

Landmines of Witnessing to Mormons

by *Bruce F. Levi*, ICARE Ministries

Often, perhaps the vast majority of the time, Christians describe their experience of witnessing to Mormons, as difficult, frustrating, and even confusing. I have arrived at this conclusion from my own experience of over 25 years of witnessing to Mormons, from various books written on the subject, and from conversations with other Christians.

It is common when witnessing to Mormons that the Mormon will become noticeably defensive, or claim that “the spirit of contention” is present, to frequently change the subject, to offer strange “proof text” and other kinds of weak arguments, or to retreat into a statement of their subjective “testimony” wherein they claim to know that the LDS church is true, that its founder Joseph Smith was a true prophet, that the LDS church currently has a living prophet, etc.

I call these kinds of reactions, attitudes and arguments, “landmines”. Landmines, because like the real landmines that are buried in the dirt by soldiers, these spiritual landmines are hidden from view. And, like real landmines, they seem to just pop up all of a sudden out of nowhere. And, like real landmines, cause damage to and even kill the conversation and the relationship. They stop the progress of the conversation and telling of the gospel to the Mormon. Furthermore, like real landmines can impede the progress of an entire company, battalion, or division, I believe such landmines in witnessing to Mormons have impeded much progress over the past 175 years in getting the gospel to Mormons in an effective way that Mormons can understand.

But not only do the religion of Mormonism and Mormons themselves bring “landmines” to conversations with Christians, Christians bring their own landmines to the conversations. Just what are these hidden bombs that impede progress? Is there a reasonable, even a biblical, explanation? I am convinced that the answer to this question is, yes.

MORMON “LANDMINES”

There are various beliefs, ideas, doctrines, thought processes, attitudes, reactions, and words that Mormons bring to conversations with Christians, that I will name here “Mormon landmines.” These things often seem to pop up out of nowhere in conversations and impede dialogue and understanding. Now, lest the Christian reader make light of the term “Mormon landmines,” let him or her note that “Christian landmines” are also impediments to understanding, and are addressed below.

1. Mormons have a low view of the Bible. They believe that it is incomplete, even that whole books and other significant parts are missing. Not only this, but that even what is still in the Bible is corrupt to the point that perhaps most verses are missing some truth that was originally there. The Book of Mormons indicates that the Roman Catholic Church, although not actually named, removed many “plain and precious parts” from the Bible. Therefore, even when Christians quote the King James Version, the only translation recognized by Mormons, questions can remain in the Mormon’s mind as to the viability of the verses and even the entire conversation. You can imagine what Mormons think when Christians quote from the NIV, or other translations that sound to them strangely different from what little they may have read in their KJV Bibles. They tend to disregard any Bible topics not flowing out of the KJV.

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2. In contrast to their low view of the Bible, Mormons have very high view of their own unique “scriptures”: the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. These books, they believe, are the very uncorrupted words of God and that the “fullness of the gospel” is found in them, not in the Bible.

Now, in reality, the Book of Mormon has undergone almost 4,000 changes subsequent to its original printing. The Doctrine & Covenants has also been significantly changed subsequent to its original 1835 first edition and especially so in comparison to its 1833 predecessor, The Book of Commandments. However, Mormons do not study these changes. In fact, LDS leaders try to avoid any discussions of them. When the subject arises, the standard reason given for changes is that the leaders receive new revelation for new situations.

3. Mormons have “another gospel” or a radically different gospel than do Christians. The biblical gospel is centered around God’s grace toward sinful people. God’s love and actions are done out of His will, plans and glory. One does not deserve and cannot earn God’s favor. In stark contrast, the Mormon “gospel” is all about humankind’s efforts to save one’s self. In fact, the official LDS church book, Gospel Principles, does not have even one chapter on grace, nor is the word grace listed in the index. From the official LDS point of view, grace appears to be unimportant.

4. In fact, not only does Mormonism define gospel differently than does the Bible, it defines all theological terms differently than does the Bible. No wonder that there is confusion and frustration. Mormons and Christians use the same religious, or theological, terms, but their respective meanings are very different. When we speak to them they “hear” a different meaning in their mind. When they speak to us, we “hear” a meaning in our minds that is different than their meaning.

5. Mormons do not have a fear of hell. Mormonism teaches that almost all people will go to one of three “heavens.” Even wicked people, whom the Bible would subscribe to hell, are in the lowest “heaven” of Mormonism. This belief that one can avoid biblical, eternal torment in hell, causes the Mormon to feel little urgency to settling the issue of salvation, or regarding the Christian’s concerns and words about hell.

6. Now, there is a Mormon equivalent to the biblical hell. Mormonism names this place of eternal judgment “outer darkness” and those who earn this damnation are “sons of perdition.” The only people who do not earn a place in one of the three “heavens,” but rather outer darkness, are traitors to Mormonism in the style of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ. Mormons who know much about the “true gospel of Mormonism” and then reject it and fight against it, can earn outer darkness. So, Mormons live under a fear or threat, that if they fall into apostasy by talking to the Christian and then leaving Mormonism, they may end up in this outer darkness, where they will not even have a resurrected body.

