Mormonism: An Overview

As the official version of the story goes, in 1820, 14-year-old Joseph Smith, Jr., had a vision in which God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him. Caught up in the Protestant revivalism of his day, Smith inquired as to which of the Christian denominations he should join. None of them, he was told, because they were all "wrong and corrupt." Rather, God would use Smith to reinstate the true church, which had been in apostasy since the death of the apostles.

Thus began the saga of the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints, or Mormons, which today is the largest and fastest-growing cult (form of counterfeit Christianity) in the world, increasing at an average rate of 300,000 converts a year – as many as 75 percent of whom may be former Protestants, according to author Fritz Ridenour (*So What's the Difference: A Look at 20 Worldviews, Faiths and Religions and How They Compare to Christianity*, p. 130).

Today the LDS Church, headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, boasts roughly 13 million members in more than 160 countries; about 6 million members reside in the United States. In addition, the church has more than 50,000 missionaries who spread the Mormon message around the world. Its current leader is Thomas S. Monson, 80, who, like founder Joseph Smith and subsequent presidents, is considered the church's "prophet, seer, and revelator."

The LDS Church initially stood in defiance of historical Christianity, claiming that after the death of the apostles the Christian church fell into "the great apostasy." Joseph Smith taught that he alone was called to restore the true church and that the revelations God have him – particularly as recorded in The *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price* – would guide the church back to its historic foundation. In recent years, however, the LDS Church has minimized, refuted or re-interpreted many earlier teachings of its leaders – such as polygamy, the multiple marriages of Jesus, and the curse of African Americans – and has launched a concerted effort to promote Mormonism as mainstream Christianity. This leads some to ask legitimately whether the LDS Church can have it both ways. Either Mormonism is true and all other forms of Christianity are false, or the LDS Church is not really needed, since historic Christianity is true after all, despite Joseph Smith's claims to the contrary.

Mormon leaders are exceptionally vague in their official statements about what the LDS church really believes. A visit to the church's official Web sites (www.lds.org and www.mormon.org) will frustrate any sincere inquirer who wants to know what Mormons really believe about the nature and character of God, the Trinity, the atonement, and man's potential for godhood. Of course, Web surfers can always click on the link for a free *Book of Mormon* and have Mormon missionaries deliver a copy personally to their door, although the answers these missionaries give likely will be as vague as those provided by their leaders.

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A Brief History

After Joseph Smith's initial visit from Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ in 1820, he allegedly saw the angel Moroni appear at his bedside in 1823 and tell him of golden plates on which was inscribed a record of the ancient American people. During his earthly life, Moroni had been a great warrior who lived among the Nephite people, descendents of Jews who fled Israel for North America around 600 B.C. Moroni's father, Mormon, commander in chief of the Nephites, had given the golden plates to his son, who added a few words of his own before hiding the plates in Hill Cumorah near Palmyra, New York. These plates featured "the fullness of the everlasting gospel." In 1827, after further visits from Moroni, Smith dug up the plates and began translating the "Reformed Egyptian" with the assistance of two special stones called "Urim" and "Thummim." The result was the *Book of Mormon*. By 1830 the book was published and Smith founded the "Church of Christ" (not affiliated with the Church of Christ denomination) with five of his followers.

From 1831 to 1844, Smith gained converts and established strongholds in Ohio, Missouri and Illinois. Wherever they went, Mormons attracted curiosity and even hostility, either because non-Mormons did not trust Smith or were suspicious of Mormon beliefs and practices. During this time, Smith continued to receive revelations. In 1835 he released *Doctrine and Covenants*, which would become "inspired Scripture" along with the *Book of Mormon*. By 1838 the Mormons had been driven from Missouri to Illinois, where they converted a swampy area on the banks of the Mississippi River into a thriving community called Nauvoo. It was here that Smith claimed to receive revelations concerning the Godhead, the origin and destiny of the human race, eternal progression, baptism for the dead, polygamy and other unique doctrines. The fourth "standard work" of Mormonism (after the King James Version of the Bible, the *Book of Mormon*, and *Doctrine and Covenants*), the *Pearl of Great Price*, was first compiled and published in 1851 and incorporated into the LDS canon in 1880.

Tensions in Nauvoo arose between Mormons and non-Mormons and came to a head when the local paper, the *Expositor*, published stories exposing the LDS practice of polygamy. Smith, who had risen to power as mayor of Nauvoo and "lieutenant general" of the 4,000-man Nauvoo legion, ordered the paper destroyed. For this, he was arrested and jailed in Carthage, Illinois. While awaiting trial, a mob of 200 attacked the jail and a gunfight ensued. Smith, using a six-shooter that had been smuggled into the jail, killed at least two attackers before he succumbed to gunshot wounds.

Following Smith's death, Brigham Young emerged as successor and led a large number of Mormons west, where they settled in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. Today, Salt Lake City is home to the LDS Church. But all LDS members did not follow Young west. Smith's widow, Emma, stayed behind in Illinois. Those who affirmed her son, Joseph Smith III, as the true successor helped found the "Reorganized Church," now called the Community of Christ and headquartered in Independence, Missouri.

