

**Sizing up the Divide:
Reviews and Replies for
How Wide the Divide?
*A Mormon and an Evangelical
in Conversation*
by Craig L. Blomberg and
Stephen E. Robinson**

Sizing Up the Divide: Reviews and Replies

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG and STEPHEN E. ROBINSON. *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997. 228 pp. Paperback, \$11.99.

I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARIES

Matthew R. Connelly and BYU Studies Staff

In August 1997, Stephen E. Robinson and Craig L. Blomberg published through InterVarsity Press a book that broke important ground in LDS and Evangelical circles. The award-winning book—*How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*—is a bold attempt to conduct an ongoing, civil dialogue between Mormons and Evangelicals.

As the title suggests, *HWD* asks a significant question. At issue is the degree of difference and similarity between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals. By addressing these in an insightful, scholarly, and informative manner, the book intends to elicit individual responses to the question the title poses. It does not attempt to impose authoritative answers to the question. That burden is left to the individual readers who, based on the material in the book and careful thinking, must decide for themselves the breadth of the divide.

The appearance of *HWD* is distinctive because it presents, for the first time in LDS circles since the B. H. Roberts–C. Van der Donckt debate of 1902,¹ a well-informed and respectful public dialogue between two scholars who seek to define, explain, and openly discuss their respective beliefs on their own terms, without surrendering to reckless polemics. In this book, the question of who is ultimately right or wrong is temporarily set aside.

Because *HWD* attempts to navigate the sensitive, unfamiliar waters of real religious understanding, it is expected the book will be subject to intense scrutiny for some time to come. Several LDS and Evangelical scholars have already taken occasion to express what they think about the book. Their reactions, as found in these earliest published reviews, range from high praise or sharp criticism to the more often trod middle path.

The primary purpose of this introductory summation is to review the main reviews and isolate the issues that seem of primary importance to reviewers. Because the number of published LDS reviews is small and because Evangelical responses to the book have been voluminous, legitimate questions may arise as to what degree the reviews discussed in this essay are representative of either faith's viewpoint.² Nevertheless, through

this survey, readers can at least be alerted to the issues that are most significant to some of the more informed members of each community.

By extracting the issues as the reviewers see them, this essay will provide authors Robinson and Blomberg with a framework from which to operate as they respond to the reviewers' conclusions. Readers will, of course, want to refer to the full text of any reviews to resolve any contextual questions. It is not possible in this brief essay to be completely neutral or to nuance each point properly.

The Book's Authors and Unique Format

This type of book could be effective only if written by qualified parties. Robinson holds a doctorate degree in religious studies from Duke University, and Blomberg a doctorate from the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) in New Testament. Robinson is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, and Blomberg is a professor of New Testament at the Denver Seminary, affiliated with the Conservative Baptist Association of America. Although formal education does not guarantee accurate information, both authors have distinguished themselves within their respective communities as reliable scholars.

The authors believe that the time for an honest, straightforward, and civil discussion of each side's beliefs is long overdue. In their view, a discussion of this kind will establish a clear departure point for ongoing dialogue and a firm foundation upon which future discussants might build. In Robinson's words, a major purpose of this book is to "explain and to educate—at last to hear and to tell the truth about each other" (21). According to Blomberg, the conversation is intended for "recognizing [our] areas of agreement and clarifying the nature of [our] disagreements" (32).

The book's unique format helps to establish an effective avenue for future dialogue. After an introduction authored separately by Robinson and Blomberg, four chapters treat what the authors believe to be primary issues of Christian theology. They are scripture, God and deification, Christ and the Trinity, and salvation. For balance, the authors alternate who leads off each chapter, and each writes in light of what the other has written so that neither has an unfair advantage.

Each chapter includes a section in which the author expresses (1) representative views of his own faith community, (2) his views on common misconceptions usually held by members of the other faith, and (3) the author's misgivings about the other faith's position. Finally, a jointly-authored conclusion assesses the differences and similarities between them on the topic contained in that chapter.

Background Assumptions

Certain background assumptions surfaced during the process of examining the reviews. Awareness of these will alert readers to the general

paradigms within which the reviewers function. Defining these assumptions will likely raise new questions that will help readers to grasp the full scope and implications of the book.

One fundamental concern is whether one can, in fact, speak authoritatively for a particular religion. One Evangelical reviewer encouraged readers to dismiss completely the joint conclusions in the book because Robinson claims to speak for himself and not officially for the LDS Church.³ The assumption, of course, is that only certain people can argue the LDS position in a way that would be considered valid to Evangelicals. But who would that be? The Prophet? The Twelve? No one says, but the question is important.⁴ To invalidate Robinson's contributions simply because he does not speak in an official capacity creates an equally difficult problem for Evangelicals. If they argue that Robinson is not to be taken seriously, then what of Blomberg? He, too, claims to speak for himself and not officially for any one (27). Should Latter-day Saints dismiss Blomberg's contributions because he does not speak officially for Evangelicals? Doing so would jeopardize *any* attempt at interfaith dialogue.

A second general problem lies in the question the book's title asks—one that the authors and reviewers believe can be and has been answered to some degree. One wonders further, however, about criteria by which this question can actually be answered. Even assuming that it is possible to determine the location of a theological divide, how can its breadth be measured? Neither the authors nor reviewers provide a measuring device; ultimately, they leave that responsibility to individual readers. This may contribute not only to the irresistible attraction of the book but also to its ultimate discomfiture.

Finally, throughout the reviews, most Evangelicals and even some Latter-day Saints apparently assume that Robinson must bear the primary burden of proof in this dialogue. Such an assumption is unwarranted. No arbiter imposes the burden of proof on either Robinson or Blomberg. In fact, the authors themselves usually refuse to place this burden on one another. While they present misgivings about each other's faith, neither Robinson nor Blomberg attempts to exact a response with the idea that if a point goes unsatisfactorily answered, the other side has suffered defeat. To assume that either author ultimately has the burden of proof goes contrary to the spirit of the book.

Scripture

Since Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals place substantial emphasis on scripture, the reviewers' agreement in favor of this topic's prominence is strong.⁵ The problem arises with the question of what constitutes scripture.

For Latter-day Saints the concept of scripture is more complicated than for Evangelicals. Evangelicals hold a narrow view of scripture, confining their definition of scripture to the Bible and to a lesser extent certain Christian creeds. Latter-day Saints define scripture to include not only the four standard works in the official canon but also a host of inspired statements made by modern prophets. In addition, the LDS view of scripture can extend to insights originating within the sacred confines of personal revelation. While the latter two sources are uncanonized and therefore not binding on the Church as a whole, most Latter-day Saints consider them extremely valuable, primarily because they provide a more personal and contemporary body of divine direction. For Latter-day Saints, these benefits far exceed any difficulty inherent in the idea of an open canon.⁶

Critiquing the authors' views of LDS and Evangelical definitions of scripture was a central task for most reviewers of *HWD*. They find several issues to be of principal significance, and they hope for further clarification from the authors.

As expected, Evangelicals are quite outspoken on what constitutes scripture. The issue of an open canon occupies a prominent place in their reviews. Of chief concern are Robinson's arguments that the Bible itself does not propound the idea of a closed canon and does not purport for itself to contain all necessary revelation from God. On the one side, according to Evangelical reviewers, Robinson's arguments in favor of an open canon still do not adequately address Evangelical arguments in protest against the LDS approach.⁷ On the other side, Evangelicals neglect to deal with the degree to which the Bible itself contains information that is helpful but not essential for salvation. With this in mind, why should Evangelicals require Latter-day Saints to demonstrate that their additional scripture is *necessary* for salvation? Would Evangelical soteriology be materially altered by the loss of a chapter or two from Second Chronicles? Probably not. Similarly, even if the LDS scriptures added nothing to Christian soteriology, what they do contain could still (on the model of much of the Bible) be the word of God.

