

## Book Review: "The Christ Who Heals" by Terryl and Fiona Givens

by Benjamin Knoll | Dec 5, 2017 | Atonement, Book Reviews, Empowerment, Featured, Goodness, Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Potential, Religion, Savior | 3 comments



At a recent Sacrament Meeting I heard the following message: "The world tells women to be independent, confident, and educated, but we know women are instead supposed to be chaste, virtuous, and modest." Sunday School then featured these highlights: "We are constantly under attack from temptation. If we deviate even an inch we can fall! We have to be constantly on guard against Satan." and "Wearing revealing clothing is breaking the law of chastity. Imagine the *shame* you would feel if the Second Coming happened and the Savior saw you wearing a sleeveless shirt!" The previous week's Sacrament Meeting featured an overview of appropriate dress standards for an upcoming EFY activity, an admonition from the Bishop to be more faithful in church cleaning assignments, and a reminder that when people become inactive or leave the Church it's ultimately because they were offended and are too prideful to repent.

A short time earlier I attended a stake conference in a different part of the world where the topics were (in this order): appropriate Sabbath Day observance standards, tithing, Book of Mormon, missionary work, the importance of "doing" and "obedience," tithing (again), missionary work

(again), and another on missionary work (a third time). At one point a counselor in the Stake Presidency directed a quick comment to visitors: "I know we have many visitors here and we welcome you! We want you to know that of course we're Christians and we believe in Jesus." (One wonders why he felt the need to clarify, given the topics that were emphasized in the meeting.)

The visiting member of the Seventy then finished the meeting with an exhortation to be faithful and obedient to home teaching, tithing, and temple attendance because, as he explained, there is no progression from Kingdom to Kingdom in the afterlife. If you are not faithful and obedient to the gospel now, he warned, your path will be forever sealed against eternal life and exaltation.

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Terryl and Fiona's latest book *The Christ Who Heals* makes a bold claim: Mormon theological culture has inherited a religious "style" from its Western Christian (Catholicism and Protestantism) antecedents that often serves to obscure its empowering, uplifting, and ennobling truths. In other words, Mormons hear the phrase "philosophies of men mingled with scripture" in their temple liturgical rites and assume that it must be referring to liberal Christians who use the Bible to defend same-sex marriage or political philosophers who argue that the Bible makes a strong case for socialism. Based on my reading, Terryl and Fiona might argue that it *also* refers to the integration of traditional Catholic and Protestant perspectives of sin, guilt, and depravity into our conceptualizations of Mormon belief and praxis.

One of the book's key methodologies is the "Hugh Nibley approach": Terryl and Fiona constantly draw parallels between Josephine Mormonism[1] and early Christian desert fathers, monks, and mystics, especially in the Eastern Christian tradition. These parallels serve to anchor their argument that the Eastern Church's theological development was much closer to what Joseph Smith taught many centuries later, while the Western Church moved continually toward more cynical and pessimistic view of human nature, sin, death, and repentance. They argue that Eastern Orthodox Christianity represents a path that Western Christianity *might* have taken, and if it had, would have resembled Josephine Mormonism to a much stronger degree than it currently does.

How, then, did Mormonism shift toward Western Christianity's notions of depravity, guilt, and sin? Through our language, they argue. Not "language" in the strict sense of speaking the English language (or others), but rather the cultural environment in which we are raised.[2] They argue that since Mormonism emerged in the fertile landscape of early America where Protestantism was on fire (literally in the "burned-over district" during the Second Great Awakening) Joseph had a difficult time breaking his followers out of their strong Protestant conditioning. To this day, they argue, Mormon theology, culture, and practice have a strong bias toward Western Christianity's orientations toward sin, guilt, and judgment instead of its "true" focus on human potential, advancement and eternal progression.

Why is it this important? Among other things, it matters how we understand the nature of God. Our understanding of God shapes everything else in our religious lives, including our values, choices, and priorities, as well as the way we interact with one another. As Joseph Smith said: "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves." [3]

Psychological research has also shown that it matters whether one believes in a more "Authoritative" God [judgmental, punitive, strict, etc.] or a more "Gracious" God [friendly, loving,

intimate] (see here and here). Those who have a more "gracious" conceptualization of God tend to have better health outcomes, report higher levels of well-being, spiritual health, self-esteem, happiness, etc., to volunteer and engage in their communities, and have lower levels of anxiety, depression, and paranoia.[4] It could be argued, then, that to the extent that Mormon clergy and laity alike embrace a Western Christian view of sin, judgment, and depravity, they are risking the emotional, physical, and spiritual health of those in their communities.

