

Episode 11

Mormon Identity

ARE MORMONS CHRISTIANS?

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NARRATOR: Welcome to Mormon Identity, a 30 minute talk radio program that addresses church topics important to the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our host is Robert L. Millet professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

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ROBERT MILLET: Welcome to this new segment of Mormon Identity. I'm Bob Millet, from Brigham Young University and I'm joined today by my friend and colleague Kent Jackson who is the Associate Dean of Religious Education and a professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. Welcome Kent.

KENT JACKSON: Glad to be here Bob, thanks for having me.

ROBERT MILLET: We want to talk about the question of, "Are Mormons, are Latter-day Saints, Christian?" Certainly a hotly debated and discussed topic today, but one I think that's worth discussing. I hear, because I spend a lot of my time in interfaith relations, I hear a good deal from people not of our faith that we are not Christian, or that we worship a different Jesus, or things of that sort and so today let's devote ourselves to that question. Kent in your encounter with persons of other faiths what, when someone says you're not Christian, what do you think they're trying to say?

KENT JACKSON: Maybe we ought to look at it from the reverse angle and say, what do people understand when they're told we're not Christians? If you are going to ask anybody on the street, "Are you a Christian? Am I a Christian? The thought that they would have is "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

ROBERT MILLET: Mm-hm. Are you a follower of Christ?

KENT JACKSON: Yes. Are you a follower of Jesus Christ? And so since I am...

ROBERT MILLET: Which is by the way a dictionary definition

KENT JACKSON: It's a dictionary definition, and it's the easiest definition. I once asked my, many years ago, when I had a 14-year-old son, I asked him, "Are we Christians?" And he said, "Well, we believe in Jesus, don't we? Doesn't that make us Christians?" That may sound funny to people engaged in theological debate, but that is the definition that people on the street are going to have. Now I am a Christian because I believe that Jesus Christ is my Savior, and that I can't be saved without Him, and that He suffered and died for my sins, so that makes me a Christian.

ROBERT MILLET: I think the thing that troubles me, Kent, as I encounter this idea. I'm probably less bothered by what the theologians or even the pastors may say because I...they have their reasons for saying what they do and we'll talk about those in a minute. I'm more worried about the man in the pew, or the woman on the street who hears the phrase, "Mormons aren't Christian."

KENT JACKSON: That's right.

ROBERT MILLET: Because what does it connote? Do we not believe in the Bible? Do we not accept the New Testament? Do we not accept the divinity of Jesus? Do we not accept the resurrection? The atonement? The fact that he was God's son? I mean, which of those don't we accept?

KENT JACKSON: Well when they hear that, what they hear is "Mormons don't believe in Jesus".

ROBERT MILLET: That's right.

KENT JACKSON: Which is, regardless of the theological fine print or anything else like that, it's just plain not true that Mormons don't believe in Jesus.

ROBERT MILLET: A friend of mine, Greg Johnson, a Baptist pastor, not too long ago was in Canada, on a radio program, a call-in show from throughout Canada, and a woman called him and just said, "Pastor Johnson, I'm just very upset that you would be so friendly to these Mormons!" And he said, "Well, why?" She said, "Well you don't understand! They're awful people!" He said, "Awful people?" And she said, "Yes! They don't even believe Jesus died on the cross!" And Greg said, "How do you think they think he died?" [LAUGHTER] And she said, "Well no, I know they believe he died on the cross, but I don't think they believe that the cross saves us." He said, "You know, madam, that's a very different issue than the one you raised. They do believe He died on the cross, and frankly they do believe that the cross saves them." But it's those kind of quips and comments that often hurt us.

KENT JACKSON: Sure, yep.

ROBERT MILLET: Kent, let me pose a thought or two to you and have you consider. What I've encountered, leaders of other churches, or theologians around the world, I often get this, "You folks must not be Christian, because you're not part of the historical tradition of Christianity. You're not Roman Catholic, you're not Protestant, you're not Eastern Orthodox, we have no place to put you." Why don't you comment on that?

