

# The *SBJT* Forum: Speaking the Truth in Love

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Russell D. Moore, R. Philip Robers, Robert Stewart, John Divito and Richard Abanes have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

## **SBJT: How can evangelicals Protestants engage Latter-day Saints with historic Christianity?**

**Moore:** Evangelicals often wonder why Mormons believe such an incredible system: golden tablets translated with "magic glasses," an advanced society of ancient American Indian Israelites who left behind no archaeological evidence at all, a "revelation" of polygamy that was reversed when Utah needed to do so for statehood, a "revelation" barring black Mormons from the priesthood that was reversed after the triumph of the civil rights movement, an eternity of godhood producing spirit babies, and special protective underwear.

What we must understand is that Latter-day Saints (LDS) believe these things for the same reason that people everywhere believe the things they do: they *want* to believe them. Very few Mormon converts become convinced by rational arguments of the prophetic office of Joseph Smith. Indeed, Mormon missionaries don't ask one to do so; instead relying on a "burning in the bosom" that the claims of Smith are true.

To understand the draw of Mormon-

ism, evangelicals should read the works of Latter-day Saints who explain why they love their religion. Some LDS intellectuals who have concluded, to their regret, that Joseph Smith constructed from his own mind the narrative of the Book of Mormon and the "translation" of the Book of Abraham are instructive here. Grant Palmer's *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, for instance, warns that his conclusions are not for children or new converts. Demonstrating the roots of the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth-century world of King James Bible, freemasonry, occultism, and frontier Americanism, Palmer nonetheless remains a committed Mormon—because he loves the social and theological vision of the LDS culture. Likewise, Coke Newell, a convert to the LDS church in his late teens, lays out why a drug culture vegetarian would find the LDS church compelling. In so doing, he glories in the ancient mysteries of Mormon cosmology and eschatology: from a God and a Goddess who produce offspring to a future in which deified humans rule a vast cosmos. Newell makes clear that he isn't simply convinced by Smith's claims; he is convinced because he *loves* the picture of

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reality they portray.

This should come as no surprise to evangelicals who have read the Apostle Paul's revelation of the roots of human idolatry in the first chapter of Romans. Fallen humans have affections and inclinations that they then prop up with beliefs, convincing themselves that their systems are true. This could not be clearer with Mormonism, which is in reality little more than an Americanized version of a Canaanite fertility cult. With this the case, evangelicals should take more than a scattershot approach to knocking down Mormon claims (although this is necessary). We must also present a counter-story to the Mormon story: one that resonates with the beauty of truth and holiness.

Evangelical "how-to" sermons are not going to reach our LDS neighbors. Neither are anti-theological churches that major on Christian experience and piety disconnected from doctrinal content. Instead, we must present the gospel the way the apostles did in the aftermath of Pentecost: as a "mystery" that now explains everything in terms of God's purposes in Jesus Christ. For an example of how to proclaim the gospel to Mormons, we should pay attention to Paul's proclamation of the gospel to a cultural milieu that closely resembled that of Salt Lake City: the pagan enclave of Ephesus. Paul presented Jesus as the key to understanding God's cosmic plan, as the reason for human existence, human worship, human fatherhood, even human sexuality. Paul did not shy away from speaking of what we intuitively seem to know is true: that there is an ancient warfare of which the affairs of human beings are only a part.

The apostle understood that for the Ephesians, and for the Mormons, and indeed for all of us outside of Christ, the

allure of falsehood is because falsehood is parasitic on the truth. We need not just ask whether Mormons believe things that are untrue and dangerous; they do. We must ask also *why* they believe these things, and counter them with the revealed truth.

Latter-day Saints do not need an unbiblical and unsatisfying vision of Christian hope that is not much more than an eternal choir practice. Instead, our LDS neighbors (and all of us) need to hear of the biblical glory of a restored universe in which human beings will rule with Christ over all things, a universe in which nature itself is freed from the curse and in which human friendship, love, and community continue and grow forever. Latter-day Saints do not need to hear of a creation stance that piecemeal stands in the gaps left by Darwinism. Instead, Mormons (and all of us) need to hear of a beautiful and resonant biblical narrative of creation that explains the meaning of the universe and our place in it. LDS families don't just need to hear that we are pro-family. They need to understand that we are pro-family because the family reflects the Fatherhood of God (Eph 3:14), a Fatherhood that finds its meaning not in pre-mortal spirit babies but in the sonship of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:15).

