

# THE FACTS ON THE MORMON CHURCH

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# Introduction to Mormonism

# 1

## What is Mormonism, and why is it important?

Mormonism is a religion founded upon the teachings of Joseph Smith (1805–1844). Although some 100 Mormon sects have existed historically, the two largest divisions are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah—LDS for short) and the Community of Christ (headquartered in Independence, Missouri, and formerly called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints).

The subject of Mormonism is important because of the Mormon Church's influence, power, and evangelistic operations. For example, it maintains over 60,000 missionaries who actively engage in proselytizing activities throughout the world. Further, Mormonism is also the fourth-largest religion in the United States, with more than 6 million claimed adherents; worldwide, it boasts a membership of 13 million.<sup>1</sup>

*The New Mormon Challenge*, a scholarly critique of recent LDS apologetics, extrapolates current growth rates to 580 million by the end of this century. Although the LDS Church doesn't release financial records, in 1997 the leadership granted *Time* magazine unusual cooperation, and in *Time*'s August 4, 1997, issue, LDS assets were valued at a minimum of \$30 billion. The same article estimated an annual gross income of \$5.9 billion.

No one can doubt the power and influence of Mormonism.<sup>2</sup>

## 2

### **How did Mormonism originate, and how important are supernatural revelations to the founding and sustaining of the Mormon Church?**

Like almost all religions, Mormonism claims divine inspiration as its source. Mormons argue that their religion was divinely instituted in 1820 when God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith Jr. in a dramatic vision. “Jesus” told Smith that Christianity was in complete apostasy and that he, Smith, would be guided into the truth—for the reestablishment of true Christian faith.

This crucial “first vision” of Joseph Smith is the official account of Mormon beginnings. Although it is said to establish the Church’s divine origin, there are at least six contradictory versions of this key event<sup>3</sup> (see question 15). A summary of the Church’s current official—and the least likely—version follows.

Joseph Smith said that when he was 15 and living in Manchester, New York, a religious revival of significant proportions took place “and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties.”<sup>4</sup> Smith said that the strife among these parties was so great as to confuse a person as to which one was correct in its teachings—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, or some other denomination. Because of this strife, Smith determined to privately seek God’s counsel as to which of the various denominations he should join.



In his own words

One day while reading James 1:5 (which refers to asking God for wisdom), Smith was greatly moved. In his own words,

Never did any passage of scripture come home with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine...[Smith then retired to a secluded place in the woods to seek God's counsel]...I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me...just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared when I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound.

When the light rested upon me, I saw two Personages whose brightness and glory defy all description standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other—“*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*”

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the [religious] sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right—and which I should join.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me

[presumably Jesus Christ] said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight: that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” He again forbade me to join with any of them: and many other things did he say.<sup>5</sup>

Although Smith’s claims were considered impossible by the Christian community, he remained true to his vision. His “mind [was satisfied] so far as the sectarian [Christian] world was concerned...It was not my duty to join with any of them, but to continue as I was until further directed.”<sup>6</sup>

#### Later revelations

Smith was convinced he had been called by God and, though in the next three years he confesses he “frequently fell into many foolish errors” (see James 1:20-22,26), he waited patiently for the next revelation.<sup>7</sup>

#### A matter of authority

If Joseph Smith had truly believed in the authority of the Bible and had really studied it, he could have determined for himself that the various Christian denominations were *not* “all corrupt” with abominable creeds, but held to similar biblical teachings on key doctrines—and that his initial vision was, therefore, a false one.<sup>8</sup>

On September 21, 1823, Smith wrote, an angel appeared to him to tell him of the location of certain gold plates. It was from the writings on these gold plates that eventually the Mormon scripture known as the Book of Mormon was purportedly “translated.” These plates were

said to contain the historical records of a tribe of Jewish people known as the “Nephites” concerning their migration to the Americas in ancient times.<sup>9</sup>

