

Mormonism, a frequent term for the Latter Day Saint (LDS) movement and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, is a restorationist movement claiming to be the truth of Christianity restored after a period of apostasy. In reality, the religion is not truly Christian, although Mormons claim to follow Jesus Christ. Mormon beliefs lead to the ultimate goal of godship and eternal rule as divine beings.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Founded by Joseph Smith in 1830, Mormonism traces its roots to the state of New York where Smith claimed to have found a chest of “golden plates” given to him by the angel Moroni. While only a handful of people ever claimed to have seen the plates, Smith translated the golden plates into the Book of Mormon.

Already known as a curious and quirky treasure-hunter, Smith gained even more widespread notoriety as a result of his alleged find of the golden plates. He gathered around himself a following of religious adherents who accepted his message that he was forming the true Christian church based on special revelation. Smith was viewed as a true prophet of the church.

Smith told of a vision he had received telling him to form a utopian settlement in Independence, Missouri. Smith led his followers to Missouri where they ended up facing stiff persecution. The governor of Missouri even signed an executive order commanding the extermination of the Mormons.

After an attempt to defend themselves against such violence, the Mormons fled to Illinois and with the help of then-congressman Abraham Lincoln incorporated the town of Nauvoo, where the Mormons enjoyed relative peace for several years.

In 1844 an anti-Mormon newspaper was published in Nauvoo. The publisher printed only one edition before the press was destroyed by order of Smith and the city council. This action stirred up anti-Mormon sentiment in the surrounding region and eventually led to the arrest of Smith and several other Mormon leaders.

While in custody, the State of Illinois transported Smith and the other prisoners to the nearby town of Carthage. The governor himself had promised safe passage. However, once they were in the Carthage jail the governor allowed an armed mob to enter the jail. The mob quickly murdered Smith and the other prisoners.

A succession crisis ensued. Who would lead the now demoralized Mormon settlers? Brigham Young emerged as the group’s leader and soon led them out west to avoid the growing persecution in the Midwest. The Mormons settled in the Salt Lake basin in the territory of Utah and have thrived there ever since, particularly after they disavowed the teaching of polygamy in 1890.

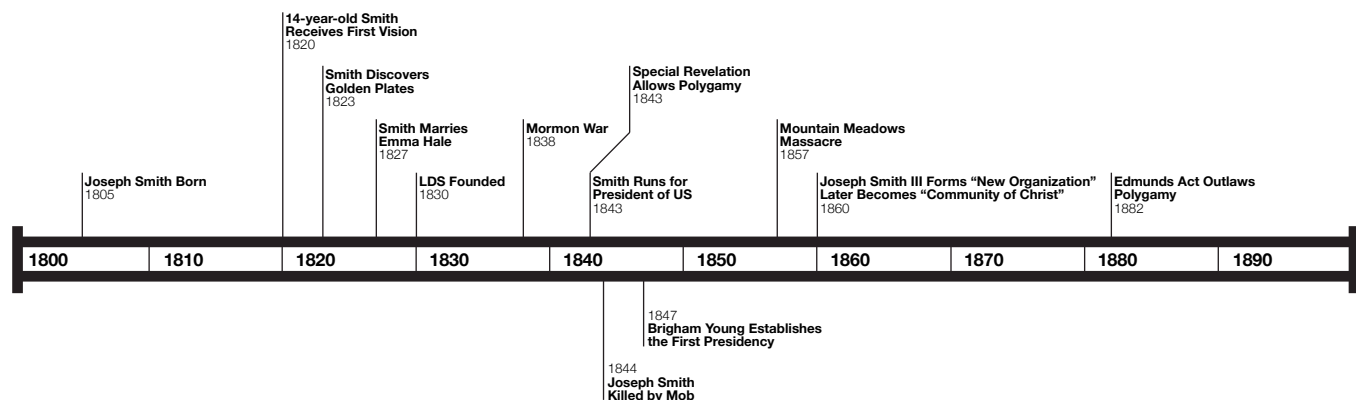
Today the church reports just over 13 million members on its official rolls.

