

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

Some Thoughts by Bruce F. Levi, former Mormon Elder and Missionary and President of ICARE Ministries © February 2005

Since its founding by Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) has converted millions and millions of people from their Christian backgrounds to a religious system of salvation by self-perfection that includes strict obedience to many laws and ordinances and a hierarchy of leaders.

In fact, in 2009, alone, over 250,000 people forsook their Christian upbringing to join the other 13 million Latter-day Saints around the world. At this rate, during the next four years one million more people will do the same! The Mormon Church converts two average-sized Christian congregations, over 600 people, per day. In fact, in the Bible Belt of the Southern States, Mormonism brags of huge gains in growth.

Why is this happening? How can such a thing be taking place? Just what is so appealing about Mormonism? Is something askew in Christianity today that would allow so many to be drawn away? Are societal factors playing in this sad drama?

I have dealt with these rather interesting questions in another article.

On the other hand, why are Christians not converting Mormons in any substantial number? The answer to this question is likely not one single thing. It is undoubtedly a complex problem that requires a complex answer. But, I believe part of the reason why Christians are not converting Mormons to Christianity is revealed in the title of this article, "Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work." Just what have we Christians been doing to reach Mormons with the gospel? Has it been effective? Has it helped, or has it hurt our cause? Are we, in fact reaching them with the gospel? Or, have we been trying to reach them some other way?

During almost 20 years, in the 1980s and 1990s, of living in Utah I saw first hand that the vast majority of evangelical churches there had only a handful of former Mormons as members - usually less than 10% of their membership. But since 70% of Utah's population is Mormon, a huge base of potential converts that totals well over 1,750,000 people, should not the percentage of former Mormons in Christian congregations be much larger than 10%? Some of those Christian Churches have been in Utah for over 100 years. But, where are all the former Mormons in their membership? By and large, people who have been transferred to Utah by their employers drive membership growth in Utah's non-Mormon churches. Indeed, it was a job transfer that took me to Utah in 1982.

Here in southwestern Idaho, where we now live, there is a corollary situation. Boise, the State Capital, was not founded by Mormon pioneers sent from Utah, as was much of eastern Idaho. Boise's largest and most famous church is the Methodist Cathedral of the Rockies. Near it are large Presbyterian, Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Baptist buildings. The oldest Church in Nampa, my hometown, is the Presbyterian Church, over 100 years old. The Mennonite Church in Nampa is also over 100 years old. Nampa is the home of Northwest Nazarene University, founded as a conservative Christian college. The Presbyterian Church founded Albertson College of Idaho in nearby Caldwell. But now, despite its development by people of the Christian faith, the population of the Boise area is fully one-fourth Mormon. Even more telling, though, are growth statistics of Mormonism in the Boise area.

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

...2

In the decade of the 1990s, in the Boise area, Mormonism grew faster than any other Church, except Roman Catholicism, which grew by virtue of the large influx of Catholic Hispanics from California and other States. According to research by several local news media companies, Mormonism grew by some 50% in the 1990s. In contrast, during this same decade, the denomination of which my home Church is part and which has ten congregations in the Boise area, has grown by only about 5%. This 5% rate is not even at pace with the population growth of this area, and is only one-tenth of Mormonism's growth rate. In the neighboring State of Oregon, which has the lowest average Church attendance of all 50 States, Mormonism grew even faster than in the Boise area – it grew there by 52%.

While it must be admitted that the Mormon Church uses sophisticated and clever techniques to retain its members, is it possible that Christians are not dealing with Mormons in ways that are conducive to bring them to faith in Christ alone? We really must ask ourselves this hard question: In this spiritual battle for the souls of men, why are only relatively few Mormons converting to faith in Christ alone for salvation? I believe that looking at the approaches Christians have typically used with Mormons over the past 170 years will show us that yes, indeed, we have been going about this ineffectively, if not incorrectly and counter to what the Bible teaches.

