

Mormons

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

OFFICIAL NAME: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)

FOUNDER: Joseph Smith Jr., on April 6, 1830

CURRENT LEADER: Gordon B. Hinckley (b. 1910)

HEADQUARTERS: Salt Lake City, Utah

MEMBERSHIP (1996): Worldwide: 9.7 million in 23,528 wards and branches in 161 countries; United States: 4.7 million in all 50 states and D.C.; Canada: 140,000.

MISSIONARIES (1996): 52,938

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded by Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844). Smith claimed to have had a visitation from God in 1820 in which God directed him to establish the true church. Consequently he organized the Mormon Church on April 6, 1830, with six original members. Beginning with a few hundred followers the church moved to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois before Smith's death at the hands of a mob at the Carthage, Ill., jail. Smith had been arrested for encouraging the destruction of the *Expositor*, a Nauvoo, Ill., newspaper. After Smith's death, Brigham Young was affirmed as president of the church by a majority of the church's leaders and led his followers to Utah where they established Salt Lake City in 1847. Joseph Smith's widow, Emma, resided in Illinois. Those who affirmed her son, Joseph Smith III, as the true successor of his father and as prophet of the church in the 1850s helped found the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now headquartered in Independence, Mo.

MAJOR BELIEFS

ONE TRUE CHURCH: The Mormon church claims to be the only true church. In God's supposed revelation to Joseph Smith, Jesus Christ told him to join no other church for "they were all wrong . . . their creeds were an abomination . . . those professors [members] were all corrupt" (*The Pearl of Great Price*,

Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Mormons teach that after the New Testament all churches became heretical and no true saints existed until the "Church of the Latter-day Saints" was organized, hence their name. Non-Mormons are thus called "Gentiles." The new revelations given to Smith, the institution of the prophet and apostles in the church, the restoration of the divine priesthoods, and the temple ceremonies make the church authentic. True and full salvation or exaltation is found only in the LDS Church.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: The true church of Jesus Christ has had an ongoing presence and witness in the world since Pentecost. Jesus Christ promised that His church, *truly* baptized and regenerate believers, would not fail (see Matt. 16:17-18). The marks of a true church include faithfulness to the teaching of the first apostles (see Acts 2:42)—not the creation of new doctrines.

AUTHORITY OF THE PROPHET: The *president* or *prophet* of the Church is thought to be the sole spokesman and revelator of God. Joseph Smith was the initial prophet, but each successive president holds that position. Through him God's will can be made known to the church. All revelations are made scripture and no Mormon can attain godhood without accepting Joseph Smith as a true prophet. The Mormon scriptures state that Latter-day Saints "shalt give heed unto all his [the prophet's] words and commandments . . . For his word ye shall receive as if from mine [God's] own mouth" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 21:4-5).

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: Old and New Testament prophets were God's spokesmen. Their words were always consistent with the Bible and pointed to God's Son, Jesus Christ. A test of genuineness for prophets was that any prediction they proclaimed would come true (see Deut. 18:20-22). For example, Joseph Smith predicted that the temple of the church would be built in Independence, Mo., within his lifetime (*Doctrine and Covenants* 84:2-5). No temple has yet been built there. New Testament prophets spoke, along with teachers, pastors and evangelists, in evangelizing with and edifying the church (see Eph. 4:11-13).

MORMON SCRIPTURE: Mormons accept four books as scripture and the word of God. The King James Version of the Bible is one of them, but only "as far as it is translated correctly"—seemingly allowing for possible questions about its authority. Joseph Smith made over 600 "corrections" to its text. Other "standard works" are the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrines and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. The Bible is missing "plain and precious parts" according to the *Book of Mormon* (1 Nephi 13:26) which the other three volumes complete. The *Book of Mormon* has "the fullness of the gospel" and tells the story of a supposed migration of Israelites in 600 B.C. to the American continent. These Israelites subsequently lapsed into apostasy although their story was preserved on golden plates written in Reformed Egyptian. Joseph Smith, it is said, translated the plates by the "gift and power of God" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 135:3). Reformed Egyptian does not exist as a language. The golden plates were returned to the angel Moroni after they were transcribed and Moroni returned them to heaven. The *Book of Mormon* does not contain explicit Mormon doctrine. *Doctrines and Covenants* contains the revelations of the Mormon prophets—138 in number along with two "declarations." Here most of Mormon doctrine can be found including the priesthood, baptism for the dead, godhood, and polygamy. *The Pearl of Great Price* contains Smith's religious history, the Articles of Faith, the Book of Abraham, and the Book of Moses.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: The Bible explicitly warns against adding to or detracting from its teaching (see Rev. 22:18; Deut. 4:2). The New Testament contains the inspired and totally accurate witness of contemporary disci-

