

Personal Witnessing to Mormons

by **Susan Roberts**

As a life-long resident of Utah, and a former Mormon, I commonly hear the words, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the Redeemer of the World.” This sounds very much like a Christian profession of faith, but it will quickly be followed by: “and I believe that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church.” This is a typical Mormon testimony.

How do we share our personal witness with someone who sounds so – well – so Christian? Let’s begin with a quick overview of how witnessing to people from an LDS background is unique. First, we must recognize that any similarities we think we see between LDS teachings and Biblical theology is strictly a matter of terminology. Mormon teachings on the nature of God, the nature of man, and the plan of salvation are not Biblical, and clearly place Mormonism outside of Christianity. However, having a basic understanding of what Mormons do believe will equip us as we witness to them: it gives us confidence to speak to them, increases our compassion for them, helps us understand where we need to focus as we begin witnessing, and prepares us to address some of the questions they may ask. In addition, Mormons will be surprised that we care enough about them to have learned something of their religion. An excellent resource for learning about LDS beliefs and how to witness to LDS people is *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* by Rev. Mark Cares.¹

One of the major difficulties in witnessing to Mormons is their terminology: they speak a unique language. They have created many new words and expressions that are unique to Mormonism and they have given new definitions to commonly used Christian words and expressions. Without a clear understanding of their language, we can find ourselves talking past them as we try to witness. Mormons may have no concept of what Christians believe and are often just as surprised at our definition of a word as we are at theirs. The following examples are familiar words with their corresponding LDS definition. The definitions are taken from *Gospel Principles*, a basic teaching manual published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²

Agency: The ability to choose between good and evil and a necessary part of the plan of salvation. By choosing wisely, we gain exaltation, progress eternally, and enjoy perfect happiness. Satan was cast out of heaven because he wanted to take away man’s agency (p. 21-24).

Atonement: The suffering and death of Jesus Christ through which resurrection is provided to all people. The process whereby Jesus paid the debt for the sins of the faithful and makes it possible for us to be saved from sin if we do our part by repaying Him through our works, repentance, and obedience (p. 71-78).

Eternal Life: Synonymous with exaltation. If we prove worthy, we will live in the highest kingdom of heaven and become like Heavenly Father. We will: live in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus, become gods, produce spirit children who have the same

¹ Cares, Mark J. *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, 2nd Ed. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998.

² The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Gospel Principles*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997 edition.

relationship with us as we have with Heavenly Father, and receive everything that Heavenly Father has – all power, glory, dominion, and knowledge (p. 301-305).

Gospel: The law of the celestial kingdom (p. 298). The plan of salvation, which embraces all works and ordinances that are necessary for us to be saved and exalted and often used as a synonym for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (p. 379)

Heaven: Consists of three kingdoms or degrees of glory: the celestial kingdom for faithful Mormons, the terrestrial kingdom for the good people of the earth who did not receive a testimony of Jesus while living on the earth or those who were not faithful, and the telestial kingdom for those who did not receive a testimony of Jesus as Christ while living or after death, and liars, sorcerers, adulterers, and whoremongers (p. 298).

Heavenly Father: God the father, our literal spirit father who was once a human, lived on an earth, and progressed to become a god (p. 11-15).

Hell: A temporary place where people will suffer for their own sins until they are allowed to enter into a kingdom of heaven (p. 298).

Outer Darkness: The place prepared for Satan and his angles where they will be totally separated from the Spirit of God and from His presence for eternity (p. 382).

Salvation: Overcoming physical death through the resurrection, made possible by the atonement of Christ. Occasionally used as a synonym for eternal life (p. 381).

Scriptures: The Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, the King James version of the Bible, and the words of the living prophet (p. 52-56). (The Mormons believe that the President of their church is a living prophet. Any published statement or public address by a President of the church is considered scripture.)

These few examples show how easy it is to get off track when witnessing to Mormons. In order to make our meaning clear, we may need to substitute the word exaltation when we talk about salvation, or outer darkness in place of hell. I rarely use the words gospel, atonement, or plan of salvation because of the confusion they can cause. As a second step in preparing to witness to our Mormon friends and neighbors, I recommend the excellent dictionary of LDS words and expressions at the end of Rev. Cares' book.

In addition, we need to recognize that Mormonism is more than a collection of beliefs and unique terminology: Mormonism is a culture that shapes the believer's view of the world and the way they relate to it. For example, Mormons are taught to experience spiritual truth based on their feelings and not on knowledge of the Scriptures. While many are very knowledgeable about their scriptures and doctrines and will enjoy a good debate on theology, when it comes to personal witnessing, you must engage them at a feeling level.

Mormon culture also makes allowances for changes in both the doctrines and the practices within the LDS church. Their ninth article of faith states: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."³ Our concept of the unchanging nature of God and God's Word has little meaning for someone from the Mormon culture. Questioning them about changes in their scriptures or practices, conflicting doctrines, inconsistencies between factual information and LDS beliefs, or

³ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Pearl of Great Price*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, p 60.

prophecies that have not been fulfilled will be brushed off with little impact and is typically not useful for personal witnessing.

While there are differences in witnessing to Mormons, many conventional witnessing methods are extremely helpful when dealing with Mormons. Establishing a personal, caring relationship is important: they need to know that you care about them. Listen to them, find out what they believe and why, and give them a safe place to talk about their life and ask questions.

Lifestyle witnessing is also important. LDS culture presupposes high standards of personal behavior and most Mormons will expect high moral and ethical behavior from someone who claims to be in a relationship with the Lord. More importantly, they need to experience the reality of your relationship with God through your lifestyle and come into contact with the reality of the gift of forgiveness in your life, both in your own freedom from guilt and your quickness to forgive others.

