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Are Mormons Christians? — A Beliefnet.com Debate

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Are Mormons Christians? Beliefnet.com invited me to debate that issue with Orson Scott Card, a prominent Mormon author. The exchange is already interesting and we will see how it develops. You can find the debate here.

In my first argument, I deal with the fact that Mormonism begins with the rejection of historic Christianity:

We are not talking here about the postmodern conception of Christianity that minimizes truth. We are not talking about Christianity as a mood or as a sociological movement. We are not talking about liberal Christianity that minimizes doctrine nor about sectarian Christianity which defines the faith in terms of eccentric doctrines. We are talking about historic, traditional, Christian orthodoxy.

Once that is made clear, the answer is inevitable. Furthermore, the answer is made easy, not only by the structure of Christian orthodoxy (a structure Mormonism denies) but by the central argument of Mormonism itself – that the true faith was restored through Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century in America and that the entire structure of Christian orthodoxy as affirmed by the post-apostolic church is corrupt and false.

In other words, Mormonism rejects traditional Christian orthodoxy at the onset – this rejection is the very logic of Mormonism's existence. A contemporary observer of Mormon public relations is not going to hear this logic presented directly, but it is the very logic and message of the Book of Mormon and the structure of Mormon thought. Mormonism rejects Christian orthodoxy as the very argument for its own existence, and it clearly identifies historic Christianity as a false faith.

Therefore:

Without doubt, Mormonism borrows Christian themes, personalities, and narratives. Nevertheless, it rejects what orthodox Christianity affirms and it affirms what orthodox Christianity rejects. It is not Christianity in a new form or another branch of the Christian tradition. By its own teachings and claims, it rejects that very tradition.

Richard John Neuhaus, a leading Roman Catholic theologian, helpfully reminds us that "Christian" is a word that "is not honorific but descriptive." Christians do respect the Mormon affirmation of the family and the zeal of Mormon youth in their own missionary work. Christians must affirm religious liberty and the right of Mormons to practice and share their faith.

Nevertheless, Mormonism is not Christianity by definition or description.