Yes, we need apologetics directed toward Mormons. And, whatever some evangelical leaders may say, we must not back away from the sad reality that Mormonism is *not* even remotely Christian. But we must remember that we will not convince Mormons with rational arguments alone. This means we cannot rely on piecemeal attempts to point out discrepancies in the Book of Mormon, or archeological proofs against the Nephite civilization, or philosophical holes in Mormon cosmology. All of these things

are important, but we must remember that, deep within their hearts, Mormons know that Joseph Smith is a fraud. They, like we before conversion, are “suppressing the truth” (Rom 1:18).

The Spirit can conquer this kind of deception, and he does so through the word of truth. This does not mean proof-text argumentation, necessarily. It does mean presenting the big picture of Scripture, tying it together in the pinnacle of all truth, Jesus of Nazareth. This is not the subjective, irrational “burning in the bosom” of our Mormon missionary friends. But let’s remember where they found the “burning in the bosom” language.

When Jesus was walking with the dejected disciples to Emmaus, he took them through all of the Scriptures, showing them how the Christ was the focus of them all. After he left them, they said to one another: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32, ESV) This was not, and is not, the anti-propositional relativism of postmodern epistemology, nor is it the irrational mysticism of New Age occultism. It is the human heart created in the image of God, freed by the Spirit, resonating with the truth. This is what the apostle John means when he writes that we know the spirit of truth from the spirit of error because the one who is from God “listens to us,” the prophetic-apostolic instruments of divine revelation (1 John 4:6).

We must remember this when we welcome our LDS neighbors over for dinner, or when we lovingly spend an evening with diligent Mormon missionaries. When divine revelation is presented in all of its Christocentric glory, there is a

longing within us for this story. That’s because it is true. And more than that, it is *the truth*, and the way, and the life. That is good news for Latter-day Saints, and for forgiven Canaanites like us.

**SBJT: Can you provide any reflections on recent dialogue that has taken place between some evangelicals and Mormons?**

**R. Philip Roberts:** The excitement began in the fall of 2004. For the first time since D. L. Moody spoke there over a century ago, the story line ran, a leading evangelical was asked by representatives of the LDS Church to address an assembly of religious leaders and assorted members of the general public in the historic LDS Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. On a Sunday evening in November, Ravi Zacharias took the podium in the famed venue to speak on the particularly appropriate topic of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ. This unique event apparently was the brainchild of “Standing Together”—an ad hoc ecumenical Mormon-evangelical alliance led by former LDS member and Baptist pastor, Greg Johnson, and BYU religion professor, Robert L. Millet. Millet and Johnson have been traveling the country together for some few years hosting town hall meetings and listening sessions together with LDS and evangelical audiences. Their stated purpose has been to increase understanding between the two groups and aid in improving relationships.

The big evening came in Salt Lake City. Ravi Zacharias, typically articulate and passionate, made a presentation on Christ’s uniqueness, which was apparently well-received, with a large number of evangelicals in the audience urging him on. If anything, however, it appears that

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his presentation avoided the particulars of just how and in what ways the Jesus Christ of evangelical thought differed or contrasted with the Jesus of Latter-day reckoning. But in the context, others argued, it was the best that could be done without appearing inflammatory and overly provocative. Perhaps so.

The real headliner for the event, however, was stolen by Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary. Prior to Zacharias's presentation, Mouw came to the podium to make a surprise statement. He proceeded to apologize and offer lamentations on how Mormons and the teaching of Mormonism had been abused, misrepresented, and caricatured by evangelicals, particularly those involved in counter-cult ministries. Numerous evangelicals responded in various ways, ranging from mild approbation to disappointment and rage. On further reflection, Mouw issued a statement of clarification stating that he knew of only two persons that he had in mind when he apologized and those were the late Walter Martin, author of *The Kingdom of the Cults*, and Dave Hunt, Christian apologist and author.

The *LDS Church News*, when reporting the event, however, gave almost their entire attention to Mouw's comments while largely ignoring Zacharias. It appears that an apology for apologetics by a leading evangelical seminary president was more important news than a presentation of the Christian gospel.

