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## Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Jonathan R. Wilson

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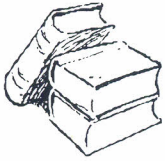
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# Book Reviews

MARKUS H. MCDOWELL, ELEANOR DANIEL, EDITORS

## **How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation**

*By Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson*

Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997. 228 pages.

There has been no lack of polemical works written by evangelical Christians about Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), or of Mormon criticisms of evangelicals. Yet serious dialogue between informed representatives from each group has occurred less frequently. Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Stephen E. Robinson, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, offer a corrective in *How Wide the Divide?* They engage in a candid discussion of the following areas of disagreement: (1) scripture, (2) the nature of God and the deification of believers, (3) the nature of Christ and the Trinity, and (4) salvation.

In each section, the authors attempt to articulate their respective constituencies' affirmations about a given doctrinal point, correct what they believe to be common misperceptions of outsiders, and state what they find most problematic with the other group's position. Irenic in tone, the work addresses real problems and avoids degenerating into acrimony. For this, the authors are to be applauded.

Blomberg and Robinson are sensitive to problems associated with terminology throughout the discussion; in fact, differing theological vocabularies stand as one significant barrier to effective communication between the communities.

In the first chapter, the authors wrestle with questions of canon—what is and what is not the inspired word of God—more than the nature of scripture. Thus, both acknowledge the Christian Bible as the inspired word of God (in the KJV, for Mormons). Latter-day Saints, however, also include in their

canon the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine of Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Despite his less than helpful language concerning biblical “inerrancy,” a failure to appreciate the significance of many of the revisions in different editions of the Book of Mormon, and his curious hesitancy to proclaim a closed canon in principle as well as practice, Blomberg effectively challenges Latter-day Saint (LDS) beliefs concerning the canon. He thus stakes out an approach first developed by Alexander Campbell in observing that much of the Book of Mormon “seems out of place in the historical context to which it is attributed but fits perfectly the religious climate and theological concerns of the early nineteenth century” (p. 48). Additionally, Blomberg uses insights from textual criticism to challenge LDS claims of inspiration. For example, why would the Book of Mormon reproduce “KJV language even where textual criticism has demonstrated the KJV to have followed an inferior and inauthentic text” (p. 50) if it were truly of divine origin? Robinson offers no cogent answer to this specific query and less than satisfactory (though sometimes novel) responses to other serious issues.

The authors discuss the nature of God and the deification of believers in chapter 2—a section that “may reflect where Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are farthest apart” (p. 109). Blomberg is especially concerned to preserve the distinction between the Creator and creation (p. 97), a distinction Robinson seems to affirm as well (pp. 77ff.). There is substantial disagreement, however, on a few major points. For instance, Robinson argues that Blomberg offers philosophical rather than biblical objections to the idea that “finite beings cannot become infinite, and that infinite beings cannot ever have been finite” (p. 92). However, since Robinson concedes that “the finite cannot of itself become infinite” (p. 92), the



notion that God himself was once a finite man seems to presume the existence of an infinite God. The authors do not pursue this issue further. These and other significant differences remain in this section as well as in all other chapters.

In chapter 3, the authors explore various issues associated with the person of Christ and the nature of the Trinity. The reader will immediately sense the relationship between this chapter and the preceding discussion concerning the nature of God. Here, many who share with Robinson at least a broader restorationist background will notice the similarities between his language at several points and their own (as well as shared assumptions born from primitivism in general). His statement that “Latter-day Saints accept all the biblical teaching on the nature of God and Christ, provided these are stated in their biblical forms rather than in their postbiblical, creedal forms” (p. 128) differs little from similar assertions made by many in the Churches of Christ. More problematic, however, is Robinson’s belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not ontologically one being. It is difficult to see how his position amounts to anything less than the polytheism that he denies (p. 132). Clearly, Mormons and evangelicals hold radically different conceptions of Christ (different Christologies), as is evident in the authors’ joint assertion that “Evangelicals insist on an eternal difference in kind between the human and the divine, whereas Latter-day Saints see the human and the divine as a single species. They believe that God and humans are reconciled in Christ, who makes it possible then by grace for humans to become what God is.” (p. 142). It is difficult to reconcile Robinson’s other, more orthodox, pronouncements with underlying conceptions such as these.

