The Mormon/Evangelical Dialogue: Retrospect and Prospect

Robert L. Millet

In a rather controversial message delivered at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City in 2004, Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, stated: “Over the past half-dozen years I have been a member of a small group of evangelical scholars who have been engaged in lengthy closed-door discussions about spiritual and theological matters with a small group of our LDS counterparts. We have not been afraid to argue strenuously with each other, but our arguments have been conducted in a sincere desire genuinely to understand each other—and in the process we have formed some deep bonds of friendship. I know that I have learned much in this continuing dialogue, and I am now convinced that we evangelicals have often seriously misrepresented the beliefs and practices of the Mormon community.

“Indeed, let me state it bluntly to the LDS folks here this evening: we have sinned against you. The God of the Scriptures makes it clear that it is a terrible thing to bear false witness against our neighbors, and we have been guilty of that sort of transgression in things we have said about you. We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to ask you what you believe. We have made much of the need to provide you with a strong defense of traditional Christian convictions, regularly quoting the Apostle Peter's mandate that we present to people like you a reasoned account of the hope that lies within us—but we have not been careful to follow the same Apostle's counsel that immediately follows that mandate, when he tells us that we must always make our case with ‘gentleness and respect’ toward those with
whom we are speaking (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, we have even on occasion demonized you, weaving conspiracy theories about what the LDS community is ‘really’ trying to accomplish in the world. And even at our best, we have—and this is true of both of our communities—we have talked past each other, setting forth oversimplified and distorted accounts of what the other group believes.”

Not surprisingly, Rich Mouw has taken hundreds of hits from disgruntled evangelicals, but he is pointing toward a sad reality, namely, the tendency of each of us to ascribe questionable motives and even to define another person’s point of view before we allow them to do so themselves. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once wrote: “There are not over a hundred people in the United States who hate the Roman Catholic Church; there are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church.”

Mouw was speaking to his own people on that occasion, but he might just as well have addressed himself to the Mormons, for we are just as prone, just as eager, to act out of ignorance and misinformation toward those of other faiths. That such is the case—and it certainly is—bespeaks the need for patience, restraint, respect, and good will; it points up the value of meaningful dialogue.

**Origins**

In April of 1997 I first became acquainted with Gregory V. Johnson, a former Latter-day Saint who had had a “born again” experience at a Bible camp, left the LDS Church, and become Evangelical at the age of fourteen. Greg was at the time of our meeting pastoring a small Evangelical church in Huntsville, Utah. We began meeting regularly for lunch, during which

---

1 Address delivered in the Mormon Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah, 4 November 2004, transcript in possession of author.
time we spoke at length about a wide range of theological and ecclesiological issues. As our friendship developed over time, both of us began to wonder if there might be some merit in enlarging our small interfaith circle to include LDS and Evangelical scholars. That formal gathering took place in the spring of 2000 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Among the evangelicals was Greg Johnson; Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary; Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary; Craig Hazen of Biola University; David Neff of Christianity Today; and Carl Moser, at the time a doctoral student in Scotland. On the LDS side, participants included myself, Stephen Robinson, Roger Keller, David Paulsen, Daniel Judd, and Andrew Skinner, all from BYU. Names and faces have changed somewhat, but the dialogue has continued.

Over the next nine years we came prepared (through readings of articles and books) to discuss a number of doctrinal subjects, including the Fall, Atonement, Scripture, Revelation, Grace and Works, Trinity/Godhead, the Corporeality of God, Theosis/Deification, Authority, and Joseph Smith’s First Vision. We met, not only at BYU and Fuller, but also at Nauvoo, Palmyra, Wheaton College, and at meetings of the AAR/SBL. Scholars who joined us to make presentations on specific topics included Richard Bushman (Columbia University), John Stackhouse (Regent College), and Velli-Matti-Karkaanin (Fuller Seminary). To date we have met together nineteen times.

