

From the Pulpit

ARE MORMONS CHRISTIANS?

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This sermon was given last March at one of the daily chapel services at St. Olaf College (Lutheran) in Northfield, Minnesota; Eugene England, DIALOGUE's Planning Editor, is Dean of Academic Affairs at St. Olaf and President of the nearby Faribault Branch of the L.D.S. Church.

One day last fall as I was getting acquainted with a student who was particularly interested in my Mormon background, the student told of being informed by a religion professor that Mormons weren't Christians. This came as something of a shock: Mormons accept Christ's absolutely necessary role in the salvation of all men and affirm the literal resurrection that He experienced and provides for us; in fact, Mormons have tended to be somewhat aghast at Protestant and Catholic attempts to demythologize the New Testament accounts of Christ and at what seems a general retreat in liberal Protestantism from literal acceptance of Christ as the divine Saviour. But I passed this experience off, feeling I could make allowance for one small spot of darkness on the otherwise brightly shining surface of the Religion Department. Then a few weeks ago a Carleton student reported a similar comment by one of his professors; I began to seriously reflect about being a Christian — what it might mean, for Mormons, for me, for others.

My first thought was that Carleton and St. Olaf religion professors were reacting to their understanding of Mormon this-worldiness: our great optimism about man and his God-like potential; our rejection of original sin; our affirmation of man in his mortal condition and our concept of Adam as a great hero, who introduced us into a world of moral choice — *according to* God's plan, not against it. The Book of Mormon states that Adam fell that men might be and that men are that they might have joy. Mormons believe

that Adam courageously began a plan that Christ completed, Christ, as he said, coming to live that we might have abundant life — that our joy might be full because He has the power as the Son of God to save us from death and ignorance and sin, those great limitations that necessarily came with the great opportunities for growth in a mortal, material realm such as Adam brought us into. Mormons have always rejected the tendency to see the world as a shadow, as tentative, with the eternal behind or beyond it. We see the world itself as eternal, the whole universe and its laws as co-eternal with God, not contingent upon Him but shaped by Him in the Creation in order to provide opportunities for growth for man in the image of God; we believe that men are also eternal, co-eternal with God, having existed always as individuals but becoming spirit children of God before this life in a pre-existence and embodied in matter here in mortality as a necessary part of our growth, then empowered by Christ to come forth after death in the resurrection in glorified bodies like Christ's. As modern scriptures tell us, spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy.

I wondered if that could be the reason Mormons might not be considered Christians, that kind of metaphysics that makes us unwilling to accept Protestant and Catholic notions of a disembodied heaven, our refusal to exalt the spirit over the body — in favor rather of what we believe was the Hebrew and early Christian vision of the soul as spirit and body together and both as essentially good and part of our divine potential. We see the activities of this world as valuable in themselves and eternal in significance, the best things here enduring beyond death — love, certainly, but also friendship, esthetic sensitivity, knowledge of all kinds, our bodies and their finest skills and joys, all of the things that we value deeply and that are inseparably bound up with both the material and the spiritual; for instance, we see marriage, that fullest combination of physical and spiritual love, as ultimately the highest form of love and as enduring beyond death in a literal way.

But during the time I thought about these things my concerns were allayed a good deal by Professor David Wee's fine sermon last week, his hymn to joy, his affirmation of life in the world, which I found, despite its Lutheran cast, to be in perfect harmony with Mormon theology — and yet everyone still seems to think Dave is a Christian.

Finally, I decided to turn to the New Testament as a check on whether Mormons are Christian, and I did so a little hesitantly, suspecting that I would find, indeed, that my faith and my life were lacking, deficient in the face of that record and its ultimate challenges. And I wasn't disappointed, because I found there three overwhelming challenges to my self-confidence, three central standards of the Christian life which are awesome to confront. The most challenging, of course, is the central theme of unconditional love, those incredible commands to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to resist not evil, to turn the other cheek — and the unqualified demand by Christ that, in this regard, at least, we be perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect. I quailed before that message. But when I asked if

