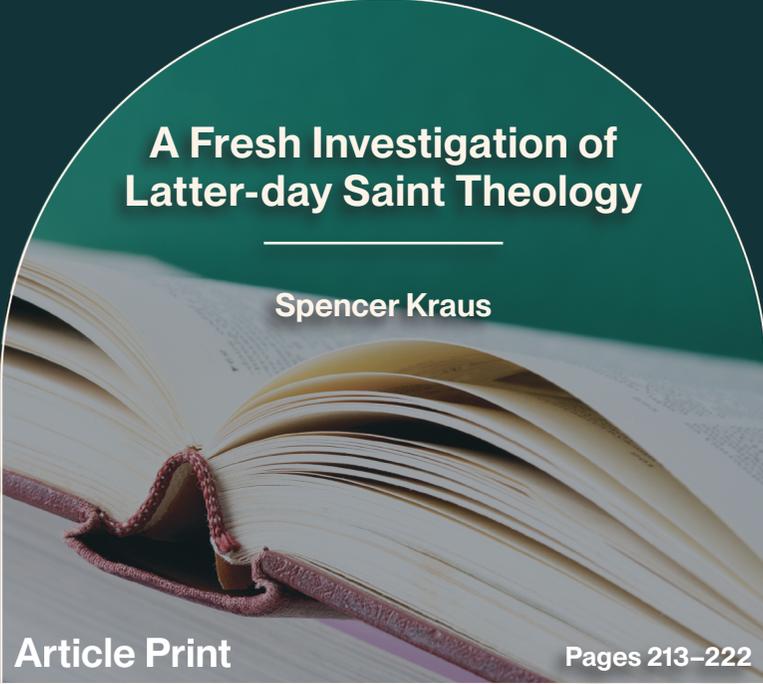


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**A Fresh Investigation of
Latter-day Saint Theology**

Spencer Kraus

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A Fresh Investigation of Latter-day Saint Theology

Spencer Kraus

Review of Grant Underwood, Latter-day Saint Theology among Christian Theologies (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025). 640 pages. \$39.99 (hardcover).

Abstract: *Grant Underwood's recent book, Latter-day Saint Theology among Christian Theologies, is an excellent treatment on the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints written primarily for those outside of our faith. However, it is still a very useful book for Latter-day Saints and well worth their attention. Specifically, this book helps Latter-day Saints better understand other Christian denominations and beliefs, can help them communicate their own beliefs more clearly to others not of our faith, and (though not written for this intent) provides good apologetic grounds for the restoration of the gospel as Latter-day Saint belief is compared with the theology of early Christianity. This book would be a welcome addition to any Latter-day Saint's library.*

Since the early days of the Restoration, the accusation that Latter-day Saints are not Christian has been almost constantly leveled by critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Reasons for this dismissal typically tend to focus on doctrines of the restored gospel that many other Christians do not believe, or more often, understand. In recent years, however, outreach from both Latter-day Saints and other Christians has seen an increased dialogue between faiths and caused many to revisit their assumptions about the Latter-day Saint faith.

Despite these dialogues, Grant Underwood noted that something was missing: “a single volume addressed to non-Latter-day Saints that systematically brings Mormon thought into conversation with main currents of Christian theology” (p. 5). As such, Underwood has provided that book himself, aptly titled *Latter-day Saint Theology among Christian Theologies*.¹ This book takes seriously the question of how Latter-day Saints should be understood within the broader realm of Christian thought, in large part, because of how diverse Christian theologies actually are. Rather than being a clear-cut monolithic Christian theology that critics can point to in an attempt to delegitimize the restored gospel, after all, there are 2,000 years of Christian history that have developed multiple theological systems, many of which are still found in different churches today.

To illustrate how the restored gospel fits within this wider web of Christian beliefs, Underwood organizes his material “around the standard, classical subdivisions of theology, its *loci communes*” (p. 5). These include items such as theology proper, Christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology. Such a book thus offers not just a primer on Latter-day Saint theology, but Christian theology as a whole. Such an organization also allows Underwood to better address his non-Latter-day Saint audience on grounds they are more prone to recognize and “make Mormonism intelligible to them in the concepts and vocabulary of traditional Christian theology” (p. 8).