KENT JACKSON: Well, they really *don't* have a place to put us.

ROBERT MILLET: And that says we don't fit the categories...

KENT JACKSON: We don't fit. If the definition of a Christian *is* somebody whose religion descends through the historical Christian tradition, through the centuries, we're not part of that.

ROBERT MILLET: That's right, we'd have to say guilty.

KENT JACKSON: We're guilty, we're not Christians by that definition. And the idea there is that all of

modern Christianity descends through, descends from the Church of Jesus and the Apostles down through the bishops through the centuries, through the various divisions between east and west, Protestants and Roman Catholics and so forth, but they all belong to the same family tree. We don't belong to that same family tree, so if belonging to that family tree is the definition, we don't belong to it because we believe that the tree was chopped down shortly after the time of Jesus.

ROBERT MILLET: Which is interesting too, for me, because when I think about it I think our Protestant brothers and sisters have a real, a serious question on their hands as well and that is, you can't say, "I go back to the first century Church." And in the same breath say, "I broke with the Christian Church in the 16th century."

KENT JACKSON: That's right

ROBERT MILLET: You can't say, "I'm a follower of Martin Luther in the 1530's", and at the same time, "I go back to the days of Jesus." It can't be both.

KENT JACKSON: No, it doesn't work that way.

ROBERT MILLET: And I thought of another thing too, I was talking with one of my friends once about this and I said, "Well let's talk about this historical thing." I said, "Where do you think those first Latter-day Saints came from?" And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, you know they just didn't spin into existence out of nothing. Where did they come from? They were Protestants before they were Latter-day Saints. We didn't baptize many Catholics back then. They came from a Protestant tradition. That means [LAUGHS] that Luther and Calvin and Wesley and Zwingli were all parts of their backgrounds as well."

KENT JACKSON: Mm hm.

ROBERT MILLET: So in a sense we have the same historical background.

KENT JACKSON: Sure, we're apostates from them like they're apostates from the Roman Catholic Church. [LAUGHTER]

ROBERT MILLET: That's right. The second thing, Kent, I hear a great deal of is, "You folks must not be Christian because you don't subscribe to the creeds of Christianity."

KENT JACKSON: Yeah. This is another major definition that even serious-minded members of other denominations use. That is allegiance to the theological positions that were developed in the creeds and the early councils. And we confess once again, guilty. We don't hold allegiance to the decisions that were made in the council of Nicaea, the council of Constantinople and other councils. We believe that all of that is very post-apostasy time and guilty as charged, we're not part of that tradition that produced those creeds.

ROBERT MILLET: You know it's interesting though, there are other Christians on the earth who don't subscribe to those as well. Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, groups for example that followed Alexander Campbell, they're not creedal. Today the United Church of Christ is not a creedal organization. Yeah, but I think, you know it's interesting when you think about creeds, I think number one, there are things in creeds that clearly are false. The

other problem I see with creeds, especially in Joseph Smith's days, that people were using them as a club in the 19th century and the 18th century to just, "You're not creedal, you're not with us." It was a dividing mechanism, and I think the Prophet was as troubled by creedal-ism as anything. What exactly, Kent, do you see as the specific kinds of problems that come out of Nicaea and 325?

KENT JACKSON: Where do we start? The first vision, the dramatic opening of the restoration, dismantled the whole theological basis of how Christians understand the nature of God. So from the first moment of the restoration first vision, before Joseph Smith really knew that he was starting a restoration of the gospel, we see the undoing of many, many centuries of Christian history.

ROBERT MILLET: And you know I think it's worth knowing as Elder Holland pointed out in his marvelous conference address a couple of conferences back, it's worth knowing that there are 324 years of Christianity that did not have a Nicene Creed, was not linked to any kind of creedal branch of Christianity that I think called themselves Christian.

KENT JACKSON: Including people like Peter and Paul.

