

FOREWORD

IN 1992, GREG Vettel Johnson was the Student Council President as a graduating senior at Denver Theological Seminary. With a lifelong interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and because he hoped to go into Evangelical Christian ministry in Utah, he kept abreast of literature coming out of LDS publishing houses much more so than probably anyone else in the Seminary community. Stephen Robinson, Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, had recently published his best-selling blockbuster, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1991) and Greg thought it deserved the attention of the Denver faculty. In fact, he even organized a public forum on a Saturday night in which four of the professors divided up the book with each respond-

ing to those sections that dovetailed most with his areas of expertise. Craig Blomberg was one of those four professors. The forum drew so much interest from the community that the Seminary chapel was packed.

Greg then sent the audiotape to Stephen for his response. Stephen, in turn, offered a detailed written analysis of the comments of each of the four different speakers. That led to an ongoing correspondence between Stephen and Craig, to our meeting each other face-to-face at subsequent professional conferences, to hosting each other as guests in the other's home, and eventually to opportunities for Craig to speak to the Religious Education faculty at Brigham Young University and for Stephen to address the Denver Seminary faculty. En route, the idea for the book, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity Press, 1997) was birthed. In it, we identified four key areas of doctrinal division between most Evangelicals and most Latter-day Saints—Scripture, God and humanity, Christ and the Godhead/Trinity, and salvation. We committed to writing four chapters, one on each of these topics, in which each of us would author half of the chapter and each of us would tackle three sub-topics in each of our half-chapters: what our particular community believes, often-held misconceptions about those beliefs by outsiders, and why we

still remain at least partly unconvinced by the other group's position on the topic. We took turns going first so that there would be as much parity as possible. We also wrote the Introduction together. At the recommendation of the publisher, we committed to jointly authoring short conclusions to each main chapter and an overall conclusion to the whole book, which forced us to agree on the wording in which we set forth those things we discovered we had in common and those things on which we still disagreed.

The title *How Wide the Divide?* also came to us as a suggestion from InterVarsity Press. They and we intended it as a genuine question that readers should try to answer for themselves, based on the contents of the book. After five years of conversations, we probably would have answered the question as to the width of the divide between Evangelicalism and Mormonism by saying, "not as much as we once thought in many areas, more than we thought in a few areas, and about what we thought in a few other areas." Quite a few critics, however, were convinced that we had the hidden agenda of blurring all significant distinctives between our two faith communities, while a handful of readers described our work as if it had been punctuated with an exclamation point rather than a question mark: *How Wide the Divide!* We realized that our work, despite the kind compliments of the reviewers in both of our commu-

nities who endorsed the book on or inside its covers as a pioneering or landmark effort, would have to be picked up by others were it not to go down in history merely as an eccentric curiosity!

To our encouragement, within a couple of years a small group of LDS and Evangelical professors exhibited precisely such interest. We have met fifteen times as of this writing. Our ranks have grown, invited guests have joined us periodically, occasional public forums have been spawned as a result, and additional writing projects have been generated. But no effort has been as sustained or as encouraging as the personal friendship and public conversations between Greg Johnson, now President of Standing Together, an Evangelical Christian parachurch ministry in Utah, and Dr. Robert Millet, Professor of Ancient Scripture and former Dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

The present book is an edited transcript of one of their public presentations around the country and overseas (now numbering over fifty) in the last seven or eight years. They have spoken in colleges and universities, religious and secular; Evangelical and LDS churches; theological seminaries; on television, both locally in Utah with their own weekly program over a number of weeks and nationally as interviewed on the Lee Strobel Show. In each setting they always have the identical goals. As we did in *How Wide*

the Divide? they want to tell the truth to each other, and thus to their audiences, about what each believes as a representative in good standing of their respective faith communities. They want to debunk misconceptions they have discovered many people often have about their beliefs. They want to avoid sidestepping the hard questions that still keep each community from believing that the other has the fullness of the Gospel. As the format of this book illustrates, they try whenever possible to leave ample periods of time for questions from the audience and the follow-up interaction that it fosters. But theirs is no typical debate. Neither is out to try to score points or win some competition. They want to dialogue, not to debate; to have a conversation, not a confrontation. Greg and Bob are passionate about modeling convicted civility—courteous, even loving interchanges among genuinely close friends over matters of the deepest personal conviction—where Ephesians 4:15 truly is brought into play: Each man speaks the truth as best he understands it in love to the other and with those who listen and then participate.

