

## LDS Perspectives Podcast

### Episode 39: Mere Christians? with Robert Millet

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**Nick Galieti:** Robert L. Millet was a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. Since joining the BYU faculty in 1983 he has served as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture, Dean of Religious Education, and Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding. He is the author or editor of more than 60 books and 160 articles and book chapters dealing mostly with the doctrine and history of the LDS Church, and its relationship to other faiths. His latest titles include *Restored and Restoring* and *Precept upon Precept*. He and his wife Shauna have six children and reside in Utah. Welcome. Thank you for coming in.

**Robert Millet:** Thank you. Nice to be with you, Nick.

**Nick Galieti:** Are Mormons Christian? That's the question that we're going to be addressing here, and it's a question that many outside of the church felt that they had an answer for a long time. This question was one of the more common that I encountered, I know, during my missionary service in Louisiana, and you've spent a lot of time in the academy and scholarly associations with those of other faiths and other institutions. How often did you encounter that question?

**Robert Millet:** I encountered it on a mission, too, but that would have been long before you. I first encountered it as I would knock on a door and someone would come to the door either with a pamphlet, but in many cases a copy of Walter Martin's new book *Kingdom of the Cults*. I was there in the mid- to late-60s, and I think I could say that I had never heard anybody say to me or any of my LDS friends, "You're not Christian," until about that time, and I think that coupled with a strong push in the 80s following "The God Makers" movie is where this all gets real traction.

Because when you think about it, I don't remember coming across too many times in church history where people said, "Well, the problem with these Mormons is they aren't Christian." No. They may say they're peculiar. They may say they're strange. But they don't think they're Jews. They don't think they're Muslims. They know they're not Catholics. They must be Christian of some kind. Different Christians, but I don't think this

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became a real issue until Walter Martin, and then the 1980s a strong push against the church that Mormons aren't Christian. I've encountered it quite a bit. I've encountered it a lot with people who are dear and beloved evangelical Christian friends and other types of Christian friends. It's out there, and when they say it, they each mean something a little different.

**Nick Galieti:** Among the Gospel Topics essays, this one has a pretty clear answer.

**Robert Millet:** Yeah.

**Nick Galieti:** This essay. It's entitled "Are Mormons Christian?" The question is at least asked and answered from a decidedly theological or doctrinal angle. Not a, do members of the church behave Christian?

**Robert Millet:** Yes.

**Nick Galieti:** In what ways do some assert that the theology of Mormonism disqualifies The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for inclusion as a Christian faith?

**Robert Millet:** Usually we talk about the exclusions that are historical, exclusions that are theological, exclusions that have to do with extra-biblical scripture. I think what we hear the most, at least in my last twenty years of doing interfaith work, the one I've heard the most is, "You are not a part of Trinitarian or Nicene Christianity; therefore, you're not Christian." And of course at first that was so offensive to me, and then the more I thought about it, I thought, "Well, no, we're not part of Nicene Christianity. If that's what being Christian is, then I guess we aren't Christian."

The historical argument is you're not a part of the traditional Catholic Orthodox or Protestant historical tradition. Again, our response has to be, "No, you're right." Except for one thing, Nick. This is interesting. It occurred to me one day, and I don't know how strong an argument this is, but it occurred to me one day. We didn't just come out of nowhere. Mormons didn't just ... They weren't born ex nihilo. In fact, many early Latter-day Saints came from Methodism. We came from Protestantism. So in a sense we can trace our ancestry if you will the same way the Protestants do.

When Protestants have said, "You're not Christian," I've often said to them, "Well frankly, you broke away before we did." Meaning, we just

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disagree on when it happened. So there's the issue of you're not Trinitarian. You're not a part of the historic Christian tradition. The third thing that I hear the most on would be, you are not Christian because you clearly do not take the Bible seriously because you include other extra-biblical scripture. Those are the three that I hear the most, I think. I've never heard anybody say, "You're not Christian because of the way your people act or because of the way you people live." Which is very interesting when you just take the time. ... From public discourse, what does the person on the street mean by a Christian? They'll always say, "Well, I suppose it's a follower of Jesus."