When my wife, Sandi, and I moved to Salt Lake City in 1982 we attended a conservative evangelical church that had been in existence for several decades. I will not divulge the church's name. It doesn't matter since what happened there applies if not exactly, certainly by result, to most churches in America. Our pastor in Salt Lake City was a man of much experience and well educated. One Sunday he announced the Church's evangelistic outreach to Mormons. It was this: we have a sign on the building that reads "visitors welcome" and they can all read. Yes, I am serious, that was our Church's sole outreach effort to Mormons! There was no training in evangelism and no outreach activity at all. I was appalled. As a new Christian and especially as a former Mormon, I was also greatly disappointed. We left that Church not many months hence.

In Christianity today in America, this approach of doing nothing is by far the most common stance toward Mormons, and all the other unsaved people in America for that matter. When we spoke at a mission conference last year, we were asked why we were based in Idaho, not Utah. I answered that question by having all the audience members raise their hands if they had Mormon relatives, friends, neighbors or co-workers. About 90% raised their hands. When I then said that our ministry was here in Idaho because we train Christians how to witness to Mormons and that obviously 90% of the audience had Mormon contacts; I received mostly silence and blank stares. Now, a year later, neither that Church, nor most of those in that same fellowship of Churches support us financially. Oh yes, these same Churches are supporting plenty of missionaries to foreign lands, some to the tune of thousands of dollars a month. The vast majority of evangelical Christians in America are not ready to give an answer to anyone of why they believe (1 Peter 3:15). Few Christians in America are doing evangelism, even fewer have the faintest idea how to do it.

As I stated above, we left that Church in Utah, which was not engaging the culture, which surrounded it. We began attending a Church, also a conservative evangelical one, that had a daily one-hour radio ministry specifically to Mormons. In one sense this Church was the opposite of the

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

...3

one we had just left. This Church not only had a daily radio ministry to Mormons, they had evangelism training and an evening each week when some of the members went door to door to visit with Mormons, and others, in nearby neighborhoods. Here was a Church that cared enough to actually go out and engage the Mormons with the gospel. This was exciting to me, and I eagerly participated in the outreach, as a new Christian.

But as I began to meet the members of this Church, I learned that only one or two, other than myself, were former Mormons, even though the vast majority of the neighborhood was Mormon. Where were all the converted Mormons? And, as the months went by, I saw how the daily radio program was a polemic, dogmatic and attacking approach to witnessing. No wonder few Mormons showed up. They perceived this Church as one that would attack them and argue with them, not one that would love them and show them the way. In the end result, there was no difference in the impact this second Church had with the Mormons than the first Church we had attended in Utah. Neither of these Churches was making a positive impact with Mormons.

It is quite obvious to the astute reader that doing nothing is not the Biblical way of evangelism. If we are not getting the message out, how can the lost hear something in which to place their faith? This is exactly what Paul said in Romans 10:14, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" We must be out there with the gospel in order for the lost to have the very thing to believe in that will save them and transform their lives.

That last phrase from Romans 10:4, And how shall they hear without a preacher, leads us to an important teaching of the New Testament. Just who preached the gospel to the lost in the early days of the Church? In Acts, chapter 8, verse one, we read that in the persecution of the days of Saul, all the Church was scattered out of Jerusalem, except the Apostles. Verse eight tells us that those who had been scattered went everywhere preaching the word. So we see that it was not the leadership of the Church that preached, but the everyday, normal, lay people who did the preaching. In one Church of which I was a member, a friend stated one day that she did not do evangelism because "that was what we hired the pastor to do." According to Acts, chapter 4, this idea is wrong. Furthermore, a statistical analysis has shown that the rapid growth of the early Church can be attributed to the fact that the vast majority of believers went everywhere preaching the word. If, like today's Christians, they had just done nothing, Christianity would not have grown as it did in the first three centuries. Since reasonable people can readily see that doing nothing is both ineffective and non-Biblical, let us move on.