ROBERT MILLET: We're discussing the whole question of whether Latter-day Saints are Christian. Kent we talked a bit about reasons that Latter-day Saints were often excluded from this category because of their historical background. We're neither Protestant nor Catholic, we're not Eastern Orthodox and so often people have no place to put us and if that's the criterion then so be it. We indicated that one of the reasons we're excluded is because of the creeds of Christianity which Latter-day Saints do not accept. Let's get more specific. How about the doctrine of the Trinity, Kent? People say that you're not Christian if you reject the doctrine of the Trinity. How does...let's get more specific on the creeds.

KENT JACKSON: Well that really is a very common and traditional definition of what is a Christian. Do you, does one follow the canonical creeds that explain the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost being three persons within one being and however that is understood in terms of the detail? And we don't understand the nature of God that way, but that is an honest definition on the part of many Christians who don't invent that definition as a means of excluding us, but simply believe that the core understanding of the nature of God is something that separates Christians from non-Christians. And because our core understanding of the nature of God is so contrary to *that* then we must not belong in that group.

ROBERT MILLET: Well let me ask you this, Kent. Are Latter-day Saints monotheistic? Do they believe in one God?

KENT JACKSON: We believe in one God, but we also believe that Jesus Christ is divine. Jesus Christ set the pattern for us while He was on Earth when He told us that we worship the Father in His name. We believe, nonetheless, that Christ is a divine being.

ROBERT MILLET: You know I think Elder Holland's General Conference address was so timely and important, but I appreciated especially when he talked about all the different ways in which we believe the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one.

KENT JACKSON: Sure

ROBERT MILLET: That is, they're infinitely more one than they are separate. They happen to be separate beings.

KENT JACKSON: Sure

ROBERT MILLET: Meaning no disrespect, I've often and just in the form of discussion with my colleagues of other faiths have often said, "Could I just ask you a simple question? I'm trying to understand this mystery of one plus one plus one equals one. Help me, if you were to invite the Godhead to dinner how many place-settings would there be?" And this is an interesting question because it does get down to practical things. Is it, you'd say, "Well there are three persons coming." OK good, now, will they all sit in the same chair? They're all one being and then, this is where we get at this, it's that Greek word that's used in the Nicene Creed "homoousios" which I suppose has been rendered "one substance" or "one essence" that becomes so problematic for us because if a person meant by that "equal divinity" I think we'd be fine. I don't think we have a question about the fact that Christ and the Father are of the same divinity.

KENT JACKSON: Sure, or "common mission" or "common vision".

ROBERT MILLET: Sure. Or that they're one in soul, one in mind, one in heart, one in purpose. We could name the things.

KENT JACKSON: Well our own scriptures emphasize all of those things. And in fact often times in our own scriptures we don't know, are these the words of the Father? Are these the words of the Son?

ROBERT MILLET: And it doesn't matter!

KENT JACKSON: The answer is, it doesn't matter. And in the Doctrine and Covenants we have the voice of Christ speaking the words of the Father. Is there a distinction? Do we want to split hairs between those? The answer always is no! It simply doesn't matter because they are of one purpose.

ROBERT MILLET: I'm reminded that this concept of unity is was very important to the Prophet Joseph Smith. I mean if we read the *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 5, clearly he talks about the Father and Son having the same *mind*. And I think that's a grand concept when Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ." It means that by the power of the Spirit we come to think as God would think, and feel as Christ would feel.

KENT JACKSON: And it also sets the model and the pattern for us in the great high priestly prayer in John chapter 17.

ROBERT MILLET: Absolutely, which I think is one of the toughest things to get around.

KENT JACKSON: Sure.

ROBERT MILLET: He's not saying, "Would you please become ontologically one, would you be *being* one, like we are?"

