

Mormon, Baptist respect differences in faith

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[Lawn Griffiths](#), Tribune, 5/2/08

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Headstrong in their two faiths, a Mormon and a Baptist squared off recently at the Tempe Institute of Religion at Arizona State University and spent 2 1/2 hours demonstrating they could aggressively question each other's religions but come away with deep respect and love for each other.

Actually, some 55 times since 2001, the Rev. Gregory Johnson, founding pastor of Ogden Valley Baptist Church in Utah, and Robert Millet, dean emeritus of religious education at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, have held "A Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical" in the U.S., Canada and England. Between genial ribbing and sharing their own spiritual journeys, they posed questions about problematic parts of each other's religion.

The dialogue on April 25 was hosted by the Greater Phoenix Latter-day Saints Interfaith Council and the Arizona Ecumenical Council.

More than 500 people watched the two wage a spirited discussion. Most of the focus centered on Mormon doctrines and practices.

"This has been a sweet experience - the purpose is understanding," said Millet, now professor of religion education, outreach and interfaith relations for BYU and author of about 50 books. "This is a world where there is much misunderstanding and misperception and, unfortunately, misrepresentation," he said. The two collaborated on a book, released in November, "Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical."

At the outset of the dialogue, they promised no winner or loser. "It is important to get along, but that is not the thrust of our approach," Johnson said.

"Bob and I are not willing to trade off on our doctrines," he said. "I am not conceding the Trinity (God, son and Holy Ghost) if you give up the baptism of the dead," a Mormon sacrament, or ordinance, in which

church members by proxy and using a range of records vicariously baptize deceased persons of other faiths or no faith.

"Historically, Mormons and evangelicals know how to argue well," said Johnson, who spent much of his boyhood as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until he had a conversion experience at a summer camp in Colorado when he was a teen and became a Baptist.

"We are not in conversation just to make points with one another," said Johnson, founder and president of Standing Together, a ministry "to advance biblical unity and spiritual transformation in Utah." He said they have engaged in intense dialogue to share "truth as we best understand it."

"Once in a while, we need to ask ourselves the hard question, 'Am I sometimes too proud, maybe even arrogant, to suppose that someone of another faith can actually teach me something - that I can learn something from him?' " asked Millet.

Often, he said, when people have contrasting religious beliefs and disagreements, "we say, 'flight or fight,' " Johnson said. It is manifested by family pledges to not discuss religion at Thanksgiving meals, for example. He recounted how often families have been "split right down the middle" when, for example, someone has left an evangelical church or the Mormon church and joined the other.

"It has severely tested marriages, it has put children opposite their parents, it has broken some families up," Johnson said. "That breaks our hearts to think there are people, in the context of loving family relationships," who let religious choices break bonds among loved ones. It runs counter to Christ's purpose on earth, he said. "Jesus died on the cross because he loved a lost world."

Johnson offered a litany of issues commonly raised with Mormons: whether Jesus and Lucifer were spirit brothers, the ban of black males from the priesthood before the doctrine was changed in 1978, the practice of polygamy until it was banned in 1890, and blood atonement whereby it was once taught that certain sins required the blood of the sinner to be shed to gain forgiveness.

"People are down on what they are not up on," Millet said. "And not many people are up on what the central teachings of the Latter-day Saints happen to be." The BYU professor said those topics and others are "peripheral teachings." He said there is a "tendency and the temptation on the part of people outside my faith to define me and to define my faith for me and tell me what I believe and what I don't believe."

Millet said the test for whether matters are bona fide Mormon doctrine falls into four areas:

Is it found in the canons of Scripture and taught in standard works?

Is it found in official declarations or proclamations of the church from the First Presidency?

Is it taught regularly and consistently by the highest authorities of the church, typically at twice annual General Conferences?

Is it found in the general handbooks of the church or its curricula?

Millet said the church constantly is defending itself from 150 years of massive writings and statements by authorities in what has been an evolving church. "We don't denounce our past, we don't denounce our beginnings, but we believe that this happens to be a living church, and if you are a living church, that means there comes line upon line, precept upon precept, development upon development. So we understand it better now than we understood in 1840."

The fundamental principles of the Mormon faith, Millet said, "are the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, who died, was buried, rose again the third day and entered into heaven." The rest, he said, are appendages, and the church should not be judged on "anomalies."

"I can find where Southern Baptists encouraged people to practice slavery on the basis of biblical references," he said.

Johnson said he would concede that point. "Martin Luther himself is a hero of the faith to me, but not very pleasant when it came to the Jews

... It is not fair to judge everything about your faith by what anybody might have said at any one time."

The two men repeatedly implored people of all faiths to engage in thoughtful, nonjudgmental dialogue. "Love is the ultimate apologetic," Johnson said. "The ultimate defender of your faith as a Christian is how you love people."

Millet said one telltale sign of neighborly love comes when someone moves in next door to a Mormon family, which extends traditional gifts of cookies and bread. If those new neighbors spurn all invitations to attend the chapel in their ward, he asked, "Do I withdraw? Do I say they aren't interested in learning about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, so I will just pull away? Or do I do something really radical and strange: Do I become friends with them?"

Johnson said love transcends religious belief.

"I believe Bob matters to Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ loves Bob, and he represents a whole group of people that I was once a part of, the Mormon community," he said. "And I believe God loves Mormons. So if God loves Mormons, then I love Mormons because I want to love the same that God loves."