



STATEMENT DM-508

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

An Alternative Approach to Reaching Mormons

by **Mark J. Cares**

In your attempts to reach Mormons with the historical gospel of salvation, do you find yourself debating Mormonism with them or witnessing Christ to them? Both have their place, but they constitute different approaches. A *debater* focuses on exposing the negatives of Mormonism, while a *witness* concentrates on presenting the positives of Christ's vicarious work (although neither approach necessarily excludes using elements of the other). Debating frequently establishes an adversarial relationship between the Christian and the Mormon. Witnessing, on the other hand, strives to create a caring climate. The goal of debating is to win the argument, while the goal of witnessing is to win the Mormon. A debater usually addresses the problems Christians have with Mormonism, while a witness addresses (among other things) the problems Mormons themselves have with Mormonism. Most importantly, debating often relies on the power of human reason *unaided* by the Holy Spirit, while witnessing principally relies on the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God (Rom. 1:16) in addition to human reason. Debating Mormonism with Mormons has its place. As is true in all outreach efforts, however, witnessing is to be the Christian's primary activity.

Over the years many Christians who have tried to witness Christ to Mormons have come away frustrated. Maybe you have been in this position. You talked about Jesus being your Savior — citing numerous passages and stressing salvation by grace alone — only to find the Mormon enthusiastically agreeing with you! You felt stymied. You knew that Mormonism and Christianity are diametrically opposed. But no matter what you said, you couldn't get that point across.

One solution to this dilemma is to debate Mormonism with them. Too often, however, when this happens people end up majoring on the minors. Although the contradictions in Mormon teaching or the problems in their history are fertile ground for debate, they are minor points compared to the gospel. And too often in debating Mormons, a positive witness to Christ and His saving work is not even made or, at best, receives short shrift.

I would like to propose a different solution to the problem of communicating the vast differences between Mormonism and Christianity to Mormons. It strives to keep Jesus and the gospel as the focal points of the discussion.

Respect Their Language. Many Christians recognize that terminology differences exist between Mormonism and Christianity. Fewer realize that these differences are so vast that Mormonism has a language all its own. Still fewer respect those differences sufficiently to make a concerted effort to learn and then use that language when talking to Mormons.

Using their language, however, is almost a prerequisite for communicating clearly with Mormons. Knowing their language means understanding, for example, that they commonly equate salvation with the bodily resurrection from the dead. This is why they can agree that Jesus is their Savior — they believe he "saved" them from physical death. When you talk to Mormons about salvation, what comes to their minds is not thoughts of heaven, but thoughts of the

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resurrection. Mormon author Joyce Bowen Maughan illustrates this in her book for small children when she writes: "Jesus was the first to be resurrected and because of him, all the people on the earth will someday be resurrected. That is why we call him 'the Savior'" (*Talks for Tots*, Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1985, 113). Christians often think that when Mormons agree that they are saved by grace alone they are being deceptive. Their agreement, however, is frequently rooted in miscommunication, *not* deception.

If you want Mormons to talk about how they are going to get to heaven, it is much better to ask them how they will be "exalted." Although they equate exaltation with becoming a god, at least you have gotten the conversation to the point where they are addressing their eternal destiny. An alternative would be to ask them what they need to do to live with "Heavenly Father." Other examples of such terminology differences abound. Mormonism truly has a language all its own, and witnessing effectively to Mormons begins with learning and using that language.

Recognize Their Stress. Although Mormons commonly appear self-assured and self-righteous, many are undergoing great stress. This is because Mormonism holds up perfection as an attainable goal. The one Bible passage the Mormon church constantly holds up before its membership is Matthew 5:48: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (KJV). They then expound on it with numerous exhortations to strive for perfection. Spencer W. Kimball, for example, wrote: "Being perfect means to triumph over sin. This is a mandate from the Lord. He is just and wise and kind. He would never require anything from his children which was not for their benefit and which was not attainable. Perfection therefore is an achievable goal" (*Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles*, Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979, 386).

This emphasis on perfection permeates every aspect of a Mormon's life. Its most common form is the unending demand on them to be "worthy." Every privilege in Mormonism is conditioned on a person's worthiness. Kimball wrote: "All blessings are conditional. I know of none that are not" (*Remember Me*, Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989, 23).