7. Mormons regard Christianity as a kind of disorganized mess. They view the Roman Catholic Church as having long ago left the true faith, having changed the Bible, and that they forbid marriage for priests. Because marriage is a key requirement for earning the highest level of salvation, you can understand Mormons’ feelings about the Roman church. Eastern Orthodox churches are seen as promoting idol worship with all their icons, etc. Furthermore, because the Protestants came

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out of Roman Catholicism, they are viewed first as not having any claim to authority. Additionally, because there are so many Protestant denominations, with seemingly contradicting teachings, they are regarded by Mormons as false and incomplete.

8. Mormons believe that around 1830 John the Baptist and then later, Peter, James, and John visited Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, and gave him and the Mormon leadership the priesthood authority to act in God's name here on earth. This means to Mormons that only the Mormon church has the authentic authority from God. Thus, Mormons view only their baptism and ceremony of receiving the Holy Ghost, both of which are necessary steps to LDS "salvation," as efficacious. In fact, since Mormons view only their priesthood as legitimate, they view all other church's ceremonies and acts as illegitimate.

9. Mormons are under the close direction of a large priesthood hierarchy of male leaders who claim to receive revelation for the administration of their respective areas of responsibility. At the very top is a modern-day prophet. He, along with his two counselors, comprise "The First Presidency." Reporting to this trio are the modern-day "Twelve Apostles." Reporting to them are the "Seventy" regional representatives. On a regional level are "Stakes," which are comprised of about ten congregations. At the local level are congregations, called "Wards." There are some female leaders at the headquarters and locally, but they do not have any actual "priesthood authority" and report to the male leaders for direction and oversight.

Twice yearly, in April and October, these leaders give direction to members of the LDS church via conference that are held in Salt Lake City, Utah in the famous "Tabernacle." These are also broadcast via television. The level of influence and control these leaders have on Mormons is greater than what most Christians ever personally encounter in their lives.

10. Mormons believe that their leaders receive new revelation from God on a continual basis, which is suited to the changing times and needs of the LDS church. Many Mormons are aware of some of the many changes. They tend to comprehend the changes as either minor, or as divinely inspired. However, this state of constant change keeps Mormons in a state of insecurity and even some confusion. It is obviously a means of control that has the effect of Mormons having to constantly staying tuned to what the leaders are saying. One of the key "rules" of Mormon teaching is that the leaders must be obeying even in seemingly small areas or topics.

11. Mormons are busy people. There are perhaps 300 volunteer positions in the average-sized "ward" of 500 members. This is a job for every second person. Indeed, Mormons' entire lives often center on their church responsibilities and activities. There are programs for all ages and participation in them is highly encouraged by the leaders. There are even teams of "elders" that visit each member's home once a month to check on and encourage members to be active in the church. Plus each ward's women's group has its own in-home visiting program to keep in contact with the female members.

12. Mormons live under the constant pressure of legalism. The Mormon "gospel" is one of "laws and ordinances" or, stated another way, rules and ceremonies. In Mormonism, Jesus freely bestows resurrection, but one's place in one of three heavens is earned by each individual's own actions. Mormonism features all four kinds of legalism: 1) They must do works to become saved. 2) They

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must do works to remain saved. 3) They must do works to earn God's continuing favor and blessings. 4) They must do works to please unwritten rules and the wishes of leaders.

13. Mormons determine truth largely on the basis of personal feelings. Such feelings are sometimes known as "a burning in the bosom." The LDS "scriptures" The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine & Covenants encourage this kind of approach to determining spiritual reality. In fact, the series of lessons that Mormon missionaries teach to potential converts ask for emotional decisions and commitments more than they do any serious level of research and fact-finding. Thus, the Christian will often encounter the Mormon's "testimony" which is an emotion-based statement in which the Mormon states that he/she "knows the LDS church is true." But virtually never are any historical, biblical, or scientific facts offered as part of such "testimonies."

LANDMINES THAT CHRISTIANS BRING TO WITNESSING ENCOUNTERS WITH MORMONS - WEAKNESSES AND MISTAKES IN OUR APPROACH

If it was not already difficult enough to witness to Mormons with the many "Mormon landmines" one encounters when trying to witness them, Christians only compound the difficulty with "Christian landmines" they bring to such conversations.

Unbiblical Attitudes

Hate, Dislike, Disgust, or Mistrust. A few years ago, while presenting our ministry to a church in southern Idaho, the Pastor told me, "I hate Mormons." I was completely taken aback by this pronouncement. Compounding this situation was the fact that the population of the small town where the church was located, was one-half Mormon. In addition, imagine being a pastor in a town where you hate one-half the people you and your fellow congregants are supposed to reach with the gospel! With this kind of attitude in the leadership, it seems highly unlikely that the members of this local church would be interested in outreach to Mormon, or evangelism in general to anyone, in that town.