KENT JACKSON: No, Jesus clearly wants his disciples to become one, like He and the Father are one. And I think all of us who have served in the Church, who have listened and felt the Spirit in meetings and things like that have sensed in some way what this *oneness* really means. And I don't disrespect or disregard in any way our brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations who clearly see and understand the oneness of the Godhead in that sense. But the Restoration makes clear by substantiating what the Bible itself teaches. That Jesus and the Father are separate beings.

ROBERT MILLET: I'm of the same mind, Kent, that a person would have to really work, in my view, as one who has read the scriptures many times and I know you have, I think you really have to work to create a doctrine of trinity in the New Testament.

KENT JACKSON: Oh absolutely, it's just not there. You can make a better case for the trinity out of the Book of Mormon than you can out of the Bible.

ROBERT MILLET: That's right. [LAUGHTER] You can indeed!

KENT JACKSON: Because the Book of Mormon teaches clearly the oneness of the purpose of the Father.

ROBERT MILLET: Which Father, Son and Holy Ghost is one God.

KENT JACKSON: Sure.

ROBERT MILLET: Talking about their absolute oneness, Kent, let me pose our next idea. We're often told that Latter-day Saints are not Christian because of our refusal to accept the Bible alone as a Holy Scripture. Why don't you comment on that?

KENT JACKSON: Well, we do believe the Bible, it's part of our curriculum in our youth classes and our Sunday school classes. We quote out of the Bible in our Church meetings and things like that. So the problem isn't do we or do we not believe in the Bible. The problem, well there are two problems other Christians have with us. One is that we believe in other things beyond the Bible. And then the other is that we don't believe that the Bible arrived to us in a perfect and complete state. But the Bible itself doesn't say that there can't be other scriptural books.

ROBERT MILLET: So often people are making claims for the Bible that it's the final word of God that the Bible doesn't make for itself.

KENT JACKSON: The Bible doesn't say that at all. In fact the pattern for the Bible is that God loves His people and so whenever He can He sends them prophets and He reveals His will to them.

ROBERT MILLET: I'm reminded of the statement that Richard Bushman, one of our Latter-day Saint historians, made once when he said that Joseph Smith found in his day that the ministers of his time had actually turned the Bible into a handbook, instead of meaning for answering gospel questions. Rather than for what it represented which was an invitation and a pattern for recognizing that God loves and speaks to His children. And Joseph Smith took that pattern, that instruction, that invitation very seriously, and sought to show revelation is real and it continues.

KENT JACKSON: And it's interesting too that many of the earliest revelations in the Doctrine and

Covenants have to do with teaching us that we can receive revelation and how to understand it.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, in fact you move through those sections, those early sections, and it's as if God is saying, "I want to teach you about revelation, and so in order to teach about revelation I'm giving you a revelation about revelation."

KENT JACKSON: Yeah, mm-hmm.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah. Kent, it seems to me our view of the Bible, I often hear this. I was just asked this morning, "How can you feel the same love for the Bible that I feel, when you believe in other books of scripture?" Now, respond to that.

KENT JACKSON: I've got four kids and having number four didn't make me love numbers one, two and three less than number four.

ROBERT MILLET: I hate to admit it but we must think alike because that's exactly what I said just this morning! [LAUGHTER] I was asked by an Evangelical friend, "How can you not dislike the Bible or think of it less if in fact you believe in the Book of Mormon?" And I said, "Well because it's a *family*! The family of scripture. The fact is I don't love the Book of Mormon more than the Bible, I don't love the Pearl of Great Price more than the Doctrine and Covenants. I love all my family!"

KENT JACKSON: But you know the Book of Mormon gives us reason to believe in the Bible better than the Bible does itself. The Book of Mormon talks about the Bible constantly and though the Book of Mormon tells us that the Bible won't arrive to us in pristine condition the greatest testimony bearer that exists in the world about the Bible is the Book of Mormon.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, yeah, the Book of Mormon. Notice the number of times that the Lord says such things as, proving to the Bible that the Holy Scriptures, proving to the world that the Holy Scriptures are true, meaning the Bible.

