

CHRISTIAN OPPORTUNITY: TALK TO MORMONS

—not chitchat, but serious conversation about Christian faith

- Witnessing to a Mormon? Keep at it.
- You tried and think you failed? Try again.
- Wish you knew how to start? Just do it.

Here are a few things to keep in mind, and some •• *suggestions* •• to consider as you continue, try again, or start from scratch.

Doctrinal dissonance. Mormon church leaders and members differ among themselves about their beliefs. Their ideas about Christian faith — what you believe — also vary and are often wrong. Each Mormon decides privately what is true (called personal revelation).

•• *Because each Mormon describes Mormon religion differently, don't try to tell Mormons what they believe.* ••

Mormons often speak freely about their own beliefs or what they think to be their church's doctrines. However: Those who listen to their church's prophets and read its publications and scriptures may not understand or believe them. Some don't listen and read; they simply don't know. Others don't care what their church teaches; they have other reasons (family programs, for example) to be Mormon.

•• *You will want to understand a Mormon's personal perspective on the religion: its lifestyle and beliefs; promises and requirements. You won't have to agree, but listen. Be careful; a person's words may sound okay, but the church's underlying definitions and doctrines are not. Ask for meanings of words a Mormon uses.* ••

The primary unifying theme of Mormon religion is a belief in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In essence, this is their gospel: After 1500 years of total apostasy God initiated the *restoration* of true Christian religion on earth in 1820 when the Father and Son visited and taught 14-year-old Smith in New York. Some Mormons accept their church's stories of the Restoration literally and may believe that their church is, as it claims, "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth." Others are uncomfortable with the exaggerated stories and put-down of your faith and church.

•• *Don't bother being offended! Lifelong Mormons were raised from childhood on feel-good stories about Joseph Smith and the*

Restoration, and may repeat the ideas without thought or animus. Converts to the religion may interpret the church's exaggerated claims more liberally. But Mormons tend to avoid acknowledging that the "only true church" claim is also a charge that your church is false. You can make the point, but let Mormons stew in their own illogic. ••

Doctrinal distractions. Mormon leaders have said that their two essential doctrines are belief in Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith.* However when Mormons recite New Testament details and use familiar gospel expressions, Christians can be distracted from the inappropriate Mormon reliance on and reverence for Joseph Smith.

On the other hand, the nitty-gritty of Mormon Restoration doctrines — the facts and fictions about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and other details of Mormon history — can be interesting, but distract from useful discussion of biblical Christian truth.

•• *Focus on essentials. Bypass details of Mormon history, whether fact or fiction, and doctrine. Your aim is to expose a Mormon to biblical truth, not to single-handedly destroy the Mormon church. Be sure a Mormon understands what you mean when you use expressions such as salvation and eternal life, grace and justification; the differences between Christian and the Mormon's professed beliefs; and the impact on both mortal and eternal life, yours and theirs.* ••

Mormons cannot easily explain salvation and eternal life. They may say "everyone is saved" and destined for an eternity in some degree of glory, but that "eternal life" must be earned by diligent obedience to Mormon prophets and "laws and ordinances of the gospel."

They prefer to challenge people to pray for personal revelation that Mormonism is true. Mormons are told to rely on similar revelations for daily life. After experiencing what they believe to be such a revelation, Mormons will say, "I know, not merely believe..."

•• *You can tell Mormons to search the scriptures, as the "more noble" hearers did in New Testament days (Acts 17:11). An elementary place to start is Isaiah 43 and 44, for example; there is only one God, and Mormonism with its three Gods cannot be true [see sidebar, "Briefly..."]. Mormons can be reminded that "the heart is deceitful" (Jeremiah 17:9); but Scripture, not personal revelation, is true.* ••

Keep it short, focused

Avoid frustration. Don't waste your time. Don't lose credibility. Keys:

- The Mormon church recognizes multiple Gods. Christians don't.
- Reject the Mormon idea that prayer will reveal that Mormonism is true. [One good reason: The religion is clearly *not* true!]
- Cite the Bible, and, if necessary, Mormon church materials. Avoid introducing anti-Mormon materials, which may be unnecessarily offensive, inaccurate, or out of date.
- Live and speak Christianly. Speak of sin, forgiveness, and justification. Share Romans 3 and 4 (and 5:1, while you're at it). Testify of your assurance of eternal life, as in 1 John 5:13.

* Called "these two great beliefs" by a Mormon church president. His message can be read at the Mormon church web site: <http://tinyurl.com/yav3784>