ples and followers of Jesus. It alone claims to be fully inspired of God and usable for the establishment of doctrine. (see 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

ESTABLISHMENT OF TEMPLES: The first Mormon temple was constructed in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836. Subsequently, a temple was constructed in Nauvoo, Ill., in 1846. Presently there are at least 49 operating temples throughout the world including the one finished in Salt Lake City in 1893. The purpose and function of temples is for the practice of eternal ordinances including primarily baptism for the dead, endowments, and celestial marriages. Baptism in the Mormon church, for both the living and the dead, is essential for the fullness of salvation. The dead often are baptized by proxy which affords them after death the opportunity to become Mormons. Celestial marriage for "time and eternity" is also a temple ordinance. It is necessary for godhood and seals the marriage forever. Temples form an essential part of Mormon salvation. Only Mormons in possession of a "temple recommend" by their bishop may enter a temple.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: The Temple of the Old Testament was a place of symbolic sacrifice prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ. Worship in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was a practice of early Jewish believers (see Acts 2:46). Otherwise there is no mention of any such practice in the New Testament. Never was the Jewish temple used for baptism for the dead, marriage, or other secret ceremonies. It was the place in the Old Testament where the glory of God occasionally dwelt. Today the individual believer is God's dwelling place and not a physical building (see 1 Cor. 3:16).

GOD IS AN EXALTED MAN: Elohim, the god of this universe, was previously a man in a prior existence. As a result of having kept the requirements of Mormonism, he was exalted to godhood and inherited his own universe. God is confined to a "body of flesh and bones" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 130:22) and yet is thought to be omniscient and omnipotent. He obviously cannot be omnipresent. There are an infinite number of gods with their own worlds—these too were previously men. The Holy Ghost, Jesus Christ, and "Heavenly Father" comprise three separate and distinct gods. Heavenly Father sires spiritual children

in heaven destined for human life on earth. All humans, as well as Jesus Christ and Lucifer, are god's heavenly children. (See *Doctrine and Covenants* 130:22; God, Jesus, and the Spirit thus had beginnings.)

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: God is Spirit and is not confined to a physical body (see John 4 :24). Jesus Christ was incarnated through a miraculous and nonphysical conception through the Virgin Mary. He was fully God from the beginning (John 1:1). Together with the person of the Holy Spirit, they form the triune (three in one) eternal God.

JESUS IS GOD'S "SON": Jesus was Heavenly Father's firstborn spirit child in heaven. He was begotten by God through Mary as in a "literal, full and complete sense" in the same "sense in which he is the son of Mary" (Bruce McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1993], 67). These two elements of Jesus being literally God's son form his uniqueness in Mormon theology. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as well as on the cross, Jesus atoned for Adam's sin and guaranteed all humankind resurrection and immortality. Jesus visited the Israelites or Indians of North America after his resurrection and established the true church among them. We are the spiritual, but literal, younger brothers and sisters of Christ. Some Mormon documents claim that Jesus was married at Cana in Galilee (see John 2) and had children himself.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: Jesus is viewed as God, the Word or Son, eternally existent with the Father and worthy of identity as God (see John 1:1-14). He was born of the Virgin Mary who had conceived him supernaturally by the Holy Spirit. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross for the sins of the world, and was raised from the dead. He will come again and reign as Lord of Lords.