It is not surprising that some of the greatest diplomatic successes on the stage of world politics have come after not entirely dissimilar kinds of conversations. One thinks particularly of the friendship that developed between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s. Peace after war,

whether civil or between nations, has often required such talk. Think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa, in Sierra Leone and in Peru. Far too few in our world make such hard work a priority. Rarely does it occur apart from genuine relationships, if not even deep friendships. As long as we don't have any close friends who fall into category "x" (whether x is a race or a nationality or a religion or a political party or a myriad of other things), people may say whatever they want about x-ers and treat them however they like, and it will be easy for us not to be much affected or feel the need to respond. But when some of our closest friends are members of group "x," and others mistreat or misrepresent or stereotype or caricaturize them, then we find ourselves taking the matter much more personally and responding to try to correct the situation.

If you have any doubts that you know everything there is to know about either Evangelical or Latter-day Saint religion and have even the slightest desire to learn more, this book is for you. (If you're sure you do know it all, then this book is really for you, but you're not likely to be reading it in the first place, except perhaps to tell others where it's wrong!) The book is straightforward and easy to read but never simplistic; lively and at times even humorous yet without in any way trivializing the conversation; passionate but never polemical; and immensely courte-

ous. As Stephen and I can attest, we have had more encounters than we care to recall with people who have combatively insisted that we were not combative enough with each other, with people who have excelled in decrying in a truly mean-spirited fashion our objections to those who treat one another with mean spirits! But neither of us has run into nearly enough people in our lives who have tried as hard as Bob and Greg have to speak the truth to one another in love. May they inspire many, many more of us to go and do likewise.

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PREFACE BY DR. ROBERT MILLET

RELIGION IS A tough thing to talk about, especially when there are theological differences between the participants in the conversation. Most traditional Christian groups have managed to bend and stretch and cut one another enough slack so that what outsiders would perceive to be significant differences are acknowledged but allowed under the large umbrella of Christendom. Thus differences in such fundamental doctrines/practices as what it takes to be saved, the involvement or non-involvement of men and women in their own conversion process, priestly hierarchies, necessity of and mode of baptism and other sacraments, manifestations of the Spirit, pre- or post-millennialism, Lordship salvation, etc.—these matters are understood to be less vital than more central and sav-

ing truths, thereby permitting variation and variety among the children living under one large roof.

In recent years interfaith dialogues have gone forward between such groups as Roman Catholics and Lutherans, Catholics and Evangelicals, Orthodox and Lutherans, and Orthodox and Pentecostals. In addition, on a much more limited but worthwhile basis, meaningful conversations have gone on between Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Such topics as the nature of God, the nature of fallen humanity, the work of the Atonement, the proper place of grace and works, deification, the Trinity, the status of scripture, creeds and *sola scriptura*, the place of religious authority—these and several other concepts have been addressed among a growing number of LDS and Evangelical scholars through a fruitful exchange that has been underway since the late 1990s.

In 1997, our colleagues Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary (Evangelical) and Stephen Robinson of Brigham Young University (LDS) broke new ground through the publication of a book entitled *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity Press). The authors addressed themselves at some length to the issues of Scripture, God, Christ, and Salvation. “This is a landmark book!” said Ronald Enroth, professor of Sociology at Westmont College. “The first of its

kind—an engaging dialogue between scholars of two ‘opposing’ religious communities presented in a context of civility and mutual respect. It will have substantial significance,” Enroth continued, “both to Mormons and to Evangelicals, and is sure to generate discussion.”

And indeed it did! As we would suppose, the book elicited both praise and criticism from both sides. There were those who felt as though one or the other had conceded too much, had compromised in some way, or did not represent their own faith tradition boldly or even accurately. There were those who simply felt it inappropriate for a Christian to engage in serious dialogue with one who was, by most Evangelical standards of measure, a non-Christian; to do so was to “legitimize” the LDS claim to a place under the Christian umbrella. There were Latter-day Saints who felt, on the other hand, that the Mormons had been allowed their day in court, had finally been permitted to tell their own story in a national publication.

It was in the aftermath of *How Wide the Divide?* that the two of us (Millet and Johnson) met and began our own conversations. Long, long hours and scores of visits raised questions, sent us both searching for clarification, and resulted in a valued friendship and eventually in a working partnership. Enough inquiries, accusations, and charges of mis-

representation led Bob to write a book addressing itself, in a somewhat different way, to the Christology and Soteriology of Mormonism. The result was another unusual effort in 2005, the book *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Eerdmans), with Foreword and Afterword written by Richard J. Mouw, President and professor of Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary. Like *How Wide the Divide?*, *A Different Jesus?* brought friend and foe out of the woodwork and revived the stir of critics, an outcome that was not all bad.

This book, *Bridging the Divide, The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical*, represents another installment in the ever-widening avenue of inquiry and discussion between two faith traditions who share basic moral values (the sanctity of life, chastity, and the preservation of traditional marriage and family) but who have doctrinal differences between them. The reader will notice that the format for this book is quite different than that of the Blomberg/Robinson volume. Here we are literally involved in a conversation about who we are, how we came to this point, what we believe, and what similarities and differences exist between us. After introducing the project, we turn to one another with questions and then finally to questions posed by Latter-day Saint and Evangelical audiences over the years.