Four Standard Works

Mormons recognize four written volumes as inspired and authoritative:

- The *King James Version of the Bible* – "as far as it is translated correctly." This caveat enables Mormons to question the Bible's veracity and authority. Joseph Smith made more than 600 "corrections" to its text. According to the *Book of Mormon*, the Bible is missing "plain and precious parts" (1 Nephi 13:26), which the other three standard volumes complete.
- The *Book of Mormon*, also called "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." According to one of the church's official Web sites (www.mormon.org), "By the power of God, Joseph Smith translated this book from an ancient record written on gold plates. The Book of Mormon is 'a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains, as does the Bible, the fullness of the everlasting gospel.'"
- *Doctrine and Covenants.* This volume features 138 revelations given to Mormon prophets, along with two "declarations." Here, much of Mormon doctrine may be found, including teachings on the priesthood, baptism for the dead, exaltation (or godhood), and polygamy.
- *Pearl of Great Price*, which contains Smith's religious history, the Articles of Faith, the Book of Abraham, and the Book of Moses.

Basic Mormon Beliefs

"The first difference to grasp between the Mormon Church and biblical Christianity is one of semantics," writes Fritz Ridenour in *So What's the Difference?* "The Mormons use but have redefined many key terms employed by evangelical Christians – a definitive sign of a cult. Analysis of Mormon views, past and present, reveals that they dismiss, twist, change or add to all biblical doctrines, particularly revelation, the Trinity and salvation by grace alone through faith alone" (p. 131).

Here is a glimpse of several key doctrines of the Mormon Church:

One true church. Joseph Smith declared that all Christian denominations were false and apostate. Mormons teach that after the death of the apostles, all churches became heretical and no true saints existed until the LDS Church was established. Full salvation and "exaltation" (godhood) is found only in the LDS Church.

LDS president as living prophet, seer and revelator. Joseph Smith and his successors are considered the sole spokesmen and revelators of God through whom God's will is made known to the church. These revelations are considered authoritative, although some early revelations have been superseded by more recent ones; others are minimized by the church today; and still others, such as Smith's prophecy that the temple would be built in Independence, Missouri, in his lifetime, have not been fulfilled.

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Mormon scripture. Mormons accept "four standard works" – The King James Version of the Bible ("as far as it is translated correctly"); the *Book of Mormon*; *Doctrine and Covenants*; and *Pearl of Great Price*. In addition, LDS presidents may receive new revelations from God, and these become scripture.

God as an exalted man. Elohim, or Heavenly Father, is the god of this world. He was a man in prior existence, but by keeping the requirements of Mormonism, he was exalted to godhood and inherited his own universe. There are an infinite number of gods with their own worlds; these gods, too, once were men. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct Gods. The Father and Son have bodies of flesh and bone; the Holy Ghost is a "personage of spirit."

Jesus is God's "Son." Jesus (also called Jehovah) was Elohim's firstborn spirit child in heaven. (Lucifer also was a spirit child, but his plan of redemption was rejected in favor of Jesus' superior plan.) Jesus was begotten by God through Mary in a "literal, full and complete sense" (Bruce McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, p. 67). Principally in the Garden of Gethsemane (and not on the cross), Jesus atoned for Adam's sin and guaranteed all people resurrection and immortality (salvation). Jesus visited the Israelites (ancestors of Native Americans) after his resurrection and established the true church among them. We are the spiritual younger brothers and sisters of Christ. Jesus was married at Cana in Galilee (John 2); in fact, He had numerous wives and fathered many children Himself.

Humans are gods in embryo. Every person has the potential to become a god by keeping the requirements of Mormonism. A key phrase in Mormonism is, "As man is god once was, as god is man become." From a prior spirit existence in heaven, people may be born on earth in order to exercise freedom to choose good or evil and to have a body for the resurrection. By obeying Mormon teachings and performing required duties, worthy Mormon males may pass the celestial guards, bring their wives with them, and achieve a status similar to Elohim. In the resurrection, faithful Mormons receive exaltation (godhood) and will have authority over their own world.

Salvation by works. When Mormons say people are "saved" by grace through faith, they mean "resurrection." In this sense, virtually all people will be saved. To achieve the highest tier of the highest level of heaven, Mormons must exercise faith in the god of Mormonism, in Christ, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; exercise repentance; and be baptized in the LDS Church. Additionally, they must keep the "Word of Wisdom" by abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine; tithe to the church; attend weekly meetings; support the Mormon prophet; do temple works; and be active in their support of the church. "Full salvation" or "exaltation" (godhood) is only available through the LDS Church.

Eternal progression. All people, as well as all gods, have existed eternally. There are four stages in "eternal progression" through which people may pass: 1) eternally existing intelligence; 2) pre-mortal spirit; 3) mortal probation; 4) resurrection and eternal life in one of six places: outer darkness; the telestial kingdom (lowest level of heaven); the terrestrial kingdom (next-highest level of heaven); or the celestial kingdom, consisting of three levels, the highest of which is exaltation/godhood.

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