Troublesome to Evangelicals is Robinson's attempt to explain the function of modern prophetic statements. Reviewers are unsure of the credence Latter-day Saints give such statements, seemingly accepting some as scripture while rejecting others in what appears to an outsider to be a haphazard, utilitarian manner.⁸ The problem is the lack of a well-defined criterion that governs such decisions. Discussions in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* about the LDS view of scripture may prove helpful in this regard.⁹

Scriptural inerrancy is another issue that dominates the reviews. Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints alike express concern and even surprise at

some of Robinson's comments on the subject. Of particular note is Robinson's insistence that Latter-day Saints could accept the Evangelical Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (57). Some reviewers are concerned that such a position misrepresents what many Latter-day Saints believe or should believe.¹⁰ Of consequence is Robinson's statement that "there isn't a verse of the Bible that [he] does not personally accept and believe" (21). This one sentence provides reviewers with several rounds of ammunition.¹¹ A major repercussion is the question it raises about LDS concerns regarding scriptural literalism and also about the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible.¹²

The last scriptural issue on which Evangelical reviewers focus is the question of historical evidence.¹³ In their view, Robinson is either attempting to conceal incriminating information or fails to realize the significance of historical evidence.

LDS reviewers have a few concerns of their own concerning the Evangelical concept of scripture. The first pertains to the function of the creeds. Blomberg argues that the creeds serve to summarize biblical propositions. Robinson, alternatively, is convinced that most Evangelicals see the creeds not merely as summaries, but as inspired interpreters of the Bible. In Robinson's view, if the creeds operate in the latter manner, Blomberg needs to reconsider the legitimacy of LDS scriptures in addition to the Bible since one of their functions is also to interpret or clarify the Bible (72).

A frequent refrain in Robinson's arguments is that Greek philosophy influenced the creeds to the point that they cannot function as inspired biblical interpreters. Some reviewers concluded that this argument is misguided,¹⁴ but it raises issues that need further attention. First, whether or not the creeds were influenced by philosophy, strictly speaking they are still extracanonical and therefore should be as objectionable to Evangelicals as any other nonbiblical scripture.¹⁵ Second, since there are many creeds, some with significant differences, how is it possible to know which creed is right?

A final scriptural issue that warrants attention is Blomberg's belief that the Bible is somehow binding for the salvation of all people, regardless of whether they are aware of its saving message. Blomberg addresses this "vexing problem" by pointing to three orthodox Christian theories that explain, in one way or another, how it is that God can hold people accountable for truth they never directly received nor recognized (171–72). One LDS reviewer expressed displeasure with this notion, arguing that it denotes a cruel God who gives his children an unchangeable nature and then punishes them for it.¹⁶

Godhood and Deification

According to the authors and reviewers, the most divisive issue between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints is each faith's understanding of God's nature.¹⁷ Though some reviewers praise the authors for their careful approach to this sensitive topic,¹⁸ several important items remain to be clarified.

Evangelical reviewers are puzzled by the LDS view of deity. Of foremost concern is whether Latter-day Saints believe in a finite or an infinite God. Though Robinson insists that Latter-day Saints worship an infinite God (78), many Evangelicals remain unconvinced. They cite two primary reasons for this.

First, they claim that Robinson's statement seems to run counter to doctrines contained or implied in Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse and Lorenzo Snow's famous couplet.¹⁹ To Evangelicals, these sources clearly imply a time in which God was not God. If this is true, God must have had a beginning as God and, hence, cannot be infinite. Evangelicals have difficulty understanding how one can accept the King Follett and the couplet as normative (85) and yet still believe in an infinite God.²⁰ Second, they assert that numerous LDS scholars have explicitly stated or implied that LDS theology denotes a finite God.²¹ While Evangelicals would like to believe Robinson, they point to the work of other LDS scholars to show different points of view within the LDS community on this critical issue.²²

Also worrisome to Evangelicals is Robinson's evidence in favor of an infinite God. Evangelical reviewers argue that just because Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals use the same "omni" adjectives to describe God, this does not necessarily mean Latter-day Saints worship the same infinite God.²³ Similar terminology need not connote similar belief. To Evangelicals, terminology must be defined on the basis of usage, and where usage differs, this difference must be recognized.

On the other side of the coin, one LDS reviewer finds equally serious problems with Blomberg's arguments on the nature of God. Blomberg insists that Christ was both fully God, the Creator, and fully human, the creature; yet he does not believe that humans can take on certain "incommunicable" attributes (96). To that reviewer, Blomberg's argument violates a basic law of logic, the law of noncontradiction, which asserts that a thing cannot both have and not have the property in question. In this case, the properties in question are the attributes of humanity and the attributes of divinity. It is not logical to argue that Christ had both while at the same time to deny that what is truly human can ever be truly divine.²⁴

Christ and the Trinity

Although this third chapter, as with the final exchange regarding salvation, has received far less attention from the reviewers than the first two chapters, these subjects are still of utmost significance. To Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals, the nature of the Godhead is a vital issue. A major theme for most reviewers is the degree to which Christ is subordinate to the Father and to what extent, if any, Christ was subordinate at the time of the Atonement.

Robinson explains that Latter-day Saints believe “the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is subordinate to both the Father and the Son” (131). In this view, Christ’s subordinate state is permanent and was therefore in effect at the time of the Atonement. Evangelicals, however, do not concur. Blomberg points out what he believes is a major flaw with the LDS doctrine, namely, “if Christ was ever less than fully God (even when he assumed a human nature), then he is by definition not the kind of infinite deity necessary to atone for our sins and to pay the infinite price required for our purification” (118).²⁵

To some Evangelicals, Robinson’s arguments on Christ’s nature are illogical. They cite, for example, the problem that arises when Robinson interprets scriptures in a particular order. During his discussion of the “oneness” of the Godhead, Robinson cites John 14:11 to support his position (130); he interprets it, however, in the context of John 17:21–22, something Evangelicals object to because these verses come later in the narrative. In their view, one should interpret John 17:21–22 in light of John 10:30 and John 14:11, “since they occur *prior* in the narrative.”²⁶

Similarly, one LDS reviewer expressed difficulty with Blomberg’s view of the Godhead and with his critique of the Mormon view. He argues that Blomberg’s explanation of the Trinity is insufficient because it does not clearly indicate the degree of closeness between the Father and the Son. It appears that Blomberg “prefers a view which, he believes, retains something like Hebrew monotheism as much as possible while also keeping the distinction between the Father and the Son.”²⁷ However, while Blomberg is “emphatic that Latter-day Saints have separated the Father and the Son too much to meet this requirement, by giving each of them a glorified body,” Blomberg fails to realize that his own position requires a radical separation.²⁸ By claiming that the Son has a body while the Father does not, Blomberg essentially asserts that “the Son thus has a nature and capacities that the Father not only lacks, but can never have. How is this supposed to maintain an identity between Father and Son compatible with Hebrew monotheism?”²⁹

LDS reviewers are frustrated that Blomberg insists the LDS view of Christ's subordination to the Father is erroneous. Especially bothersome is his statement that "historic Christianity has always insisted on balancing Christ's *functional* subordination with his ontological equality" (117). According to one reviewer, "this type of talk is vague. I'm not sure what Blomberg means by 'historic Christianity,' but if it includes the earliest Christians who wrote the New Testament, then his insistence on 'ontological equality' seems to me misdirected. I cannot find that word or even the concept anywhere in my Bible."³⁰ In general, Latter-day Saints find it ironic that anyone who believes in the "incomprehensible" Trinity should complain that someone else's view of the Godhead is illogical.

Salvation

LDS and Evangelical reviewers have mixed reactions concerning the treatment of salvation in *HWD*. Some view this topic as the area in which the two faiths have the most in common.³¹ Others, however, see the authors' arguments as possibly misleading.

A divisive issue among reviewers is their differing perceptions of how well the authors have explained the scriptural concept of grace. Their reactions are most likely prompted by Blomberg's assessment that Robinson "comes tantalizingly close to historic Christian affirmations of salvation by grace alone, but then just stops short of them" (179). Not surprisingly, this pleases some Evangelicals who see it as a positive sign that LDS thinking may be shifting away from a works-enhanced view of grace.³² Satisfaction with Robinson's position on grace is not limited to Evangelicals. At least one LDS reviewer expressed pleasure that Robinson's understanding of grace is directly in line with LDS scriptures.³³

Other reviewers, however, are reluctant to accept Robinson's interpretation of grace. One Evangelical worries that excitement over Robinson's seemingly compatible view of grace will obscure the fact that other LDS doctrines may still be divergent.³⁴ Another thinks that Robinson is misguided in his attempt to equate LDS teachings on salvation with the Arminian position.³⁵

One LDS reviewer argues that the way Robinson interprets grace is more along Protestant than Mormon lines. He worries that the idea behind Robinson's well-known bicycle parable "is more Protestant than Mormon."³⁶ He finds that the bicycle parable, though effective in some ways, is about "amounts" of grace and works rather than the conditional salvation taught by modern revelation.³⁷

At the same time, Blomberg is not immune from criticism for his views on salvation. One LDS reviewer found problems with his (and Robinson's) understanding of the relationship between faith and works.