So just what's going on in Salt Lake City? Are Mormons coming to their theological senses? Is there a doctrinal seismic shift afoot akin to what occurred with the World Wide Church of God just a few years ago when that group renounced their heretical views and embraced evan-

gelical theology? While I hope so, in my opinion, a more sober assessment demonstrates that this is hardly the case.

In a highly centralized, bureaucratic and secretive religious structure like the LDS Church, Robert Millet is a very long way from the levers of power and influence. While the Church is obviously in some ways supportive of his efforts and values the public relations spin-off of a leading evangelical seminary president's apology, the purpose for their support is likely more about public relations than a serious search and desire for theological truth. This *modus operandi* falls in line with the entire approach taken by the LDS church over the last 25 years to lower the "cult" profile of the movement while working hard to gain a measure of acceptance and recognition among Christians generally and evangelicals particularly. LDS leaders probably believed that the recasting of their image will greatly assist in their proselytizing efforts.

Other signs, however, tell us that nothing much has changed in Salt Lake City. Here are a few examples. There are no substantive doctrinal changes in any official LDS publications. "Well," someone might say, "What about the publication of Robert Millet's most recent book, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-Day Saints?* (Eerdmans, 2005). Interestingly, this tome released by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company contains endorsements by several evangelicals including Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary, David Neff of Christianity Today, and Craig Hazen of Biola University—as well as both a foreword and afterword by Mouw. It is heralded as a breakthrough volume signaling, if not a shift, then perhaps an opening to a consideration of a shift by the Mormon church.

A bit further reflection, however, calls for less effusiveness. In fact, it is just the kind of volume the LDS public relations moguls love to see surface. Why? Because it provides just enough public relations credibility for the LDS Church to begin to be thought of in more mainstream—even distantly evangelical—terms without giving away anything of substance. Millet toys enough with familiar evangelical terms and concepts to sound convincing to the uninformed. Without being an official publication of the LDS Church, it also allows church leadership plausible deniability, if what Millet writes rankles some church members or causes a crisis of faith among the less stable.

Allow me to risk being termed “hard core” and “abrasive” by saying that at least some of what Millet says has the appearance of actually misleading the reader. For instance, when he discusses that Jesus and Jesus alone “saves,” and nothing else, he fails totally in elucidating the point that, in fact, salvation or “immortality” in Mormon thought is provided for all in either the terrestrial or celestial kingdoms except for apostates from the LDS church, the devil and his angels. An evangelical might think that Millet is speaking of salvation as an evangelical does—that a Christian receives the “fullness” of salvation through, by, and because of the work of Christ alone. Not so. It is only through the “ordinances and rituals” of the “fullness” of the gospel provided by latter-day revelation and the “latter-day,” i.e., Mormon, restoration that all of salvation is possible. In other words, apart from proxy baptism once dead, only “Temple-worthy” Mormons will enter the celestial kingdom and become gods. They will be the only ones to experience the fullness of salvation. It is omissions like these that

make Millet’s book so potentially misleading in the supposed rapprochement of evangelical Mormon relations. After all, remember that, in addition to being a religion professor at BYU, Millet is also manager of Outreach and Interfaith for the LDS Church and as such serves in its public affairs office.

Other such basic and missionary-appropriate tools (like *Gospel Principles*), which contain the essence of what a new or potentially new convert to Mormonism will learn about Mormonism, are left unchanged. These works are the official publications of the Mormon church. More importantly, the primary sources of Mormonism, The Book of Mormon, The Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants, are left unchanged. Only when changes are made in authoritative sources or even in official proselytizing, indoctrinating sources can one be assured that something more substantive than public relations spin is afoot.

Notably, the latest edition of the LDS missionary manual (2004) contains all of the same old teaching including the notions of the great apostasy (i.e., all forms of traditional Christianity are corrupted), the concept that God is confined to a physical body, and that the “fullness of salvation” is finally revealed in latter-day Mormon revelation. Additionally, missionaries are encouraged to be less than forthcoming, one might even say disingenuous, about the teachings of the LDS Church. On the doctrine of “the Fall,” they are instructed, “When first teaching this doctrine, do not teach everything you know about it,” (*Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*, 50). It appears that the official, sanctioned representatives of the LDS Church to the world, the missionaries, have not changed either their

style or substance.