**Results**

In the early sessions, it was not uncommon to sense a bit of tension, a subtle uncertainty as to where this was going, a slight uneasiness among the participants. As the dialogue began to take shape, it was apparent that we were searching for an identity—was this to be a
confrontation? An argument? A debate? Was it to produce a winner and a loser? Just how candid and earnest were we expected to be? Some of the Latter-day Saints wondered: Do the “other guys” see this encounter as a grand effort to “fix” Mormonism, to make it more traditionally Christian, more acceptable to skeptical onlookers? Some of the Evangelicals wondered: Are those “other guys” for real? Is what they are saying an accurate expression of LDS belief? Can a person be a genuine Christian and yet not be a part of the larger body of Christ? A question that continues to come up is, Just how much “bad theology” can the grace of God compensate for? Before too long, those kinds of issues became part of the dialogue itself, and in the process, much of the tension began to dissipate.

The nineteen meetings have been more than conversations. We have visited key historical sites, eaten and socialized, sung hymns and prayed, mourned together over the passing of members of our group, and shared ideas, books, and articles throughout the year. The initial feeling of formality has given way to a sweet informality, a brother-and-sisterhood, a kindness in disagreement, a respect for opposing views, and a feeling of responsibility toward those not of our faith—a responsibility to represent their doctrines and practices accurately. In the words of Richard Mouw, we seem to have maintained a “convicted civility” in the dialogue: no one has compromised or diluted his or her own theological convictions, but everyone has sought to demonstrate the kind of civility that ought to characterize a mature exchange of ideas among a body of believers who have discarded defensiveness. There have been those times, as well, when many of us have felt what Harvard’s Krister Stendahl has described as “holy envy”—something stronger and more satisfying than tolerance, something definitely more heartwarming and even

---

compelling than ideological indifference. No dialogue of this type is worth its salt unless the participants gradually begin to realize that there is much to be learned from the “other guys.”

John Stackhouse at Regent College in Vancouver has written: “If I go no further than to think that it’s okay for you to do your thing and I to do mine, then where is the incentive to seriously consider whether I should adopt your thing and abandon mine?” Further, “If one is not sufficiently sympathetic, not sufficiently vulnerable to changing one’s mind, not sufficiently willing to entertain the idea that these people might just be right—then it is most unlikely that one will enter into that religion far enough to understand its essence.”

Challenges

Progress has not come about easily. This is tough sledding, hard work. In my own life it has entailed a tremendous amount of reading of Christian history, Christian theology, and, more particularly, Evangelical thought. I cannot very well enter into their world and their way of thinking unless I immerse myself in their literature. This is particularly difficult when such efforts come out of your own hide, that is, when you must do it above and beyond everything else you are required to do. It takes a significant investment of time, energy, and money.

Second, while we have sought from the beginning to insure that the proper balance of academic backgrounds in History, Philosophy, and Theology are represented in the dialogue, it soon became clear that perhaps more critical than intellectual acumen was a non-defensive, clear-headed, thick-skinned, persistent but pleasant personality. Kindness works really well. Those steeped in apologetics, whether LDS or evangelical, face an especial hurdle in this regard. We agreed early on, for example, that we would not take the time to address every anti-Mormon

---

polemic, any more than a Christian/Muslim dialogue would spend appreciable time evaluating proofs on whether Muhammad actually entertained the angel Gabriel. Furthermore, and this is much more difficult, we agreed as a larger team to a rather high standard of loyalty—that we would not say anything publically about the “other guys” in private that we would not say in public.

Third, as close as we have become, as warm and congenial as the dialogues have proven to be, there is still an underlying premise that guides most of the evangelical participants: that Mormonism is the tradition that needs to do the changing if progress is to be forthcoming. To be sure, the LDS diologists have become well aware that we are not well understood and that many of our theological positions need clarifying. Too often, however, the implication is that if the Mormons can only alter this or drop that, then we will be getting somewhere. A number of the LDS cohort have voiced this concern and suggested that it just might be a healthy exercise for the evangelicals to do a bit more introspection, to consider that this enterprise is in fact a dialogue, a mutual conversation, one where long-term progress will come only as both sides are convinced that there is much to be learned from one another, including doctrine.