While doing nothing is obviously not the right way, what may not be so obvious concerns the manner of evangelistic outreach. Did not that second Church we attended in Utah use the radio airwaves and even physically go into the neighborhoods? They were doing something, right? Yes, they were. But, what they were doing did not bring Mormons to the point of conversion. Was their methodology the same way of evangelism that resulted in so many converts in the first few centuries? Was it the way of evangelism used by the Apostles and Jesus as seen in the New Testament? By comparing the in your face, dogmatic, polemic methodology of "witnessing" with the gospel-based evangelism of the New Testament, I believe we will see clearly one of the reasons

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

...4

why we have not been winning many Mormons to Christ. And more importantly, we will understand the Biblical way of evangelism and can apply it to not just Mormons, but to everyone.

Speaking of evangelism, just what does the word evangelism mean and where did it come from. The word evangelism came into the English language from the French *evangile*, which came from the Latin *evangelium*. German uses this Latin word as its own. The Greek word is similar to the Latin. The English language has its own word for evangelism – gospel, from the older word *godspel*. Gospel simply means good news. So, to do evangelism is to tell the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Paul told the Corinthians that he had not preached the gospel to them with excellency of speech or enticing words of man's wisdom, the wisdom of the world, but had come to them in weakness and fear and in the power of the Holy Spirit. He makes it clear that the unsaved cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God. (1Corinthians 1:20-2:16). So, when we go to the unsaved and try to explain the things of God, the unsaved listener cannot understand them. They do not have the Holy Spirit in them. Often, what we do to Mormons, and others, is come to them in human wisdom and argue about the doctrines of God, Jesus, the Bible, etc. It is as if we want to reason with them about the Trinity and other doctrines that are from Christians. And, we often argue with the Mormons about the failed prophecies of Joseph Smith, the problems with the Book of Mormon, etc. This, of course, makes them defensive. Now, eventually the Mormon will have to come to grips with his/her false doctrines. But, to do this at the beginning only causes defensiveness.

Well, since the unsaved cannot understand the things of God, and since attacking the error of their thinking is an appeal to human wisdom, just what shall be our message to the unsaved? We know from other writings of Paul that the power of God unto salvation is the gospel (Romans 1:16) and that we are to preach something to the unsaved (Romans 10:13 -15). Do the passages in 1 Corinthians contradict those in Romans. No, they do not. Let's take a look and see what our message to the unsaved is to be. Let us see what has the power of the Holy Spirit and what gets to the heart of the unsaved person.

The Gospel must be our message. The Bible is very plain that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). Just what entails a presentation of the gospel? I have heard and read so-called evangelical messages today that ask unsaved people to "give their life to Christ." Is the gospel? No, it is not. It cannot be the gospel for at least two reasons. First, the unsaved are dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1) and therefore have no life to "give to Christ." Secondly, the gospel is specifically defined in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 as consisting of three things. One, Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. Two, He was buried in the tomb. Three, He rose the third day, alive again. This is our message. This is what the Holy Spirit uses.

Many people do a great job talking about some of the points of the gospel – that Jesus died, was buried and rose again. But they often leave out a key point, or at least are not clear enough about one of the points of the gospel, namely that he died for our sins according to the scriptures. If we leave out one of the parts of the gospel, we are not truly giving the gospel, we are not true to the Word of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit is not with us. The giving of the good news, the gospel, must include a discussion of man as a sinner, and that one that is perishing (John 3:16) in

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

...5

sin. We must do this with any unsaved person to whom we are attempting to witness. We must be diligent and wise in giving all parts of the gospel to the unsaved in a way that the unsaved person can understand.

It is very important to discuss with a Mormon how that man is a sinner according to the scriptures. This is so because the Mormon religion downplays the doctrine that man is a sinner. Mormon doctrine states that Adam "fell upward" when he rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. Also, Mormon doctrine teaches that God was once a man and that man can become a God. If man can be a God, can he really be a depraved sinner? The Mormon system of salvation asks men to work their way to Godhood as the ultimate salvation. No man who is a totally depraved sinner could ever achieve this lofty goal by his own efforts, could he?