BASIC TENETS AND BELIEFS

The **ultimate goal** of Mormonism is godhood. The state of being a god is described by synonymous terms: exaltation, having eternal life, having an eternal family. While Mormons often downplay this teaching, it is very much a part of the official dogma of the church and is frequently mentioned by church leaders and teachers.

Still, not all Mormons understand that their church teaches this. Some do not realize “having an eternal family” means becoming a god since Mormon doctrine requires godhood to have an “eternal family.”

This doctrine of godhood is explained in one of Mormonism’s canonical scriptures, *Doctrine and Covenants*:



They shall be gods, because they have no end; therefore they shall be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.

The family unit is central to this process of becoming gods. For this reason the family unit is very important to Mormons. In fact, Mormons believe in “spirit children,” which are children procreated for all eternity. It is the function of gods and future gods to produce spirit children who can then populate planets and themselves become gods. Mormons would say that we ourselves are God’s spirit children.

The **intermediate goal** of Mormonism is perfection. Basing their teaching on Matthew 5:48, one of the goals of the LDS church is to “perfect the saints.” Where the teaching of godhood is confusing, this concept is crystal clear to Mormons. The pursuit of perfection is central in their lives. But they don’t limit it to their own lives either. Mormons allow for many “eternities” to pass before they gain perfection.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE PLAN OF SALVATION

Mormonism presents an exotic chronology of how they view the process of reaching exaltation.

Mormons believe that all beings are procreated in “pre-existence” during which time they grow and mature and achieve a great deal of the progress toward exaltation.

At their mortal birth this spirit child has his memory of pre-existence wiped away forever. Mormons believe that this period of mortality is the most opportune time to advance toward godhood by doing temple ordinances such as baptism for the dead, endowment, and eternal marriage. Mormons spend their entire lives seeking to prove their worthiness for exaltation.

When people die, Mormons teach that adherents to Mormonism enter spiritual paradise while non-Mormons enter spiritual prison. People from the spiritual paradise do mission work in the spiritual prison to convert spirits to Mormonism. Those converted spirits may enter paradise when they are vicariously baptized by someone currently living. This is the reason for the zealous baptism of the dead that Mormons perform so diligently.

When the judgment comes and Jesus returns people are raised from the dead. Jesus then assigns everyone to one of three kingdoms based on their worthiness. Those worthy of exaltation enter the celestial kingdom where they become gods. Those who were almost worthy for exaltation still enter the celestial kingdom but act as ministering servants for the gods at their planets. Most moral non-Mormons and “less than valiant” Mormons enter the terrestrial kingdom. Virtually all the rest enter the telestial kingdom. Although the telestial kingdom is the lowest kingdom it is still considered to be far better than this earth. Outer darkness is reserved for those who rejected Mormonism and Lucifer. Most Mor-

mons believe there will be fewer than ten beings in outer darkness. While one might think there is little incentive to strive for exaltation since even the lowest post-mortal kingdom is so wonderful, in practice virtually all Mormons view their religion as “exaltation or bust.”

BASIC THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Mormons don’t view sin all that seriously. While there are actions they would call sin, they feel it takes a great deal of malice to actually sin. Instead they refer to things like “mistakes, errors, lapses in judgment.” For example, striking someone is not always considered a sin in Mormonism.

Mormons also view the Adam’s fall into sin as a positive event. To the Mormon mind, being “mortal” is equal with being able to procreate. Adam gained from the fall not only because he gained a mortal body (necessary for the process of becoming a god) but also the ability to procreate (necessary to become a god and helpful to bodiless spirit children).

Most notable, however, is the Mormon view of Jesus. Mormons will point out with great vehemence that they truly revere and honor Jesus as God and Savior. They are, after all, the Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-Day Saints. But, they are in fact unchristian and anti-trinitarian, which separates them from even the most universal tenets of Christianity.

