

Mormonism/Latter Day Saints

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Of all the groups that present themselves as Christian in the public square, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — popularly called the Mormon Church — has cultivated one of the most public faces. Clean living, strong families, weekly family nights, principled abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and many other modern indulgences, volunteerism, tithing, and a missionary presence on nearly every street in the developed world. Many a Christian family would do well to imitate their discipline. Behind the attractive face, however, lies a theological system that differs from Orthodox Christianity at nearly every decisive point — on the nature of God, on the Person of Christ, on the source of Scripture, on the means of salvation, and on the destiny of the human soul. The servant must be able to recognize Mormonism not as an eccentric variety of Christianity but as a distinct religious system, and to speak about it with truthful charity. This lesson sets out the history, the sources, the beliefs, and the Christian response, so that the servant can guard his flock without slandering his neighbor.

The Appeal and the Task

A young Orthodox mother meets a pair of Mormon missionaries at her door. They are polite, well-dressed, clean-cut, and articulate about Christ. They invite her to study the Book of Mormon. Her instinct, trained in a culture that mistakes civility for doctrinal agreement, may be to think of these young men as fellow Christians of a slightly different flavor. The servant's task is to help her see that the difference is larger than flavor.

The proper response to Mormonism is neither mockery nor paranoia. We do not caricature. We do not demonize. Neither do we soften what the Mormon Church actually teaches in order to be sociable. What we do is set Mormon doctrine against the apostolic faith, clearly and honestly, so that the faithful are not carried away by the attractive packaging of something fundamentally other.

It is worth noting at the outset that many Mormons sincerely believe themselves to be Christians, and the Church of Latter-day Saints has, in recent decades, emphasized its commitment to Jesus Christ in its public identity. The measure of whether a group is Christian, however, is not whether it uses Christ's name but whether it confesses the apostolic faith about Him. By that measure, Mormonism is not Christian.

History: Joseph Smith and the Founding

Mormonism was founded in the early nineteenth century in upstate New York by Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844). Smith claimed, at the age of fourteen, to have been visited in a vision by "two personages" whom he identified as God the Father and Jesus Christ. According to his account, these beings informed him that all existing Christian denominations were "wrong and corrupt" and that he had been chosen to restore the true Gospel.

Three years later, Smith reported a second supernatural experience. An angel named Moroni, he said, led him to a set of golden plates buried in a hill near his home, inscribed in "reformed Egyptian." Smith claimed to translate these plates, producing the Book of Mormon. On completion of the translation, Moroni reportedly took the plates away. No plates have ever been produced for independent examination, and no language called "reformed Egyptian" is known to the linguistic and archaeological professions.

Smith continued to receive what he called revelations throughout his life, guiding his growing community westward from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and finally Illinois. In 1844, Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, during a period of violent controversy over his practices, particularly polygamy. Leadership of the movement then passed to Brigham Young, who led the community to the Utah Territory in 1847 and there exercised a theocratic authority while publicly defending polygamy as a commandment of God. Polygamy was officially abandoned by the LDS Church in 1890 under United States federal pressure, a matter we shall return to under the doctrine of "continuous revelation."

The Four Sources of Mormon Scripture

The LDS canon rests on four texts: the Bible (accepted "insofar as it is correctly translated" — the Eighth Article of Faith); the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants; and the Pearl of Great Price. The phrase "insofar as it is correctly translated" effectively subordinates the Bible to the three later texts: wherever the Bible conflicts with them, Mormon theology judges the Bible to be mistranslated. This inverts the classical Christian doctrine of Scripture as the supreme written witness.

The Book of Mormon purports to narrate the history of two ancient civilizations, the Nephites and the Lamanites, who are said to have migrated from the Middle East to the Americas around 600 B.C. and to have received visits from the risen Christ before dying out in a great battle. More than two centuries after Smith's translation, there remains no archaeological, linguistic, genetic, or textual evidence to support the existence of these peoples as he described them, their script, or the golden plates from which the book is said to have come. The faith rests on the testimony of one man.

The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of revelations Smith claimed to receive, introducing the most distinctive Mormon doctrines: a plurality of gods, God as an exalted man, the capacity of human beings to become gods, three degrees of heaven, polygamy, eternal progression, and baptism for the dead. Also included are prophecies that did not come to pass — a fact which, by the plain rule of Deuteronomy 18:22 ("when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously"), marks their author as a false prophet.

The Pearl of Great Price includes the Book of Abraham, which Smith claimed to have translated from Egyptian papyri he purchased. The papyri were thought to have been lost in the 1871 Chicago Fire, but portions were rediscovered in 1966. Both Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists have since examined them and determined that they are standard Egyptian funerary texts — instructions for

mummification — not the writings of the patriarch Abraham. The discovery has been an abiding embarrassment for the claim that Smith could translate unknown ancient languages.