The two authors seem to insist that works follow automatically from faith or grace (187), “as if works are a mere afterthought that play no role in our salvation.”³⁸ According to that reviewer, however, the scriptures render such a separation of faith and works a “false dichotomy—like a body without a spirit.”³⁹

Also of concern to that reviewer is Blomberg’s worry that Latter-day Saints emphasize keeping the commandments more than they do relying upon grace (178–80). To him this indicates that Blomberg misunderstands the grace that the Apostle John teaches in the scriptures.⁴⁰ This grace “focuses on the unconditional divine love that we accept by reciprocating love. However, *conditions to ‘abide in’ the relationship require keeping the commandments.*”⁴¹ In other words, the LDS emphasis on works comes directly from the teachings of John.⁴²

Different interpretations of grace, of course, may serve only to highlight the fact that grace may not mean exactly the same thing in the writings of John as it does in the letters of Paul or in the Epistle of James. In the face of biblical ambiguity, Latter-day Saints welcome the clarity found in the Book of Mormon’s description of the plan of salvation.

Overall Assessment

The numerous reviews of *How Wide the Divide?* provide strong evidence that the book is achieving its main purpose. Several Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals now appear anxious to engage in meaningful dialogue. The reviewers have identified several issues that call for further attention. BYU Studies is honored that Robinson and Blomberg have agreed to respond below to some of these issues and to further the healthy dialogue they have initiated. Before they continue, we echo the reviewers’ conclusions. As Paul Owen and Carl Mosser see it,

Stephen Robinson and Craig Blomberg have done the members of their respective religions a service in writing this book. Both should be commended for their efforts to present their views with clarity, to deal with the issues honestly, and to display a charitable attitude in the process. *How Wide the Divide?* is one of the most important books ever to be written on Mormonism. Anyone with an interest in Mormonism who has not yet read this book dare not wait any longer. *Things have changed.* Latter-day Saints no longer have an excuse for expressing their views with imprecise language, bad terminology, or pejorative anti-Evangelical rhetoric. Evangelicals no longer have an excuse for not trying to understand *contemporary* Latter-day Saint theology on its own terms, for sloppy scholarship, or for employing pejorative anti-Mormon rhetoric. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson have changed the tone of discussion to a level appropriate for those who call themselves Christians. We can all hope and pray that others will follow the path these two have pioneered.⁴³

Virtually all reviews have commended the “good spirit,”⁴⁴ the “civility,”⁴⁵ and the “irenic and charitable attitude of the authors.”⁴⁶ As Blake Ostler concludes,

amazingly, they carry on a conversation worthy of being called “Christian” regarding the concerns and agreements they have with one another. They have jointly authored an important book that is a model of informed discussion about issues affecting Mormons and evangelicals.⁴⁷

Thus, although we still may be waiting and looking for the answer to the question just how wide is the divide? we may well be on the right track toward reaching an answer.

II. REPLY BY STEPHEN E. ROBINSON

From my perspective, Evangelical reaction to *HWD* has been self-contradictory at best and perhaps even schizophrenic at worst. On the one hand, certain reviewers have been positively vicious in their denunciation of the book and its authors; on the other hand, *HWD* received an annual Best Book award from the mainstream Evangelical weekly *Christianity Today* (April 27, 1998). While the book has been damned as a Mormon plot designed to proselytize Evangelicals, it was co-authored by a respected Evangelical scholar, was published by a leading Evangelical press, and spends as much effort explaining Evangelical beliefs to its Latter-day Saint readers as vice versa. Some Evangelical reviewers have praised the book as a landmark in LDS-Evangelical relations and understanding, but others have resorted to unrestrained *ad hominem* argument, characterizing me, among other things, as a calculating liar and Blomberg as a slobbering idiot.

How does one account for these surprising extremes in Evangelical evaluations of the same work? The answer is actually very simple. Those Evangelicals who are genuinely interested in understanding Latter-day Saints generally find *HWD* helpful. Those Evangelicals who believe the book should have been written as a proselytizing weapon to be used against Latter-day Saints generally hate it. I have found that positive and negative reviews have fallen rather neatly into the categories of either scholars and academics or professional “anticultists” and their retinue.

The latter’s negative reviews are not surprising. After all, demonizing the enemy is a common strategy in warfare. Thus, militant anti-Mormons generally evaluate the book only on how well it accomplishes their propaganda goals, and since Blomberg has failed to demonize Latter-day Saints, the book and its Evangelical co-author can only be seen by these militants in negative terms. For so-called anticultists, the proper focus of any such book should be, not intellectual truth and understanding, but strategy and tactics in proselytizing.

Among Evangelical intellectuals, academics, and scholars, however, *HWD* has been much better received, hence the Best Book award based on a large poll of Evangelical thinkers. This, I believe, is because such individuals better understand that a dialogue is not a contest and they also tend to be more focused on gaining correct understanding than they are on “winning” (though this emphatically does *not* mean that they have agreed with my position or beliefs). I have discovered (to my surprise, I must admit) that most Evangelical thinkers, like Gamaliel of old, are willing to hear both sides, and that most are actually pleased at Blomberg’s opportunity in *HWD* to present a sympathetic treatment of Evangelical beliefs to a large number of LDS readers. This, then, is the polarity that explains the “wide divide” in Evangelical opinions toward this book.

Perhaps I should mention that I began this project with considerable mistrust, looking for the hidden dagger in every move of my co-author and his publisher. In the course of time, however, I learned that both Blomberg and all those I worked with at InterVarsity Press were truly Christian men and women of great integrity, and it pains me to see them maligned by extremists in their own camp for representing Mormons as they are at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I want to note that after all is said and done, neither of us converted each other. In fact, the book ends with a number of points on which Blomberg and I (and Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints) are still definitely at odds. I am still a devout Latter-day Saint, and Blomberg is still a devout Evangelical. And yet we do understand each other better, we like each other more, and we have in some small measure reduced the amount of religious intolerance and hatred in the world. Neither of us believes in a God who would be displeased with these results.

Of course, the great unfairness in judging *HWD* by its proselytizing potential is that neither Blomberg nor I took any thought for proselytizing in composing the book. Thus, instead of evaluating the book according to the purposes for which we wrote it, the negative reviewers on both sides of the divide have rather charged us with writing the wrong book! Yet as we two scholars came to know each other, it became clear that Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals do not usually understand each other. It often follows that they do not like each other either. Therefore, the purpose of the book was to increase understanding rather than to win proselytes on either side. For that endeavor, we have been criticized, particularly Blomberg, whose intellectual sandals, in my opinion, his critics are not worthy to loose.

Most of what I would say to the reviewers in this forum has already been said at greater length in the book itself. I find in this fact evidence that the reviewers either have not read *HWD*, did not understand it, or have simply dismissed its arguments without considering them. Moreover, the design of *HWD* did not imagine that we would attempt to respond to every

issue raised. Many of those have been addressed elsewhere, for instance questions regarding various details of Book of Mormon historicity. There are, however, a couple of negative themes in the reviews that I would like to respond to briefly.

The flimsiest, in my judgment, is the claim that my views as expressed in *HWD* are not representative of “real” Mormonism. Some Evangelical reviewers have accused me of intentional deception on this point, while others have merely dismissed me as an aberration out of harmony with the LDS mainstream. Professional anticultists in particular are forced to deny my LDS orthodoxy since my beliefs are so incompatible with the caricature they have created and presented to their fellow Evangelicals over the years. If my testimony is allowed to stand, they will find themselves in the same boat with the silversmiths at Ephesus—with lost income to match their lost credibility.