It should be noted that Underwood does not have his principal training in theology, but in history. Even given Underwood’s focus on the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and on its unique worldview and doctrine through his many publications, some may wonder if he is qualified to write on such a topic. Although he may lack a degree in theology, he makes up for this in his careful use of sources throughout the book—a brief glance through the Works Cited and numerous footnotes will show that Underwood has done extensive reading on each topic discussed. Further, it should be noted that this book is not intended to be a definitive work on the subject, and more dialogue is invited by the author himself. In his introduction, Underwood states that the parameters of the book required that he focus on what Latter-day Saint apostles and prophets have taught rather than citing at length the work of Latter-day Saint scholars (who, in a discussion regarding the doctrine of the Church, by

1. Grant Underwood, *Latter-day Saint Theology among Christian Theologies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025).

nature maintain a less important position than that of the scriptures or prophets) (pp. 12–14). He also states that he “leaves to other authors the detailed excavation and reconstruction of Mormon thought from earlier periods in the church’s history,” and notes that this work necessarily had to focus its citations of major Christian theologians (including the Church Fathers of the early centuries AD) rather than draw comparisons to smaller Christian churches that would likewise be possible (pp. 13–14). So, while he may not have the same qualifications as others who have written introductory textbooks on Christian theology, Underwood is absolutely qualified to tackle this issue, especially given the premises of this work itself and its own limitations given the scope of the topic (all of which are acknowledged by Underwood).

Furthermore, the question has been raised to me in conversations with others if, given this book’s focus and publisher, any effort was made to undersell the Latter-day Saint position in an effort to be accepted by Eerdmans (a typically Protestant publisher) or by other Protestants as a whole. I am pleased to say that any who takes the time to read this book will come away knowing that this is not the case. Great care is taken throughout the work to emphasize both the similarities to other faiths and also the unique aspects of our theology. And, for their part, Eerdmans has been open in its desire to “hand the microphone” to an active Latter-day Saint and allow him to tell their primarily traditional Christian audience what Latter-day Saints believe.² The approach to better understand other faiths that Eerdmans appears to be taking can also be seen in a similar book they published the same year that serves as an introduction to Jewish theology, written by a Jewish scholar and intended for a Christian audience.³ Reading these books, one would be hard-pressed to find an instance where the author felt strong-armed into conceding

2. Kurt Manwaring, “Why Did Eerdmans Publish a Book on Latter-day Saint Theology?” *From the Desk* (blog), 14 November 2025, fromthedesk.org/eerdmans-publishing-latter-day-saint-theology/. This is an interview with the editor-in-chief of Eerdmans, James Ernest, during which he explains that while Eerdmans had published a polemical expose on the Church some years ago, it was not a fair portrayal of the Church and this book was seen as an opportunity “to help Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox believers come to grips with Mormon thought” while avoiding the pitfalls that polemical approaches would take. Furthermore, Eerdmans is “likely to want to begin our engagement with traditions outside of mainstream Christianity by inviting representatives of those traditions to explain their own traditions.”

3. See Tzvi Novick, *Judaism: A Guide for Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025).

anything in order to make the book more acceptable to Eerdmans's traditional audience. Rather, it is clear from the first page that *Latter-day Saint Theology* is intended to help other Christians better understand Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices.

As such, "this book is not addressed to Latter-day Saints, though they may profit by reading it" (p. 8). I concur with Underwood. I believe that this book is useful for Latter-day Saints and they will profit by reading it for a variety of purposes. Where other reviews of this book by non-Latter-day Saint scholars and theologians have focused on how this book helps clarify the restored gospel for outsiders, I will focus this review on how the book can be useful to Latter-day Saints specifically.⁴ In particular, I will focus on three points. First, this book will help Latter-day Saints better understand other Christian faiths and traditions. Second, this book will help Latter-day Saints better communicate their beliefs to other Christians in a way that both parties can understand. And finally, while the book itself is not written to be apologetic in nature, it can be useful for apologetic defenses of Latter-day Saint faith and doctrine as a restoration of ancient Christianity.

