

What Do Mormons Really Believe?

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[The Confusion Caused by Mormonism](#)

In Newsweek's September 10, 2001 cover story on the Mormon church, Kenneth L. Woodward wrote that "The church now insists that it be regarded as a Christian church, albeit one with doctrines about God, salvation, and the priesthood that differ radically from traditional Christianity... [Further] Mormon rhetoric is becoming more overtly evangelical."

The insistence of the Mormon church that it be viewed by the world as a Christian church, despite doctrines that deny basic Christianity, is the subject matter of this book. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—otherwise known as Mormons—strongly emphasize that they are authentic, sincere believers in the complete divine authority of the Bible, in the biblical God, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, in the holy Trinity, in salvation by grace, in heaven and hell, and in much more that Christians also believe in.

These claims have been so widely broadcast that legitimate confusion now exists in the minds of many people, even many Christians, as to whether Mormonism should be classified as a genuine Christian religion. Do Mormons really have the same beliefs as Christians? And if so, what is all the fuss about—why do some claim Mormonism is actually an anti-Christian religion?

How does one proceed to determine the truth? We have written this book to help clarify what Mormons actually believe, not what they give the impression of believing. Unfortunately, this seems to place us in the position of those attempting to "tell others what they really believe," a task rarely appreciated, for obvious reasons. Part of the problem is semantic—using the same words with different meanings. When Mormons say they "believe in Jesus Christ," they are as sincere as anyone. The question is, Do they believe in the Jesus Christ of the New Testament—the true, historical Jesus—or in the Jesus approved by the LDS church? In addition, part of the problem is the vigorous program in the LDS church to promote itself as genuinely Christian (which, obviously, is succeeding in some quarters). Finally, many Mormons and Christians aren't really quite sure as to what constitutes genuine Christianity. So the confusion, while unfortunate, is understandable.

But the larger problem is that well-informed Mormons, at least, do know what they believe. They also know it is not what historic, orthodox Christianity has always believed. They have been taught that LDS doctrines are biblical; hence, they are convinced that it is traditional Christianity

that is wrong in its beliefs. Mormons are the "true" Christians, having had correct doctrines and the true interpretation of the Bible restored through divine revelation by their founder and prophet, Joseph Smith.

The solution here is a relatively easy one. It is to compare and contrast the beliefs of the Bible and the authoritative beliefs of the LDS church, as well as to examine LDS claims that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. We have taken pains to cite sources that the LDS church considers authoritative in determining LDS beliefs and claims. However the reader should understand that there are serious doctrinal conflicts between the alleged divinely inspired teachings of both early and modern Mormonism. Worse, there is no objective manner by which to determine which should be trusted as the "true" divine revelation. As part of our analysis, we have discussed the understandable problem this presents for LDS credibility

So how do Christians know their faith is valid, rather than the Mormons' faith? We touched briefly on the evidence for the uniqueness and truth of biblical Christianity in *Ready with an Answer, Knowing the Truth About Salvation* and other books. Objective evidence of divine revelation is found in only one religion. This evidence is sufficiently robust to convince even open-minded skeptics. It includes such things as specific, fulfilled prophecies concerning the distant future, scientific prevision, and other facts that are inexplicable apart from divine omniscience and foreknowledge. It involves the miracles, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, proving His claim to be God incarnate, supplying divine authority to His words.

No critic of Christianity can logically, convincingly dispute the fact that in all history, only one Man claimed to be God incarnate, predicted His resurrection from the dead in public, and rose from the dead in proof of His claims (cf. Acts 1:3; 17:31). Whether one cares to accept it, the simple fact is that biblical Christianity is the only religion with convincing, concrete evidence to support its claims. Further, of the world's religious literature, only the Bible can logically and evidentially be considered the Word of God. Therefore, biblical truth is the only viable standard by which to judge religious truth claims, and that is why we have applied it here to the issue of LDS assertions to be the Christian church.¹

Unfortunately, when we come to the subject of religion in general, we find that most religions do not permit the believer to exercise their God-given right of independent inquiry and critical examination, at least as far as the religion itself is concerned. To do so is to permit members to discover the truth, whereas the "real" truth has been decided beforehand by the religion in question. In fact, "God" Himself is presented as the advocate of the status quo; to question one's religion is to question God. But what kind of God would give us minds to use and then forbid their use?

