



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 00: The Need for this Work

>

Several years ago, a friend asked me to recommend a book as an introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ for those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After some research, I found that there was no work on the topic which I could consider adequate or satisfactory to recommend to my friends and acquaintances. The overwhelming majority of gospel literature carried in LDS bookstores is written for LDS members; little of it would be understandable to non-members. Those written for nonmember audiences tend to be primarily scholarly specialty works or histories, and not systematic introduction to the gospel. Some like Terryl Givens' *By the Hand of Mormon* have done an excellent job of presenting thoughtful scholarly narratives, although Givens' primary purpose is expounding the Book of Mormon's theology, history, and cultural impact rather as a work of outreach.

It may be often assumed that the role of outreach to nonmembers is filled by missionary department literature, yet little if any official church literature except for perhaps the pamphlets accompanying the missionary discussions is directed toward nonmembers with no previous knowledge or background of the Church. The missionary discussions provide a brief overview of key doctrines, augmented with the personal testimony and insight of the missionaries, as well as the study, prayer, and life implementation of investigators. Yet many individuals I have known over the years have wanted more details, and more answers, than are provided by the four short missionary lessons.

Over the past twenty years, I have collected numerous missionary books and pamphlets. Some of these, like Charles Penrose's *Rays of Living Light* and John Widtsoe's *A Rational Theology*, admirably demonstrate the uniqueness, logic, power, scriptural consistency, and divine inspiration of Christ's Gospel as taught in His Church. Yet these and other authors wrote for audiences of their time and place, and therefore tend to assume a great many things that we can no longer take for granted.

//

In largely Christian early 20th century America, the assumption of LDS missionaries was that people if people received a divine witness of the inspiration of the Book of Mormon or the veracity of the teachings of the LDS Church, conversion and active membership in the Church would follow. Today, this is usually not the case, as many member-missionaries and full-time missionaries have learned through sometimes frustrating experience. There has been great growth in the segment of individuals who classify themselves as spiritual but not religious, and seek spiritual experiences outside the channels of organized religion. Of those who attend church, most do not believe that any single denomination has the full truth; many believe either that a heterogeneous group of Christian denominations all offer equally valid paths to God. Furthermore, few of those who express a denominational preference adhere strictly to the doctrinal teachings of their faith; the beliefs of most people consist of a hybrid of elements from their denominational teachings, from Christianity generally, from secular philosophy and worldview, and sometimes even elements of counter-Christian beliefs like astrology and reincarnation. And this is just among Christians.

As the gospel has been more widely preached around the world, missionaries have encountered increasing numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Confucianists, adherents of other traditional and nontraditional faiths, each of which carries its own worldview and spectrum of interpretations. With few exceptions, the LDS outreach works written to date have focused almost exclusively on Christianity; those addressing other faiths have been primarily scholarly and analytical works written for LDS audiences rather than to introduce the LDS church to members of those other faiths. The missionary discussions spend only one page on the existence of God before moving into a Christian worldview discussing Jesus Christ, prophets, scripture, and revelation.

With few notable exceptions like Mongolia and Cambodia, the LDS church has experienced little growth among non-Christians; it appears that over 95% of LDS converts come from Christian backgrounds, although only one third of the world's people are Christians. It has sometimes been argued that this is because non-Christian groups may be less receptive. In some cases, this may be true. Yet we also find countries like Indonesia where the LDS church has been largely stagnant for decades, whereas other Christian groups have experienced steady growth. Such trends suggest that the problem may not lie exclusively in the lack of receptivity of non-Christian groups; part of the problem may arise from applying modes of proselytism designed for Christian audiences to diverse cultures for which they are not well suited.

A program of teaching that may seem perfectly logical to a Christian missionary may not lead to the necessary insights for

non-Christians. An adherent of Eastern philosophy may have no difficulty expressing belief in the Bible and Book of Mormon along with countless other works, while viewing them as merely situational revelation for specific individuals or societies at the given times with no more universal relevance to modern man than the Bhagavad-Gita or the writings of Buddha, thus disbelieving their core messages. A Muslim may acknowledge some inspiration of the Bible while viewing Jesus as merely a great prophet superseded by Mohammed rather than as Savior and the literal son of God. A Buddhist may doubt the calling of prophets, the accessibility of divine revelation, or the need for active participation in the community of believers.

In writing this work, I have focused on logically connected topics that have repeatedly come up in my personal discussions with friends and acquaintances as well as from my prior missionary experience. The focus is therefore on practical topics that regularly arise and not esoteric themes. I have attempted to write this work in a manner that will be understandable and relevant to individuals of any cultural or religious background. Although some religious backgrounds may place greater emphasis on one section or another, I have tried to make this material as transcultural as possible for the benefit of diverse readers.

My purpose in writing this work is to fill, at least in part, what I see as a gap in current LDS outreach literature. I do not imagine that my humble writings are fully up to the task at hand, and I do not doubt the better authors will one day far surpass any merit or insight I may offer. This work is written to address contemporary religious challenges, and may not be as applicable and 50 or 100 years. Nonetheless, I hope that this work will be helpful to seekers of truth and to Latter-day Saints who want to better understand how to share their faith.

My views and perspectives are my own; I do not speak for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am solely responsible for this work. This work has been written on my own time with no funding or support from any outside source. Those who wish to learn more about the LDS church from authorized representatives are encouraged to visit the Church's outreach website at <http://mormon.org> or its main website at <http://www.lds.org>