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WHEN TOMORROW IS TOO LATE

by Eric Johnson

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During a friendly dialogue that I had recently with a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon), I made a point that seemed to strike a chord. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the LDS member said respectfully, "What you're showing me appears to be correct. I'm not sure how to answer your objection to my faith. I guess we'll all know in the end anyway, won't we?"

He was right. After all, every person will know the truth by the time the engraver carves the death date onto the gravestone. In conversations with LDS friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbors, the Christian may be offered a similar white flag of surrender. When that happens, there are several techniques that can be used to help the Mormon grasp how important it is to discover truth today, because tomorrow may be too late.

The Mormon Testimony

Before walking away, the Mormon in the story above decided to share his testimony, which went in part, "I testify to you that Joseph Smith and Thomas S. Monson are prophets of God and that the Book of Mormon is true." The impetus for this typical testimony is derived from Moroni 10:4, the last book and chapter in the Book of Mormon. It says that "if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost."

The emotional draw for potential converts to get the "right" answer can be immense. For example, pleasing the missionaries or LDS friends and family may play a major factor. But this isn't the way we look for truth in real life. Suppose someone says, "I *know* that the Chargers won their football game last night," when it is a fact that they lost 34-21. Even if you and your friends are diehard fans, is it reasonable to argue about the game's outcome with followers of the opponent when the score is published in today's newspaper?

There are risks to trusting in feelings and ignoring the evidence. Imagine getting ready to board an airliner that you learned had serious problems with the landing gear in its previous flight. "Don't worry," the stewardess tells the passengers on the PA system, "I know it will be OK. While we haven't exactly fixed the landing gear yet, the

mechanics will be on board this flight to do additional maintenance on it once the plane takes off.” In this circumstance, would you board the plane? Even if it meant losing his entire airfare, a wise person would simply walk away and look for alternative transportation. Of course, sometimes it is a natural response to want to rely on what we have been taught or what feels best. Yet no matter how sincere we might be, only the fool goes with his or her feelings against the facts. As Proverbs 28:26 puts it, “He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe” (NIV).

While the LDS Church is losing members due to a variety of reasons, a recent poll of three thousand former Mormons shows that factual evidence causes more defections than emotional or subjective issues. The survey showed that the top four reasons for leaving the Church involved historical topics (church history, Joseph Smith, and Book of Mormon) as well as doctrine. Between 35 and 39 percent said these were primary reasons for leaving, with 79–87 percent saying they were moderate to strong factors. No other reason for leaving Mormonism came close to these.¹ While the vast majority of those surveyed probably had shared their testimonies in the Book of Mormon and the LDS Church, they came to a realization that the facts of their faith did not match up with reality.

Many Mormons have not been properly challenged when they testify about their faith in the Book of Mormon. When the testimony is shared, one strategy is asking, “Have you prayed about the Qu’ran? Or how about the Bhagavad-Gita?” Using the Mormon’s logic, perhaps every religion’s scripture ought to be prayed over since Islam or Hinduism could have more truth. After all, what if these religions could provide more peaceful feelings than what is received in Mormonism? While Mormons don’t use this type of prayer test with other scriptures, they may get frustrated when Christians won’t pray about the Book of Mormon. Following the example set by the Bereans in Acts 17:11, however, they need to know how Christians are commanded to test everything by searching God’s Word.²

What Everyone Stands to Lose

Many Mormons have never entertained the possibility that they could be wrong about their faith. In their minds, such an absurd proposition isn’t worth the time of day for consideration. Mathematician/philosopher Blaise Pascal stated that either God exists or He does not. Therefore everyone has to wager whether or not there is a God.³ While this “wager” was originally intended for atheists, every single person must use his or her very soul as collateral when determining the truth claims of different religions. By using a modified form of Pascal’s Wager, we can help a Mormon understand the importance of considering all points of view. In fact, there are only four possibilities when Mormonism and biblical Christianity are considered:

(1) Both faiths are correct. This is, however, impossible because the two claims made by the two religions are mutually exclusive.⁴ Hence, if Mormonism is true, then by definition, biblical Christianity is false—or vice versa.

(2) Both faiths are wrong. While neither the Mormon nor the Christian thinks this is likely, we both have to acknowledge that perhaps Islam, Buddhism, atheism, or some other philosophy is true, negating both our views.

(3) Mormonism is true and Christianity is wrong. For the sake of comparison, let's suppose this is true. Ask the Latter-day Saints what the situation will be like for them after death. Smiling, they will usually describe a celestial life living forever with their immediate families. Then ask, "If you were to die right now, would you go to this place?" More often than not, there is a pause, followed by "I hope so," "I'm trying," or "I'm doing my best." Knowing the stringent requirements, they usually recognize that they're not doing what they've been commanded.⁵ Despite what 1 John 5:13 promises, there is no assurance of salvation available in Mormonism. Meanwhile, the fate for the Christian in this scenario is perhaps the Terrestrial Kingdom, a place where even many Mormons expect to spend eternity. As for the worst that Mormonism has to offer, very few on this earth can expect to be cast out to "Outer Darkness," since they were valiant in a premortal life and chose Jesus over Lucifer.

(4) Christianity is true and Mormonism is false. If Christianity is true, it means the difference between heaven and hell: true believers receive heaven while unbelievers will spend eternity in hell. There are no "do-overs."

I Can Do It Later

If nothing else, the questions associated with the third possibility (Mormonism is true) can help show the Mormons how they're not ready for the Celestial Kingdom, even if their religion is true. Because they know they are not doing what they've been commanded to do, many put their hope in the idea that they will be able to fix their sinful state in the intermediate state after death. Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon disagree with this assessment. Hebrews 9:24 says, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Second Corinthians 6:2b adds that "now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

According to Alma 34:32–34 in the Book of Mormon, the prophet Amulek stated, "For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God...do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed....For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his."

Using this passage as a theme for chapter one of his book titled *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, twelfth LDS President Spencer W. Kimball taught that it was fallacious to assume that redemptive work could be done after death. He lamented, "Again and again in different phraseology and throughout the centuries the Lord has reminded man so that he could never have excuse. And the burden of the prophetic warning has been that *the time to act is now, in this mortal life*. One cannot with impunity delay his

compliance with God's commandments."⁶ Even if their philosophy is correct, Mormons must be challenged that it is during this life they must accomplish the work set out before them by their church; it does them no good to hope that their failures here will somehow be ignored and everything will be equalized in the end.

With a wave of the hand to make the facts go away, too many Mormons feel as if everything is fine—"After all, we'll all know in the end"—by dismissing legitimate objections. Getting Mormons to consider the possibility that they might be wrong while urging them to think through vital issues is an excellent and fruitful strategy.

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NOTES

- 1 The survey "Causes and Costs of Mormon Faith Crisis" was conducted by the Open Stories Foundation during the fall and winter of 2011 and released on January 30, 2012. See http://whymormonsleave.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Mormon_Stories_FC.pdf.
- 2 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1.
- 3 *Pensées*, Part III, note 233.
- 4 For instance, the nature of God, the nature of Scripture, and the process of salvation are contradicted in the two religions.
- 5 For more information, see Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, "The Mormon View of Salvation: A Gospel That Is Truly Impossible," *Christian Research Journal* 34, 4 (2011): 6–7.
- 6 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 10. Emphasis in original. Chapter one is titled "This Life Is the Time."