The christological issues mentioned in chapter 3 lead naturally enough to the issues of soteriology, or salvation, that are treated in chapter 4. For his part, Blomberg believes this to be the most crucial chapter of the book (p. 187). While the authors discuss various aspects of salvation (Will people have an opportunity to respond to the gospel after death? What is the significance of baptism in the life of a believer?), the relationship between faith and works occupies center stage in this final chapter. In short, evangeli-

cals are fearful that Mormons promote a works-oriented view of salvation, while Mormons believe that evangelicals unwittingly promote an understanding of cheap grace that does not lead to a changed life.

At various points throughout the book, the authors offer simplistic (and inaccurate) assessments of evangelical and LDS discussions that confuse matters. For example, Robinson writes, “[I]t irritates the LDS that some Evangelicals keep trying to add the Journal of Discourses or other examples of LDS homiletics to the canon of LDS” (p. 73; cf. pp. 68, 84–85, 140, 162). But analogies that liken the difference between the sermons of John Calvin and scripture to the sermons of Brigham Young and scripture seem forced in light of the unique authority early LDS leaders claimed for themselves. For example, in a sermon delivered in 1870 and later published in the Journal of Discourses, President Young boldly announced: “I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call Scripture. Let me have the privilege of correcting a sermon, and it is as good Scripture as they deserve. The people have the oracles of God continually.” (Journal of Discourses, 13:95).

Additionally, Robinson concedes that many Latter-day Saints make the same mistake evangelicals do by granting normative status to this type of material. So while it is one thing to express gratitude for progress and to agree to interact with the current state of LDS revelation, as Blomberg urges (p. 47), it is quite another to dismiss previous literature altogether—literature that may prove instructive when assessing the credibility and truth claims of these early LDS “apostles” who claimed to speak for God.

While space does not permit a discussion of other problems (e.g., the discussion of differing theological vocabularies is misleading), one might question just how representative Robinson is of Mormons in general. Likewise, his charitable readings of his religious ancestors’ attitudes toward non-Mormons do not comport with the historical evidence.

Despite problems, the authors have produced a groundbreaking work that might rightly be described as a conversation intended to facilitate understanding. The effort is particularly welcome in an arena (evangelical and LDS apologetics) that is often rid-



dled with stereotypes, exaggeration, and half-truths. So, "How wide the divide?" It is wide indeed. And though the authors have provided a model for continuing the dialogue, I suspect that increased understanding will do little to bridge the gap.

CRAIG CHURCHILL

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### **Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's *After Virtue***

By Jonathan R. Wilson

Christian Mission and Modern Culture, ed. Alan Neely, Wayne Pipkin, and Wilbert R. Shenk. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1997. 85 pages, including notes and references.

Ever since my first encounter with Alasdair MacIntyre, I have been compelled by his work and the potential it holds for the Christian community, especially the Restoration tradition. In this brief book, Dr. Jonathan R. Wilson, associate professor of systematic theology and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Westmont College, draws five lessons from MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984) as a lens through which to assess the situation of the church in the Western world.

The first lesson is that the church should embrace its history, in all its glory and misery, as an internal argument and foundational narrative. Too often, Wilson notes, our apologetics downplay the horrors of Christian history and overemphasize the triumphs. He suggests that we discard this narrative for a vision of the church as a communion of both unfaithfulness and faithfulness to God in the midst of varying historical contexts. From this perspective, the gospel story properly defines the church, distinguishing it from the broader culture and calling it to its mission within that culture.