Mormon faith and theology are wanting in the face of that extreme criterion, my answer had to be "No." The commandments in modern scripture, the vision of perfect love in human relations, of unconditional regard for the welfare of others at whatever sacrifice to the self is just as clear — in one particular regard, perhaps even clearer. In the Book of Mormon is an account, the only one in scripture — or in history, as far as I know — of a group living out the love ethic to its ultimate consequences. The Book of Mormon is a religious history of a group of Israelites who traveled, under God's direction, to America about 600 B. C. and received continuing revelation from God to their prophets and a visit from Christ himself after His resurrection. Part of the record tells of a group who had broken away from the main body and lost their faith and relationship with God; some became reconverted and in the power of their new faith in Christ covenanted with God "That rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives." They "took their swords and all their weapons which they used for the shedding of man's blood and buried them deep in the earth." When they were later attacked by enemies they were true to their covenant, even though many of them were massacred; but without ignoring the high personal costs of obedience, the account gives powerful evidence that this ethic, which most Christians affirm but are afraid to try, is both right and *effective*: The attackers in turn were finally moved to repentance and threw down their weapons, "for they were stung for the murders which they had committed; and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them." This is an extreme example of the redemptive power of unconditional love, the love that changes people, absorbs and does away with evil rather than striking back in retribution and passing the evil on; it is a love that stands in judgment over all our talk as Christians and as a Christian nation about protecting our rights and about national security.

A second great challenge running throughout the New Testament is that condemnation of the rich, of material possession and its whirlpool tendency toward material obsession at the expense of the Kingdom of God, a theme climaxed by the example of the early Christians, moved by their faith to form a community in which they held all things in common. Being a relatively affluent capitalist I again quailed before that challenge; but again I found my Mormon faith and history, if anything, more demanding. In modern times the Lord has said, through Joseph Smith, "It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin," and again, "If you are not equal in earthly things you cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things." These revelations were given in preparation for the demand placed on the early Mormons to practice their ideals by actually forming communities in which all material possessions were deeded to the common group and then redistributed as literal stewardships; the results of the whole community's effort went first to meet the basic needs of all and any surplus was then used for the benefit of the needy elsewhere or the whole community.

A third pervasive challenge I find in the New Testament is that which Christ poses to the learned and to the respectable. The Greeks in their wisdom found the Gospel foolishness and Christ's claims and demands a scandal because they are incomprehensible without faith and imagination and humility. "I have not come to call the respectable people but the outcast," He said once. "God has shown to the unlearned what is hidden from the wise and learned." "God makes foolish the wisdom of this world." As a fairly good academic, a captive of Greek rationality, I again quailed before those statements, but again could find no relief from the challenge in Mormon theology. True, in keeping with its affirmation of the finest pursuits of the whole man and of this world and its beauties, there is great emphasis on education, on the eternal value of gains of the mind. But there is also strong insistence that ultimate values, saving values, lie beyond and are often threatened by reliance on the learning and wisdom of the world. The Book of Mormon says it this way, "To be learned is good, if they hearken unto the counsels of God."

But then I began to reflect that perhaps it was not my faith, not the theology of Mormonism, that was in question. The statement after all was that *Mormons*, not Mormon ideas, weren't Christian. The crucial question for me was, "Am I, a Mormon, also a Christian." And in the midst of those reflections I had an experience that provided a kind of answer, a frightening one. Last Sunday, a stranger approached me and as we talked about other things it became clear to me that the man badly needed food. I found out that he had not eaten for four days and had no prospects of food for at least a few more. I was in another town; I didn't have any money with me, and as I tried to help or find a way to help, I couldn't find any way that wouldn't have made his plight public in a way that was unacceptable to him, any way that wouldn't shame him; and finally, as I pressed various ways of getting money or food for him, he literally rushed away and left me helpless. That night, which I spent without much sleep, I was able to think of at least five good ways that I could have helped and that he could have accepted, but it was too late. If he had needed a \$10,000 government grant for some academic project or had wanted some help revising an Honors Program or with an analysis of the structure of a sonnet, or even an exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, I could have gone right to work and helped him — effectively and promptly. But in the rather simple matter of finding food for a proud person I was not resourceful. "Inasmuch as ye have done it not unto the least of these, by brethren, ye have done it not unto me." I felt great despair — and then I gradually indulged in a kind of rationalization that comes all too easy to me. I thought about the failures most of us make of this kind — the failure to perceive or respond effectively to basic needs. How often I have had students in my office discussing some relatively trivial matter, all the while communicating in the background a high, thin, silent cry for help. I've found it very difficult to find ways to be helpful, to even get enough trust that the need can be spoken. I've wondered how often I, and others of you, have failed to even hear the cry, or believed the evidence that we are not responding very effectively to students' deepest needs

— for personal identity and growth, for value orientation, for “significant others” to touch their lives. I began to wonder who indeed is Christian, if measured honestly against all those ultimate ethical demands of Christ, those awesome challenges to the quality of our lives.