A further sense of a loosening of the reins by church hierarchy seemed far-fetched when Mormon author Grant H. Parker was disfellowshipped early in 2005 for the publication of his work, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Signature Books, 2002). This volume seriously questioned the historicity of Mormon and The Book of Mormon origins. Parker has a year to reconsider his position and, presumably, to withdraw his book before being excommunicated.

Do any of these developments carry the hope of possible change? Not at all. Remember that repentance and redirection in the World Wide Church of God basically started at the top. Robert Millet, Stephen Robinson, and others at BYU are not official LDS church leaders. At the present time, LDS church leadership displays no indication of making doctrinal adjustments. They are doubtlessly desirous to see impressions altered, though. This desire is evident in the amount of time and money spent on trying to gain acceptance from mainstream Christianity. They welcome dialogue and discussion to this end.

In June 1998, on the occasion of the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City, the Mormon President, Gordon B. Hinckley, was quoted in the LDS *Church News* as saying that Latter-day Saints “do not believe in the traditional Christ. No I don't. The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times. He, together with His Father, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith in the year 1820, and when Joseph Smith left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of

God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of the ages” (*Church News*, June 20, 1998). I encouraged Dr. Paige Patterson, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, to write President Hinckley. With a bit of my involvement, he did so speedily and enthusiastically. In his letter, among other points, Dr. Patterson stated the following:

I appreciate your acknowledgement of a point most evangelical theologians have been stating for some time and that is: that traditional Christians (including Baptists) and Mormons do not believe in the same Jesus. Many of your church's spokesmen in recent years have sought to minimize that distinction. Your candor is refreshing. In my opinion, that enhances your credibility and the fact that traditional Christians and Mormons believe in two different and distinctive views of Christ.

President Hinckley, the issue of who Jesus is, as well as that of the nature of His work, is absolutely critical. If one does not have their faith in the genuine, biblical Christ then we must acknowledge that they are not Christian. Sadly and regrettably, on this most critical issue our two respective confessional communities disagree.

Nonetheless, I appreciate your forthrightness in expressing your church's views. In my opinion, true dialogue among faiths begins with honest expression of both agreements and disagreements in doctrinal and practical issues. Regarding our disagreements about Jesus Christ, President Hinckley, I would be happy to meet with you for a respectful and personal conversation in a private setting at any time and place of your choosing.

Patterson concluded with an invitation for Hinckley and his counselors to be his guests at Southeastern Seminary if they wished. To the date of the writing of this column, Dr. Patterson has not received a reply from President Hinckley.

In my opinion, Hinckley's response, or lack thereof, to Patterson's open-ended invitation says far more about the state of substantive meaningful dialogue between Mormons and evangelicals than anything currently going on in Salt Lake City.

**SBJT: In sharing the gospel with Mormon friends, what should we as evangelicals do when, after discussing the differences between Mormonism and Christianity, they insist that statements by Mormon presidents and apostles are not "official" Mormon doctrine?**

**Robert Stewart:** More and more Latter-day Saints are distancing themselves from statements made by earlier authorities such as Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. They insist that many statements, particularly nineteenth or early twentieth century sermons, are merely speculation, or polemic and/or hyperbole meant to inspire the saints to greater obedience, or that they relate to tangential or minor issues of the faith, upon which the saints are free to differ, rather than to core doctrines. This complicates the task for Christians trying to witness to Mormons or answer unique LDS truth claims. I hope to explain briefly why these situations arise and how we can share effectively with Mormons today.

Never assume that Mormons are being disingenuous when they claim not to believe what you have good reason to think is Mormon doctrine. Mormonism is not monolithic, not all Mormons believe all the same things. In fact, Mormons do not all agree on exactly what is Mormon doctrine. Hence, distinguishing official Mormon doctrine from non-official Mormon doctrine is difficult.

Some LDS writers, such as Brigham Young University (BYU) professor Ste-

phen Robinson, hold to a "minimalist" position on Mormon doctrine, insisting that only what is contained in their standard works (KJV Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price) and/or signed by the First Presidency or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles collectively is official LDS doctrine. One problem with such a minimalist restriction is that it cannot pass its own test. By its own standard it is not an "official" definition of Mormon doctrine. A further difficulty is that even Robinson admits that some acknowledged beliefs and practices in Mormonism—such as the couplet, "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become"—cannot be considered "official" according to his criteria. Nevertheless, he insists, they have *in effect* become normative." Given his criteria, how can this be? Moreover, a brief perusal of official LDS teaching manuals reveals a further difficulty. In these writings Mormon leaders cite "non-official" statements by past leaders in the same way that critics of Mormonism do. Those statements of which the current leadership approves are taken as normative while those of which they do not approve are treated as musings, speculations, or anomalies. To put it charitably, their practice seems inconsistent at this point.