Mormons view Jesus’ work as gaining salvation, but by salvation Mormons mean the ability for us to be resurrected and continue our path to godhood. Mormons call Jesus “Jehovah” and claim to recognize his divinity, however, Jehovah they separate from “Elohim,” the name of the Father. Furthermore, they view the Holy Spirit as a god but without a body (a curious contradiction of their dogma about godhood requiring a body). Mormons are not Trinitarian.

Mormons view Jesus as a spirit child of the father, physically conceived by an actual sexual act between the physical, bodily Father and the virgin Mary.

In short, Jesus is a facilitator toward godhood. But he is a crucial part of the plan for all Mormons.

All other religious concepts familiar to us like grace, justification, faith, etc. are used in the Mormon vocabulary. However, instead of presenting a gift of salvation from God they represent to the Mormon mind the parts of their work-oriented plan of salvation. See the glossary on the back page for more information.

THE MORMON SCRIPTURES

There are actually four authoritative scriptures in the Latter-Day Saint church.

First is the **Bible** as we know it today. However, Mormons consider the Bible to be their least reliable source since they assume much of the content of the Bible has been lost over the ages.

Second is the **Book of Mormon** which Joseph Smith translated from the golden plates he claimed were given to him by the Angel Moroni. Actually the Book of Mormon is viewed by Mormons in much the same way they view the Bible. It is considered a little old and outdated, and it doesn't contain much Mormon doctrine. Many Mormons are unfamiliar with it and cannot find their way around the book. Mormons, however, truly believe it is "another testament of Jesus Christ." The main purpose then is to introduce people to the concept of religious authority outside of sacred texts.

The third book is **Doctrine and Covenants (D&C)** which is a series of revelations allegedly given directly by God. Almost all of them were recorded by Joseph Smith, while several are from later presidents of the church. The early revelations deal mainly with matters important to the lives of the Mormon settlers. As time progressed Smith used revelations to introduce teachings and solidify the doctrine of the church he was founding. The book is very obviously of human origin, but it is highly revered by Mormons everywhere.

The final and smallest book is **The Pearl of Great Price** which is so small (about 60 pages) that publishers usually print it with D&C. The Pearl of Great Price is a series of short accounts written by Joseph Smith. It includes a rewritten account of the creation and fall, other revised Biblical history, and a brief history of the LDS church of Smith's time.

CONTINUAL REVELATION

Essential to Mormonism is the belief in continual revelation. Mormons believe God continues to reveal things to them that were not known before.

Mormons have a two-tiered priesthood system to which most male Mormons belong. Mormons believe that being a priest allows you to communicate directly with God. Many Mormon publications are filled with stories of visions and revelations from the readers.

The most important part of continuous revelation in the Mormon system is the "Living Prophet." Mormons hold that at all times God will provide a living prophet to tell them what God is thinking. This living prophet is to be honored and trusted more than "dead" prophets. It is because of this living prophet system that the dogma of the Mormon church can sometimes change dramatically. However, this does not cause Mormons any real concern since they are taught that the system is perfectly acceptable.

One now-shunned statement from an LDS publication in 1945 sums it up nicely:

When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done.

Mormons actually have a sense of pity on Biblical Christians who do not have the benefit of continuous revelation.

In addition to these sources of authority, Mormons also place a heavy emphasis on feelings as a guide to conduct.

SUMMARY

While Mormons claim to be Christians, Mormonism is actually very anti-Christian. The religion represents a bizarre mix of Christian terms and teaching and the "revelations" of an eccentric and unusual American citizen heavily influenced by the superstitions and fads of his time.