Understanding Other Christian Faiths and Traditions

Underwood's book is extremely well researched and covers a wide variety of Christian thought from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant interpretations. While Christians (including Latter-day Saints) may have a general idea of how each branch of Christianity developed and unique doctrines to each branch, many may not know much more about other Christian denominations outside their own. For Latter-day Saints, we find ourselves in a unique position as neither Catholic nor Orthodox nor Protestant. As such, though we share beliefs with all three, many may not properly understand or even be aware of certain beliefs in other Christian denominations and will walk away from this book having learned more and gaining a better understanding of other Christians.

For example, most are aware that some Christian churches (such

4. See, for example, John G. Turner, "Review of *Latter-day Saint Theology Among Christian Theologies* by Grant Underwood," *BYU Studies* 64, no. 2 (2025): 171–74; Robert D. Cornwall, "Review: *Latter-Day Saint Theology Among Christian Theologies*," *Word & Way*, 10 April 2025, wordandway.org/2025/04/10/review-latter-day-saint-theology-among-christian-theologies/. See also Manwaring, "Why Did Eerdmans Publish a Book on Latter-day Saint Theology?" for similar remarks on this book's usefulness for non-Latter-day Saints by James Ernest.

as the Catholic or Anglican churches) practice infant baptism (or pedobaptism). However, less commonly discussed is why this practice emerged or why it is continuously practiced to this day. In his discussion of this practice, Underwood does not take anything for granted, nor does he assume that his audience will know the complex history surrounding this topic. As such, he clearly and concisely discusses why pedobaptism emerged and what caused other Christians to reject this idea in favor of believer's baptism. (It should be noted that this is the same approach he takes for all other issues raised in this book, making it very accessible to readers of any theological background.) Reading this discussion, one can appreciate the objective tone that Underwood utilizes as he shares the reasons each side has to offer for their preferred mode of baptism, and how Latter-day Saint doctrine fits into the wider discussion on the proper age for baptism (pp. 377–83).

Another long-standing issue in Christian theology has surrounded the concepts of grace, faith, and works. Many Christians maintain that we are saved by grace regardless of our works, while Latter-day Saints and other Christians maintain that good works are a vital aspect of our salvation. In his discussion on soteriology, these issues are addressed. In discussing the long history of these topics, Underwood notes how "from Augustine onward," some theologians have tried to make sense of how God's grace could be irresistible without eliminating the free will and choice of the believer, culminating in Calvin's more famous take on the irresistible grace of God (p. 226).

Underwood includes a discussion on how Paul discussed grace and works, the epistle to the Romans in the New Testament, and how they were intended to function alongside one another (pp. 243–45). This discussion certainly could have been longer and could have benefited by more direct mention of the "New Perspective on Paul" in scholarship that most strongly advances how grace and works worked alongside one another in Paul's writings (especially regarding a proper understanding of faith and grace in the Bible given their first-century definitions). It is understandable, though, why Underwood would instead focus his attention on specific churches, such as the Orthodox faith, that advocate for a position similar to the Latter-day Saints (p. 244).

Ultimately, the discussion on grace can help Latter-day Saints better understand what factors led to different churches coming to different views on these important topics and how Latter-day Saints'

understanding of these doctrines is rooted in both historical and biblical Christianity (see especially pp. 253–67). As always, he does not disparage any other viewpoint and focuses only on helping his readers understand the different views.