BYU professor Robert Millet suggests four somewhat broader criteria for establishing whether or not a particular belief is in fact part of Mormon doctrine: (1) Is it found within the four standard works? (2) Is it contained within official LDS declarations or proclamations? (3) Is it taught or discussed in General Conference by general Church leaders today? (4) Is it found in the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today? (see Robert Millet, *Getting at the*

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*Truth: Responding to Difficult Questions about LDS Beliefs* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2004] 49). While one may reasonably reject Millet's criteria, they do give evangelical Christians a good idea of what sources are most readily accepted by Mormons and thus most easily used by evangelicals in witnessing encounters and apologetic endeavors.

We should keep several things in mind when confronting Mormon doctrine. First, Mormon doctrine is a moving target. Because Latter-day Saints believe in continual revelation, Mormon doctrine can change. Some teachings that were official doctrine in the past no longer are today. One example is the Adam-God doctrine. Although there is little doubt that Brigham Young believed and taught that Adam was the god of this earth, no Mormon authority today affirms this doctrine. One must stay up to date. Second, some statements cited by critics of Mormonism were never widely taught. Although past Mormon leaders have held some bizarre opinions, such as men living on the moon, not all of these were taught as doctrine. Bringing up such statements will not help one reach a Mormon friend. In fact, it may anger him and make evangelistic efforts more difficult. Third, virtually all of the core doctrines of Mormonism can be identified as such using Millet's criteria—if one knows where to look and documents his sources.

More importantly, the question of what is "official" Mormon doctrine is sometimes merely a smokescreen intended to divert attention away from problematic Mormon beliefs. *What matters most is not whether or not a statement is official but if it is true.* A statement can be unofficial but significant. Mormons are justifiably hesitant to say that their prophets and apostles are

actually wrong, preferring instead to say, "That's only his opinion, but not official Church teaching." When confronted with this sort of statement, I often reply, "My question is not, 'is it official, but is it true?' Was he right or wrong?" While this may seem to be nitpicking, it matters a great deal if Mormon leaders, even past leaders, in the exercise of their office, proclaimed false doctrines, whatever their motivation. Preaching false doctrine is wrong for any prophet or apostle at any time.

Other helpful questions are, "*Do you agree with Joseph Smith (or whomever) on this point?*" "*In your opinion, is he right or wrong?*" "*Do you believe this?*" Force them to take a position. Truth, after all, is the crucial issue. If they disagree with the authority cited, ask, "Why accept him as a prophet if you disagree with his theology?" or "If his unofficial beliefs are false, how can we be certain that his official beliefs are true?"

A final question that must be asked is, "Can you support this biblically?" The Bible is the one source that Mormons and Christians agree is God's word (although Mormons insist contemporary translations are corrupted). Appeals to uniquely LDS scriptures to support LDS theology simply beg the question.

What matters most in evangelistic or apologetic encounters with Mormons is what the individual Mormon to whom you are speaking believes. In other words, we should be concerned to speak as knowledgeably as possible, and to cite sources that our Mormon friends will likely accept as authoritative. We must be careful, however, that we do not become so consumed with answering a question that not even all Mormons agree upon that we lose sight of the goal—sharing our faith with our Mormon friends in an

effective and meaningful way.

In conclusion, Christians sharing with LDS friends should do their best to use the most widely-accepted sources available, make the individual Mormon speak for himself, and insist on logical consistency and biblical support. Patient fair-minded dialogue of this sort, bathed in prayer, and based on biblical teaching is the best way to share with Mormons.

**SBJT: As a former Mormon, what advice can you give to others who are successful in bringing a Latter-day Saint into a true relationship with Christ?**

**John Divito:** Unfortunately, this is a question that, all too often, Christians do not think about or address. For some reason, many evangelicals think that when a former Mormon or other cultist comes to Christ, all of his or her former beliefs and attachments simply disappear. This is simply not the case. Maybe a personal example would be helpful.

