose of all of creation. I hope to be with Him forever. My journey with the Saints and into Mormonism is motivated solely by the hope and conviction that Joseph's own journey was blazed by the light of Jesus Christ and that he understood his ministry as an attempt to be of service to Him. All glory be to Jesus, now and forevermore. Amen.<sup>36</sup>

---

Alonzo L. Gaskill is Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine and a Richard L. Evans Fellow in the Office of Religious Outreach at Brigham Young University. His primary teaching emphasis is world religions. In 2015, he and Stephen H. Webb published their book, *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation* (Oxford University Press).

---

36. Stephen Webb, email to author, November 19, 2014.