KENT JACKSON: Mm-hm.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, we want to talk a little more about being Christian in a personal sense, Kent, I want to come back to that because I know you've done some thinking about this. We're dealing with this question again of, "Are Latter-day Saints Christian?" It seems to me, Kent, that not too many thinking people believe, I hope they don't, that the judgment will consist of standing before God and being given a multiple choice, matching or essay exam, in which we'll be quizzed on our theological knowledge, but that really entails one's acceptance of, devotion to, obedience to Jesus Christ. Wouldn't you say?

KENT JACKSON: Yeah, I think that if the definition of a Christian is one who has accepted Jesus Christ in his own life and this is a legitimate definition that many people outside of our own faith use. A Christian is one who has accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and has taken Him as a guide in his life. If that's the definition of what is a Christian then we really can't say, "I've gotta pass the test on whether or not I understand how the trinity works or what the Nicene Creed says", or anything like that. Now what that means is that Latter-day Saints pose a serious problem for some other Christians who don't like to think that we are

Christians, because the Latter-day Saints that I know have had a conversion experience in which they have put off the old man, put upon themselves the new man in the image of Christ and have changed their lives.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, Kent, several years back I received a telephone call from a religion editor of a local newspaper and the person said to me, “Bob, do you have a minute?” And I said, “Certainly.” And they said, “I just read an interesting poll survey conducted by a very respected Christian organization. They were asking people different questions about their faith and one of the questions that was raised was, ‘Have you been born again?’” This person said, “I was excited because they included Latter-day Saints in this survey,\ and Bob it was exciting.” This person said, “Twenty-six percent of those surveyed Latter-day Saints said they were born again! Isn’t that exciting?!” I said, “What?!” And he said, “Yes, twenty-six percent!”

KENT JACKSON: That’s terrible!

ROBERT MILLET: I know! I said, “What about the other eighty-four?” And the person said, “Well no I thought it was exciting that they said they were born again!” And it seemed to me, I said, “You know, I’m convinced that it’s as if wording and semantics became the issue here. I think what Latter-day Saints heard was ‘have you had a born-again experience like my Evangelical friends.’”

KENT JACKSON: Right, right.

ROBERT MILLET: Because I think most Latter-day Saints would say, “No not exactly that way.” What about yourself, Kent, you think you have had a born-again experience?

KENT JACKSON: I certainly have. And you know I look around my neighborhood, I live in a very typical Utah neighborhood with lots of Latter-day Saints and probably there are very few people in my ward who would use that kind of language to describe their own conversion experience and it’s too bad. I don’t know if we avoid that kind of language because we’re running away from trying to look like Protestants or something like that, I just don’t know. But I look at the good people in my ward, probably who couldn’t explain anything in terms of theological language that would be understandable to Evangelicals or other Protestants. They couldn’t explain that. But you ask them, “Has there been a change in your life? If you look back to when you were 17, did something happen in your life between that point and this point in your life?” And they say, “Yes, I got converted to the gospel. I recognized that Jesus is the Christ. I decided I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I want to come to church and partake of the sacrament worthily.”

ROBERT MILLET: I began to lose the desire for the old lifestyle that I had before.

KENT JACKSON: Absolutely. The problem with your poll is that we don’t necessarily describe it in that kind of language, but I would be, my guess would be, as I envision the people in my own ward, that all of the active faithful members of that ward have been through that process even if they don’t know what to call it, don’t know how to describe it.

ROBERT MILLET: I think that’s fascinating, Kent. I’m reminded of that passage in the Book of Mormon where we’re told that the Lamanites in Helaman chapter 5 have been baptized by fire and

“knew it not”. Now, I don’t doubt that they knew that they had had an experience but I think that if you’d walked up to them and said, “Have you been born of the Spirit and baptized by fire?” I think they would have said, “I don’t know, but I sure had a great experience and I just want to do good.”