I came out of Mormonism through personal study. In an attempt to win my girlfriend (now my wife) to the “true” faith, I decided to read evangelical materials in order to refute them. It was during this time that I was confronted with a more balanced and accurate history regarding Joseph Smith. Through my research, as well as the gospel proclamation of a local campus ministry, I eventually repented of my sins and believed and trusted in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Now this gets us to the point of the question. I quickly became involved with the campus ministry and started attending a local church. Nevertheless, doubts began to creep in. “Could Joseph Smith really be a false prophet?” I would wonder. “Maybe I was hasty in my conclusions—after all, so many people that I trust know that he

was a true prophet of God! Are they all wrong?” I struggled with trusting both the pastor of my church and the campus minister. “On what authority can he say these things? He’s not a prophet of God! How can I trust him?” Worst of all, I felt alone. Others in the church did not seem to have the problems I was having.

At the same time, I knew I could not go back to Mormonism. I knew it was false. Yet my struggle raged. Over time, through Bible study and the patient discipleship of the campus minister along with other Christians, I eventually became firmly rooted in my beliefs. No longer did I struggle with the legitimacy of Joseph Smith, but it took a lot of time and much doubting. At some points, I wondered if I was even truly saved.

By God’s grace, I am saved. However, the most difficult part of this trial was my sense of aloneness and not feeling like I could talk to others about the issues with which I was struggling. How could I, when they seemed to have it all together and treated me as if I was “over” my involvement with Mormonism?

Thankfully, God instilled in me a deep love for his Word and brought the campus minister into my life. I remember spending hours in his office just talking to him about different things. Sadly, not everybody is as fortunate as I was. It is not uncommon to hear about former Mormons struggling with these issues, and more, for years. Many continue to struggle over doctrinal differences. While I may not be able to deal with the minimum amount of doctrinal knowledge a person must believe in order to be saved, I can say that it is not uncommon for former cult members to harbor some vestiges of errant doctrine after their conversion. For example, a former Mormon may still

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believe that all humans preexisted before we were physically born on earth. He or she may question the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. There may even be more serious doctrinal differences that remain in an individual's thinking.

I think that there are two solutions to this problem. First, we must not water down the gospel. While this should go without saying, it is always a temptation for those involved in evangelism. This becomes all the more important when dealing with Mormons and other cult members. There are many differences that should not be glossed over when witnessing. As is often said about Mormons, they use the same vocabulary but different dictionary. They use words such as grace, atonement, Jesus Christ, the Godhead, salvation, etc., but mean different things by them. A Mormon can actually say, "I am saved by grace alone in Jesus Christ," but they do not mean what evangelicals mean by this statement. Effectively handling this language barrier and proclaiming the gospel message so they can understand it is essential. Simple, formulaic, canned presentations will not do. And the less Mormons know up front, the more likely they are to continue believing errors or to even falsely profess faith in Christ.

Second, we must be open, sympathetic, and patient. It takes time to work through these issues. Gently working with and counseling former Mormons will go a long way in helping them to mature in their fledgling faith. We must never sacrifice the truth, but we should also be sensitive to the issues and baggage that a former Mormon is dealing with. As the apostle Paul says, we need to be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15 NIV). I also always try to keep in mind one of my favorite New Testament verses:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15 NIV). Sometimes I find it easier to follow the first part—giving an answer—rather than the second part—"with gentleness and respect." May our conduct live up to the One whom we proclaim.

Finally, I highly recommend reading Janis Hutchinson's book *Out of the Cults and into the Church: Understanding & Encouraging Ex-Cultists* (Kregel, 1994). While I do not agree with all of her analysis or conclusions, it is an excellent book in thinking through how to minister effectively to those who have come out of Mormonism or other cults. I pray that God will raise a generation that will passionately preach the good news to the Mormon people, and that they will be able effectively to disciple those whom the Lord draws to himself.