This work is based on the fact that “convicted civility” (the term used by Rich Mouw) can and should exist between Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals, especially as we consider and weigh sacred subjects, matters vital to the salvation of the soul. To be sure, no one wants to be led astray. No one wants to be guilty of compromise. At the same time, surely no one who professes a present belief in and eternal loyalty to the Lordship of Jesus Christ—who identifies themselves as one of his disciples—would condemn or block a sincere effort to better understand and love our brothers and sisters of other faiths. Jesus taught a doctrine of inclusion, a mindset that emphasized that we “judge not,” meaning that we admit at the outset that we do not know the heart of another human being, that we do not grasp fully how they feel toward God and in what manner they have dedicated their lives to spreading the good news, the glad tidings of his Beloved Son.

Greg and I have known each other quite well since 1997. There are few issues of conflict and disagreement that have gone undetected and undiscussed; we have neither hidden our heads in the sand nor acted as though there were no differences. But our engagement has been undertaken in a spirit of openness (knowing that we really can learn something from the other); sincerity (knowing that only through honesty, transparency, and trust can genuine prog-

ress be made); and love (knowing that only as we seek to see and feel toward the other something of what the Master sees and feels are we prepared to minister meaningfully to one another). True religion is a thing of the heart as well as the mind, and when we tread there we tread on holy ground, ground that must not be trampled or harrowed up unnecessarily.

Some readers may be troubled by the title of this book, *Bridging the Divide*. Let us be clear: The bridge connecting Mormonism with Evangelicalism has not been completed. There are gaps, in some cases large gaps, between our respective faith positions. We have not settled all issues, and are soberly aware that we may not do so in our lifetime. But we are in the business of engaging the issues, wrestling over doctrinal matters, acknowledging differences, and rejoicing in similarities and agreements. In other words, while the bridge is under way, it obviously has not been “fitly framed together” (Ephesians 2:21).

What we agree on absolutely is this: People matter. Their feelings matter. God is in the business of people, and so must we be if we are to be successful as his under-shepherds. Our enthusiasm for spreading the truth far and wide and convincing the nations to repent and come unto Christ must never take the form of “grace in your face” or “grace up your nose” if we are to be effective ambassadors of

the Prince of Peace. In the words of our friend John Stackhouse, “God cares about people more than he cares about ‘truth’ in the abstract. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to make a point. He died on the cross to save people whom he loves. We, too, must represent our Lord with love to God and our neighbor always foremost in our concerns.”

It is our hope that what follows will prove to be both intellectually stimulating and spiritually encouraging in this work of reaching out to those who do not see things exactly as we do. Our scope has been broadened, our minds expanded, our witness strengthened, and our lives enriched in ways we never could have supposed in 1997. That the reader may partake of at least a pinch of our enthusiasm for this enterprise and sense its worth is our sincere prayer.

AN INTRODUCTION
FROM REV. GREGORY JOHNSON

THE COVER DESIGN of this book is an interesting example of how challenging it can be to engage in inter-religious conversation and friendship. Bob, a devout Latter-day Saint, and I, a devout Evangelical Christian, have been working on this book project for a number of years, and it was always our goal to offer a next installment to the significant Blomberg/Robinson book of 1997, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity Press). Originally, we thought the title of our book, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical*, would appropriately be offered as a question and as such conclude with a question mark, *Bridging the Divide?*. It was then and remains now

an important concern for me that no one misunderstands the title of our book. Neither Bob nor I would want anyone to think that we believe that the theological divide between Evangelicalism and Mormonism has been bridged, thus the need for a question mark. Lest our critics cry foul and say that Bob and I are essentially theological compromisers who are betraying our own faith traditions, we wanted to say that we are engaged in the process of bridge building. That is to say, we are two men of two different faiths, historically hostile to each other, who are building a bridge of friendship and dialogue between us in the hopes that improved communication can lead to increased understanding of each other's faith, reduced confrontationalism, and an improved ability to share the hope that resides in us in a way that is both respectful and gentle (I Peter 3:15). Of course Bob and I could do this privately without writing a book or by presenting our national dialogue, "A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation," (which we have done now 50 times as of this writing) but it is our sincere desire that our model of what Dr. Richard Mouw of Fuller Seminary calls "Convicted Civility" would be replicated in individual Mormon/Evangelical relationships throughout the world.