Lesson two affirms MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" that we in the West live in a "fragmented" rather than a pluralistic world (p. 24). A pluralistic world is composed of coherent communities in dialogue. Our world is fragmented because it has no vision of "the way things ought to be."

Unfortunately, the church has bought into this frag-

mentation. Wilson suggests that the gospel calls the church to its proper end: "glorifying and enjoying God forever" (p. 34). A reorientation to this end, he suggests, will bring coherence to the Christian community, motivate its activities, and reenergize mission in Western societies.

MacIntyre's third lesson for the church is that the life of the faithful Christian community is a self-sufficient foundation for the gospel. No other grounds for justification are either appropriate or necessary. Wilson rightly notes that throughout the modern period, the church participated in its own Enlightenment project, attempting to prove the gospel on a variety of external grounds. However, the Christian community finds its proper justification only in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which serves as its judge and redeemer. Any other criterion for ordering the life of the church—whether pleasure, individual happiness, or bureaucratic effectiveness—is external to the gospel and calls the Christian community away from its proper end.

The fourth lesson Wilson presents is that the church needs to consider the Aristotelian approach to virtue, tradition, and community as suggested by MacIntyre. The church is not obligated to see itself in the same categories articulated in *After Virtue*, but it can still benefit by answering the following questions: What is the good life according to the gospel? How can the church envision itself as a tradition of inquiry that is making productive strides toward its proper end? What practices are peculiar to this goal? How do these practices affirm a distinct Christian character? What sort of community is created as this tradition is lived and Christian character is nurtured? Wilson suggests that the church will come to understand its faithfulness to the gospel in a profound sense as it answers these questions in the context of our Christian traditions.

MacIntyre's final lesson for the church sums up the previous four. He calls for a "new monasticism" that manifests itself in "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us" (p. 69). There are four characteristics of this new monasticism: First, "a recovery of the *telos* (goal,



end) of this world that is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ" (p. 72). Second, an application of this telos to the Christian community as a whole, not just a portion of the church (though it has to start somewhere!). Third, a communal discipline that will reinforce the virtues inherent in this Christian telos. Fourth, a regrasping of "deep theological reflection and commitment" (p. 75). According to Wilson, this new monasticism embodies what it means for the Christian community to live faithfully in a fragmented world.

Wilson provides the Christian community with an accessible introduction to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. His judicious selection of five distinct "lessons" from *After Virtue* is a helpful way to gain crucial insights from MacIntyre without rehearsing the whole of his argument. Wilson gives us a taste for MacIntyre so that those compelled by his vision will have a basis on which to give *After Virtue* a full consideration. More significant than this introduction to MacIntyre, however, is the application of his critique to the church. Through this critique, Wilson provides the church with a challenging perspective from which to assess not only the state of its surrounding culture but also its internal life within that culture.

While, in my opinion, Wilson's appropriation of MacIntyre is helpful, it poses two special problems for churches of the Restoration tradition. First, it calls us away from an ahistorical account of our past. The first lesson Wilson suggests is that living faithfully requires an embrace of the glories and ills of Christian history. However, one of our traditional maxims is that after a.d. 33 the church turned apostate and did not appear on the scene again in its authentic form until our Restoration movement. Wilson's call to embrace our history, therefore, stands as a significant hurdle to our engagement of his proposal.

Second, MacIntyre's critique undermines our tradition's commitment to the failed Enlightenment project. In Wilson's third lesson, he affirms that the only foundation for the gospel is the faithful Christian community. The restoration impulse, however, seeks to reappropriate through historical reconstruction the forms of the first century church. Thus the life and

worship of this idealized church become, in essence, the gospel. We ground the gospel, therefore, on a historical reconstruction of a true church, thereby misplacing its appropriate proving ground. Churches of the Restoration tradition will have to adjust their vision and keep their eyes less on this ideal church and more on the "restoration" of Christian communities of worship and mission in the present context.

*Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* is well written, but it retains enough of MacIntyre's complexity to keep it from being easy reading. Church leaders, in particular, will benefit from the critiques and suggestions Wilson draws from *After Virtue*. This book could also be used for an in-depth Wednesday night study directed by someone with a prior understanding of MacIntyre's work. The book includes excellent references to other books that can be helpful in understanding the vision Wilson articulates.

In conclusion, I commend this brief tome as a challenging read that has great potential to enrich the life of churches in the Restoration tradition.

CARL FLYNN

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### **No Longer I: Being Transformed into the Image of Christ**

*By Larry E. Hall*

Abilene: ACU Press, 1998. 205 pages, including study guide.

Larry E. Hall is the family life minister at Belton Church of Christ in Belton, Texas. Prior to taking that position, he served for a decade in the pulpit ministry and another in private practice as a family counselor. Hall's *No Longer I* is a set of thirteen extended meditations in which he sets out "to capture the essence, the heart of Christian discipleship" (p. ix). He designed the book for both individual and small-group study and discussion, and he includes a fairly extensive discussion guide.

The book is structured in thirteen chapters of five main sections. In the first section, "The Cross of



Christ,” Hall lays the foundation for his understanding of discipleship. He reminds his readers that the Christian life does not come through what Christians commonly think of as self-denial or self-discipline. It comes through dying to self (which is true self-discipline) and acknowledging Christ. “As long as I am concentrating on merely denying self, I have not succeeded, for self is ever before me. It’s like trying to forget about purple elephants by constantly telling myself, ‘Don’t think about purple elephants.’ . . . When I am fully immersed in Christ, the process of self-denial isn’t a painful consuming center of focus, rather it’s a simple, unavoidable reality.” (pp. 29–30)

Self-denial without “Christ-realization” (Hall’s term) is incomplete. Christians must understand that the coin has two sides. On the one side is denial of self; on the other is acknowledging and embracing Christ. When Christians pursue this balance, God blesses their attempts at self-denial by giving continual renewal and growth.

In the second section, “The Mind of Christ,” Hall discusses the interaction between Christian self-understanding and discipleship. God gives Christians a new nature, a desire to serve and do what is right. He also gives them the ability to carry out that desire, by losing self and embracing Christ. Christ’s presence transforms the Christian’s conscience (which Hall refers to as the “C3”—Christ-Centered Conscience). “But I no longer have to accept that grand lie of our post-Freudian age, the lie that says that I am a mere puppet of all those drives and neuroses hidden somewhere deep inside. I can choose to go directly to my C3 and do what is right, what is best, what is rational, reasonable, realistic, and righteous.” (p. 63)

In the third section, “The Body of Christ,” Hall discusses the implications that his understanding of discipleship holds for corporate life in the church. As Christians look at each other properly, through the lens of “not I, but Christ,” they see that every Christian is valuable and precious. They will be unified by Christ’s purpose for the church.

The fourth section, “The Word of Christ,” is the heart of the book. Here, Hall examines the effects of his understanding of discipleship on three specific components of the Christian worldview. First,

Christians should not understand evangelism in terms of their own work; rather, evangelism is Christ working/reaching/speaking through them. Likewise, discipleship should form (or transform) Christians’ definition of truth. For Christians, truth is neither abstract nor relative, it is personal (i.e., personified, or incarnate)—wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus and growing in the knowledge of his word are the only sure guides to truth and righteousness. Seen thus, truth is not subject to individual discernment. Discernment must be subject to truth. Christians explore and experience and submit themselves to the truth as they know and worship Jesus and know and obey his gospel. Third, discipleship causes Christians to realize that they need a source of morality greater than themselves. The twin errors of antinomianism and legalism are based on allowing self to be in control. Discipleship avoids these errors—although Christians in their humanness never completely leave them behind—by seeing morality in relational terms. Morality and ethics are character-based: behavior comes from being wrapped up in Christ, knowing and worshiping him.