**Nick Galieti:** Right.

**Robert Millet:** But the second one they give is not theological either. It's, "Well, I guess it's people who try to live like Jesus said you ought to live." And so what I find especially with the more conservative Protestantism is the strict emphasis upon theology, in other words orthodoxy. Little or no consideration for orthopraxy, how you practice the faith, how you live. Those are the three I've heard over and over and over again.

**Nick Galieti:** It's been one of those things that I've been curious about because I read Elder Bruce R. McConkie who talked about the Nicene Creed and made certain pronouncements as saying some of these things are heresies. Some of the greatest heresies that are out there. So I have wondered at times if what we are trying to attach ourselves to is not something we should. You use the term evangelical Christian. Should we start coining the phrase, a Latter-day Saint Christian?

**Robert Millet:** I was in New York City probably now close to ten years ago, and I had just finished reading a book by Richard John Neuhaus. Do you remember that name?

**Nick Galieti:** I don't.

**Robert Millet:** A very conservative Roman Catholic voice. He had been a Lutheran pastor who converted to Catholicism. I had read many of his things. A very wonderful writer. He was the initial editor of the journal magazine called *First Things*. I called him, told him who I was. He said, "I've heard of you. You've been working with evangelicals." I said, "Well, I have, yes. Did you know about that?" He said, "Yeah. Well, a number of those

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people, Richard Mouw at the Theological Seminary in Pasadena, we're friends."

We talked for a little less than an hour. I stood up at a certain point wanting to guard his time, and he reached out his hand to me to shake hands, and he said, "Bob, the time is long overdue for there to be more and better conversation between Latter-day Saint Christians and Nicene Christians." It was the first time I ever heard anybody make that kind of a distinction. I said, "Richard, that is a distinction that no thinking Mormon would have any problem with," because that's right. That is the difference.

Let me tell you the only reason I've struggled to push on the Christian button. It is this. I know what the theologians mean. They mean you're not Trinitarian. You're extra-biblical. You're not part of the historic Christian tradition. But the man on the street, the woman in the pew, when they hear, "Mormons aren't Christian," what are they thinking? Are they thinking, "Mormons don't believe in the Bible. Mormons don't believe in the divine birth of Jesus. They don't believe in his miracles. They don't believe in his atoning sacrifice. They don't believe in his resurrection." Obviously, if they believed any of those things about us they would be dead wrong.

They are the people I'm much more concerned about. I'm fine with theologians who want to say, "On this technicality, by our definition, you aren't Christian." You're right in the sense that I've said on a number of occasions, people say, "Well, why do you want to be a part of mainline Christianity?" My response is, we don't. We don't want to be a part of mainline Christianity. We want to be recognized for being a different branch of Christianity, that we certainly practice Christianity. That anything the New Testament says about Jesus for example, we believe.

No, I don't think there should be a push on Latter-day Saints' part to insist we're Christian just like you, and here's the point. You can't have it both ways. You can't have them be mad at us or attacking us for being non-Christians and at the same time, do we want them to be saying, "You're just like us?" We don't want that. We're different than they are, so you can't have it both ways. If you're different, you're different. You got to admit you're different. So I say I'm a Christian because I'm a believer in Christ, because I believe in his divinity, because I want to live my life according to his pattern. And if they said, "But you just don't fit our category." Hey, fine. Fine. If that's the category, we don't fit. Uncle.

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**Nick Galieti:**

You win. You win. This Gospel Topics essay “Are Mormons Christian?” opposed to maybe some of the other ones, this one answers the question pretty quickly, right off the bat. Very first sentence. “Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unequivocally affirm themselves to be Christians,” and it seems as if the rest of the essay goes on to prove that assertion. Does this essay prove Mormonism to be, in fact, a Christian faith?

**Robert Millet:**

No. I think what the author of the article hoped they could accomplish would be to have people understand why we feel we are Christian. It isn't a matter of proof. You're not going to prove anything to a person who doesn't want to believe it. What we found over and over again in our interfaith work is the more people get to know us and know us well, then when the question is asked, “Are Latter-day Saints Christian,” here's what I begin to notice. Long pauses. And then maybe one of them will say, “That's not an easy question to answer.” Do you see what I'm saying? And it's because A, they've gotten to know us well. B, whenever we meet together, yes, we all have our Bible, but we also all have our triple combination and so when things come up we'll read a passage from Paul but we'll also read something from Abinadi and from Alma, and they read it along with us.

