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Book Review: Understanding Your Mormon Neighbor by Ross Anderson

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Ross Anderson, *Understanding Your Mormon Neighbor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, 138 pp, \$14.99.

Reviewed by Travis S. Kerns. Assistant Professor of Christian Worldview and Apologetics, Boyce College, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Understanding persons of other faith traditions is never an easy task, especially when those faith traditions are strongly linked to, and use the same vocabulary as, historic, orthodox Christianity. Ross Anderson's *Understanding Your Mormon Neighbor* is another attempt by an evangelical at doing exactly that—understanding another person, specifically, understanding a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Originally born in Utah but raised in California as a Mormon, Anderson was converted to evangelical Christianity during college. He went on to earn the D. Min. from an evangelical seminary, became the founding pastor of the Wasatch Evangelical Free Church in Roy, Utah, and currently serves as a teaching pastor at an evangelical church in northern Utah.

Anderson's thesis is simple, yet bold. He writes, "I hope to produce a description of Mormon life that is recognizable to both Latter-day Saints and intelligible to non-Mormon readers, free of the weaknesses common to both

insider and outsider accounts” (7–8). He then lists three specific goals for the work: “to foster a congenial perspective,” “to stimulate my fellow evangelicals to think new thoughts about how to engage Mormonism,” and “to encourage traditional Christians to enter relationships with Latter-day Saints in order to engage in spiritual conversations and faith-sharing” (8).

As with the thesis, the book is simple, yet bold. Anderson sets out to explain Mormonism in a few more than sixty pages beginning with the proverbial 800 pound gorilla of whether Mormonism should be considered a cult or a culture. He answers, “We need to understand Mormonism as a culture that shapes not only the doctrines but the very identity of its people” (20). Elaborating on the cult issue, Anderson writes, “If our goal is to have spiritual conversations with Latter-day Saints that open up opportunities to share our faith with them in a positive way, labeling them as cult members is surely unnecessary and counterproductive” (21).

The following six chapters deal with the basic beliefs of Latter-day Saints and the practical outworking of those beliefs, including the “one true church” doctrine, how local congregations function, how families are understood, the role of temples, and the personal experiences of everyday Mormonism. Within these chapters, Anderson highlights some of the major practical differences between Christianity and Mormonism and offers concise explanations of those differences. The chapter discussing the role of temples will likely be of most interest to readers as Anderson deals with some of the mystery surrounding those structures, the significant role temples play in the lives of Mormons, and some of the symbolism inherent in the temples themselves.

Within the final three chapters of the book, Anderson discusses the Mormon view of non-Mormons, the ways persons join and leave the Mormon faith, and the ways Mormons and non-Mormons have interacted throughout the history of the LDS Church. The author offers some discussion of the evangelistic effort of Mormons and of the current political climate in the United States with Mormons at the forefront of electoral and social issues. Anderson also mentions the ways in which persons join and leave the LDS Church, the reasons for joining and leaving, and the consequences faced by persons who choose to leave the Mormon fold. The final chapter of the book is Anderson’s evaluation of the historic and contemporary interaction between Mormons and Christians. His analysis of the historic interaction between the two groups is a negative one and argues that Mormons and Christians have either isolated themselves from each other or Christians have used apologetics against Mormons to “[tear] down their prophet and [try] to destroy their church” (100–01). His final plea to Christians is, as one of the subtitles reads in the final chapter, “We can do better” (99).

Kerns: Book Review: Understanding Your Mormon Neighbor by Ross Anderson

Anderson's book has a number of strengths which can be very helpful to the reader. First, the thesis is incredibly bold and helpful. For years, Latter-day Saints have argued that Christians' explanations of Mormonism are, at the least, incorrect and, at the worst, outright fabrications. Anderson's attempt at writing a work accessible to both Mormons and Christians is to be commended. Unfortunately, as with all religious groups, there will be some Mormons who will be unsatisfied with his explanations of their faith. This is simply the nature of doing comparative religion work.

