“Looking Across the Doctrinal Divide”: Latter-day Saints, Southern Baptists and the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention, Salt Lake City

“I was a graduate student at Duke University,” recalls Steven Robinson, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), “when our LDS bishop, along with other local ministers, received an invitation to attend a meeting of a citizen’s committee combating the growth of adult bookstores and movie houses in our area.” But when LDS leaders showed up, several Evangelical ministers warned they would “walk out” if the LDS Church was involved. “So we withdrew,” wrote Robinson, “but the lesson was not lost on us—some Evangelicals oppose Mormons more vehemently than they oppose pornography.”

Likewise, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America’s largest Evangelical Protestant denomination, have long discouraged fellowshipping on moral issues with the LDS Church. But both Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints “are conservative, virtually agreeing on family values (they are for them) as well as abortion, pornography, protected gay rights, drug use, and legislated gaming (they are against them),” describes religion historian Jan Shipps. “Voting Republican is the normal pattern for the great majority of Baptists and Latter-day Saints. Moreover, many members of both groups are clearly part of the Christian Right.” In fact, Evangelical Christians, including Southern Baptists, are more closely aligned to Latter-day Saints on moral and social issues than they are to their fellow Mainline Protestants. But Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints rarely, if ever, work together. Not surprisingly, outside observers are often confused by the unwillingness of these two conservative groups to fellowship each other and unite on a shared moral/political agenda. Why the disconnect?

I will argue that doctrinal differences are responsible for the deep divide between Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints. More specifically, it is the belief of Southern Baptists that the LDS Church is not Christian that divides the two religious camps. As Southern Baptists are committed to fellowshipping other “Christian” denominations on moral issues, they are unwilling to form moral
coalitions with groups like the Latter-day Saints whose theology renders them undesirable partners. In addition, LDS Church representatives seem reluctant to make overtures to those who criticize their Christianity. They instead seek to form ecumenical alliances with more inclusive religious organizations—Christian and non-Christian—that also share their moral agenda.

This tension between two of America’s largest religious organizations was highlighted during the 1998 SBC, Salt Lake City. The SBC’s “Crossover Salt Lake City” provided both denominations the opportunity to define who they were, and who they were not. Both the SBC and LDS Church showcased their doctrine and sense of morality, which like parallel lines mirrored each other but never met. “Conventional Christians ask, ‘Are Mormons Christian?’ and in asking think they already know the answer,” point out Richard and Joan Ostling. “And Mormons think they have a better, if unspoken answer. They are not only Christians, they are the only true Christians, and their church is the only true church of Jesus Christ.” SBC president Tom Elliff explained, “The Christ that the Mormons speak about is not, in our minds, identified with the Christ identified solely in the scriptures.” The Ostlings are both wrong and right on the LDS position. Latter-day Saints do not believe they are the only true Christians but do believe their church to be the only true church of Jesus Christ. As LDS scholar Terryl Givens explains, Mormonism has “never claimed to be anything less than the fullest repository of divine truth in the midst of a universal darkness. The evidence of that apostasy was guarantor of the need for a restoration; Mormonism was erected on the premise of radical difference.”

Due to these Christ-centered doctrinal issues, leaders from both denominations seemed content to stay on their side of the divide. “We don’t have to carry each other’s mail here,” said SBC president Tom Elliff. “We can happily agree that there are other people who sign on to the same issues we do. I’m grateful others do, but we don’t necessarily need to work together. If it works out in some arena where there’s no compromise of conviction or faith—neither group will compromise tenets of their faith.”