In the fifth section, “The Faith of Christ,” Hall surveys the landmarks of Christian life in the light of discipleship. Christians should understand conversion in terms of true self-death, a drastic and permanent shift in allegiance from self to Christ. Between conversion and eternity, Christians live in the now and the not-yet. They strive for what their transformed minds want them to become, knowing that God will realize his purposes for them. Self still stands in the way at times, but defeated and dying.

The book closes with a detailed study guide, which contains content and discussion questions for both the individual chapters and the five major sections.

Hall does an admirable job of weaving together exposition, reflection, and insights from the world of Christian counseling as he pursues his goal. He attempts no in-depth exegesis of any particular text. He touches briefly on the “faith of/in Christ” question without referring to any of the current debate. His thumbnail overview of the theology of baptism (pp. 144–49) is excellent and worth consulting. His general theological approach is perhaps more



gospel-centered (and less Pauline) than that of many writers from a restorationist perspective, but it is generally balanced. In essence, Hall proposes a new Christian mysticism—but with a difference. He grounds discipleship in seeing life in terms of worship and the experience of Christ, but he also grounds it in searching revealed truth and submitting self and life to that truth. One quibble: Hall explains ethics exclusively in terms of character ethics, without ever really discussing how (or even whether) rule ethics or pragmatic considerations belong in the equation. Stylistically, Hall is an excellent storyteller. He paints scenes beautifully, although at times his point takes a moment or two to surface. This quirk, however, is not a major distraction, and the points—once they do surface—are consistently well articulated and applied.

*No Longer I* is an excellent examination of the life God desires for his people. I was blessed by Hall's message, and I recommend this book for study by both individuals and adult classes.

PERRY L. STEPP

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### **Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer**

by J. Philip Newell

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. 83 pages plus appendix.

Although the Celtic church and its unique traditions were marginalized and even forbidden beginning with the Synod of Whitby in 664, all things Celtic are enjoying a modern resurgence. Celtic theology provides a welcome corrective to radical rationalism and the classic doctrine of original sin. The Celtic church traces its origins through the Gospel of John and the Wisdom traditions of ancient Israel, thus its prayers focus firmly on God as revealed mysteriously in his creation and the human spirit.

Newell has put together a collection of daily meditations and prayers that are truly representative of the tradition. Richly illustrated with *illuminati* art-

work from the 7th century Lindisfarne Gospels, morning and evening devotions are supplied for each day of the week—each day focusing on a particular theme drawn from the Celtic office of daily prayer. Each devotion begins with a short scripture, such as Psalm 90.2, which sets the tone and theme for the day, followed by an invitation to become aware of the presence of God through silence. An opening prayer follows, which both praises God in the theme of the day and asks for some benefit, as in this garnered example.

Out of the silence at the beginning of time  
you spoke the Word of life.  
Out of the world's primeval darkness  
you flooded the universe with light.  
I wait and I watch.  
I search in the silence of my spirit, O God. (p. 8)

Two short scriptures follow. Next, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, such as:

For the first showings of the morning light  
and the emerging outline of the day.  
thanks be to you, O God.  
Dispel the confusions that cling close to my soul  
that I may see with eyes washed by your grace. (p. 40)

This is followed by an invitation to pray for the coming day (morning) or to reflect on the day (evening) and to pray for the world. Finally, a closing prayer asks for some gift of grace connected to the theme of the day:

Grant me the grace of the dawn's glory  
that I may be well in my own soul  
and part of the world's healing this day. (p. 41)

While one might wonder if the 14 devotions might quickly become stale after a few weeks, I have found that the richness of the language and theology continually lend to fresh insights and new applications. There are a plethora of devotional books that are ephemeral and theologically shallow, but this book is at once deeply theological and meaningfully traditional. I highly recommend this short book to anyone looking to enrich their daily devotions.

MARKUS H. MCDOWELL

Mr. McDowell is a Ph.D. candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary and teaches in the Religion Division at Pepperdine University.