A fourth challenge is one we did not anticipate. In Evangelicalism there is no organizational structure, no priestly hierarchy, no living prophet or magesterium to set forth the “final word” on doctrine or practice, although there are supporting organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Theological Society. On the other hand, Mormonism is clearly a top-down organization, the final word resting with the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Thus our dialogue team might very well make phenomenal progress toward a shared understanding on doctrine, but evangelicals around the world will not see our conclusions as in any way binding or perhaps even relevant.
This is not unlike the challenge that the evangelical team involved in the ecumenical effort called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” faces. Despite the fact that they have issued several joint declarations such as “The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” (1994), “The Gift of Salvation” (1997), “Your Word Is Truth” (2002), “The Communion of Saints” (2003), “The Call to Holiness” (2005), “That They May Have Life” (2006), and, most recently, “The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life” (2009), the results of the interactions seem to be still questioned by individual Catholics and institutional Catholicism. On the other hand, recent LDS Official Declarations, such as “The Family, A Proclamation to the World” (1997) and “The Living Christ” (2000) were prepared and issued by the fifteen senior leaders of the Church, upon whom the responsibility rests for the determination of doctrine and policy, and these two documents enjoy near-canonical status among the Mormons. Having that presiding group acknowledge, consider, and accept what an ancillary, non-ecclesiastical entity proposes will be a challenge at best.

**Looking Ahead**

We have been content heretofore with putting on the shelf the question of where these dialogues are headed or exactly what the final product of our investigation, our vexations of the soul, will look like. Many of us have felt a superintending Hand in the overall enterprise and consequently trusted that whatever comes to pass is providentially intended. I would be less than honest if I suggested that the enterprise has been motivated solely by intellectual engagement, although our two-day sessions have been immensely stimulating and enriching. I have learned that I cannot, simply cannot, take another religious tradition seriously without (1) coming to appreciate beauty, truth, conviction within its adherents, and lifestyle that are commendable and even praiseworthy; (2) asking hard questions about your own tradition, including its theological
consistency and relevance in a modern world; and (3) recognizing that God is moving in the hearts and lives of men and women throughout the world in ways not easily perceived.

In reflecting on his visit to Salt Lake City and his major message in the Mormon Tabernacle in November 2004, evangelist Ravi Zacharias observed: “The last time an Evangelical Christian was invited to speak there was 1899, when D. L. Moody spoke. . . . I accepted the invitation, . . . and I spoke on the exclusivity and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. I also asked if I could bring my own music, to which they also graciously agreed. So Michael Card joined us to share his music. He did a marvelous job, and one of the pieces he sang brought a predictable smile to all present. It was based on Peter’s visit to Cornelius’ home and was entitled, ‘I’m Not Supposed To Be Here.’ He couldn’t have picked a better piece! I can truly say that I sensed the anointing of the Lord as I preached and still marvel that the event happened. The power of God’s presence, even amid some opposition, was something to experience. As the one closing the meeting said, ‘I don’t want this evening to end.’ Only time will tell the true impact. Who knows what the future will bring? Our faith is foundationally and theologically very different from the Mormon faith, but maybe the Lord is doing something far beyond what we can see.”

Few things are more needed in this tense and confused world than understanding. It really is time to stop name-calling, categorizing, and demonizing, especially among people who claim to be religious. “If I esteem mankind to be in error,” Joseph Smith observed in 1843, less than a year before his death, “shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way. Do you believe in Jesus Christ

and the Gospel of salvation which he revealed? So do I. Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst; and they will do it before the millennium can be ushered in and Christ takes possession of His kingdom."\(^6\)

---