Similarly, Latter-day Saints may be unfamiliar with many Christian churches' views of priesthood authority. For this discussion, Underwood helpfully splits the topic into “ministerial priesthood” and the “priesthood of all Christians” (pp. 339, 344). Though there are many churches that do emphasize the priesthood of all believers, many do distinguish between the ministry and the “priesthood” inherent in being a Christian. And, because Latter-day Saints do not use the term “priesthood of all believers,” we may miss that not all churches view this term in the same ministerial light. Through his discussion, lay Latter-day Saint readers may be better able to appreciate why some Christians believe in this “priesthood of all believers” and how not all Christians view it in the same way. Using phrases such as “every member a minister,” many emphasize that all Christians are called to share the gospel with their neighbors and do not all view this in the same vein as ministerial authority given to ordained priests (p. 346). Underwood also notes how the restored Church distinguishes between these two ideas: there is a ministerial priesthood received through the laying on of hands, and Church leaders have taught that all Saints—men and women—can exercise priesthood authority in their callings, and each Latter-day Saint man and woman receives priesthood power and authority through the temple endowment (pp. 347–50).

Toward Better Communication

Such comparisons invite Underwood's audience to better understand each other. The discussion regarding the priesthood is also an example of the second point in my review: Namely, this book can have a great capacity to help Latter-day Saints communicate their beliefs with other Christians. Oftentimes, interfaith dialogues have a tendency for either party to talk over the head of the other simply because the language used to express the same idea differs between churches.

Other examples could be used to further illustrate this point. For example, Latter-day Saints use the term “Godhead” to describe the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as the supreme authority in the universe that are unified in purpose, each being their own separate personage. For other Christians, the term “Trinity” is used. What is often lost in translation is just how varied that beliefs in the “Trinity” can be. While

many Christians maintain that the Trinity is a “divine mystery” (p. 44), Underwood notes that our understanding of three divine beings united in purpose is close to how some other Christians may view the Trinity. Not only have early Christians, such as Origen, described the Trinity/Godhead as three divine beings united in purpose, but “social Trinitarianism” likewise views the Trinity in these terms (pp. 48, 51). While differences exist between social Trinitarianism and the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Godhead (p. 53), by describing various beliefs regarding the Trinity, Underwood is able to “translate” our beliefs and the beliefs of other Christians into language that each will understand, allowing them to better recognize how our beliefs may align (or differ) with their own (p. 7). This is a skill that is, more often than not, underappreciated in interfaith dialogues.

Another example of “translation” of beliefs can be found in chapter 9, discussing the role baptismal interviews play in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While early baptisms in both The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the early Christian church appeared to be more spontaneous, as time progressed both developed traditions regarding the preparation an individual should receive before baptism. In Catholic and Orthodox churches today, these individuals may be referred to as “catechumens” and be expected to “affirm the faith by responding to a series of baptismal interrogatories” prior to baptism (p. 384). Though we do not refer to those seeking admission to the Church by this term (instead opting for “investigators” or “friends”), and though the process for the initiate may differ between Christian churches, the underlying idea is the same, and Underwood’s presentation allows Christians of any stripe to better understand the processes involved in each faith tradition (p. 385). Such can also be used to explain to non-Latter-day Saints why we hold these interviews in the first place to show that it is not a unique practice when viewed in the broader spectrum of Christianity.

An Apologetic Resource

Regarding the apologetic use this book provides, it should be noted that Underwood emphasizes that his book was not written to persuade anyone of the truthfulness of any doctrinal position he discusses:

While the theological expressions discussed here are treated with empathy and respect, they are also not promoted. The volume seeks to investigate, not indoctrinate, to

analyze, not catechize. Its objective is to probe, not propagate, the theological viewpoints under study. In short, it endeavors to explain, not persuade. (p. 8)

Regarding this, Underwood succeeds, as his book is written in such a way that doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ are explained clearly in a way that other Christians will be able to understand without being polemical or intended to proselytize.

In doing so, it should not be said that Underwood does not give the Church or its doctrines the merit they deserve. Just because something is written non-polemically does not mean that it is written in an effort to undersell our position. Rather, Underwood explains the doctrines, beliefs, and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ clearly and defensibly. He does not concede any point of doctrine in order to “fit in” with other Christians, nor does he disparage any faith tradition that disagrees with Latter-day Saint belief or practice. A tone of objectivity is maintained, as should be expected for any academic treatment on the topic. For this, Underwood is to be praised in presenting the doctrines of the restored gospel in a clear and concise manner to non-Latter-day Saints. This alone can be useful for apologists who strive to accurately relate our beliefs to others and understand others’ beliefs as well.