KENT JACKSON: Yeah, you and I probably didn’t know how describe that until many years after the fact. I look back on my own life as an eighteen year old, not necessarily living the kind of life that I should have been living. And the process by which I decided to prepare myself for a mission, and lost the disposition to do the things that I had done before, *desired* to be among faithful Latter-day Saints, *wanted* to serve the Lord, and those kinds of feelings haven’t left since that time. So because I know the language, because I’ve spent time with people of other faiths I can say, “Yes, I have been born-again.”

ROBERT MILLET: It’s like Elder Oaks said in his April 1998 address “Are We Saved?” He said, “Well, listen I’ve learned that understand what they’re asking ‘Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior?’ ‘Yes!’ ‘Do you believe He’s the only hope for salvation?’ ‘Yes!’ ‘Has He forgiven your sins?’ ‘He has!’ Well in that sense, yes, I’ve been saved, because I know what they’re asking.”

KENT JACKSON: We differ in those areas from some people of other Christian religions in that we don’t view this so much as a once-in-a-lifetime event that saves us. We view it as an ongoing process that continues to redeem us as we continue to take advantage of the blessings of the Atonement through our lives.

ROBERT MILLET: Well said. Kent, let me ask you this as we begin to draw this to a close. I often hear this, “The problem with Latter-day Saints is that they worship a different Jesus.” Would you comment on that?

KENT JACKSON: You know, the best and the most full and the clearest explanation of who Jesus Christ is, comes out of our Latter-day Saints scriptures. People who with a sincere heart read the Book of Mormon are going to get to know Jesus in ways that the Bible really can’t deliver for them. The Book of Mormon was given to us to be a testament of Jesus Christ, to teach the first principles of the gospel, faith, repentance, baptism, spiritual rebirth, and things like that. So, do we worship a different Jesus? Absolutely not. The Jesus we worship...

ROBERT MILLET: The Christ of the New Testament.

KENT JACKSON: ...is entirely consistent with the depiction in the New Testament. There’s nothing in the New Testament that I am uncomfortable about with respect to descriptions of Jesus and what He did.

ROBERT MILLET: It’s as if the modern revelation affirms what we have in ancient scripture and the scriptures of the Restoration give us insights into dimensions of Christ’s character and nature that aren’t contained, but it doesn’t mean that I’m worshipping a different person.

KENT JACKSON: Absolutely not! And that’s why converts are so attracted to the gospel, through by means of the Book of Mormon, because the Book of Mormon reinforces what they have always felt in their hearts about Jesus Christ.

ROBERT MILLET: Well let me just pose this thought for you, Kent. I was with Father Richard John Neuhaus a few years ago. Father Neuhaus passed away recently, a great loss to the Christian world. And we were discussing some of the work I had done with Evangelical Christians and he thanked me for the work I'd done with his Evangelical friends and he of course a Roman Catholic said, "And when do plan to begin work with Roman Catholics?" And I said, "Well that will depend on what the Brethren want done, but we certainly are eager to do so." And he said this; this is very interesting, he said, "I think we need to have more conversations, more ongoing conversations between," then he said it this way, "Latter-day Saint Christians and Nicene Christians." What do you think of that?

KENT JACKSON: That kind of statement acknowledges that we're Christians.

ROBERT MILLET: That's what I think, and I was, in other words, we need to appreciate the fact that, and help others appreciate the fact that we *are* Christian. That we *do* believe in Christ and his divine sonship and His atoning sacrifice and that He is our, in Sheri Dew's words, our only hope. And we don't shy away from that one bit. Just a closing thought for our friends as we draw this to a close. We believe in Christ. Nephi meant what he said when he said, "we preach of Christ, we prophecy of Christ, we talk of Christ" and then this interesting phrase, "that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins."

KENT JACKSON: Yeah

ROBERT MILLET: There should not be any question, any question whatsoever, it should not be a secret in the minds of our friends that Latter-day Saints are Christians.

[MUSIC BEGINS]

NARRATOR: You've been listening to Mormon Identity. Thanks for tuning in. We hope you join us next time.

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