To the contrary, the God of the Bible invites fair-minded, critical investigation so that the truth will be known and broadcast. "You shall love the Lord your God with...all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). "Examine everything carefully" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The Bereans examined the Scriptures every day, to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11; cf. verses 2-3). "Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD" (Isaiah 1:18). Concerning earliest Christianity, the physician said he had "investigated everything carefully from the beginning" (Luke 1:3-4). "Let us examine and probe our ways" (Lamentations 3:40). "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).²

It only makes sense that if God gave us a mind, He intended us to use it. "The naive believes everything, but the prudent man considers his steps" (Proverbs 14:15). Regrettably, Mormons who obey this injunction may pay an unwelcome price.

Besides millions of faithful Mormons, there are also, apparently, millions of Mormons who have left the LDS church, often the result of having discovered serious doctrinal contradictions or moral and ethical breaches in church leadership, both historically and today. The only thing these Mormons know is that the LDS church is not what it claims to be. Such Mormons can only be described as being in a state of "spiritual suspension," unsure of what to believe, if anything. We hope they will understand that God is not at fault for what men do.

Sadly, if we look at LDS leadership impartially, we discover that the Mormon faithful have been kept from the truth, as we document herein. This means that church members must take special pains to test what they have been told, even if this requires real work and courage—i.e., a sacrificial love for truth. But once again, discovering the truth can be expensive. As R.K. McGregor Wright asks, "Would we be able to reject our religious beliefs if we felt God were telling us to? Are we willing to seek God and His truth if, respectively, it would cost us that? What if it would cost the alienation of one's longtime friends, family, even one's most cherished way of life?" Sooner or later one pays a price for learning and loving the truth, but the rewards, happily, are far greater—knowing God as a person and experiencing His love and fellowship now, and later, forever. And, once you have met Him, how can you leave Him?

It should additionally be noted that the arguments in defense of Mormonism have recently become more sophisticated and scholarly through FARMS and related organizations. We briefly touched upon this in our *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (1999, pp. 314-333). The arguments presented by scholarly Mormons, however, are generally found to be extraneous. No amount of research and scholarship can prove the truth of something already demonstrated as false by biblical revelation. This misuse of argument is common today even outside religious circles, and is a warning against complacency. Consider the current frustration of the scientific establishment over the nature of the evidence for naturalistic evolution: great scientific scholarship and research are put forth, to little effect. This will always be the case with something artificial to begin with, but when such beliefs are robustly defended, it may require more time and effort to sort through the issues. (Cf. our *Darwin's Leap of Faith*.) Ignoring the problems is never the answer, opening one's mind and looking at the facts without prejudice is. Otherwise, the cost is merely accountability in expanding the number of falsehoods.

Nevertheless, recent scholarly LDS arguments are probably convincing to LDS members who do not take the necessary time to look at the other side fairly and examine such arguments critically. Our hope and prayer is that this book will begin to help Mormons and Christians to "examine everything carefully" and "hold fast to that which is good." In addition, the following online sources will prove useful for additional study and further documentation of the arguments made in this book:

Utah Lighthouse Mission—<http://www.utlm.org>

Mormon Research Ministry—<http://www.mrm.org>

Apologetics Index—<http://www.gospelcom.net/apologeticsindex/>

Recovery from Mormonism—<http://www.exmormon.org>

The Ankerberg Theological Research Institute—<http://www.jashow.org>

Alpha & Omega Ministries—<http://aomin.org/Mormonism.html>

Section I: What Is the Mormon Church?

1. The Mormon Church Today

In the minds of most people Mormonism has a good, clean reputation and is often thought to be a respectable Christian religion.

