

Mormon-Evangelical dialogue could clarify misperceptions of doctrine

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Mormon leaders should take to heart the bruising lessons Mitt Romney's presidential campaign taught them about their faith's image and open a public dialogue about LDS theology, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary says.

Now that Romney is out of the race, LDS leaders can comment on the "distorted characterizations of Mormon thought," Richard Mouw wrote in *Beliefnet*, a national online magazine about religion. They could also give their "official blessings" to the ongoing discussions between evangelical theologians and Mormon scholars that could help clarify "those elements of Mormon thought that are most susceptible to criticism from the perspective of traditional Christianity."

Such an endorsement would help Evangelicals, too, Mouw argues.

"The LDS leadership has a marvelous opportunity right now to invite Evangelicals and Mormons to learn together how to be better neighbors," he says.

Mormon officials responded to Mouw's suggestion with a broad, but vague statement.

Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints "welcome those efforts. . .and look forward to continued friendly association and dialogue with Dr. Mouw and with others of goodwill," LDS spokesman Scott Trotter said. "The church embraces as an article of faith the concept of respect for other religions and the freedom to choose, and urges its own members to avoid misrepresentation or mischaracterizations of the beliefs of others."

Not all Mormons think Mouw's proposal is feasible.

The differences between Evangelicals and Mormons is more than theological, says Kathleen Flake, who teaches American religious history at Vanderbilt University. It's also organizational and systematic.

Evangelicals are only loosely organized around a set of principles; not least emphasizing the primacy of the Bible over theology, Flake says. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, "are tightly organized around an enlarged canon of Bible-based narratives. These are loosely employed to express personal conviction of God's contemporary and revelatory immediacy."

Mouw's invitation for official, Vatican II-like negotiation makes sense, she says, "only if you think that Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints have a theology sufficiently systematized to speak definitively. It seems to me that neither does."

Talking is good, Flake says, "but it's never going to be official, only academic."

That may be likely given that the first conversations began in a university setting.

About a decade ago, Mouw and some colleagues visited Brigham Young University to discuss questions of authority, revelation, becoming gods, faith and works, grace and Jesus' atoning sacrifice for humanity with BYU religion professor Bob Millet. Millet later went to Mouw's turf at Fuller in Pasadena, Calif. These conversations continue to this day and now involve dozens of others. Last year, an expanded group met in Nauvoo, Ill., a historic location dear to the LDS faithful.

"They've been good discussions," Mouw said in a phone interview. "We really disagree about things but at the same time, we have gotten to a place where there's trust between us."

In a 2004 speech before a packed audience in the Mormon Tabernacle on Temple Square, Mouw chastised his fellow Evangelicals for sinning against Latter-day Saints by misrepresenting their views to others in order to debunk Mormonism.

"It's a terrible thing to bear false witness," Mouw said. "We've told you what you believe without first asking you. . . I remain convinced there are serious issues of difference that are of eternal consequence, but now we can discuss them as friends."

Though some people on both sides of the divide took his advice to heart, Mouw saw the same kind of misrepresentation emerge during Romney's run for the presidency.

The problem, as he sees it, is that few people know much about what Mormons believe and Mormons often don't explain their deep doctrine to outsiders.

"The element of mystery generates a feeling of suspicion," he said.

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