The christology and soteriology that I laid out in *HWD*, which my critics label as either deceptions or aberrations, are found at greater length in two books I wrote previously for LDS audiences, *Believing Christ*⁴⁸ and *Following Christ*.⁴⁹ Each of these books received both the Best Book and Best Doctrinal Book awards from the Independent LDS Booksellers (in 1995 and 1996, respectively). In addition, I received the Deseret Book Award for Exceptional Contribution to LDS Literature for writing *Believing Christ*. Together, these two books have sold almost a third of a million copies in an English speaking, LDS market of about 5 million persons. The remarkable success of these books as well as the almost total lack of negative criticism from within the LDS community render Evangelical charges of misrepresentation without merit. While it is true that only President Hinckley can officially declare the doctrines of the Church, it is at least clear from the above that my beliefs are commonly found in the LDS Church and that they are considered within the bounds of LDS orthodoxy.

Though I am, like Paul, embarrassed at the need to commend myself in defense of my credibility, I seem forced by some reviewers to do so. I am an active Latter-day Saint, I am a former bishop in the LDS Church, I am one of a handful of Latter-day Saints to hold a doctorate in religious studies (Duke, 1978), and I have learned the religious terminology of Protestants by teaching religion at both Methodist and Presbyterian colleges. I have been at BYU in the Department of Ancient Scripture for thirteen years, six and one-half of those years serving as department chair. I have served the LDS Church both officially and unofficially in discussions with other denominations and continue to do so today. For example, Southern Baptists who are familiar with the SBC video “The Mormon Puzzle” will have seen me answering doctrinal questions on Mormonism for that documentary—at the request of LDS leaders. The charges that my beliefs

are not “real” Mormonism constitute the last desperate *ad hominem* of anticultists terrified of finally losing their monopoly on interpreting Mormonism to Evangelicals. For years they have, like ventriloquists, scripted and delivered both sides of the discussion, and they don’t like the muzzle finally being taken off the other side.

One area in which both LDS and Evangelical reviewers have had trouble involves the difference between “scripture” and “canon.” For Evangelicals these terms are almost synonymous, but this is not true for Latter-day Saints, who believe that “scripture” (with a lower case *s*) can be whatever an individual personally receives as inspired by the Holy Ghost. But “scripture” in this latter sense is always personal and individual, and there is no guarantee that the inspiration an individual receives related to non-canonical sources will always be correct. However, “the canon of scripture” or “the standard works” is what the Church—led by its prophet—has *collectively* received as inspired by the Holy Ghost. My patriarchal blessing might be “scripture” for me, but it is not, therefore, a valid source of doctrine for the whole LDS Church. President Hinckley is certainly aware of his authority to canonize anyone’s sermon, statement, opinion, or blessing, wherever and however expressed, but so far he has declined to do so, though previous prophets have canonized sections 137, 138 and Official Declaration 2 in the Doctrine and Covenants. No new doctrine is “the doctrine of the Church” until it has been so canonized by addition to the standard works. All the rest is homily, interpretation, or application that may be very good and profitable, but it does not enjoy the same status as the standard works. Latter-day Saints tend to blur this important distinction when they think individually rather than collectively, if they confuse policy decisions and their application with doctrinal declarations, or if they forget that even General Authorities sometimes disagree among themselves in their interpretations of the standard works. Militant anti-Mormons, on the other hand, also blur the distinction because most of their ammunition comes from noncanonical LDS sources.

Another point of controversy over my part of *HWD* is that I insist that the LDS God is “infinite.” I believe this, and I will continue to insist on it simply because that is what the standard works say and because they never say the opposite. Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants (the extremely important “Articles and Covenants of the Church”) states, “By these things we know that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them” (v. 17). Verse 28 goes on to say, “Which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end. Amen.” To me, that seems pretty straightforward. God and his attributes are also described in the Book of Mormon as infinite

(see 2 Nephi 1:10; 9:7; 25:16; Mosiah 5:3; 28:4; Alma 34:10–14; Helaman 12:1; Moroni 8:3).

On the other hand, I can find no description of God in the standard works as “finite.” If some LDS writers want to adopt the philosophical argument that an embodied God can’t be infinite (the incarnation of Christ notwithstanding), they are certainly free to do so. But they cannot do so without contradicting the canonical scriptures of the Church, which define LDS doctrine on this point. And if some whiz kids want to attempt explaining their philosophical objections to me, I shall be amused at the prospect of finite theologians telling an infinite God what he can or cannot be or do. The doctrine of the Church as stated in its standard works is that God is infinite.

III. REPLY BY CRAIG L. BLOMBERG

I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to Matthew Connelly and BYU Studies’ fine summary of various published reviews of *HWD*. Considering that it was produced from an LDS viewpoint, I find its summaries and assessments to be about as even handed and representative as one could expect. Only occasionally does it seem to depart from an objective evaluation by engaging in a little of its own apologetic.⁵⁰

An even more comprehensive survey of responses to *HWD* would include published reactions in recent books, as well as a number of more popular-level Evangelical journals. For example, in the last two years Evangelicals have produced books such as *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (which criticizes at numerous points both my material and Stephen Robinson’s),⁵¹ *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism: The Great Divide between Mormonism and Christianity* (which criticizes only Robinson’s material),⁵² and *Mormonism Unmasked: Confronting the Contradictions between Mormon Beliefs and True Christianity* (which does not explicitly refer to *HWD* but which is based in part on an unpublished paper delivered in 1997 to the Evangelical Theological Society that did explicitly review and critique both authors).⁵³ In addition, Hank Hanegraaff takes us to task in the introduction to his revision of Walter Martin’s *Kingdom of the Cults*.⁵⁴ As for journals, James White sharply criticizes *HWD* in *The Christian Research Journal*,⁵⁵ as does L. L. Veinot in *The Midwest Christian Outreach Journal*.⁵⁶ Stephen F. Cannon concludes that the divide is still wide in *The Quarterly Journal*,⁵⁷ while Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson feel similarly in an on-line review.⁵⁸ On the other hand, much more positive assessments appear in reviews found in *First Things*,⁵⁹ *Truth Quest Journal*,⁶⁰ and in several articles in *The Watchman Expositor*.⁶¹ I’m sure there must be additional LDS responses as well, but I am personally unaware of any published versions.⁶²

Of course, in addition to all of the published material, I have received countless responses in person, over the telephone, and through letters and email. A substantial majority of these responses, from both Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints, has been extremely positive and encouraging, but there has also been a minority of sharply critical responses from both camps. Because it may not be entirely clear, it is important to stress that the reviews by Evangelicals Mouw and Owen and Mosser are highly affirming of *HWD*, and even the more mixed review by Pement generally approves of the dialogue but simply feels that it was premature to put it into printed form. Sivulka appreciates my contribution but questions Robinson on scripture. Clearly, the book creates a polarized response; few remain neutral about it! Fortunately, however, the publisher, my own seminary community, and the Baptist church in which I am an elder have all remained uniformly supportive of me in this endeavor.

Before dealing with the various responses to *HWD*, I would like to defend myself against what I believe is an unwarranted criticism, one that is not mentioned by the reviewers summarized above but needs attention nonetheless. Clearly, there were specific statements that I made in the book which I realize in retrospect could have been better clarified. To take just one oft-cited example, I refer to my remarks in the book on the three sources of much Evangelical knowledge about Latter-day Saints: polemical anticult literature, doorstep conversations with missionaries, and information from ex-Latter-day Saints who left the Church with some bitterness (22). From this seemingly harmless information, my critics have accused me of saying that most ex-Mormons are bitter, most anticult literature is polemical, and most anticult literature is written by bitter ex-Mormons. Of course, none of these statements logically follows from my comments, nor do they accurately reflect my intent. I am aware of many well-informed nonpolemical outreach ministries to Latter-day Saints (and also of many that are not).