The Mormons' obsession with perfection creates a great deal of stress. Although they try to hide it, anxiety is bubbling beneath the surface in countless Mormons. Christians need to recognize that this constant striving for perfection — and the resultant stress it produces — offers an excellent opening to talk to Mormons about Jesus and the imputed perfection we receive through Him.

Many Mormons turned a deaf ear and put up their defenses when I talked to them about Joseph Smith or discarded Mormon doctrines. The same held true when I discussed God's nature with them. Most weren't troubled or concerned about these issues. In fact, numerous converts to Mormonism have told me that one of the things that initially attracted them to Mormonism was that it made God understandable to them. In other words, they listed Mormonism's view of God's nature as one of its strengths!

In striking contrast, many have perked up their ears when I broached the subject of perfection. Instead of trying to end the discussion as quickly as possible, many were eager to prolong it. Because of Mormonism's emphasis on perfection and the stress this emphasis places on its followers, raising the issue of perfection will often grab their attention.

Reinforce Their Predicament. Average hard-working Mormons view this striving for perfection as a heavy but manageable burden. They can cultivate illusions of perfection because the Mormon church has greatly watered down the concept of sin. Consequently the Christian witness needs to show Mormons both the severity of their predicament and the impossibility of their becoming perfect. In other words, they need to have a face-to-face confrontation with the stern message of God's law, because "through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:21).

The law must first convince Mormons of the severity of their predicament. The best way to accomplish this is to tell them, lovingly but firmly, that they are going to "outer darkness." (Outer darkness is the closest concept in Mormonism to an eternal hell.) Most Mormons have never been told this, nor have they ever considered that possibility for themselves, since Mormonism teaches that nearly everyone will enter one of Mormonism's three kingdoms of heaven. Therefore, until you introduce the thought of eternal suffering, they will not feel any real urgency to take your witness to heart. On the contrary, most, if they are willing to talk at all, will view any religious conversation as nothing more than an interesting intellectual discussion.

Christians often hesitate to be this blunt. They feel that if anything will turn Mormons off, telling them that they are going to outer darkness surely will. I shared that fear when I began using this approach. To my amazement,

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however, rejection wasn't the reaction I received. Most have been shocked, but they were also eager to know why I would say such a thing. The key is to speak this truth *with love*, in such a way that our concern for their souls is readily apparent.

Alerting Mormons to the very real danger of their going to outer darkness opens the door to telling them the *basis* for that judgment — which is, they are not meeting God's requirement for living with Him (they are not *presently* perfect). The key to explaining this is the present imperative, *be perfect*, in Matthew 5:48. Although Mormon authorities regularly explain this passage by talking about *progressing* to perfection, the many Mormons I have witnessed to have been stopped short when faced with this present imperative. They don't have a set response for explaining how "be perfect" can mean "become perfect." Neither can they brush it off by saying it is a corrupted text, since the Mormon church uses it so extensively. Consequently they have been puzzled and troubled by it. It has effectively communicated to them that God demands perfection *now*.

Relate God's Answer. Once God's law has done its work by bringing Mormons to the knowledge of their sinfulness, they need to hear the good news of the gospel. But they need to hear it *in their own language*. Tragically, Mormonism has emptied many gospel words of their beauty. Words like salvation, grace, redemption, atonement, and justification all mean something different in Mormonism than they do in Christianity. This is why Christians, in their attempts to witness to Mormons, have often ended up talking past them.

One passage that doesn't miss the mark, however, is Hebrews 10:10–18 — especially verse 14: "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." This passage is effective because (1) it is little known in Mormonism, with the result that they don't have a church-supplied answer to it; (2) Joseph Smith did not alter it in his "translation"; (3) it deals with perfection, a topic near and dear to the hearts of most Mormons; and (4) it avoids the problem of differing definitions of words.

What a joy it is to present the gospel to Mormons in a way that communicates to them! But not only does the above approach communicate to them, it also offers them genuine *relief*. The message of being perfected through Jesus' one offering touches them where they are hurting tremendously. It can soothe their deepest spiritual aches.

Rely on the Holy Spirit. In most cases, Mormons will need to come into repeated contact with these truths. It usually takes a long time for them to sink in. The danger for the Christian witness is to give up. Instead of giving up, Christians need to continue to take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:12). We need to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit by persistently speaking God's Word to Mormons in *their* language, addressing *their* stresses. May we always remember that "faith comes from hearing the message" (Rom. 10:17).

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