As disappointing as this true situation may be to the reader, it has been my sad experience that many people who claim to be Christians actually do hate Mormons. And, even if the sentiment is not so strong as to be hate, it is certainly dislike, disgust, or mistrust. This is a strong statement, but I believe it is nevertheless true. One reason for this is that Christians, over the nearly 180 years since Mormonism's founding in 1830, have been taught that the tenets of the Mormon religion are evil and anti-Biblical. And, certainly this is true. In fact, Mormonism attacks the biblical doctrines of God, the nature of mankind, the Church, and the way of salvation that is by grace alone through faith alone. The problem here is that Christians are confusing the hate of false doctrine with hate for people. It is OK to hate false doctrine. It is not OK to hate people.

Christians are focusing on the symptoms, not the real problem. The Bible teaches us to "go into all the world and make disciples out of all peoples." This includes Mormons. This was Jesus' last direct command to His church, as recorded in Matthew 28:19. Jesus also taught us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). So, even if Christians regard Mormons as enemies, the ostensible reason for the hate, we are to nevertheless love them.

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Ephesians 4:15 tells us to “speak the truth in love.” Jude 3 tells us to “earnestly contend for the faith,” not to be contentious for the faith.

However, it seems that the primary doctrine Christians ignore, which leads to this attitude of hate, dislike, or mistrust, is what is taught in Ephesians 6:12. (See also Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.) Our struggle in the world is not against “flesh and blood” – a clear reference to people. Our struggles and troubles come from the unseen, spiritual realm. The word translated “wrestle” (KJV) means a kind of hand-to-hand combat that involves trickery and deception. The very word God gave us here tells us wherein the battle lies. And then He added, for clarity, that our battle is not with people.

Chip on your shoulder

Having a “chip on your shoulder” is the idea that one has something to prove to Mormons, because they are ignorant, stupid, or mentally dense. This attitude often causes the Christian to want to win intellectual arguments with Mormons. Such arguments usually focus on topics like the nature of God, the Trinity, grace versus works, the many false prophecies of Joseph Smith, or strange and obscure doctrines of Mormonism. One reason for this attitude toward Mormons is that much, if not most, material written about Mormonism takes this approach to witnessing to Mormons. If this is what Christians are reading about how to witness to Mormons, it is only natural for Christians to have this “chip.”

Another reason for this “chip” on our shoulder is the bringing to light, by well-intentioned and factually-correct Christians, of the absurdities of the Book of Mormon and other facts of Mormon history. Such absurdities often include the Book of Mormon story of the crossing of the ocean in submarine-like boat that had a hole in both the top and bottom. And, that the Book of Mormon describes wheat, sheep, silk worms, horses, elephants, etc. in the Americas hundreds of year before such things were brought by Europeans. Because to believe such things is both unscientific and even ridiculous, Christians falsely conclude that Mormons are at best ignorant, or perhaps even stupid. The Christian then takes it upon himself to “straighten out” the Mormon scientific and intellectual matters.

However, the problem with Mormons is not a lack of intelligence. There are many accomplished Mormon scientists, statesmen, doctors, lawyers, actors, media hosts, FBI and CIA agents, musicians, inventors, business leaders, athletes, etc. What the Christian who has this kind of chip on their shoulder forgets, or does not realize, is the biblical teaching on the nature of humankind and the doctrines of salvation.

The Bible is clear that “natural” (unsaved) people cannot (are completely unable to) “receive the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14). People who remain yet unregenerated are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) How can a dead person receive the most intellectual, factual, logical arguments, no matter how well they are presented to him? Of course, the dead person cannot receive any part of a presentation – he is dead. That mankind is dead from sinning, is clear from the beginning, in Genesis. God told Adam the penalty for disobeying was sin. Adam and Eve were thrust from God’s presence. They died spiritually and could no longer hear God, nor see Him. They also began to die physically.

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The Bible reinforces this doctrine of humankind's deadness in the New Testament. Unsaved people, in fact every single one of them, do not seek after God, at all. "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God" (Romans 3:11-18).

Confusion regarding Biblical Salvation

When it comes to the doctrines of the Bible regarding salvation, there is confusion among Christians. This confusion is another "Christian landmine" that is often brought to conversations with Mormons. The Apostle Paul said this about the process of salvation in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." Man's role in salvation is likened here to a farmer, who plants and waters, but the ability, or power in the growing of the seed is all in the hands of God: "God gave the increase."

To begin with, most Christians do not take into account how the above influences on Mormons affect the Mormon, in his soul, as a real person. Most Christians, when they do speak with Mormons in an attempt to witness the biblical gospel, simply "steamroll" over the Mormon's background and feelings, often in an argumentative manner.