So then, the question might be asked, “Why is there no question mark at the conclusion of our title on the cover of this book?” Well, I’m glad you asked. The suggestion was made by our publisher that our book should make a statement rather than pose a question, provoke a reaction, if you will, to the very idea that a bridge of dialogue could be built between a present day LDS scholar and an Evangelical pastor. What makes the Bob Millet and Greg Johnson dialogue unique to us is that we believe we are being genuine representatives of our own faith traditions while at the same time breaking new ground in our public civility. We are not engaged, nor are we interested in what might be termed “liberal interfaith activities” or in some circles “ecumenicism.” In other words, we are not attempting to play down our theological differences just to get along and be nice with one another. It is our sincere hope that an agenda greater than our own would prevail, indeed, that God would accomplish what He desires to do through this relational bridge building effort at whatever level He desires to do it. Both Bob and I have confidence that God’s agenda in all of this is far superior to whatever agenda we might have begun our friendship with, and by deferring to His plan

we are allowing the process of dialogue to continue as He directs.

Now then, back to the cover of our book. After I yielded to the no question mark suggestion, I countered by requesting that the cover of the book should picture an uncompleted bridge showing visually what the question mark would have, had it been in our title. Actually, we had always had the idea of an uncompleted bridge on the cover anyway, so I was confident that clarity would prevail and that our readers would understand that our faith conversation was a work in progress, not a completed act. In fact, Bob and I would both be troubled by the thought or implication that our book was suggesting that the divide between Mormonism and traditional/Evangelical Christianity had been bridged. And lest anyone accuse either of us of saying so, we both affirm that there are significant theological differences between our two faiths, and they are of eternal importance, but this should not prevent us from doing the hard work of discussing truth with one another in a loving and Christ-honoring way.

Well, as you can see by the cover of our book, a very lovely and long completed bridge was chosen for our cover. Now, please do not get me wrong, I like the bridge on our cover and I think it makes our

cover very attractive and eye catching. Once again, my concern remains that the completed bridge might be interpreted by some as a statement that we are saying the Mormon/Evangelical divide has been bridged and is not a conversation that is underway. My disappointment over this decision was genuine, even after the suggestion was made that the length of the bridge implied that our conversation had a long way to go still, and that our title was not actually saying, "The divide between Mormonism and Evangelical Christianity has been bridged." I must say that at this point it may have appeared to Bob and Monkfish Publishing that I was just being a little stubborn, but my concerns were legitimate to me and I wanted my Evangelical constituency to understand my heart and conviction in this area. When Bob humorously asked at this point if I would be ok with an Angel Moroni statue somewhere on the bridge I replied, "Bob, that would kill the book deal!"

I began this introduction by stating that the story of our cover design was an interesting example of how interfaith friendships can be difficult. I did not share the challenges presented in selecting our cover design to be critical of my co-author or our publisher, but simply to reveal how the process works. Yes,

there are things we overlook, things we put aside, matters we leave for later when we engage in cross-religious conversations with people not of our faith. Far too often, people who love to talk about truth seem to listen poorly and are unable to give any ground in the discussion. I like the line from Ravi Zacharias who once stated, “When we throw dirt at someone, two things generally happen, we get dirty and we lose ground in the process.” There are ways around some of the peripheral matters of concerns between people of differing faiths, and for me, writing this introduction as an explanation of our cover and how it illustrates an important part of the process was a fair compromise. In the end, we have an attractive cover that makes a statement that might cause a reaction of curiosity, that might lead folks to buy this book, read my introduction, and understand everything I needed to say about our cover, and everyone is still happy.

Let me conclude by saying, as one who used to primarily engage Latter-day Saint people with an “apologetics only” mentality, seeking to prove them wrong by contrasting their claims with my understanding of biblical truth, that a dialogue approach is frankly more difficult but at the same time far more rewarding. In what is increasingly being called a “Missional

Model” of ministry, the task of engaging our spiritual other with “just the facts” really is not enough. If we Evangelicals are concerned about Mormon people, if we think their beliefs or their world view are contradictory to revealed biblical truth, then I think we are obligated to engage them in patient, loving, honest, dare I say, Christian conversations about truth. We must be reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words in First Corinthians that while Paul or Apollos might have planted or watered the seeds of faith in the hearts of unbelievers, “God made it grow” (3:6). Thus, in frankness, it is really not my job, nor is it within my ability to make Bob Millet embrace the truth of Jesus Christ as I see it. Rather, my role is to love Bob Millet, be his friend, to pray for him, share life with him, and honor him as my fellow human being and fellow truth seeker. I will gladly leave the transformation process or any other plan that God might have in my relationship with Bob in His capable and divine hands. In the end, I have been faithful to my truth convictions, I have integrity before God as His ambassador of Good News, and I have a wonderful friendship with a man named Bob whom I hope has seen the testimony of God’s amazing grace in my life. Having said that, I hope you enjoy the book. May many wonderful missional friendships be in your future!