It is in this context that Terryl and Fiona try their best to "move the needle" of the Mormon theological conversation back toward a "gracious" conceptualization of God. As is common in their writing, they draw on scripture, science, literature, and art, as well as theologians from Irenaeus to Origen to Tertullian to Julian of Norwich[5] to bolster their arguments. A sampling includes:

- "Salvation is the culmination of our richer incorporation into the heavenly family of celestial beings." (50)
- "Christ ... volunteers himself an offering to assume the painful consequences of our injurious choices. Appeasing some abstract justice, or propitiating a sovereign God, is *not* the point." (55)
- "Atonement is primarily about healing the pains and strains of injured relationships." (74)
- "Zion-building is not *preparation* for heaven. It *is* heaven, in embryo. The process of sanctifying disciples of Christ, constituting them into a community of love and harmony, does not *qualify* individuals for heaven; sanctification and celestial relationality *are* the essence of heaven." (78)
- "We do not *earn* heaven; we *co-create* heaven, and we do so by participating in the celestial relationships that are its essence." (93)
- "We cannot overstate the significance of this shift from accusatory judgment and evaluation to judgment as an awakening of self." (98)
- "Sin is whatever is crippling, destructive of human relations, whatever distorts or hedges up the way of flourishing. Virtue, on the other hand, is wholeness, the measure of our creation." (102)

I will admit that I struggled with the understanding of the concept of atonement that is presented in *The Christ Who Heals*. The authors firmly reject the Cleon Skousen view that Christ's atonement was necessary to satisfy the demands of justice on the part of "intelligences" upon which God's support depends to maintain his position as God (a view that was popular in late-20th century Mormonism). Instead, as I understood from my reading of the book, they argue that Christ's atonement was primarily about sharing in our pain so that he could serve as a perfect Healer and to generate the infinite grace necessary to draw and persuade all of God's children unto him. This is a compelling and exciting view, but to me it begs the question: was an atonement necessary, then? Did our Heavenly Parents already not have the ability to share in and heal our pains? Did they not already have the ability to draw and persuade us back to Them, absent of someone else needing to perform that task or generate that ability? The Skousen view, while in my view wrong, at least has a clear and consistent logic. I finished *The Christ Who Heals* without a clear understanding of how the authors' view of atonement ultimately requires a Christ to perform that atonement. (All the more reason, in my view, to move away from a literalistic understanding of Christianity and the atonement and toward a more metaphorical, mystical understanding.)

Perhaps their most important and exciting theological argument is made in the final chapter, where they argue that an overly-judgmental conceptualization of God risks obscuring the bold

and radical doctrine of eternal progression. They outline in Chapter 12 that Mormon authorities such as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, B.H. Roberts, James Talmage, Joseph F. Smith, J. Reuben Clark taught clearly that even though Mormon doctrine believes in an initial assignment to a degree of glory in the afterlife, there exists the potential for eternal advancement, even from kingdom to kingdom. (They further argue that this perspective can be reasonably inferred from early desert fathers such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.) It is only more recent Mormon authorities such as Bruce R. McConkie and Joseph Fielding Smith who taught that this is not true, based on an erroneous understanding of the phrase "words without end" in D&C 76:112. [6]

If there truly *is* the potential of advancement from kingdom to kingdom in the afterlife, it is a radical and ennobling principle: *it is never too late*. Terryl and Fiona argue that our Heavenly Parents are rooting and cheering for us throughout the eternities, and that the Savior will never give up on inviting, loving, and helping us all on our way toward eternal life and exaltation as we climb the long ladder of eternal progression and improvement. No one who desires will be left behind, even if it takes eternities for them to come around.

The implications of this possibility cannot be understated. This means that everyone *who wants to* can and will "make it" in the end. While some will take a little longer than others, everyone is on the same journey with the same destination. Vicarious temple work ensures that everyone will receive all the saving ordinances in the end, and so long as a person's orientation is pointed toward God (or even Goodness), they will for eternity have a standing invitation to progress and learn and come ever-closer to "eternal life and exaltation." [7] We will all have the "eternal family" that is promised to us, sooner or later, regardless of how far down the road we make it in this life. [8]

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For many people, the day-to-day lived experience of contemporary Mormonism, with its frequent focus on behavioral checklists, institutional maintenance, dress standards, guilt-based persuasions, and obedience over grace, is an environment that they find effective and helpful to them as they seek to draw closer to God and become more like Them, participating in the "co-creation" that Terryl and Fiona describe. For some, however, the contemporary LDS environment has become stifling, discouraging, uninspiring, uninteresting, [9] or in some rare cases, even unsafe. [10]