The Mormon Doctrine of God

Here the decisive break with Christianity becomes unmistakable. Mormonism is not monotheistic. It teaches a plurality of gods. In the words of Joseph Smith himself: "I will preach on the plurality of Gods. I have always declared God to be a distinct personage. The Lord Jesus Christ is a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and the Holy Ghost is a distinct personage and a Spirit. And these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." This is not the Christian Trinity. This is tritheism at best, and the Mormon doctrine goes further.

The Mormon God the Father is not eternal in the Christian sense. He was once a man living on another planet, who progressed through good works and obedience to divine laws until he attained godhood. He has a wife, a "Heavenly Mother." Together they begot countless spirit children in a pre-mortal existence. The first and greatest of these spirit children was Jesus. The second was Lucifer. All other human beings were also their spirit children, and all are therefore literal "spirit brothers and sisters" of Jesus and of Satan alike.

Beyond this God the Father stands another god who made him; beyond that, another; and so on without end. The Mormon cosmos is a spiritual pyramid scheme. Each god was once a man on a previous world. Each faithful Mormon man may, with sufficient obedience, attain his own godhood in a future universe — the doctrine called "eternal progression" or "exaltation." Lorenzo Snow, the fifth LDS president, summarized it in the couplet Mormons have long known by heart: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become."

Against this the Church confesses the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). We confess the eternal God who was not made, who has never been other than God, and who alone is God: "I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). There is no hidden council of gods above Him. There is no earlier god who made Him. The Christian God is not a man who made good; He is God eternally, and by His grace we are made His children, not His fellow gods.

The Mormon Jesus

Because Mormon theology denies the historic doctrine of God, it also denies the historic doctrine of Christ. The Mormon Jesus is not the eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father, begotten of the Father before all worlds. He is one of the Heavenly Father's countless spirit children, the eldest brother of humanity, and the spirit brother of Lucifer.

The Mormon account of the Lord's conception is gravely offensive to Christian reverence. Mormon teaching holds that Jesus was conceived through literal sexual relations between the Heavenly Father, who has a body of flesh and bone, and the Virgin Mary. This contradicts the Gospel's own witness: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that

Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The Incarnation is a miracle; Mormon doctrine reduces it to biology.

In the classical apostolic faith, the Son of God is eternally God, "true God of true God, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father" (as the Nicene Creed confesses). He took flesh by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary. He lived without sin, died for our sins, rose bodily, and reigns. He is not a created being, not a spirit brother of Lucifer, not the elder child of a mother goddess. The Mormon Christ and the Christian Christ share a name. They do not share an identity.

The Mormon Doctrine of Salvation

Mormonism teaches that Christ's atonement secured general immortality for all human beings — everyone will be resurrected — but not personal salvation. Salvation from sin and exaltation to godhood must be earned. The requirements are faith in the Mormon Christ, repentance of all sins, baptism by immersion in the LDS Church, reception of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands of an LDS priesthood holder, and ongoing obedience to the commandments of the Mormon Church, including tithing, temple ordinances, celestial marriage, and continuing good works.

Three "degrees of glory" await the dead.

- The Celestial Kingdom is the highest — reserved for faithful Mormons who have received all temple ordinances and overcome sin in this life. These become gods on their own worlds in eternity.
- The Terrestrial Kingdom is intermediate — for good-hearted people, including non-Mormon Christians, who have lived decently without the fullness of Mormon teaching.
- The Telestial Kingdom is the lowest — for the wicked. Only a very small number — "sons of perdition," who have committed the unpardonable sin — go to hell in the traditional sense.

Against this scheme the apostolic Gospel is plain. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Christian is not saved by his performance of religious ordinances in a system designed to produce gods. He is saved by the once-for-all sacrifice of the Son of God on the Cross, received in faith, sealed in baptism, nourished by the Eucharist, lived out in repentance and love. The end of the Christian hope is not to become a god on a future world. It is to behold God and to be made like Him by participation in His life — a far greater gift than the private divinity Mormonism offers.

Baptism for the Dead and Continuing Revelation

Two further Mormon doctrines require attention because they touch many ordinary Christian families.

The first is baptism for the dead. Mormons baptize living persons as proxies for deceased persons, including non-Mormon ancestors, in the belief that the dead can accept the Gospel in the afterlife if a living Mormon has been baptized on their behalf. This practice — carried out on an industrial scale in Mormon temples — has distressed many Jewish, Catholic, and Orthodox families whose deceased relatives have been posthumously "baptized" without consent. The single verse Mormons appeal to, 1 Corinthians 15:29, is addressed polemically in a passage about the resurrection and is not a command;

the practice it refers to (obscure even to New Testament scholars) is never commended, explained, or established as a Christian ordinance anywhere in the Scriptures or the Fathers.