Second, the concise nature of the book is helpful, especially for contemporary readers. With the world seemingly run by short talking points and 140-character life updates, long treatments of subjects do not seem to be *en vogue*. The short length of this work makes modern marketing sense and shows that Anderson has his finger on the pulse of contemporary humanity and its short attention span.

122 A third strength of the work is the final section of each chapter subtitled, "Interacting with your neighbor." Many books dealing with other faith groups tend toward explanation without advice for interaction. For Christian readers, these sections will prove extremely helpful as they offer practical advice for sharing Christ with Mormons and for getting past difficulties in speaking to Mormons.

The final, and major, strength of the work comes in small pieces throughout in the form of evangelistic tips and strategies not necessarily concentrated in one section. For example, Anderson writes, "When Saints come to feel defeated in their pursuit of worthiness, they have four options. They can try harder. They can pretend to try harder, in order to maintain the public image of worthiness. They can reinterpret the standards downward so that they feel as if they are measuring up. Or they can just give up. When our LDS friends come to sense the futility of their efforts, a kind, trusted Christian friend can provide a safe listening ear" (80). This is a perfect example of the futility of a works-centered theological system and the failure of humans within such systems. Here is the point at which a grace-centered theological system can offer hope and forgiveness. Likewise, Anderson writes, "One common pitfall has to do with the meaning of words" (106). Mormons and Christians use the same vocabulary in their religious speech; however, they use vastly different dictionaries. This is a significant problem when dialogue between members of the two groups occurs, and knowing there is a difference is more than helpful.

A few limitations occur within this work which, if alleviated, would greatly enhance the helpfulness of the book. The first of these limitations is the opposite side of one of the strengths—the concise nature of the work. Though concision is helpful, it is equally harmful, especially when dealing with such a large topic as

Mormonism. Numerous statements are made in which further elaboration would assuage hasty generalizations. For example, the author argues, “Apologetics ministries focus more on proving Mormonism wrong than offering good news, as if the desired result is nothing more than for people to leave the LDS Church” (101). Though there are ministries focused on proving Mormonism wrong, many, if not most, of those ministries give equal attention to sharing the good news of Christ. Indeed, the desired result is for persons to leave the LDS Church, and many apologetics ministries offer Christianity as the only alternative.

A second limitation of the work is the continual use of the phrase “traditional Christian” when referring to a person who believes the doctrines of historic, orthodox Christianity. Admittedly, a person who holds those beliefs is a traditional Christian, but no explanation is offered as to why this particular phrase is used. When dealing with Mormons, some Christians hesitate to keep from making hard distinctions between the two groups, especially with the words “Christian” and “non-Christian.” This does not seem to be the case explicitly with Anderson; however, there are certainly hints at this hesitation throughout. For example, he argues that we should be “sensitive about issues that offend Latter-day Saints” (107), and one of those issues is “when members of other churches deny that Mormons are Christians” (107). Likewise, one of the appendices deals with the question, “Are Mormons Christians?” and Anderson concludes this question “amounts to little more than a debate over labels” (119). Anderson does note the closer one is to a “Mormon worldview, the less likely he or she is to be right with God on those terms,” however, there still seems to be a general hesitation in this area (119).

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Though there are limitations to the work, they do not harm the overall helpfulness of the book in any serious way. Anderson’s personal involvement both inside and outside Mormonism lend significant credibility to his ministry, and this work should be taken as a good, concise primer on the mentality of Mormons and Mormonism. The subtitle is indeed an excellent description of the work—a quick guide for relating to Latter-day Saints.

Elmer John Thiessen. *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011, 285 pp., \$24.00.

Reviewed by: Thomas P. Johnston, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO

Elmer John Thiessen, in a captivating way, introduces and explains the fields of study which impact the topics of evangelism, proselytism, or religious persuasion