Terryl and Fiona present what is, in my view, a desperately needed "course corrective" to predominant framings and emphases in contemporary Mormon theological discourse. The Mormon tradition is by leaps and bounds richer for the perspectives they are contributing to the theological conversations and narratives. To be sure, there are local leaders and General Authorities who strive to bring these more expansive and ennobling perspectives to the fore. These framings are, however, usually a strong minority in most corners of Mormondom. The Mormonism that Terryl and Fiona present is, very regrettably, simply not the Mormonism that most members encounter these days in their day-in-day-out, on-the-ground experience with the Church. [11] I therefore fear that their effort to influence the dominant narratives in Mormonism is an increasingly quixotic one as American Mormonism and Evangelical Protestantism become increasingly interchangeable in their outlooks, perspectives, and religious styles. But as a

Christian, of course, I value hope, and I hold out hope that, in the end, the Mormonism of *The Christ Who Heals* will prevail.

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FN1: I use the term "Josephine Mormonism" in reference to Joseph Smith's version of Mormon theology.

FN2: I whole-heartedly agree with this, by the way. And I might venture to take it one step further. What other understandings or assumptions about God and religion are influenced by our cultural conditioning, either as individuals, communities, or institutions? How much has our understandings of concepts like "church," "priesthood," "authority," "exaltation," "scripture," or even "Jesus" or "God" been shaped by the cultural environments in which we were raised and by the languages and assumptions and worldviews that we swim in? (2 Nephi 31:3) How much might our views of gender or sexuality be influenced in the same way? And to take it another step further: Terryl and Fiona argue that Joseph's ability to bring the early Saints to new truths was constrained by their cultural conditioning, but how much of *Joseph's* own theology, revelations, and behavior was *also* constricted and bounded by *his* cultural conditioning? If Joseph Smith had been born in India, for example, how might he have understood and conveyed his First Vision experience to his followers? What would the "Book of Mormon" looked like?

FN3: History of the Church, 6:303

FN4: See here, here, here, here, e.g.

FN5: I particularly appreciate that Terryl and Fiona gave Julian such a strong platform in this book. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* should be required reading for all Christians. That said, I may be biased, as my wife and I named one of our daughters in her honor: "Hazel Julian."

FN6: The point about "worlds without end" comes from an interview with Fiona on the LDS Perspectives Podcast. She argues that "worlds without end" in the 19th century was used as a title for God, and thus Joseph likely understood this mean: "but where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, *where We are* [yet!]" I might venture to add that this was a missed opportunity that the book could have taken. What is a faithful Mormon to do when there is very clear evidence that Mormon authorities taught mutually exclusive perspectives on a topic? Or that an authoritative doctrinal teaching is based on an erroneous interpretation of a scriptural phrase?

FN7: A similar argument was featured on this blog in 2015: <https://rationalfaiths.com/an-argument-for-mormon-universalism/>

FN8: Of course, this presents an awkward paradox. If salvation is truly an eternal opportunity and the door never closes, what is the urgency to faithfully follow the LDS program in this life, especially if someone finds more light, knowledge, hope, and/or faith in other faith traditions (or none at all)? The answer, for Terryl and Fiona, is that they personally find the LDS context most

compelling and conducive to learning the lessons of eternity and creating a Zion community. I never found in the book a compelling argument, though, for why *everyone* necessarily best thrives and flourishes in an LDS context, or what to do if someone finds that active LDS participation is more of a hindrance than a help toward a more abundant spiritual life, especially given that the ennobling and empowering narrative of Mormonism they present is not frequently encountered in most Mormon contexts these days. This seems to be the unanswerable question for Mormon apologists such as Terryl and Fiona and Patrick Mason. It is difficult to simultaneously hold to a near-universal view of salvation while simultaneously arguing for the necessity of a near-universal LDS experience.

FN9: Indeed, the 2016 Next Mormons Survey found that 20% of self-identified Mormons in the United States say that at the end of church they feel "tired or burned out" instead of "spiritually fed and inspired." This includes 13% of those who attend church regularly.

FN10: See, for example, "The LGBTQ Mormon Crisis: Responding to the Empirical Research on Suicide by Michael Barker, Daniel Parkinson, and Benjamin Knoll", *Dialogue* 49(2) as well as my research on Mormon context and youth suicide rates: <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Knoll4902.pdf>

FN11: In contrast, I tend to find many of the general positive, ennobling, and universalistic aspects of Josephine Mormonism more often these days taught and celebrated in Mainline Protestant communities.

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## 3 Comments



**Happy Hubby** on December 5, 2017 at 9:58 am

Nice recap of the book and implications.