HUMANS ARE GODS IN EMBRYO: Every human being has the potential of becoming a god by keeping the requirements of Mormonism. A well-known statement within Mormonism is, "As man is god once was, as god is man may become." From a prior spirit existence in heaven, humans may be born on earth

in order to exercise freedom to choose good or evil and to have a body for the resurrection. Basically humans are good, but they will be punished for their sin. But by keeping Mormon teaching and obeying the church and the Prophet, after the resurrection worthy Mormon males may pass the celestial guards, bring their wives with them, and achieve a status similar to Elohim—the god of this world. The consequences of their sin are erased by their allegiance to the tenets of Mormonism. In resurrection faithful Mormons receive exaltation to godhood and will exercise dominion over their world.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: Human beings are God's special creation. There is no evidence from scripture of preexistence, rather God acknowledges that it was in the womb of our mothers that he formed us (see Isaiah 44:2). A sinful nature is part of humanity's experience. Liberation from the power and presence of sin is experienced as a result of faith in Christ. At that point God's image is begun to be remade in every Christian. While being transformed to Christlikeness the Bible does not teach literal godhood as the inheritance of the saints (see Rom. 8:29; Rev. 1:5-6).

MORMON PLAN OF SALVATION: The Mormon plan of salvation is built on the idea that all people have eternal life, but only the most faithful Mormons have godhood or enter the celestial Kingdom. In order to obtain this ultimate step, Mormons must exercise faith in the God of Mormonism, its Christ, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; exercise repentance; and be baptized in the LDS Church. Additionally Mormons must keep the "Word of Wisdom" by abstaining from alcohol, tobacco and caffeine; tithing to the church; attend weekly sacrament meetings; support the Mormon prophet; do temple works; and be active in their support of the church.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE: Salvation, according to the Bible, is due to God's grace and love. He provided Jesus as the sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is through faith in the crucified and risen Jesus that we may be saved. Works are excluded (John 1:12; 3:16; Rom. 10:9-13; Eph. 2:8-9).

EVANGELIZING MORMONS

1. Have a basic and clear understanding of the Christian faith and the gospel.
2. Be aware of the unique Mormon doctrines as presented in this belief bulletin.
3. Remember, Mormons use Christian vocabulary (gospel, atonement, god) but radically redefine their meanings. Define clearly what you mean when you use biblical words.
4. Present a clear testimony of your faith in Christ alone for your salvation.
5. Show your Mormon friend that the Bible teaches salvation alone through the cross of Christ (John 3:16; Rom. 10:4,10-13; Eph. 2:8-9).
6. Warn the Mormon about trusting in feelings (i.e., the burning in the bosom) for a validation of Mormonism's truth claim. Without historical, objective verification, feelings are useless.
7. When Mormons use a Bible verse, read carefully the verses before and afterward to make clear the exact meaning and purpose of the passage. Don't let them take Bible verses out of context. Read carefully the full reference in the Bible before deciding what any one verse means.
8. Keep the central doctrines of the faith as the focus of your discussion.
9. Share the plan of salvation with your Mormon friend. Emphasize that salvation is a gift to be received, not a merit to be earned.
10. Do the basics: pray, trust the Holy Spirit, and be loving, patient, and steadfast.

OTHER COMMON LDS TERMS:

Aaronic Priesthood: The lesser of the two divisions of the LDS priesthood.
Bishop: Presiding high priest of a local LDS ward.

Endowment: Ceremony in LDS temples in which worthy members learn sacred (secret) details of the LDS plan of salvation.

First Presidency: Highest leadership and authority group in the LDS church. Normally consists of the president of the church and his two counselors.

Gentiles: All people who are either not Jewish or not members of the LDS church.

Godhead: According to LDS, is three separate divine entities (gods) - the Heavenly Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. They are united in one purpose.

Gospel: The full system of LDS belief and practice.

Holy Ghost: Divine entity in LDS godhead who is a personage of spirit.

Melchizedek Priesthood: The higher of the two divisions of the LDS priesthood.

Mission: The specific time and place in which a Mormon serves as an LDS missionary.

Restoration: Refers to Heavenly Father's restoring true Christianity and the true church to the earth through Joseph Smith Jr. in the 1820s and 30s.

Sacrament: Ordinance in which elements of bread and water are partaken by LDS members in weekly ward services.

Sealing: Temple services uniting LDS husbands, wives, and children as a family unit for eternity.

Testimony: A subjective experience that validates the LDS church and doctrine to the Mormon. It is sometimes described as a "burning in the bosom."

Tithe: Payment of one-tenth of their annual income made by LDS members to the church.

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