**SBJT: Can you offer some advice on sharing the gospel with Mormons?**

**Richard Abanes:** Christians are supposed to defend the faith (Jude 3), preserve the Gospel's purity (Gal 1:6-9; 1 Pet 3:15), test all things (1 Thess 5:21), and correct those who have doctrinally erred (2 Tim 4:2). Equally relevant scriptures include Eph 4:15, which mentions speaking the truth "in love," and 2 Tim 2:24-26, which says to correct using "gentleness and respect." Unfortunately, these latter two passages often take a backseat to what becomes the overriding aim of witnessing—that is, make sure that someone realizes he is wrong. But this unbiblical approach never results in a person falling to his knees, repenting, and shouting appreciation for being shown the error of his doctrinal ways. Instead, emotional walls go up,

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defensive arguments are launched (no matter how baseless or illogical they may be), and a golden opportunity to show Christ's love is lost.

One of the most obvious places where some well-meaning Christians have failed to follow biblical mandates about sharing the good news has been in the area of witnessing to Mormons. I have myself, truth be told, been guilty of speaking to Mormons *not* so lovingly and *not* with so much gentleness or respect. And I have seen similar mistakes made by others.

Given the fact that the Bible says judgment begins in the church (1 Pet 4:17), I believe it is time for all of us to stop for a moment and consider why we do what we do in the area of "cult" evangelism. This is especially relevant in connection to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), since we share with them a number of general concepts:

(1) There is a personal God who cares about us (as opposed to either no God at all or an impersonal force).

(2) Jesus Christ was a real, historical person who lived, died, and physically rose again from the dead.

(3) A Christian's life in this world should be marked by holy living, pure thoughts, and zeal for evangelism.

The problem, of course, is that Mormons define doctrinal terms/concepts quite differently than evangelicals. For example, Mormons deny the traditional definition of the Trinity. "God" in Mormonism is an exalted man and is only one god among many gods in the universe. Additionally, Jesus is a created being whose nature is virtually the same as ours—the primary difference being that he has progressed to godhood. Mormons also teach that there are two salvations—*general*, which is merely resurrection life (a gift given by

grace), and *individual*, which is godhood (a reward secured by a grace/works synergy). Obviously, there are many issues to discuss with Mormons. But this can lead to many mistakes.

First, a good approach certainly would *not* include mocking Mormonism or depicting as profane those things that Mormons view as sacred (e.g., the undergarments that Mormons wear). Second, it does no good to accuse twenty-first century Mormons of believing certain teachings/opinions/doctrines that were taught in the nineteenth century (e.g., the "Adam-God" doctrine taught by Brigham Young). Third, one should not instantly assume the worst about a Mormon's motives and/or arguments. Mormons are *not* always "lying" or "dodging the issues" or "seeking to deceive." It is true that *some* Mormons resort to such tactics. But so do *some* so-called "Christians" whose main concern is advancing a personal agenda or idolized doctrinal notion. The average Mormon is very much like the average Christian in that they hold their faith dear, see things in a certain way, and voice arguments that to their minds make sense.

To avoid mistakes, a few things should be remembered. First, God is in control. Those who are called by the Holy Spirit *will* come to Him (John 17:9-10). We are merely tools (Phil 2:3-7) that God chooses to use in the conversion process (Rom 10:15; 1 Cor 3:1-8). Second, every Mormon is a person, not just a representation of the corporate "Mormons." Acknowledging this can help eradicate the "us vs. them" battle lines that are usually drawn during most witnessing encounters. Sharing the good news is not about winning a holy war. It is about Christ touching a person's heart via our interaction with them. Third,

witnessing should be an enjoyable time of talking—not a shouting match—about meaningful truths.

Finally, the most important thing is to be Christ-like: show love; speak kindly; be patient; walk humbly; bear the burden of a broken heart. Nothing is more critical. *That* is what witnessing is really all about—not conversions. Before, during, and after every Mormon encounter, we must ask: Am I just seeking another conversion badge? Do I want to hear “Uncle! Uncle!” more than “Jesus, I receive you”? What is the attitude of spirit that is motivating me? Witnessing to Mormons is in many ways just as much about us as it is about them.

Hopefully evangelicals will be able to do better than the admirable sentiments expressed in 2003 by Mormon apologist and Brigham Young University professor, Daniel C. Peterson, who happens to be a personal friend. In reference to discussing doctrinal differences, he said, “[Some] take this as just, ‘it’s a competition, you can score points.’ You know, you can ‘win on this’—gratify your ego by defeating somebody on that point or something. That’s not what it’s really about. Resist that temptation.” Is there any reason why evangelicals should not follow such counsel—especially since we claim to have the *true* gospel? Certainly our Lord demands nothing less.