The second is the doctrine of continuing revelation. The living LDS president is said to be a prophet who may receive new revelations that supersede any previous revelation, including the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or any other text. This doctrine is the mechanism by which Mormon teaching has been modified over time, sometimes dramatically — most publicly in 1890, when polygamy was abandoned under federal pressure, and in 1978, when Black men were at last admitted to the priesthood after more than a century of explicit racial exclusion taught by Brigham Young and others in the most emphatic terms. Before 1978, Mormon teaching held that persons of African descent bore "the mark of Cain"; after 1978, God was said to have changed His mind. This is not what Christians mean by revelation. The God of Scripture does not evolve. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). A prophet whose prophecies fail and whose doctrines are reversed by later prophets has, by Scripture's own test, failed the test.

The Apostolic Answer, Point by Point

The servant should be able to set the two systems side by side without hesitation.

Element of Faith	Historic Christianity	Mormonism
Supreme Being	One eternal God, Creator of all, existing as Trinity — Father, Son, Holy Spirit (Genesis 1; Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19).	The Heavenly Father is an exalted man with a physical body of flesh and bone, who was once a man in a pre-existence.
Jesus Christ	The eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, perfect God and perfect Man (John 1:1-14).	The first-begotten spirit child of the Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother; spirit brother of Lucifer; conceived physically by the Father and Mary.
Work of Christ	The sinless Son offered Himself on the Cross for the sins of humanity; rose bodily; reigns at the Father's right hand (John 3:16).	His death guarantees universal resurrection; exaltation requires personal works, temple ordinances, and obedience. Suffered chiefly in Gethsemane.
Sources of Authority	The Old and New Testaments, interpreted within the apostolic Tradition guarded by the Church (2 Timothy 3:16-17).	The Bible as correctly translated; the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants; the Pearl of Great Price; revelations of the current LDS prophet.

Humanity	Made in the image of God, distinct from God, fallen in Adam, to be restored in Christ (Genesis 1:26-28; Romans 3:23).	Pre-existent spirit children of the Heavenly Parents; gods in embryo; each person responsible for personal sin, not inheriting Adam's guilt.
Salvation	Restoration to communion with God by grace through faith, sealed in baptism, lived in repentance and love (Ephesians 2:8-9).	Exaltation to godhood through faith in Christ, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands, temple ordinances, celestial marriage, tithing, and continuing works.
Life After Death	Eternal communion with God (heaven) or eternal separation from God (hell) (Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 20-22).	Three degrees of glory (Celestial, Terrestrial, Telestial); only the worst are consigned to outer darkness with Satan.

The table lays bare what the pleasant missionaries at the door do not always say quickly. The differences are not cosmetic; they reach to the nature of God and the meaning of salvation.

Mormonism presents itself with a Christian vocabulary and a clean public face, but its theological substance diverges from historic Christianity at every decisive point. It denies the eternity of God by teaching that He was once a man. It denies the monotheism of Scripture by teaching a plurality of gods. It denies the unique divinity of Christ by making Him a created spirit brother of Lucifer. It denies the sufficiency of Scripture by introducing three additional books of contested origin. It denies the sufficiency of the Cross by requiring a program of temple ordinances and obedience for exaltation. It denies the unchangeableness of God by teaching a continuing revelation that has reversed prior revelations.

The servant owes Mormons honesty about what they actually teach, charity in every personal encounter, and clarity in the pulpit and in the catechism classroom. He does not accept the premise that Mormonism is simply another branch of Christianity. It is a new religion that uses Christian names. The faithful must be taught the difference.

The positive task is greater than the negative one. We do not want merely to keep our people out of the Mormon Church; we want to form them so deeply in the true faith that no alternative proves sustainable. The Orthodox parish that teaches, worships, prays, loves, and lives the apostolic Gospel is the answer — to Mormonism and to every other system that offers a partial good at the price of the whole truth.



Review Questions

1. Who founded the Church of Latter Day Saints? (A: Joseph Smith)

2. What texts do they follow? (A: The Book of Mormon, the Bible, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price)
3. Where did God come from? (A: He was created by another god.)
4. How are Jesus and Lucifer related? (A: They are brothers and the first spirit children of the father god and his goddess wife)
5. What is continuous revelation? (A: The current prophet can receive new revelations from God that contradict previous revelations.)
6. What are their two types of worship. (A: Chapel worship and Temple worship)
7. Where did the Book of Mormon come from? (A: Golden tablets buried near Joseph Smith's house.)
8. How was Jesus born according to Mormons? (A: The father god had sexual relations with St. Mary.)
9. What is Jesus' role in salvation? (A: He had to die in order for all humans to be resurrected, but this is not sufficient for personal salvation)
10. Why do we not consider Mormons to be Christians? (A: They are polytheistic, they do not believe in the Trinity, they believe Jesus was created)