

# Students aim to bridge theological gap

## Conference in S.L. explores the meaning of Christianity

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As Mitt Romney tells people that his religion won't dictate his political policy decisions and an occasional Christian pastor warns publicly that Romney's religion is a "cult," some are looking to bridge the cultural gap that divides evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints.

More than 300 scholars and students on both sides of the gulf recently spent two days in Salt Lake City talking about the meaning of Christianity — including the definition of grace and injunction by Jesus to "love one another" despite the differences in theology.

The National Student Dialogue Conference at the Salt Lake Christian Center drew university students from Biola, Azusa Pacific, Colorado Christian, Wheaton College, Fuller Theological Seminary, Brigham Young University and BYU-Idaho, as well as a few LDS Institute students from local campuses. Topics included whether the two groups should even be talking to each other at all.

The answer, said acting Salt Lake Theological Seminary President William Heersink, depended on one's perspective. "I heard many students say 'this is helpful' or 'this is stimulating.' In part they learned more about the contents of (each others') beliefs, but more important was the sense of being able to interact and relate in a wholesome way."

Five plenary sessions explored the history and current practice of interfaith dialogue between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints, with two scholars from opposite sides of the table exploring the topics in paired presentations and in open dialogue. That modeling of how to practice "convicted civility" was probably the most important part of the event, said Heersink, who was among the presenters.

Scholars who participated would likely have "a mixed reaction" to the conference, he said. "There were some who feel there are too many problems with this kind of thing and that misinterpretations that can result, so you really shouldn't be doing it in a public way. Others feel it's a real breakthrough and didn't realize we could talk at this level."

In fact, several scholars made mention of the fact that their professional colleagues and peers have openly questioned their involvement in such dialogue. Yet students engaged in spirited discussion at informal roundtable events that paired them with peers not of their faith.

Jerry Root, adjunct professor of Christian formation and theology at Wheaton College, told participants that one benefit of the pursuit of truth should be "spiritual maturity," that considers the beliefs of others and is not afraid to ask deep questions about one's own or another's faith.

That pursuit recognizes that "truth is not reality, but truth is what I think about reality" and must be distinguished from opinion, which is "based on probability rather than certainty ... I must not be afraid of honest doubt that accompanies debate and discussion."

Failure to have doubts about faith "may mean I'm on the threshold of delusion," the former pastor said, adding "spiritual formation is a process of maturity."

Bob Millet, who holds the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University, said he's spent the past five years talking with evangelicals about their faith and trying to better understand them. He's now known among his colleagues at BYU as the "resident evangelical," he said, with some skeptical of his work to dialogue with scholars who have traditionally viewed Latter-day Saints as "non-Christian."

One of the things he's learned in those discussions is "it's a cardinal sin to say 'I know what you believe far better than you know what you believe.' The only thing worse than that is 'he's a liar and not really telling the truth.' I know a little about that, too." He and Pastor Greg Johnson of the local evangelical group, Standing Together, have traveled in many parts of the United States and abroad modeling how Latter-day Saints and evangelicals can talk about faith together without "giving in" on theological differences.

Johnson was one of the conference organizers to get students engaged in such discussion.

"My life has been enriched because I've been around great and good men and women and they've taught me great and good things. I don't agree with all of them, but I try to hold them sacred," Millet said, adding his biggest regret in life is that he didn't meet Johnson and promote interfaith dialogue a decade earlier.

To maintain his integrity in doing so, "I would never say anything in private that I would not be willing to say in public with my evangelical friends. That's the only way I can be me. There are not two Bob Millets. I want to stand up and say what I say wherever I am."

Doug McConnell, dean of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Seminary, said it took 22 years as a missionary in several exotic locales before he began to understand how his worldview had been stereotyped regarding people of other faiths, particularly Muslims with whom he was interacting in Africa.

"The more I spent time with them, the more I realized ... there was something about hearing what they believed, rather than me telling them what they believed. That isn't what Jesus did."

As he gained understanding, appreciation began to replace anxiety, he said. "I realized that entering another's world physically was not enough. I had to move toward understanding that was supported by empathy to really enter their world."

Those who adhere to their religious dogma often carry negative stereotypes about those of other faiths, he said, because there is an underlying assumption that "other people have to be 'put in their place.' In forming a cultural identity, we tend to affiliate with others like us and confirm our uniqueness in comparison to others."

Why? "Because it's easier to define who you aren't than who you are. And that fosters a problem."

To have a productive interfaith discussion, each participant must be affirmed for who they are and what they believe, and disagreement must be accepted as a valid response, he said. "Do we all know that same Jesus? Fundamentally, that's the question."

Camille Fronk, a professor of ancient scripture at BYU, acknowledged that the concept of "grace" is uncomfortable for many Latter-day Saints, who are quick to focus on "works" as a means of salvation. Teaching LDS high school students in the 1980s, she found many of them were well-versed in topics like temple marriage — which is unique to Latter-day Saints — but didn't talk much about Jesus Christ.

About the same time, top LDS leaders added a subtitle to the Book of Mormon as "another testament of Jesus Christ." Many Latter-day Saints assumed it was to instruct others about the centrality of Christ in the faith, but Fronk said it was just as likely to emphasize it for members.

"Some may worry that a constant public emphasis on (being saved by) grace will lead some church members to leave the crucial 'after all we can do' out," she said.

"I know Jesus Christ is my Savior and Redeemer and there is no other way" to salvation, she said. "Only through the mercy, merits and grace of Jesus Christ are we saved. The more I accept that, the more I desire to serve him, not because I merit any kind of return, but because I love him."

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