

The Evangelical & The Mormon: Building bridges through discourse

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By Kristen Moulton

Boise, Idaho -- Robert Millet and Greg Johnson have been talking about faith to church audiences across the country and now on a weekly television show, but they agreed long ago to set aside the question on everyone's mind: Who will convert whom?

It's not that Millet, a prominent Latter-day Saint author and educator, and Johnson, a Baptist minister, are aloof about what each considers his great commission.

"Would we like to see the other come our way?" asks Johnson. "Of course."

"It's a given," says Millet. But, he adds, "This is bigger than that." Bigger than winning an argument over whether Mormons are Christian, over salvation through grace alone, over the claim of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' to be the "one, true church," over the Trinity, over the nature of God.

Johnson and Millet have decided to let go of the need to be right. "I can't tell you what a relief that is," says Johnson.

Now, when the two friends travel -- as they have to Boise, Idaho, and to Durham, N.C., and Manchester, England, this year to demonstrate how Mormons and evangelical Christians can converse civilly with one another -- they work at understanding.

"What I'm feeling is the need to get beyond doctrinal differences to . . . people's humanity," says Millet. "If I really care as much about people as God cares about people, then I'm into finding ways to build bridges between us."

Their friendship, they say, is about love.

"It's not a warm, oozy, truth-doesn't-matter kind of love," says Johnson. "That's not the convicted civility that Bob and I believe in."

"It's, 'Let Jesus Christ reign supreme and let Jesus Christ be responsible for what he wants to do here.' "

The friendship begins: Millet, 57, and Johnson, 38, first met in 1997 at Brigham Young University in Provo, when Johnson took one of his professors from the Denver Theological Seminary to speak to the BYU religion faculty.

Johnson had been raised LDS in California and Colorado but had become an evangelical Christian as a teenager.

By the time he was a Baptist minister and had spent six years pastoring in Ogden and in Huntsville, Johnson knew he wanted somehow to address the hostility he saw simmering among the Mormons and evangelicals in his own family, in his community.

Mormons and mainline Christianity had been at odds since the 1800s, when the Latter-day Saints fled persecution in the Midwest and isolated themselves in the Great Basin, intent on living restored, true Christianity. Evangelicals, of all Christians, had resisted the push by Latter-day Saints in recent decades to join the mainstream of Christianity, leading to a tension too great to ignore.

So Johnson and Millet, then dean of religious education at BYU, met for lunch at Johnson's office in Huntsville, just down the street from former

LDS President David O. McKay's boyhood home and next door to Utah's oldest saloon, the Shooting Star.

They lunched often, laying bare all the complaints and grievances and misunderstandings each had about the other's doctrines and culture. They taught each other.

After a year, Johnson moved to Orem to become pastor of a church there, and after some years, there came a wrenching moment when the two men had to decide whether to continue meeting, since neither was likely to convert. As another BYU professor once asked, what was the point?

Johnson and Millet, who was by then holding the BYU chair of religious understanding, however, felt like God wanted them to keep talking. So they did. Soon, an invitation to talk about their relationship and faith differences came from an Episcopal church in Park City. That was in late 2001.

The next year, they were invited to an evangelical college in California, and between 2003 and 2004, Johnson and Millet took "A Mormon and Evangelical in Conversation" to 24 cities from California to Canada, speaking in Mormon and evangelical churches and at colleges. Johnson is now the director of Standing Together, a nonprofit funded by Christian churches interested in building better relationships with Latter-day Saints.

This month, KTMW Channel 20 in Provo began airing the call-in show "Bob and Greg in Conversation," on Tuesdays at 9 p.m., and the pair has been flooded by callers curious about the expanding dialogue. Later this year or early next, the two will publish a book about their ongoing conversation and the questions they get.

On Easter Sunday, Johnson and Millet will be featured in a segment of the "CBS Sunday Morning News."

Critics abound: The Millet-Johnson conversation has not been without its critics. Some on both sides of the aisle feel uneasy.

Millet had a call from an LDS general authority wanting reassurance he wasn't compromising LDS doctrine, and a fellow Mormon once asked how he could justify using the resources of the church, at BYU, to build relationships with evangelicals.

Johnson watched as a large Southern California church jerked its support for Standing Together after the pair spoke there.

During their appearances at a Boise LDS chapel and at an evangelical church earlier this month, perennial Temple Square protester Lonnie Pursiful was outside, carrying a huge sign and passing out booklets.

Johnson, Pursiful says, talks more like a Mormon than a Baptist.

"There's no place in the Bible where we are told to build bridges. It says to reprove and rebuke."

Johnson concedes he has angered many evangelicals. "This comes at a price, this kind of work. It does not come without people questioning our motives, wondering about our loyalties."

To the audiences who linger long after their two-hour talks end, Johnson and Millet provide the right mix of humor, cajoling and honest talk about tough topics.

Millet makes them laugh by referring to the LDS concept of salvation as "Christ of the Gaps."

"We will do all we can and Christ will make up the rest," Millet says. "It's true, but that's not all of it."

Like brothers who get on each other's nerves, Millet, in a resonant voice, ribs Johnson about talking too much. Johnson in turn says Millet must be getting nervous or he wouldn't try to shut him up.

"Neither of these men backs down in what they believe, not one iota," said Gary Walker, director of public relations for the LDS Church in Idaho. He was at a March 3 appearance in Boise. The future: Millet says that while he is educating those of other faiths, he also is speaking to Mormons.

Conversations such as his and Johnson's are increasingly vital to his fast-growing church, which must become part of the religious conversation of the world, Millet says.

"I sense that God is trying to use me to say to my own people just what President Gordon B. Hinckley has been saying: 'Open up, don't be so parochial, don't be arrogant, don't be closed minded.' "

If Mormons are increasingly talking like Christians, "It's because we're becoming more aware of things that are in our own scripture," says Millet.

To evangelicals, he says, "Cut us a little slack. Give us a little time." Johnson says he couldn't be happier that LDS leaders in recent years are encouraging Mormons to reach out to their neighbors.

Where it will lead, he doesn't know. But Johnson is willing to dream.

"Why do we have to assume we could never see each other as fellow Christians?" asks Johnson. "If he [God] wants that to happen, he can make that happen. Let's dream big dreams. Let's hope for the thing we never thought would happen."