

Speaker's apology to LDS stirs up fuss

By **Carrie A. Moore**

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In the two months since a leading evangelical Christian apologized, on behalf of his fellow believers, to Latter-day Saints for mischaracterizations of their faith, several conservative Christians have voiced their displeasure with his remarks.



Ravi Zacharias speaks at "Evening of Friendship" Nov. 14. At the same meeting, evangelical Richard Mouw said that evangelicals have sinned against LDS. **Jason Olson, Deseret Morning News**

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, spoke Nov. 14 at the Tabernacle on Temple Square as part of an "Evening of Friendship." The meeting featured Christian philosopher Ravi Zacharias as the keynote speaker and was co-sponsored by a local group of evangelical ministers called Standing Together Ministries, and the Richard L. Evans Chair for Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University.

"Let me state it clearly. We evangelicals have sinned against you," Mouw said, noting a tendency among some Christians to distort the truth about the beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to ask you what you believe."

Mouw went on to explain that "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."

Latter-day Saints have often responded in kind to such actions, he said, lamenting, "Friendship with each other has not come easily for our two communities."

He lauded the event as a step toward mending strained relations. But his remarks didn't sit well with some conservative evangelicals, a few of whom have posted lengthy responses to his published text on their own Web sites and have encouraged others to make their displeasure known to Mouw.

As the backlash began following his speech, Mouw, who is also a columnist for Beliefnet.com, a nondenominational Web site, allowed the text of his remarks to be posted there with an explanation of the background for the meeting in Salt Lake City.

In posting the text, still available at www.beliefnet.com/index/index_10044.html, Mouw wrote that, "The speech is making the rounds among surprised and generally pleased evangelical and Mormon groups."

But several conservatives were not pleased.

A story following the event in Baptist Press, which writes about the Southern Baptist Convention, quoted three local ministers — Mike Gray, pastor of Southeast Baptist Church; Roger Russell of Holladay Baptist Church; and Tim Clark of the Utah-Idaho Baptist Convention — saying Mouw unfairly impugned their ministries and activities by making a blanket apology to Latter-day Saints.

"(Mouw) was wrong," the story quoted the Rev. Gray as saying. "He had no business. And it will hurt.

"He doesn't live here and he doesn't know what we do," the Rev. Gray said. "We haven't been ugly to our Mormon neighbors. We love them and care about them."

The article said Mouw had responded to such criticism with an e-mail to Baptist Press saying he "certainly did not mean to imply that every evangelical has sinned in this regard," Mouw wrote. "Suppose I were to address an African-American gathering and say that we whites have sinned against you blacks. Who would deny that this is a correct assessment? But who would think that I was speaking about and on behalf of all white people?"

Another Utahn troubled by Mouw's remarks, Ronald V. Huggins, assistant professor of theological and historical studies at Salt Lake Theological Seminary, posted a text of his own in response at a Web site of the Institute for Religious Research, www.irr.org/mit/authentic-dialogue.html, under a section titled, "Mormons in Transition."

Huggins said he and other faculty at the Salt Lake Theological Seminary asked Mouw in August 2004 to "avoid following the pattern he had

established in writing and public events during the past few years of disparaging earlier Christian efforts to reach Mormons for Christ.

Regrettably, Dr. Mouw ignored the SLTS faculty's concern."

Several faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary have met in recent years with several religion faculty at Brigham Young University to discuss topics of faith, and the seminary has hosted a couple of scholarly forums focusing on beliefs and doctrine of the LDS Church.

"Evangelicals present at the (Tabernacle) event, even some of those sitting on the stage, went away with the clear impression that Mouw was aiming his criticism at them," Huggins wrote.

While he said he agrees that some Evangelicals "have certainly been unkind to Mormons and have been guilty of inaccurately portraying Mormon beliefs," the approach "does not characterize the attitudes and actions of most evangelical churches and ministries, which is what made Mouw's blanket apology inappropriate."

He said some Christians in Utah "were surprised and disappointed by the apparent bad faith reflected in the LDS Church's post-event coverage; others, including myself, expected it on the basis of the conviction that, contrary to the belief and hope of many Evangelicals, the LDS Church does not appear ready for, nor does it seem to really desire, authentic dialogue with Evangelicals. What the LDS Church certainly does seem to desire is mainline respectability."

He said the church "appears to be interested in 'dialoguing' only with evangelicals who lack an in-depth knowledge of Mormon history and doctrine, and who are thus more likely to take at face value the representations of its PR people."

Huggins wrote that two weeks after Mouw's remarks, he and about two dozen local Christian leaders met with Standing Together director Greg Johnson to discuss the event and expressed their feeling that Mouw's apology "was both ill-advised and inappropriate; a significant number of those present (again including myself) felt it was highly inappropriate."

As for Standing Together, Huggins wrote that "evangelicals associated with that ministry have developed unhealthy, lopsided relationships with the Mormon apologists. Several years ago I came up with a name for this 'evangelistic strategy' — the 'Pander/Slander' method: 'If you want to pander to the Mormon apologists not ready for real dialogue, the cost is going to be a willingness to slander the Christian brethren that went before you.' "

The Rev. Johnson said he told the group concerned about Mouw's apology, "if the shoe doesn't fit, don't wear it."

"I would not accuse Mouw of hubris or arrogance or being proud. Did he fully appreciate the ramifications of his statement? Probably not. I'm sorry that his words and presentations were such a distraction to the purpose of the evening."

While he acknowledged the remarks were "very bold, they were his words, not mine. I wouldn't invite a Christian leader of his stature to the podium and ask him to submit the speech to me. Some have said I should have."

Despite the criticism, the Rev. Johnson said he believes "there were a whole lot of people thrilled with that evening."

As evidence, he said Standing Together has received more than 400 orders for a DVD or CD of the event. "We get a lot of notes now from people who have watched it and heard about it," noting it's been the subject of several radio programs across the country with "a lot of extremely good feedback."

"I've tried to say to people 'get the DVD and judge it for yourself.' Focus on the Family just ordered today 100 sets for their student leadership forum. They just called to get them. That's a nice thing."

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