Rather than attempting to respond to the reviewers point-by-point as summarized above, an impossible task in the compass of a short response of this nature, let me identify what I believe are three dominant, recurring issues among the reviewers who are more critical of *HWD*. First, many Evangelicals doubt whether Robinson is representative of current LDS thinking. This is not quite the same point as the matter of Robinson not speaking in an official capacity. Evangelical reviewers recognize that he is an academic and not a Church authority, but the real issue is whether his way of phrasing many of his positions, which seems to put him at times quite close to Evangelicals, does in fact reflect the majority perspective (or even a significant minority view) within both the more official leadership of the Church and the broader grassroots membership. I'm convinced,

from a variety of sources and conversations that, *contra* the speculation of some, Robinson very much remains in the good graces of LDS leadership and represents the views of at least a significant segment of Church authorities. Particularly significant in this regard are the published commendations of Robinson's writings by Elder Dallin H. Oaks, one of the current Twelve Apostles of the Church.⁶³ I am much less in a position to evaluate how comparable Robinson's views are to the average "person in the pew." As I indicated at several points in *HWD*, several of Robinson's own reflections seem at times to distance him from more conventional ways of phrasing LDS doctrine (53–54, 104–5, 179–82),⁶⁴ but since I wrote the book, virtually every Mormon of the dozens I have met or who has contacted me has generally approved of Robinson's approaches. The LDS reviews by Ostler and England do demonstrate scholarly dissent from Robinson at several points yet do not make him out to be aberrant overall.

A second major theme is that several critical reviewers suspect that Robinson is deliberately withholding information that would cast the LDS perspective in a quite different light. This is particularly true, they argue, when Robinson does not discuss instances where Latter-day Saints are divided on issues of doctrinal significance. Such criticisms, however, are unjustified. Clearly, the two of us, along with our publisher, agreed to limit our dialogue to four central and typically divisive doctrinal questions, so obviously both of us had to leave out issues and remarks on related topics that we might have made in a more wide-ranging study. Few informed Latter-day Saints would deny that differences on doctrinal issues exist among themselves, least of all Robinson. The foregoing summary itself, for example, points to the diversity of LDS discussion on such questions as Is God "finite" or "infinite" (or was he *ever* finite)? Does Robinson wittingly or unwittingly reflect more of a Protestant than an orthodox LDS understanding of grace? (and) Is Robinson's nuanced approval of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy a faithful reflection of his tradition's understanding of the doctrine of scripture or not?

Expanding on just one of these areas of divergence, Francis Beckwith observes:

In *How Wide the Divide* Stephen Robinson claims that 'Evangelicals often accuse Latter-day Saints of believing in a limited, finite or changeable God, but there is absolutely nothing in the LDS Scriptures or LDS beliefs to justify such a charge. I've never heard any such proposition stated in my church—*never!*' In light of what has been covered [a reference to competing LDS views similar to those cited above], it is difficult to understand how a man of Professor Robinson's acumen can make such a claim.⁶⁵

Beckwith goes on to note David Paulsen's doctoral dissertation "in which he presents the LDS view of God as a form of finite theism by citing numerous

LDS authorities and then proceeds to give a philosophically sophisticated defense of Mormon finite theism.”⁶⁶ Like Beckwith (and Ostler in his review), I am unable to resolve these conflicting claims.

The third major area of criticism is directed toward my contribution to *HWD*. Some reviewers fear that I have too compromised the distinctives of Evangelicalism or, while adequately articulating our views, have not engaged in a vigorous enough rebuttal of Robinson. Still others question the value of such a dialogue apart from explicitly evangelistic motives. And many have pointed to our joint conclusions, particularly the lists of agreements and disagreements at the end of the book (195–96), as making the divide between our respective communities seem much narrower than it actually is. Again, I remain unconvinced of the accuracy of any of these charges, while nevertheless conceding, as is the case with any published work, that after the fact one can see ways in which various points could have been expressed more clearly or forcefully.

Particularly troubling to me, however, is the way in which few, if any, reviewers from either the Evangelical or LDS communities acknowledged or interacted with several somewhat less common or more creative points which I tried to raise in my part of *HWD*. For example, the historical argument that so many of the distinctives of the Book of Mormon fit perfectly into the world of pioneer America in the early 1800s but make very little sense in some ancient Middle Eastern or Central American context (48–49) seems to have been largely ignored. Or, more generally, the argument that historians, like textual critics, prefer the “harder reading” and recognize that complex and ambiguous developments tend to spawn the desire to simplify and remove ambiguities seems to have been mostly overlooked (51–52). There is no question that in every one of the doctrinal areas which the book discusses, classic orthodox Christianity arrives at various impasses, paradoxes, or other puzzling conundra that the Old and New Testaments do not directly address or totally resolve. Thus it is entirely natural that later offshoots of the Christian tradition should wish to avoid or resolve the enigmas surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity, the divine and human natures of Christ, the fate of the unevangelized, and so forth, whereas it seems to me incomprehensible and virtually impossible that a religion should have at one stage in its history solved all of those problems as neatly and tidily as Mormonism does with all trace of those resolutions then vanishing for nearly two millennia (108, 126).

At the end of the chapter on salvation, I thought that one of my more important contributions was the application of Pascal’s wager to the debate between the two communities. This famous philosophical argument asks each conversation partner in an interreligious dialogue to reflect on what is at stake if one person’s views are wrong and his or her opponents’ views are

correct. I concluded that far more is at stake for the faithful Mormon if his or her views should turn out to be false than for the Evangelical; that perspective alone seems to me to some extent to commend Evangelical faith (183–86). But again, these more distinctive contributions seem largely to have been passed over by reviewers in favor of criticizing me for not perpetuating more conventional arguments.

Perhaps even more frustrating than the reviewers' failure to comment on the key distinctives of my contribution to *HWD* are the numerous more informal reactions I have received that speculate about what I intentionally did not say in the book. The most obvious and important of these is the issue of whether I believe a Mormon who accepts all of the LDS authoritative teachings can in fact legitimately merit the title Christian, besides perhaps in some very broad and relatively meaningless sense by which every Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox church member, however nominal or sectarian, would also be included. Stephen Robinson, of course, believes that the answer to this question is "yes," and he has devoted an entire book to the topic, which itself has spawned numerous reviews.⁶⁷ I still remain to be persuaded of this claim. Thus, it became very clear early in our conversations with one another and with our prospective publishers that little progress would be made if our book deliberately debated that topic. I therefore explicitly make the disclaimer in *HWD* that "this book does not intend to address the question of whether Evangelicals and Mormons are both, in certain instances, bona fide Christians, however well worthwhile that issue might be to discuss" (199 n. 6). I realize in retrospect that it was ill-advised to relegate this comment to what I thought would be formatted as a footnote but which turned out to be an endnote that has probably been very little read. Nevertheless, reviewers who commit themselves to respond to a work in a public medium have an obligation to read the entirety of the volumes they review and not to distort or misrepresent in their responses the authors' claims and intentions. While many people who have interacted with me, formally or informally, have picked up on this point, an astonishing number of the book's severest critics from both sides have either ignored or refused to believe my statement and insisted that I am indeed trying to claim that at least some Mormons are bona fide Christians.⁶⁸ The seminary with which I am affiliated even had to write a letter to Elder Oaks appealing to him to help stop this rumor apparently being promoted by LDS missionaries, since a nationally known Baptist denominational leader had reported to our school that this was exactly what was happening!

The most egregious published misrepresentation of my views of which I am aware appears, ironically, in a newsletter from an organization entitled "Truth-in-Love Ministries." In their June 1997 issue, an unsigned review declares that I go so far as to say that I am "thrilled to discover

Evangelical Mormonism' in Robinson's dialogue."⁶⁹ In fact, my wording in the book reads, "I would be overjoyed if I learned that there might be an 'Evangelical Mormonism,' just as increasing numbers of Roman Catholics or Seventh-day Adventists are abandoning their legacies of works-centered religion" (182). I then go on to note other questions that I would need to raise that make it clear from the context that I do not believe such an "Evangelical Mormonism" yet exists. The article in which I am misrepresented is also quite a polemical attack, thus demonstrating that, at least in this instance, the organization speaks neither in truth nor in love! It is worth adding that I am not the first to raise the possibility of an orthodox Christian element existing among Latter-day Saints. In 1991, Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary, wrote a sidebar in *Christianity Today* entitled "Evangelical Mormonism?"⁷⁰ In his article, Mouw discerns a trend among at least a handful of leading Mormon scholars and writers who appear to be moving noticeably closer to historic Christian orthodoxy.