I remember one time as we were meeting with evangelicals. It must have been our second time, so this would have been in 2001. Our topic for that particular two-day period was grace and works. How salvation comes. At a certain point, in spite of what we tried to get across to them that Mormons do have an avenue of grace that we believe is very important. One of them said, “I just don't see it. I just don't see it in your Book of Mormon for example.” And I remember that I was sitting next to Stephen Robinson, and I said, “You want to deal with this or do you want me to?” He said, “Let me try it.” I said, “Go ahead.” He said, “Okay, everybody. Get your Book of Mormon out.”

And he then marched us through just about seven or eight Book of Mormon passages that are pretty clearly grace passages. There was silence and then I heard one of them whisper, “Sounds pretty Christian to me.” Now, there are those moments in other words where they say, and I've had them say, “Look, I believe you're as much my brother in Christ as anybody else.” Now, if you push them and said, “Do you think they are the same as Nicene Christians,” I think rightfully they'd say, “No. No, they're not.”

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My greatest concern has always been for the person who isn't thinking theologically or even historically but just thinking, "Who are these people out there who always seem to be at the forefront of social issues, et cetera?" I would hate for them to think we don't take Jesus Christ very seriously. Does that make sense?

**Nick Galieti:** Absolutely. One of the challenges that we have with these Gospel Topics essays is that we have been encouraged to use them in our gospel lessons in seminaries and institute lessons, so how would you recommend the teaching and use of this essay to members of the church?

**Robert Millet:** Again Nick, I would approach it from the point of view of, let's talk about why we feel we're Christians and when people ask us, we're not going to convince them we are but we could at least say, "Could I explain to you why I feel we are Christian?" I think that's the way I would approach, which is, there are some things we ought to be able to say about our beliefs, about our lifestyle, that make us Christian. I wouldn't press young people or older people for that matter to insist we're Christians just like they are, because I think that wouldn't be true. It's not true. I think I'd probably do it in the form of, here are some reasons why Latter-day Saints believe they are Christian.

**Nick Galieti:** How we define ourselves.

**Robert Millet:** How we define ourselves. A religious group ought to have the right of self-definition if anything, and we haven't generally been given that right. One of the fun things to discover early in an evangelical-LDS dialog was the principle of "let us define for you what you believe." I think we do the same thing. I'm not saying they were the only ones. We did it, too. We had in our heads, "You believe this. You believe this."

Here's a fun moment. It was in a Doctrine and Covenants class at BYU. Large group, probably about 200. Something came up. I don't remember the topic, but a young returned missionary in the back spoke up and said, "Well, Brother Millet, you know how those born-againers are. They believe that once you've been saved you can live any way you want to live." And I'd been involved in the dialog probably at that point about ten years.

**Nick Galieti:** The interfaith dialog.

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**Robert Millet:** The interfaith dialog with my evangelical friends, and the thought hit me, I cannot let this pass. We hate being misrepresented. Why would we ever want to misrepresent them? So I basically very kindly just said, “Can we talk about that for a minute?” I said, “You know what? Actually they don’t believe that. I guess there may be evangelicals out there who voice that, but if they do that’s not what their faith is.”

I tried to explain to them the difference between an approach that’s, we can live any way we want to, rather than what they might say is, I believe once I’ve been saved that I cannot fall from grace. Or to say it another way, what I said to them was, “They believe that your faith ought to be manifest in your faithfulness.” That’s what the word implies, and so yeah, you find a good Christian out there who wants to talk about the grace of God. If they know their faith well they’ll know that they ought to be living lives as Christ called you to live and if you’re not, you have to wonder where they have faith. That’s what James was talking about.

**Nick Galieti:** One of the other sides of this issue about declaring yourself or calling yourself a Christian. In some circles, particularly secular and news media, this is a term that has been under assault for being a negative thing.

**Robert Millet:** No question. I don’t think there’s any question. I believe that a significant part of the growth of the “nones” and the “dones,” the young people and the older people who have now distanced themselves from religion. We’re talking about as high as 25% of the nation’s population who have disaffiliated themselves from organized religion. I’m persuaded that much of that is due to the fact that certain people have given Christianity a horrible name.