Telling your personal story is an effective way to witness to Mormons. Remember, they experience spiritual truth at the feeling level and there is no better way to witness to someone than from your heart. How has God revealed Himself to be merciful in your life despite your sinfulness? What is the story of your personal journey of faith? What are the special joys or blessings in your life that are God's gifts to you because of His gift of salvation?

Meeting people at the level of their felt needs is also important. Generally, the felt needs of a person from an LDS background are a hunger for a relationship with a loving and forgiving God and Savior and, because of the need to be perfect, their overwhelming sense of guilt, unworthiness, and uncertainty about their relationship with God and their own salvation. As Martin Luther reminds us, sinful man cannot flee to a gracious and forgiving Father but must find a wrathful and angry God. Without the gift of grace, we cannot seek God's mercy and forgiveness but must approach God either with hearts hardened in sin or in despair.⁴

Forgiveness does not come easy in LDS theology; it must be earned through many works and acts of repentance. One never knows if they have done enough, or if what they have done is good enough, to merit forgiveness and a relationship with a merciful Father in heaven. What better service can we offer than to share the Good News of the complete forgiveness of sin through the sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice to reconcile men to God?

So, what can you do to witness to your Mormons friends and neighbors?

- Pray for them.
- Tell them the Good News in your own words and get them into the Word of God.
- Build personal relationships and love them, listen to them, and treat them with respect.
- Understand what they believe and why, be sensitive to their culture, and learn their language.
- Find common ground to build on and focus on the essentials: the nature of God, who Jesus is and what He has done for us, who we are and why we need a Savior, and God's true plan of salvation.
- Share your personal story and expose them to Christian worship or other Christian experiences.
- Above all, be patient and realize that while you may be planting the seeds, it is God who makes them grow.

This process can take a long time but nothing is impossible with God.

⁴Luther, Martin. (1999, c1955). *Vol. 12: Luther's works, vol. 12: Selected Psalms I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ps 51:2). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Resources:

Books:

- *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons*, Rev. Mark J. Cares, Northwestern Publishing House
- *How to Respond to the Latter-day Saints*, Edgar Kaiser, Concordia Publishing House
- *Answering Mormons' Questions*, Bill McKeever, Bethany House Publishers
- *Mormons Answered Verse by Verse*, David Reed and John Farkas, Baker Books
- *The 10 Most Important Things You Can Say to a Mormon*, Ron Rhodes, Harvest House Publishers

Web sites:

www.truthinlovetomormons.com
www.utlm.org

Practice:

The following is an example of a recent witnessing opportunity.

How would you respond?

You receive a phone call from an inactive LDS woman who has lost a close family member, also LDS, to a long and painful illness. She says she wants to know if her family member is okay. She has read the LDS scriptures and even talked to her Bishop (the Mormon equivalent of a Pastor) but has no peace and she wants to know what the Bible has to say about what happens when we die. She has a Bible but it is the King James Version published by the LDS church and all the footnotes and references are to other Mormon scriptures. What would you say to her?

Pray: What do you want to pray for this person and this conversation?

Listen: What felt need is this person experiencing; what is her underlying question? What resource can you use to give her an answer? How does Jesus' death and resurrection provide an answer?

Affirm: How can you be supportive in helping her understand the Gospel? Can you provide an answer without being judgmental?

Share: Use the Bible to answer her questions; what verses might you use to talk about what happens after death? What is your personal witness about what it means to put your trust in Jesus?

Pray: After the conversation has ended, keep this person in your prayers.

Follow-Up: What might you do as a follow-up?

Here is what I did in this situation.

Pray: "Father, thank you for working in the life and heart of this person. Help me to speak Your words in a clear way, that Your message of love and mercy might be understood."

Listen: Because this person has been taught that we earn our salvation, she is concerned about the fate of a loved one and unsure about her own eternal life. She no longer trusts the teachings of the LDS church and is seeking guidance from God through His Word.

Share: I began by reading the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 and we talked about how Lazarus, in the midst of his torment, trusted in his Lord and Savior. When he died there was no waiting, the angels carried him to heaven to be by Abraham's side. We turned to Luke 23:43 where Jesus reinforces the fact that believers go to heaven right away when He spoke to the thief on the cross. Finally, we turned to Revelation 7: 15-17 for a description of the saints in heaven.

The next question came quickly, would her family member be considered a believer? He was an active member of the LDS church; would you tell her no because we know that LDS doctrine is not Christian?

Affirm: I explained that we cannot judge a person's relationship with God; only God can judge what is in a person's heart.

Share: I asked her if I could tell her what the Bible says and what I, as a Christian Lutheran, believe constitutes a believer. Giving her the Bible references from Romans (Romans 3:23-24, 10, 6:23, 5:7-8, 3:22-24, 27-28, 10:8-10) I explained, in my own words, that we are all sinners and incapable of earning our way into heaven but that God gave us the gift of eternal life through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. It is only through His free gift of forgiveness and faith in Jesus that we gain eternal life. I was careful to use the correct Mormon terminology (eternal life) and not to use words that she would either misunderstand or not understand (Grace).

Pray: I have kept this person in my prayers.

Follow-Up: Because of her personal loss, she is eager to read and hear God's Word. I asked her if I could pass her name on to a pastor so he could bring her a Bible and talk more about God's gift of forgiveness. After receiving her permission, I immediately talked to a pastor in her area who is trained in working with Mormons and arranged for a visit and the gift of a Bible.

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