All of this leads me to a more general concern. Despite our American tradition of democracy and the historic Protestant emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers," it seems that North American evangelicalism has no forum for objectively debating highly charged and sensitive issues without potentially incurring the wrath of self-appointed watchdog individuals and communities. While I am delighted how frequently Deseret bookstores have stocked and promoted our work, I am disappointed at how many Evangelical Christian bookstores have refused to do likewise. Booksellers obviously cannot read every book they might consider stocking, so they rely heavily on secondhand recommendations. Unfortunately, the blurb which appeared in *Christian Retailing* very soon after the book was published concluded with the comment "Be careful when recommending this book. It may confuse seekers and prove disconcerting to new believers."⁷¹ These cautions may be true of much Christian literature, and they may explain why the average Christian bookstore stocks proportionately little of academic substance (and why in turn even within Evangelical and LDS congregations there is widespread biblical illiteracy). I am afraid that many booksellers were scared off by our volume early on, without ever having the opportunity to read and evaluate it for themselves. In fact, if I have learned some lessons from my critics, they include how few of them read the work in its entirety and how many refused to evaluate our jointly authored comments (clearly the most controversial part of the volume) in light of the remarks we each made in our separately authored sections. In addition, numerous persons who have not even read the book at all nevertheless continue to pass on inaccurate and prejudicial information about it from sources to whom they have given more trust than they merit.

Notwithstanding, I am sure all these tendencies are not unique to Evangelicals. Given the caution that Robinson exercised throughout the editing process of our book and given Deseret's ultimate unwillingness, despite initial interest, to publish the book, it is obvious that there is a potential process of formal or informal censure that goes on among Latter-day Saints as well. Further evidence of this is provided by England's and Ostler's reviews, which lament the sometimes inappropriately harsh intra-LDS debate. We could wish that these states of affairs were not as they are, but there seems to be little that individual scholars can do at the moment to reverse the trends.

So what, then, is the next step? The summary above begins by stating that our book "is a bold attempt to conduct an ongoing, civil dialogue between Mormons and Evangelicals." This may have been Robinson's unexpressed intention; I do not know. Mine was the more modest one of conducting only *one* civil dialogue between *one* prominent Mormon and *one* Evangelical New Testament scholar. Nevertheless, I would be delighted if others followed in our footsteps and improved on the areas in which we have been deficient. It seems to me, however, that the potential fallout is too great for most scholars in both communities to attempt anything much beyond what we have done thus far. What does seem workable among people of good will in both faiths is some kind of wide-ranging conference (or series of conferences) involving a broad cross-section of Evangelical biblical scholars and theologians (representing numerous institutions and denominational traditions) and several representative LDS scholars. These two groups could give papers, engage in panel discussions, or generate other kinds of conversations in which each community attempts to reflect the diversity of acceptable perspectives within their movements and then compare and contrast the results. In this way, no individual would have to bear the brunt of the inevitable criticisms by their constituency's watchdogs, and whatever common conclusions emerged would clearly reflect more than the personal positions of individual scholars. Whether anyone in either of the two communities has the will to attempt to organize and convene such gatherings remains to be seen. I would be happy to help and to participate, but I am no administrator. Plus I am a bit too shell-shocked for the time being!

Nevertheless, even this three-part exchange of views in *BYU Studies* is an important and strategic follow-up to *HWD*, and I reiterate my thanks for being asked to participate. The tone and rhetoric of past eras of Evangelical-LDS exchanges need not continue. Ours is an age of unprecedented inter-religious dialogue on many fronts, even if our two communities are among the last to join in, at least with one another. Let us hope that a new century

and millennium will bring new overtures toward truly fulfilling Paul's command to speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), not least to each other.⁷²

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1. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts–Van der Donckt Discussion* (1903; reprint, with a foreword by David L. Paulsen, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

2. Several reviews of *HWD* by such authors as Paul Owen, Carl Mosser, Blake T. Ostler, William Hamblin, Daniel Peterson, Roger Cook, and David L. Paulsen are slated for publication in a forthcoming special issue of *FARMS Review of Books*. We have worked with prepublication versions of these reviews.

3. Evangelicals Francis Beckwith and Howard Hoffmann hold that Robinson's arguments are not authoritative and should therefore be "taken with a grain of salt." Francis J. Beckwith and W. Howard Hoffmann, review of *HWD* in *Christianity Today*, November 17, 1997, 59.

4. If readers are dubious about the way Robinson represents LDS ideas, they may consult various authors in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1992) and *Latter-day Christianity* (Provo, Utah: FARMS and Religious Education, 1998) for two other recent scholarly attempts to state orthodox LDS doctrines for a non-LDS audience.

5. Evangelicals Owen and Mosser emphasize, "The issue of the different canons, and the nature of the works in those canons, is the wellspring from which many of the other differences flow." Accordingly, the idea of scripture should be discussed as fully as possible since "the question of what God has and has not revealed is a question of utmost seriousness." Owen and Mosser, review of *HWD*, forthcoming in *FARMS Review of Books*.

6. For additional perspectives on the LDS doctrine of an open canon, see John W. Welch and David J. Whittaker, *Mormonism's Open Canon: Some Historical Perspectives on Its Religious Limits and Potentials* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997).

7. Owen and Mosser believe Robinson's argument against a closed canon is unsubstantiated because it avoids the "real" questions, which are, "What body of information is necessary for salvation?" and "Does the Bible contain this information?" They claim that only by approaching the issue in this way can Robinson make a strong case to Evangelicals for the possibility of an open canon. In addition, they state that if Robinson wants "to show the inferiority of the Evangelical view it would behoove [him] to demonstrate what information . . . is lacking in the Bible, and how uniquely Latter-day Saint canonical sources supply this indispensable data." Owen and Mosser are also concerned that Robinson fails to respond convincingly to Blomberg's arguments for the "plausibility of a closed canon based on traditional criteria." Owen and Mosser, *FARMS* review.

8. Beckwith and Hoffmann argue that Robinson's emphasis on the words of living prophets to the exclusion of those from dead prophets provides him with a convenient "escape clause" that allows him to avoid directly addressing the discrepancies found in the words of the modern prophets. According to Beckwith and Hoffmann, Robinson's own epistemology might force him to deny even some of Joseph Smith's prophetic pronouncements. Beckwith and Hoffmann, review of *HWD*, 57–59.

Latter-day Saint Blake Ostler finds similar problems in Robinson's scriptural arguments. He asserts that Robinson contradicts himself by insisting that the only doctrines binding upon Mormons are those found in canonized scripture. According to Ostler, such a position is:

hard to square with his [Robinson's] view that the ultimate authority in the Latter-day Saint community resides in living prophets, for he has no principled basis for rejecting the sermons of dead prophets in the *Journal of Discourses* as opposed to sermons of the living prophet, which he accepts as the ultimate guarantee of accurate interpretation of scripture. (Blake T. Ostler, review of *HWD*, forthcoming in *FARMS Review of Books*)

9. See "Scripture," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1277–84.

10. Evangelical Eric Pement argues that "it is . . . difficult to resist the impression that Dr. Robinson is merely *using* the Chicago Statement to gain the confidence of Evangelicals, and that he himself is either ignorant of its contents or somehow believes that errors and false statements in the autographs do not affect inerrancy." Eric Pement, "Is Mormonism Christian?" review of *HWD* in *Cornerstone* 26, no. 112 (1998): 44.

Ostler criticizes both Robinson and Blomberg for affirming the doctrine of inerrancy as set forth by the Chicago Statement: "In my opinion, numerous insuperable problems dictate the rejection of inerrancy in general and inerrancy as promulgated in the Chicago Statement in particular." According to Ostler, the doctrine of inerrancy is, among other things, incoherent and untenable, and he is particularly "stunned that Robinson apparently accepted the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as consistent with his Latter-day Saint beliefs, especially after he went to such great lengths to explain that he as a Mormon believes that scripture 'is in [the Mormons'] view recorded by men who can and do make mistakes.'" Ostler, *FARMS* review. For text critical concerns, see the *FARMS* review by William Hamblin and Daniel Peterson.