Many Mormons suffer under the stress of this religious system. The drive to attain perfection and godhood can drive many to the brink. However, witnessing to Mormons presents unique challenges since the system itself is so hard to pin down. Knowing more about Mormons will certainly aid your witness to them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What images come to mind when you think of Mormons? Relate an encounter with a Mormon.
2. What factors do you think led to so many people following Smith's exotic teachings so early on?
3. Why do you think Mormons try to downplay the godhood doctrine publicly?
4. Why do you think Mormons had an inclination toward polygamy?
5. Would we re-baptize someone who had been baptized a Mormon?
6. What is especially challenging about the concept of continual revelation?
7. Why do you think Mormons downplay sin so much in their official doctrine?
8. How does the Mormon view of God, the Trinity, and Jesus exclude them from true salvation?
9. Based on what you've learned about Mormon teachings, what do you think would be some effective ways to reach out to Mormons?

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Exaltation

Mormonism's ultimate goal. It includes becoming a god and having an eternal family.

Eternal Life

Not living with God but living as God; synonymous with exaltation.

Eternal Family

The continuation of the family unit in eternity and the ability to procreate spirit children for all eternity. Only those who attain godhood will have eternal families.

God

An exalted man who is married and procreating spirit children.

Perfection

The intermediate goal constantly set before Mormons that enables them to attain godhood.

Eternal Progression

The idea that persons, throughout all eternity, progress toward godhood.

Agency

The LDS belief that persons have the innate free will to choose the right.

Spirit Children

Mormons teach that everyone was procreated by Heavenly Father in preexistence.

Gospel

Mormonism, the LDS plan of salvation.

Worthiness

A key word in the daily practice of Mormonism. Mormons become worthy by obeying LDS laws and authorities.

Temple Work

"Sacred work" done by worthy Mormons inside the temple. Most often refers to their work for the dead.

Vicarious Work

The temple work done for the dead.

Endowment

The temple ceremony that serves as their formal introduction to the temple. During this ceremony they receive their sacred undergarments, their new name, and learn the secret handshakes that are essential for exaltation.

Baptism for the Dead

Mormons believe that the living can be baptized for the dead. This can be done only in the temple.

Eternal Marriage

Being married in the temple. Also called celestial marriage or sealing, it is essential for exaltation.

Spirit World

The place where spirits go after death. LDS spirits go to paradise; the spirits of non-Mormons go to the spirit prison. LDS spirits do missionary work among those in spirit prison.

Damnation

Being stopped in your progression to godhood. It does not mean going to hell.

Hell

- 1) The temporary punishment some suffer in spirit prison and*
- 2) The regret people in the telestial kingdom will experience.*

Mortal

Mormons claim that mortality includes having the ability to bear children.

Adam's Fall

Mormonism views it as a positive event because it made man mortal.

Sin

Mormons downplay sin. They see sin mainly in things that hurt them rather than anger God.

Five Major Sins of Mormonism

Apostasy, murder, sexual immorality, breaking the Word of Wisdom, refusal to bear children.

Atonement

Mormonism limits it to Jesus' overcoming physical death for mankind. LDS redemption is synonymous with it.

Salvation

In Mormonism it is equivalent to physical resurrection. This is why Mormons can say Jesus saved them without any work on their part.

Grace

In Mormonism, not an attribute of God but a power of God placed within people.

Repentance

In Mormonism it means improving your life by abandoning the sin in your life.

Faith

Mormons place their complete and total faith in a work-oriented plan of salvation.

Justification

Not God's loving verdict of "not guilty" but rather his strict accounting of merits and demerits.

Book of Mormon

The supposed history of three ancient people in the Americas. It does not contain many unique LDS beliefs.

Doctrine and Covenants

A book containing "revelations" given mostly to Joseph Smith. It contains more LDS doctrine than the other three standard works combined.

Pearl of Great Price

A collection of five short works. Unfamiliar to most Mormons.

General Authorities

Title for the leaders of the international church. They consist of the Presidency of the Church, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the first and second quorums of the Seventies, and the Presiding Bishop. They are also called the Brethren.

Living Prophet

The president of the church. They believe his words take precedence even over written scriptures

Revelation through Feelings

Feelings, not facts, are important to Mormons. One of the greatest things that can happen to them is to get a "burning in the bosom."