As Underwood strives to explain beliefs of other faith traditions, he necessarily provides an overview of many of the beliefs in question. Often, each chapter will include a scholarly overview of the topic at point and will trace the history of the belief from early Christianity to the present. Each topic is thoroughly covered, allowing one to see a brief overview of the history of a particular doctrine’s development among major branches of Christianity.

Take, for example, the first chapter on theology proper, that is, the study of God himself. Underwood begins the chapter by demonstrating the present scholarly view of anthropomorphism in the Bible: Namely, God did not just appear to have a body to the authors of the Old Testament, “he actually *has* one” (p. 19). Though this belief was eventually rejected by later Christian and Jewish thinkers, “this would all be challenged by the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, who dramatically reclaimed the physicality of God and sought to bridge the unbridgeable chasm between finite and infinite” (p. 20). Underwood provides a brief history of why the doctrine of an embodied God was eventually replaced by its metaphorical counterpart as well as how that doctrine was challenged by other Christian thinkers (pp. 20–24),

after which he expounds on the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on this topic. In so doing, Underwood not only places our belief in an embodied God in its proper context among other Christians’ views on the subject but also shows how this doctrine fits closer to the earliest beliefs on this topic. (We might even say how Joseph Smith restored this doctrine.)

Another instance where this is seen is in chapter 12, which discusses eschatology or the theology of the end times and destiny of mankind. In this chapter, Underwood lays out the aspects of the plan of salvation pertaining to the afterlife, including our belief that there are three kingdoms of glory that we can inherit based upon our actions and our commitment to follow Christ and keep our covenants with God. Underwood notes that such an idea was maintained by early Jewish and Christian writers, and even that “the notion that all receive the same degree of glory in heaven . . . was condemned at synods in Rome and Milan near the end of the fourth century,” believing rather that our faithfulness determined the quality of heavenly reward we received (p. 526). Though the idea of multiple heavens was eventually lost, the idea of multi-tiered rewards perpetuated among the Reformers as well (pp. 526–27). Underwood’s discussion highlights how the idea of multiple levels of heaven fits neatly into Christian thought, while also demonstrating how Joseph’s visions in Doctrine and Covenants 76 and 19 expands upon this belief by expanding heaven and shrinking hell (pp. 527–32).

Similarly, the Latter-day Saint belief of exaltation is not only compared to Protestant beliefs of eternal progression in the afterlife (p. 536), but also the Orthodox belief of *theosis* while highlighting how Latter-day Saint belief differs from these beliefs as well (pp. 535, 539–42). However, even though we may differ on some aspects of these points, Underwood demonstrates how the restored gospel fits neatly into broader Christianity as a whole.

Summary

Other examples could be drawn upon throughout this book for each of the three points I discussed. To keep this review brief, however, I will not go over every point possible. Further, while some (whether Latter-day Saint or not) may quibble at some of the points or the presentation of the material in this book, I find that it is an excellent primer on each topic that invites further dialogue. Given the book’s own stated purposes, Underwood masterfully succeeds in presenting the restored

gospel in a way that other Christians can appreciate. Furthermore, he does an excellent job in presenting the case that the restored gospel fits within the broader spectrum of Christian theologies. In fact, I would even call this book an act of consecration on Underwood's part. Having dedicated decades of his life to this research, Underwood is able to present the restored gospel to a wide audience that may help them reconsider their former assumptions about Latter-day Saints and their beliefs. This book is well worth the time and will be a welcome addition to any Latter-day Saint's library.



Spencer Kraus *graduated from Brigham Young University with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science, Modern Hebrew, and Ancient Near Eastern Studies. He is a researcher for the Ancient America Foundation and works with Lincoln Blumell on topics relating to early Christianity and the Greek New Testament.*

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