Some of that may have come with a kind of a moral majority swing in our nation, and I think that’s really unfortunate because it makes it hard for all of us who claim Christian ties to persuade others that Christianity is a good thing, but you’re absolutely right. I think many of these young people have said, “I’m sick of the fighting. I’m sick of being told how many people are going to hell.” And they’re just saying, “Heck, I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.”

**Nick Galieti:** This whole idea of Christianity almost becoming a swear word to some people, and for others it’s still a battleground. We are Christian exclusively and not you.

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**Robert Millet:** That's right.

**Nick Galieti:** We find ourselves kind of in our own world again, and in a sense we're almost getting persecuted from both sides. We affiliate ourselves with Christianity, and we're getting persecuted by both sides of this.

**Robert Millet:** Yeah, it is a catch-22, isn't it?

**Nick Galieti:** In its own way, yeah. And so part of what we look at here moving forward as members of the church, again we have a document like "The Living Christ," where our leaders are certainly putting forward that we believe in this. Elder Ballard even refocused on that in this last General Conference. So moving forward, at what point, or is there a point I should say, that the church, its membership, that we look at this idea of claiming Christianity as, "We've already done this. We've already talked about this. Let's stop talking about it. Let's stop making campaigns for it, because it's a losing battle." Is that even something that you see in the future?

**Robert Millet:** I don't, and here's why. In looking back, people who've watched Mormonism for some time, those outside our faith who've watched us, they're fully aware that in the last two to three decades we've become worlds more Christ conscious, atonement conscious, and grace conscious. They have frequently asked me, "How come Mormonism's big on being Christian now?" And it's a really good question. Part of the answer is practical. When we were being hit on all sides, "The Mormons are not to be trusted. They are not Christians."

I think the public affairs department of the church stepped forward and said, "We've got to somehow try to combat this notion because it gives the wrong impression." I think it was a natural response, but I think there's another less publicized look at this, and that is, I think the impact of Ezra Taft Benson has been phenomenal, and one day we're going to look back and see that his nine years as president or however long it was was terribly significant. Think about it. He pushes us and pushes us and pushes us to read, read, study, study, live the Book of Mormon, and that's what we hear for a decade.

Now, you cannot study in a serious way the Book of Mormon without coming away immersed in what I call redemptive theology. Early in the story you are confronted with the nature of the fall and fallen humanity. You come to know very quickly that salvation comes by the grace of

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Christ and by no other way. You cannot go through the Book of Mormon without experiencing that. I think that has had a profound influence on us becoming more Christ centered and more Christ focused and more grace focused. I don't see that letting up.

I was just talking with someone a few days ago, and he mentioned he'd read a study. I haven't read it yet. Of when, at what point in time, you can actually plot it in General Conference a degree, the extent to which we were talking about Christ himself or the atonement. It's a large jump. It isn't really even much of a gradual jump. It's a jump beginning in about the 1980s. Part of that would have been reaction to people telling us we aren't, but by the mid-80s, I look back, and I think one of the most important talks given in General Conference, one of the most important in our dispensation and I'm sure people will disagree with me on this, I think it's Bruce McConkie's last address to the church. That talk on atonement—

**Nick Galieti:** “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane.”

**Robert Millet:** “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane.” That talk rocked the church and people still read that. People still listen to it. People still watch it. The timing is very interesting. I was director of the Institute of Religion at Florida State, and the directors from all over the southern states were meeting and we met together, and one of the leaders called me and said, “Why don't you give us a presentation on grace and works?” I think he knew I'd been thinking about it. This would have been again '79, '80.

So I did. The reaction was very interesting. All positive. Then I received in the mail, and this surprised me. A call for papers from this new organization that was being started in Salt Lake City called *Sunstone*. I thought, “What the heck?” I submitted a proposal on grace in Latter-day Saint theology. I'm sure if I read it now I would be deeply embarrassed, but it was clearly on my mind.