This is partly because in recent years the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) has initiated a powerful campaign to influence millions of people with its message. Sophisticated magazine, newspaper, and television ads have reached literally tens of millions of people with the claims of Mormonism. Multiple full-page newspaper inserts proclaim, "We believe the New Testament Scriptures are true and that they testify that Jesus is indeed the Promised Messiah and Savior of the world." Headlines blare, "Mormons believe Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior" and "Mormons testify Jesus is the Christ."

These advertisements have also been placed in *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide* and have even provided an 800 number that respondents could call and receive a free copy of the *Book of Mormon*, which is boldly advertised as "another testament of Jesus Christ."

The success of these ads is evident; back in 1989 almost 260,000 requests for a free *Book of Mormon* were received, and 86,000 of those responding wanted missionaries to make a personal visit. In addition, forty percent of the respondents said they "believed the book was the Word of God" and indicated that "they had a special feeling about it."¹ By 2001, the church had published a total of 105 million copies of the *Book of Mormon*, distributing almost six million copies in the year 2000 alone.

Direct advertising is only one way by which the Mormon church seeks converts. Its methods of proselytizing are as varied as its corporate holdings. For example, the church takes advantage of the fact that every year millions of people visit Hawaii:

Mormons own a substantial portion of Hawaii [including] the major financial institutions of this area. When you go to the [Mormon sponsored] Polynesian Culture Center they offer you a tour to [visit] their Temple....Soon after you return from your visit...you will receive a knock from a Mormon missionary asking how you enjoyed your visit and whether you would like to know more about the Church. The Mormons have many other ways of recruiting members: through door-to-door missionaries, visitor centers, the thousands of church sponsored Boy Scout troops and educational institutions, and...the Marriott Hotel chain which places Mormon literature in every room.²

The power of Mormonism also stems from the fact that it is perhaps the largest, most influential and missionary-minded of the various unconventional religions of the United States. In 2001, the church had over 60,000 missionaries engaged in proselytizing activities around the world, and they won over 300,000 converts. The church's current membership passed the eleven million mark worldwide in 2000.³ By November 2000, 31 new Mormon temples had opened up, bringing the total number to 100 worldwide⁴ By September 2001, there were 106 temples in operation, with plans for 20 more. That's in addition to the more than 12,000 local churches or meetinghouses in the world.

Moreover, the church maintains financial assets valued at \$25 to \$30 billion, with annual revenues approaching \$6 billion.⁵ This makes it one of the wealthiest churches per capita in the

entire world. Not unexpectedly, many of the lay leaders within the Mormon church are businessmen who help the church oversee a vast and growing worldwide financial empire.

For example, the church's real estate holdings are worth billions of dollars. In addition, the church owns or has owned five insurance companies, a newspaper, two television stations, a chain of bookstores, a shopping mall, a dozen radio stations, hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland, one of the nation's largest private television networks, and most of Salt Lake City's tallest skyscrapers.⁶ The Mormon empire also runs several colleges and schools, including Brigham Young University.

Mormons tend to view financial prosperity as a sign of God's blessing (cf. Alma 1:29; 4 Nephi 1:23). Their corporate wealth confirms their belief that Mormonism is wealthy because it is pleasing to God. Tithing is a principal means of church income. According to Mormon doctrine, tithing is a law of God commanded upon the people; *Doctrine and Covenants* (hereafter cited in the text as *D&C*) 119:3,4 calls it a "standing law...forever." A devoted former church member estimates that many Mormons "will be paying 20%-25% of their gross income to the Church."⁷ Wealthy Mormon celebrities and business executives also tend to tithe generously. For example, the Osmond and Marriott families are two large contributors to the Mormon empire.^{*8}

* Such tithing is part of the "package" of good works that will eventually earn a Mormon his supposed exaltation or godhood⁹ In fact, in Mormonism, the logical motive undergirding both tithing and missions work is the personal hope of exaltation to divinity. Any Mormon who desires godhood must tithe generously and also become a Mormon missionary.¹⁰ In essence, two of the most effective means for expanding the Mormon empire are sustained by one of the most compelling and enticing motivators known to man—the anticipation of absolute power.