Smith reported he had many more angelic revelations. Just as the LDS Church ostensibly began through supernatural revelation, it was also sustained by this process. For example, from 1831 to 1844, Smith “received 135 direct revelations from God,” helping the new movement to grow and solidify itself.<sup>10</sup> He believed he received revelations from God, Jesus, and many spirits of the dead, such as Peter, James, John the Baptist, and others.<sup>11</sup> (See questions 21–23. Many of these revelations are printed in Doctrine and Covenants, the second and doctrinally most important volume of Mormon scriptures.<sup>12</sup>)

### 3

## How can we know whether these revelations were from God or were from some other source?

That Joseph Smith or anyone else claims to have divine visions does not automatically prove the visions are from God. People may invent stories for unknown reasons, or they may even be suffering from mental delusions. Even if Joseph Smith was the recipient of *genuine* supernatural manifestations, how does anyone know they were not counterfeits from deceiving spirits—spirits who were lying when they said they were angels and saints?<sup>13</sup>

The issue of Mormon revelations can be finally reduced to one simple test. If Joseph Smith’s revelations

deny, contradict, and oppose the Bible, then whatever their source, they cannot possibly have originated in God. And if they did not originate in God, they have no divine authority and should not be heeded.

Most of this book will be devoted to supplying documentation that Mormon revelations and the doctrine derived from them cannot be considered divine. If you are a Mormon, we ask you to carefully consider the arguments presented. Every person has a responsibility to be certain that what he or she maintains is from God really is from him (see 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).<sup>14</sup>

#### 4

### **Does Mormonism claim to be the only true church on earth?**

Mormonism does not claim to be one part of the Christian religion, such as a Christian denomination (although outsiders often view it this way). Rather, it claims to constitute the *only* true Christian religion on earth. This is in harmony with the “first vision” of Joseph Smith, in which, as we saw, “Jesus” condemned all Christian religions as corrupt abominations. Doctrine and Covenants emphasizes that Mormonism is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”<sup>15</sup>

From its earliest days, Mormon teachings have asserted that Mormons were the only people of God on earth. In 1854, leading Mormon Orson Pratt argued, “All other churches are entirely destitute of all authority from God.” A leading doctrinal theologian of the modern Mormon Church, the late apostle Bruce McConkie, asserted that “Mormons...have the

only pure and perfect Christianity now on earth.” He also taught, “All other systems of religion are false.” The Mormon Sunday school text *The Master’s Church, Course A* informs children, “We cannot accept that any other church can lead its members to salvation.”<sup>16</sup>

## 5

### Is Mormonism a Christian religion?

Many people accept the Mormon faith as genuinely Christian. But when Christians view Mormons as believers, they have failed to understand Mormonism accurately. They have accepted Mormon claims without determining whether those claims are true.<sup>17</sup>

Virtually all knowledgeable Christian authorities recognize that not only is Mormonism not Christian, it is really anti-Christian. In his book *The Four Major Cults*, for many years a standard reference, Dr. Anthony Hoekema declared, “We must...assert, in the strongest possible terms, that Mormonism does not deserve to be called a Christian religion. It is basically anti-Christian and anti-biblical.”<sup>18</sup>

One of the leading modern authorities on comparative religions and cults, Dr. Walter Martin, asserted, “In no uncertain terms, the Bible condemns the teachings of the Mormon Church.” Former Mormons and leading experts on Mormonism, Jerald and Sandra Tanner,\* also affirm that “the Mormon Church is certainly not built on the teachings of the Bible.”<sup>19</sup>

If the teachings of Mormonism are biblical, then

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\* Jerald Tanner passed away in 2006. His materials and ministry, however, continue to provide crucial research on Mormonism from a Christian perspective at [www.utlm.org](http://www.utlm.org).

they deserve to be called Christian. But if Mormon teachings deny and oppose biblical teaching, then it is inaccurate for anyone to consider Mormonism a Christian religion.