That's 1980, I think it was. All of these things begin to happen in the 1980s, and we find ourselves moving more and more and more, reaching a kind of a climax I would say with President Dieter Uchtdorf's wonderful talk, “The Gift of Grace.” My gosh. To show you how people know what you spend your time doing, when that session was over another BYU colleague in the back said, “Well, Bob, do you feel better?”

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**Nick Galieti:** Feel vindicated?

**Robert Millet:** Feel vindicated? So I don't see it changing because I see us becoming more and more conscious. This most recent address by President Nelson was very interesting. In one sense he's praising us for being willing and able and eager to talk about the Christ and talk about the atonement more and more, but as we talk about it, let's make sure we understand. This is not about a program. This is not about an event. This is about a person. I think that's a significant. It shows you we're having to do some refining. You see what I'm saying?

**Nick Galieti:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Robert Millet:** And I had seen the very things he was describing. That talk alone illustrates that — yes, we're talking more about it than we ever have. We just need to make sure that our talk is proper and right, lest we give the wrong impression to our members and to those outside the faith.

**Nick Galieti:** One of those things that I actually wanted to get your thoughts on was some of the tone of the Gospel Topics essay that almost seemed as if it called for other Christian faiths to recognize perhaps the false tradition of the Nicene Creed, and almost called repentance to those that held to that.

**Robert Millet:** Yeah. It does have a little bit of that. Elder Holland said some interesting things in General Conference several years ago when he talked about God and Christ and referred specifically to the Nicene Creed. When you think about that creed, and I've read that thing many, many times. Pored over it with colleagues. There aren't very many things that are objectionable about it. The only major thing that I know of that's objectionable to me at least is, they're the same substance or they are the same essence. We wouldn't go there. That's why Elder Oaks in his talk just recently in General Conference said two distinct beings. He didn't just say two distinct persons. They believe they're two persons. They just don't believe they're two beings. They believe two persons, one God.

**Nick Galieti:** Manifestation.

**Robert Millet:** I think there was a little bit of that. A little bit of, we ought to be able to make a stand on this, and say, "Look, this is why we think we are Christian, and for that matter, maybe your position isn't quite as strong as you think it is." For example, there are thinking Protestants and Catholics

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who ask hard questions like, why did we close the canon? Who authorized that? Can we find any ... Here's the other question they ask. Does closing the canon conceivably make us less open to divine direction? I think they're good questions to be asked, not in a form of an argument or a fight or a debate but in terms of, I think there are things we can ask back to those who tell us we aren't Christian about their Christian status and say, "Maybe your position isn't quite as strong as you thought."

**Nick Galieti:** The question about the canon is an interesting one in that Catholics historically have made this argument that it's a closed canon, yet there are so many different things that they practice —

**Robert Millet:** Nobody has a closed canon.

**Nick Galieti:** Not when you get down to it, right?

**Robert Millet:** The Catholic church, as does the Protestant church, has the ... The Catholics have the Magisterium. That is the teaching office of the church. Protestants and Catholics have the Great Tradition, they call it. What is that? Well, that's the teachings of the church fathers through the generations, and it's the creeds. Not just Nicene and Athanasian. It's the Westminster Confession of Faith. It's this, this, this. It's the articles of the Church of England.

My colleague Richard Mouw from Fuller Seminary, he's made the point in writing to his folks. I don't think we ought to get too uppity to the Latter-day Saints about them having additional things. He said, "Look, I've had to sign on about four occasions documents indicating I will not teach anything that's not in harmony with the Westminster Confession of Faith." He said, "That's pretty strong." He said, "Didn't ask me will I teach according to the Bible. It asked me will I teach according to the creed." Nobody has a closed canon. They just sort of think they do.

**Nick Galieti:** This is again, an interesting subject. Perhaps not one that many Latter-day Saints as we talked about before think much about as much as we used to twenty years ago. Again, it's something that people do encounter every now and again. I want to thank you for coming in and talking about this topic, "Are Mormons Christian?" and the Gospel Topics essay that hopes to answer that for people both in and out of the church.

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**Robert Millet:** Or it provides for them an approach. An approach. Not the approach, but an approach to answering it.

**Nick Galieti:** That's fair. Absolutely. Well, again, thank you for coming in.

**Robert Millet:** Great to be with you.

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