Peter had no problem telling his audience that they were sinners (Acts 2:23). The same can be said of Stephen in Acts 7:1-54. Paul reasoned with Felix to try to show him that he was a sinner (Acts 24:25). Jesus showed the lawyer in Luke 10:25-29 that he (the lawyer) was a sinner. Jesus showed the rich ruler in Luke 18:18-23 that he (the ruler) was a sinner. Jesus showed the woman at the well (John 4:7-26) that she was a sinner. Those are some pretty good examples to follow in our evangelism, aren't they?

Just what did Peter, Stephen, Paul and Jesus use to show their various audiences that they were sinners? Paul, whom I call the Lord's Master Evangelist, made very clear what shows people they are sinners. It is the Law that shows people they are sinners (Romans 3:20). Paul states explicitly that the Law has shown him he was a sinner (Romans 7:7-12). So, we see now how the Law goes hand in hand with the Gospel. Paul, in fact, even taught this fact in his first letter to Timothy. See 1 Timothy 1:8-11; especially verse 11. Thus we are to use the Law to show the unsaved person that he/she is a helpless sinner by nature. After he/she understands this fact, he/she is ready to hear about the good news of Christ's substitutionary (He died in our place.) death for sins. This is very important - the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and we must be sure to give all the gospel, including that people are sinners.

Why does using the Law have such an impact on the sinner? Why can we use it, and why is it effective, in view of the fact that the unsaved cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God, as we read in 1 Corinthians 2:14? What is it about the Law that allows the sinner to be able to grasp it when he cannot naturally grasp the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18)? Here is the answer. The work of the Law is written on every person's heart, or inner being of true self (Romans 2:15). This is why Paul used the Law with Felix (Acts 25:25) and why Jesus used the Law with the lawyer (Luke 10:25-29), the ruler (Luke 18:18-23), and the woman at the well (John 4:7-26). Even isolated tribes in the jungles have moral laws for their society, without ever having seen a Bible.

Furthermore, Jesus Himself stated that He came into the world to save only sinners (1 Timothy 1:15; Matthew 9:13; Luke 19:10; etc.). People who recognize that they are sinners are the only people that can be saved. People who think they are righteous do not think they need forgiveness. People who do not think they are lost in sin do not realize they need a savior to come and save them. People who do not think they are perishing do not think they need someone to make them alive (John 3:3). Mormons believe they are dying in a physical sense alone. And mistakenly think they can work their way to godhood or some other heaven. Mormons use the words sin, sins, sin-

Traditional Methods of Witnessing to Mormons: Why They Don't Work

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

...6

ner, forgiveness, etc. But, their definitions tend toward individual sins and also downplay the seriousness and implications of the biblical teaching that all people are sinners by nature. The Bible teaches that man sins because he is a sinner. It is like the fact that a dog barks because he is a dog. The bark does not make the animal a dog. The dog's very nature causes it to bark. Mormonism, on the other hand, reduces sins to mere mistakes.

So, we must help Mormons to realize how, why and the extent to which they are sinners. Until they come to a realization of this fact, they will not truly seek the Savior.

If we argue with Mormons to try to prove them wrong, we make them defensive. And, sometimes they win the argument, and then we are nowhere and they may go away just as prideful as they arrived. We know this is true by observing how things work in life in general. If someone attacks or ridicules our decision of what car we purchased, we become offended and defensive. Based on this alone, why would we want to argue with Mormons? Instead, why not lovingly help them see that they are sinners and cannot keep the Law for salvation?

Indeed, the Bible says we are to love all men, including our enemies (Matthew 5:44). We are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Notice that this indicates a balanced approach. We must speak the truth, but it must be motivated by love. I have seen done, and have done it myself, have had it done to me, witness to Mormons that is truth, but done with no love. Maybe even done in hate. It sure comes across that way to Mormons. Let us rise above this and make our witness to Mormons a balanced witness.