Evangelical Robert Sivulka argues that Robinson and Blomberg "may *not* in fact share the same understanding of inerrancy." According to Sivulka, while Blomberg believes that the Bible manuscripts are inerrant "as they were *originally* given via their writers," Robinson believes that they are inerrant only when they are translated correctly. Sivulka points out two possible problems with Robinson's view. First, "If, as Robinson notes, 'it is possible to mistranslate or to misinterpret the Hebrew and Greek (or Nephite) texts' (57), then surely it is possible to mistranslate . . . or to misinterpret the living prophet." What this means is that, "contrary to Robinson, epistemologically there is never any 'guarantee of doctrinal correctness' (57) for the church, nor any assurance that 'the written word will be interpreted and applied correctly to new contexts' (58), not even if God himself were to state the same thing in a more contemporary way." Second, Sivulka argues that it is possible for the person who interprets the translation, the living prophet, to communicate the revelation fallibly. Sivulka asserts that the question of whether this could occur is one that "Robinson never directly answers, and it is this question that raises ambiguity in his presentation (particularly pp. 56–58). Robinson could really be agreeing or disagreeing with Blomberg and other Evangelicals that the prophets and apostles were infallible in communicating that revelation." Sivulka would like to see Robinson clarify his position on this issue. In his view, if Robinson agrees that prophets can possibly communicate revelation fallibly, then it is impossible for him to claim that he and Blomberg share the same understanding of inerrancy. Sivulka also criticizes Blomberg, who "seems oblivious to this distinction between his [own] understanding of an inerrant original text and Robinson's possible

understanding of an inerrant direct revelation with a resulting possible fallible text.” Robert M. Sivulka, “Similar yet Different,” review of *HWD* in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 3 (1998): 196–98.

11. Latter-day Saint Eugene England says, “It was surprising to read Robinson’s rather complete capitulation to what seems like scriptural literalism. . . . It was especially surprising after his accurate summary of the rather liberal Mormon understanding, through modern revelation, that God speaks to his ‘servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language’ (D&C 1:24).” Eugene England, review of *HWD*, in this issue, 196.

Pement makes this point: “Though Dr. Robinson says he believes ‘every book, every chapter, every verse’ of the Bible, neither he nor Dr. Blomberg inform us that, according to the JST, ‘the Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings.’ Since Mormons believe the JST is ‘inspired,’ does Robinson reject the Song of Solomon?” Pement, “Is Mormonism Christian?” 44.

12. Owen and Mosser are perplexed by the JST issue. They argue that “according to Robinson’s own criteria, logically the JST should be a part of the Latter-day Saint standard works. That is, unless Robinson wants to advocate a position recognizing a division between authoritative scripture and unauthoritative scripture, in which case the term *scripture* becomes meaningless.” Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

13. Owen and Mosser are discouraged about this: “LDS and Evangelical readers alike will be disappointed that Robinson fails to give objective *reasons* for believing these additional works should be added to the canon, that he does not defend them against Blomberg’s criticisms, and (especially) disappointed that he fails to offer any *evidence* in favor of their historical veracity.” Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

14. Evangelical Richard Mouw says:

Anyone who is tempted by this ‘de-Hellenizing’ rhetoric . . . should read John Courtney Murray’s *The Problem of God*. There the great Jesuit thinker convincingly demonstrates that the classical creedal formulations about ‘being’ and ‘substance’ were not impositions of alien philosophical categories but the result of a necessary search for words that would capture the sense of Scripture to guard against dangerous misreadings of the biblical texts. (Richard J. Mouw, “Can a Real Mormon Believe in Jesus?” review of *HWD* in *Books and Culture* 3, no. 5 [1997]: 11, 15)

Ostler feels that “philosophical precision is not the problem Robinson makes it out to be. . . . The problem comes when devotion to prior philosophical paradigms or religious dogmas blocks acceptance of new revelation or leads to the commitment to two incompatible traditions of religious beliefs.” This “prior devotion” may have been what Robinson intended by his comments. If so, it was lost on Ostler. Ostler, FARMS review.

15. The very existence of the creeds, regardless of their use, complicates Blomberg’s arguments against LDS scriptures. For example, Blomberg argues that the Book of Mormon is superfluous; if it agrees with the Bible, then it is not necessary; if it disagrees with the Bible, then it is not scriptural and should be rejected. This same argument, however, can be applied to the creeds. For a discussion of other problems raised by the traditional creeds, see the FARMS review by Roger Cook.

16. England, review, 198.

17. To emphasize the significance of this issue, Owen and Mosser paraphrase the authors’ conclusion: “The doctrine of God is where the divide between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints is greatest. And it is from our differences concerning God that

most (if not all) of our other theological differences arise." Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

18. Owen and Mosser believe Robinson's "discussion of deification was cogently presented and insightful. He notices that the ontological distinction between Creator and creatures is perhaps 'the heart of the of the disagreements between us, for Latter-day Saints maintain that God's work is to *remove* the distinctions and barriers between us and to make us what God is.'" Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

Ostler says, "I believe that Robinson has elucidated a profound and insightful view of deity and grace. . . . I want to emphasize that Robinson has done an outstanding job in describing how humans become 'gods' that is consistent both with Mormon scriptures and the Bible." Ostler, FARMS review.

19. See K. Codell Carter, "Godhood," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:553-55, and Donald Q. Cannon, "King Follett Discourse," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:291-92.

20. Owen and Mosser say that because Robinson allows for the doctrines in the King Follett Discourse and Lorenzo Snow's couplet he "leaves the non-LDS reader wondering why these two statements should be taken as exceptions to [his] often-stated reminder that 'Scripture is normative; sermons are not' (74)." They would also like Robinson to clarify what he meant in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* when he wrote, "The Father became the Father at some time before 'the beginning,' as humans know it" (2:549). They want to know exactly what he meant in this context since, "strictly speaking, he writes of a beginning to God's role as a Father, not of a beginning to God's existence as God." In addition, Owen and Mosser are unsure of what Robinson is implying by his statement that "God the Son was undoubtedly once a man, and that did not compromise his divinity." They say, "In Latter-day Saint theology Jesus was already a God before his incarnation. Is Robinson implying that the Father likewise experienced mortality as a God-man, rather than *merely* a man like the rest of us?" Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

21. Owen and Mosser cite several LDS scholars who appear to hold this view: David L. Paulsen in *The Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism* (Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan, 1975; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1975); Blake T. Ostler in "The Mormon Concept of God" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 2 (summer 1984): 65-93; Blake T. Ostler in a review of Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* in *FARMS Review of Books* 8, no. 2 (1996): 99-146; David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler in a review of Beckwith and Parrish's *The Mormon Concept of God* in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35, no. 2 (1994): 118-20; James E. Faulconer in a review of Beckwith and Parrish's *The Mormon Concept of God* in *BYU Studies* 32 (fall 1992): 185-95; and Sterling McMurrin in *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1965), 26-27. See David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 82-89, and his FARMS review for further expositions of Paulsen's views on scripture, God's nature, and salvation.

Owen and Mosser write:

Robinson may not believe in a finite deity, and it may be that he does find the concept repugnant (as do most Evangelicals). Perhaps he believes that a finite deity is an improper object of worship. He may even agree with us that these other Latter-day Saints are mistaken about the virtue of a finite deity. But it is simply inaccurate for him to say that Evangelicals are erroneous in their perception of Latter-day Saints as advocates of a unique form of finite theism. (Owen and Mosser, FARMS review)

22. England is also concerned that Robinson's argument for an infinite God is misdirected and plays to Evangelical critics at the expense of valid prophetic statements. England, review, 197.