In state and national politics, Mormons have retained more than their share of influence. Richard Beal, one of the most powerful men in the Reagan administration, was a Mormon,¹¹ and Mormons have headed the following posts and departments: Assistant Attorney General, head of the National Security Council, Secretary of Agriculture, Treasurer of the United States, the United States Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Interior, the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Research Board, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and various state government posts.¹² Mormons also head or have headed Walt Disney Productions, Say-On Drugs, Max Factor, Standard Oil, and many other conglomerates.¹³

The Mormon church is also the single largest sponsor of Boy Scout units in the United States, and Mormon officials have admitted this is an effective manner in which to share the faith.¹⁴ For example, former Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower administration and former Mormon prophet and president, Ezra Taft Benson, comments, "Scouting is Church work. It is part of the [Mormon] Church program."¹⁵ And,

I have been deeply impressed with the record that has been made by the Church....In no other field do we have a better reputation than in the field of Scouting....We have...a higher proportion of Scout troops sponsored by the Church than any other church or civic organization in the world... [And] we have the highest enrollment of boys in Scouting of any church on the earth.¹⁶

In fact, President Benson stated, "Religious emphasis is a part of Scouting" and, "Scouting helps prepare boys for [Mormon] Church responsibility.... We want these boys to become better men

and boys and honor their [Mormon] priesthood and to be faithful members of the [Mormon] Church and kingdom of God."¹⁷

Thus, the positive image of Mormonism is undergirded by many factors: their scouting leadership, their financial reputation, their moral emphasis, and their Christian appearance. All this is why even many Christians think that the Mormon church is a Christian organization and that individual Mormons are Christians.

In fact, the Mormon church's successful portrayal of itself as Christian explains why there may be (according to Mormons) more converts to Mormonism from Christian churches than there are official defections from Mormonism. According to research published in a Mormon magazine, "Far more persons convert to the Mormon Church from other churches or from a status of no religious affiliation than leave."¹⁸ The report cited a 1990 study published by Mormons Howard M. Bahr and David Hunt relying on NORC General Social Survey data from 1972-1988 and the University of Wisconsin National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-1988.

This study also indicated that the conversion rates from various Christian denominations to Mormonism were proportionately similar. Jewish, Catholic, Baptist, and Christian Reformed churches had somewhat lower conversion rates, though, than several Evangelical and Fundamentalist denominations and some mainline denominations (Presbyterian, Episcopal, Christian and United Churches of Christ, among others). Studies also indicated that among leading world religions, Mormonism has the fourth highest retention rate: Islam (92 percent), Jewish (88 percent), Catholic (83.5 percent), Mormon (82 percent).¹⁹ But such studies do not give us the whole picture.

Even though global membership of the Mormon church has climbed sevenfold since 1947, making it the fifth largest religious denomination in America, not all is well with Mormonism. For example, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, several analysts familiar with the Mormon church have stated that at least 40 percent of Mormons are inactive and that many of these are disillusioned.²⁰ But if even 30 percent of Mormons are inactive or disillusioned, the Mormon empire could face some serious future problems.

One purpose of this book is to reveal some of the reasons for this disillusionment. We will seek to answer the following questions: What exactly is Mormonism and what does it teach? How did the Mormon religion begin? What kind of men founded the Mormon church and are they to be considered prophets according to biblical definition and standards? Can Mormonism truly be considered a Christian religion? Are the early teachings of the inspired Mormon prophets the doctrines of the church today? Has the official history of the church been suppressed or altered? Is the average Mormon aware of the early history and teachings of the church? Has the church engaged in deliberate suppression or alteration of its own divine revelations? Does Mormonism really believe that Jesus was the product of the *physical* sexual union between God the Father and the "virgin" Mary? Are those the Mormon church labels its "enemies" really guilty of misrepresenting and distorting what Mormonism teaches? Is one branded an enemy of the church merely for raising these questions?

These are only some of the issues we will seek to answer in this volume.