Most of us are respectable, learned, guilty of arrogant or merely habitual authoritarianism, of much pride in our command of the wisdom of this present world; few of us are Christ’s fools. We are all participants to some degree in a suspicion — even rejection — of any learning not closed up in the four walls of a classroom or the covers of books; many of us bind ourselves and our students up in homage to the false God of scientism, that process of dividing and reducing knowledge that has afflicted the humanities as much as the sciences in our century, that surrender to the seduction of getting better and better answers to smaller and smaller questions until in many fields we may now be getting and teaching perfect answers to meaningless questions — a process that leaves Christ’s gospel outside the academy door as mere foolishness, impractical, logically nonsensical, too bulky to fit into our test tubes, or computers, or elegantly refined categories.

All of us are more or less rich, not equal in temporal things with each other and certainly not with the great majority of the world. All of us live in the upper ten or probably five per cent of men (in standard of living) and do it with few qualms of conscience. None of us does anything remotely like selling all, giving to the poor, and following Christ.

All of us stand under the awful judgment of the love ethic. Mere justice is hard to find on our campus; unconditional love beyond justice is much rarer. How many of us in this Christian college are willing to follow Paul’s advice to the Corinthians who were taking each other to count; how many of us are willing to “take wrong, to suffer [ourselves] to be defrauded,” in order to retain our relationships with others and to help them? Christ’s perfect love casts out fear, but each of us is to some degree caught up in fear, anxiety, hostility. We insist on our rights — our prerogatives — even at the cost of being destructive to others, belittling them, returning evil for evil. We ostracize the swingers, make fun of the straights. And of course very few of us have seriously confronted with the Gospel that ultimate form of human willingness to injure each other — war. Our discussion of the retention of ROTC in committees and in faculty meetings seems to me to have been incredibly devoid of anything like a Christian context. It took a student, Douglas Koons, to ask the right questions in the student newspaper, however much we may disagree with his answers. In the faculty meeting in which the final decision was made the terms God and Christ and Gospel were mentioned only in the opening prayer; hopefully this week one of us on the faculty who voted to retain ROTC, or abstained, or voted against it, can answer Mr. Koon’s questions about the relationship of our decision to Christ’s ethic, about the mission of Christian discipleship and the responsibility it places on a Christian college.

Who of us is Christian? I suspect none of us are by these measures; but perhaps the measures are too severe. Perhaps these ethical standards

are so extreme in their demands that all must fail before them — as Paul the Apostle for one recognized he did. Mormons don't use the term Christian very often. The designation, of course, was first used by the non-Christians; the early Christians called themselves "saints," which clearly meant to them not what it means in a designation like St. Olaf but merely all the community of those who were trying to follow Christ. I seek a definition this morning that might unite us and give us some hope, and I think it's there in the New Testament: the definition of a "saint" — or a Christian — as one who has faith that Christ was sent by God to show us what God is like and to motivate and empower us to be like God, faith that unconditional love is the ultimate experience and ethic available to persons, both God and man, and is knowable by mortal man in its highest and only enduring form through Christ. A saint is one who has begun a relationship of faith that sustains him, does not make him better than others but better than he would be otherwise, and puts him in the way, the only way eventually, to eternal salvation through the Atonement of Christ, that at-one-ment, that internal and external integrity that Christ achieved and achieves in us if we let Him. A saint is one who actively believes that only the power of Christ's special love can ultimately cut through our judgment of others and of ourselves and free us to love ourselves and thus others because we are unconditionally accepted by Christ, who has the power so to affect us spiritually and psychologically because he is our Creator and the source of the moral law which judges us in the first place; Christ gives the law which enables us to grow and stands with us and accepts us in the midst of our sin — our failure to live the law — so that we can gain the power to overcome sin and grow through law to freedom.

I know as well as I know anything, and witness to you, my fellow saints, my fellow Christians, that Christ lives as a literal being, a person, and that his unique love is available to all of us who will have the faith to try him — to take his name seriously and follow him fully. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.