## 6

### Does the Mormon Church give biblical words an entirely false meaning?

In this question, we will briefly illustrate how Mormon teachings contradict biblical teachings. We will do this by showing that when the Mormon Church uses a Christian term, it often changes the biblical definition of that term and substitutes a different, non-Christian definition in its place. This redefinition of words underscores the problem we face when discussing religious issues with Mormons. Unless Christians pursue the meaning of such words, and unless Mormons are candid in sharing their true Mormon definition, Christians and the public in general will continue to be confused over the religious beliefs of Mormonism.

Although Mormons themselves may not be aware of some of the definitions and descriptions cited below, they represent true Mormon teaching as proven by an evaluation of standard Mormon historical and theological works.<sup>20</sup> (Section two provides illustrations.)

- *Christianity*: sectarianism; a false and damnable apostate religion.
- *God*: “Elohim”; one of innumerable self-progressing bodily deities; formerly a man, a finite creature; now the principal deity of the earth. In early Mormon theology, Adam (of the garden

of Eden) was considered the true earth deity by many Mormons.<sup>21</sup>

- *Jesus Christ*: a self-progressing deity (“Jehovah” of the Old Testament) and the first spirit child of “Elohim” and his wife.
- *Holy Spirit*: a deified man with a spiritual body of matter.
- *Trinity*: a tritheistic (three-god) grouping of deities, coordinated under general Mormon polytheism. Thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are separate deities.
- *The Gospel*: Mormon salvation by works, leading to exaltation or godhood.
- *Born-again*: having undergone water baptism into Mormonism.
- *Immortality*: salvation by grace (the universal resurrection of all men).
- *Atonement*: the provision God has supplied for people to earn their own salvation “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (*Articles of Faith*, 3).
- *The Fall*: a spiritual step upward; a blessing permitting the production of physical bodies for pre-existent spirits to inhabit and thus have the possibility of attaining their own “exaltation,” or godhood.
- *True salvation/eternal life/redemption*: exaltation to godhood in the highest part of the celestial kingdom based upon individual good works

and personal merit in this life and during pre-existence. Exaltation incorporates ruling a new world and sexual procreation in order to produce spirit children who will eventually be embodied and inhabit that world, each then having the opportunity to be exalted, or deified.

- *Death*: in general, a step upward. Death represents the possibility of a form of salvation (if not exaltation) for those who have never heard of Mormonism.
- *Heaven*: three “kingdoms of glory” comprising various spiritual gradations.
- *Hell*: generally purgatorial; possibly eternal for a very few (primarily apostate Mormons).
- *Virgin birth*: the birth of Christ through a physical sex act between God the Father (the Mormon earth god “Elohim”) and Mary (hence, *not* a virgin birth).
- *Man*: a pre-existent spirit with the potential to earn godhood by obedience to Mormon dictates.
- *Creation*: the reorganization of eternal matter.
- *The Scriptures*: the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price, and the Bible “as far as it is translated correctly” (Articles of Faith, 8).
- *The Bible*: an erring and often unreliable inspired record, properly interpreted only by Mormons and only in light of Mormon theology.

For 2,000 years the Christian church has expressed



general agreement on the meanings of these terms. Yet the Mormon definitions and descriptions of them are anything but Christian. Why has the Mormon Church supplied distinctly different definitions to common Christian terms? Because it has not relied upon the Bible alone to formulate its views. It has depended upon novel revelations from other sources (see Section Four), and these revelations have forced a redefinition of terms. Once these revelations became the Church's standard scriptures, the doctrinal teachings of the Mormon Church were predetermined.

### Concerns about misrepresentation

Gordon Fraser, the author of four books on Mormonism, commented, "We object to Mormon missionaries posing as Christians, and our objections are based on the differences between what they are taught by their [Mormon] General Authorities and what the Bible teaches."<sup>22</sup>

This is why Mormonism cannot be considered Christian. Its new revelations deny the true meaning of biblical terms and offer non-Christian teachings in their place.

In our next section, we will contrast specific Mormon and Christian doctrines so readers can easily see the fundamental ways in which Mormonism differs from Christianity.