23. Owen and Mosser state, "We do not deny that Latter-day Saints describe God with the various *omni* terms. . . . But we feel that in Latter-day Saint terminology the meaning is so far removed from standard usage that it serves only to miscommunicate." They argue that Robinson's failure to make a distinction between Evangelical and LDS usage and Blomberg's failure to insist on it is "a weakness of both their presentations." In their view, LDS usage of omnipresent "would probably be more accurately described as 'omni-influential,'" which is different from the Evangelical view that describes God as "one having personal presence everywhere." Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

Ostler also sees problems with Robinson's usage of the "omni" terminology:

It is important to keep straight that when Latter-day Saints use such terms . . . they mean something different than the same terms in classical theology. . . . Robinson acknowledges this with respect to terms such as *finite*, *changing*, and *limited*, but seems to insist that the "omni" attributes are somehow univocal for both Mormons and evangelicals. This position can only lead to confusion and further charges that Latter-day Saints are somehow not being up-front. (Ostler, FARMS review)

24. Ostler argues that "Blomberg's acceptance of the so-called 'incommunicable' attributes of God leads to an incoherent view of the fully human and fully divine Jesus Christ." According to Ostler, this is so because it violates the law of noncontradiction. He surmises that Blomberg holds this view because of his belief in the two nature theory of Christ as promulgated in the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 A.D., yet Ostler finds several problems with this theory. One is that

the two nature theory is ultimately incoherent because the *entire person* of Christ is essentially uncreated (ontologically necessary) as God whereas humans are necessarily created (ontologically contingent)—at least on Blomberg's view. Blomberg's Christology thus implicitly violates the law of noncontradiction. Nothing can be both created and uncreated in the same respects. (Ostler, FARMS review)

25. Owen and Mosser support Blomberg's argument, claiming that it is especially difficult for Robinson to hold this position when the Bible (Phil. 2:5-8) and the Book of Mormon (Alma 34:10-14) imply or state that Christ remained "fully God during his experience of mortality" and that it was the infinite Jesus who wrought the Atonement. Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

26. Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

27. Ostler, FARMS review.

28. Ostler, FARMS review.

29. Ostler, FARMS review.

30. Ostler, FARMS review.

31. Owen and Mosser, for example, find "the divide between Blomberg and Robinson to be the narrowest" on the topic of salvation. Owen and Mosser, FARMS review.

32. Owen and Mosser expect that

Evangelicals will find that in many ways Robinson's presentation alleviates some fears and concerns they have had about the LDS doctrine of salvation. . . . Whether or not what Robinson describes has always been Latter-day

Saint theology, or even if he represents what *most* Latter-day Saints currently believe, we leave for others to determine. We are encouraged by what we read if Robinson's views are in fact representational of the direction in which Latter-day Saint theology is headed. (Owen and Mosser, FARMS review)

33. Ostler states: "I enthusiastically endorse Robinson's statement of grace and salvation as a view not merely compatible with Mormon scriptures, but required by them." By agreeing with Robinson's view of grace and salvation, Ostler argues that it is difficult for Blomberg to imply (as he does on p. 182) that Robinson is a "closet evangelical and that Latter-day Saints are really committed to salvation by works." Ostler, FARMS review.

34. Mouw says:

Should I be pleased to see Robinson making that confession? Perhaps. I can honestly say that I would *like* to be pleased. I certainly find nothing wrong with the way he says it here; if someone whom I was evangelizing said those same words with obvious sincerity, I would be hopeful that I had witnessed a genuine conversion. Why, then, am I reluctant to rejoice when a Mormon says them? Because I still worry about the larger set of beliefs and practices in which this confession is nested. (Mouw, "Can a Real Mormon Believe in Jesus?" 14)

35. Eric Pement argues that the LDS and Arminian positions cannot be compared for four reasons: (1) LDS theology teaches that almost everyone will be saved and therefore the need for faith is eliminated, (2) LDS teach that God cannot forgive certain sins, (3) LDS and Arminian definitions of justification are different, and (4) the LDS understanding of eternal life is different from that of biblical theology. Pement, "Is Mormonism Christian?" 47.

36. England, review, 193.

37. England asserts that "the crucial difference is, as I see it, that between an absolute God *giving* us relief from his absolute demands of justice because we have no merit and a loving Father *helping* us to become Christlike because we can't do it alone." He continues, "Salvation is not a quid-pro-quo reward (or punishment) by God but a state of being (or lack thereof) and of spiritual growth toward Godhood achieved through whatever combination of grace and choice and effort best works for each of us." England, review, 193, 194.

38. Ostler, FARMS review.

39. To support his assertion, Ostler cites James 2:17, James 2:22, and James 2:26.

40. Ostler concludes this from the following evidence:

John teaches that "we love [God] because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's unconditional love precedes our response; he has already accepted us. We accept God's unconditional offer of love, of saving grace, by reciprocating love. If we accept God, we love him, and if we love him, we "keep his commandments" (John 14:21-23; 2 John 2:6). If we keep God's commandments, then we "abide in [his] love" (John 15:10-11; 1 John 3:22-24). We "know" God (interpersonally) if we keep his commandments (1 John 2:3). To "know" the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent, is life eternal (John 17:3). If we keep the commandments, then "the love of God [is] perfected" in us and "we [know] that we are in him" (1 John 2:5). The love of God transforms us into "sons of God," and when he appears "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2) because this hope purifies us as He is pure (1 John 3:3). (Ostler, FARMS review)

41. Ostler, FARMS review.
42. In Ostler's words, "neither Robinson nor the Latter-day Saints invented this emphasis on keeping the commandments as a condition to abiding in God's love. It is a part of the Johannine expression of grace." Ostler, FARMS review.
43. Owen and Mosser, FARMS review. A joint review by Evangelical Bill Calderwood and LDS Mark Evans strongly agrees, in *Spirit Catalyst* (March 1999): 9.
44. England, review, 192.
45. Mouw, "Can a Real Mormon Believe in Jesus?" 14.
46. Pement, "Is Mormonism Christian?" 47.
47. Ostler, FARMS review.
48. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).
49. Stephen E. Robinson, *Following Christ: The Parable of the Diver and More Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995).
50. For example, arguing for the LDS view of an open canon or asserting that my arguments against the Book of Mormon could also apply to the creeds (note 15 and accompanying text above).
51. James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother? Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997).
52. Francis J. Beckwith and others, *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism: The Great Divide between Mormonism and Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1998).
53. R. Philip Roberts, *Mormonism Unmasked: Confronting the Contradictions between Mormon Beliefs and True Christianity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998).
54. Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Hank Hanegraaff (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 13–14. Hanegraaff selectively cites our work to make it appear that I no longer believe in evangelism, despite my explicit and italicized disclaimers to the contrary (191, 27 of *HWD*).
55. James White, "Review of How Wide the Divide," *Christian Research Journal* 20 (November–December 1997): 48–51.
56. L. L. Veinot, "Why the Divide," *Midwest Christian Outreach Journal* (July–August 1997): 6–9.
57. Stephen F. Cannon, "Still Wide the Divide: A Critical Analysis of a Mormon and an Evangelical in Dialogue," *Quarterly Journal* 17, no. 4 (1997): 1, 12–18.
58. Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, "How Wide Is the Divide?" (September 1997), <http://www.mrm.org/articles/divide.html>.
59. Alan Goff, brief notice of *HWD* in *First Things*, no 77 (November 1997): 61–62.
60. Ronald Enroth, "Other Evangelical Views of *How Wide the Divide?*" *Truth Quest Journal* 1, no. 3 (1997): 7.
61. Jason Barker, "Christians and Interreligious Dialogue," *Watchman Expositor* 15, no. 4 (1998): 4–8; Jason Barker, "The Key to Effective Religious Dialogue," *Watchman Expositor* 15, no. 4 (1998): 9–12; Jason Barker, "New Religious Movements: Religious Dialogue," *Watchman Expositor* 15, no. 4 (1998): 13–14, 19–21.
62. I did, however, receive eight tapes from KSL radio, Salt Lake City, of various shows and forums reflecting a diversity of LDS response to the book between June and October 1997.
63. Dallin H. Oaks, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," *Ensign* 24 (March 1994): 66.
64. Compare the similar experiences and reflections of Carl Mosser, "Why Evangelicals Need to Take the New Mormon Scholarship Seriously" (Orlando: ETS, November 1998), 9–12.

65. Beckwith and others, *Counterfeit Gospel*, 76, referring to Robinson in *HWD*, 92.

66. Beckwith and others, *Counterfeit Gospel*, 76.

67. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991).

68. See Ostler, FARMS review.

69. "Truth-in-Love Letter" [Milwaukie, Ore.: Truth-in-Love Ministries] (June 1997): 1–2. After my colleague Gordon Lewis wrote and pointed out this information to them, they did publish a retraction in their September 1997 newsletter, p. 4, apologizing for the error but giving no explanation for how it originally came about and continuing to polemicize against and misrepresent the book's function.

70. Richard Mouw, "Evangelical Mormonism?" *Christianity Today* 35 (November 1991): 30.

71. David Daniels, "How Wide the Divide?" *Christian Retailing* 43 (May 5, 1997): 62.

72. Since this article was first submitted, I have received the very positive double-review of *HWD* by evangelical Bill Catherwood and LDS L. Mark Evans in *Spirit Catalyst* (March 1999): 9.