

2 Mormonism

The *Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints*, whose members have been nicknamed *Mormons* claims to be the restoration of the true church established by Jesus Christ. It has no relation with the Catholic or Protestant Churches but differs from them in theology, organization, and religious practices. In its numerous publications it emphasizes that the Christian Church established by Jesus Christ has become corrupt over the century and needed to be re-established again. Because of this, there is no salvation outside the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.

These are strong claims, but they carry some truth. The Christian Churches have always been in danger of being corrupted. Some, like the Catholic Church, have fallen pretty badly during the middle age and were never restored. The reformation in the 1500's started new churches which were theologically correct again, but today they suffer from a serious lack of commitment. Even many Baptist Churches do not preach the whole word of God anymore.

But is the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints in fact a restoration of the true church of Jesus Christ? Let's have a look at what they believe.

- We believe the Bible to be the word of God
- We believe in God the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost
- We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Jehova, the promised Messiah, Redeemer and Savior, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
- We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved

These are original citations from the Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. That sounds pretty much like what we believe, doesn't it? So – why do we say that Mormonism is a cult? Where are the differences?

Well, the differences show up when you dive deeper into Mormon theology and find out that the above articles of faith have a different meaning for them than for us. The bible is not the only source of authority they accept, their interpretation of the word “God” is quite different from ours and the same holds for the words “redemption” and “salvation”. To understand what the Mormons believe we need to know a little bit about the early history of Mormonism.

2.1 History

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints was founded by its first prophet Joseph Smith in 1830 in Fayette, New York – no further than 40 miles from here. According to his own reports he had his first heavenly vision in 1820 which were followed by numerous visitations by a “resurrected person” named Moroni. In 1827 Moroni delivered to Smith the “golden plates”, whose translation is now the *Book of Mormon*. In May 1829 John the Baptist appeared and ordained Smith to the

Aaronic Priesthood. Shortly after that Peter, James, and John came to ordain him to the Melchizedek Priesthood. This established the authority of the church, because without the Melchizedek Priesthood there could be not salvation for men on earth. It is difficult to understand how Smith found his first followers, but the Finger Lakes Region has always been an easy prey for new religions and probably still is. As far as I know, Mormonism wasn't the only cult that started here. But because of its great emphasis on missions, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints has now grown into a church that has more than 3 million members, most of them in the state of Utah, and sends out as many as 14,000 missionaries. A few organizations separated from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints when Brigham Young took the Mormons to Utah, but compared to main church they are rather insignificant.

2.2 Major Doctrines – where are the differences?

Many bad things have been said about the Mormons, most of them being not true. In fact, as far as commitment and moral standards are concerned, the accomplishments of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints are astonishing and probably far beyond what Baptist Churches have achieved with their own members. In that respect, we can only learn from them.

But what about their beliefs? The claims of Joseph Smith about his visions may seem a little strange – but that alone doesn't mean that Mormonism is a cult. So, is the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints really a Church of Jesus Christ or not? Let's look at our measuring rod – our own articles of faith – and compare.

2.2.1 Sources of Authority – anything but the Bible?

Let me give a more complete citation from the Mormon's articles of faith

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and that he will reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God

So while the Mormons believe that the Bible is the word of God, it is only one of the many possible sources of authority. They strongly emphasize that the Bible is not complete and that there will always be additions to the current canon. It is taught, for instance, that Jesus repealed the law of Moses in the sermon on the mount **Matthew 5:21–48** although he explicitly says in **Matthew 5:17** that he will not change it.

The Mormons rely on the King James Version of the Bible, but the restriction “as far as it is translated correctly” suggests errors in the translation which make corrections by subsequent revelations and prophecies necessary.

The book of Mormon is considered to be an equally inspired record of the ancient people who inhabited the American continent before and after the time of Christ. The

book tells the epic story of two waves of immigration, the first after the destruction of the tower of Babel with no survivors after a deadly battle 1500 years later, and the second about 600 B.C. under Levi from the tribe of Manasseh. Two nations, the Nephite and the Lamanite, came out of this. The Nephites were well advanced in civilization and became Christians after the resurrected Christ came to the Americas to organize his church. The Lamanites fell under the curse, became dark in skin, and degenerated. In a final struggle 1000 years later the Nephites were eliminated. Their last survivor, Moroni, completed the book of Mormon on Golden Plates and hid them until he reappeared to give them to Joseph Smith. The surviving “degenerated nation” is identified with the American Indians.

In contrast to the Bible, which is confirmed by thousands of historical evidences, the book of Mormon must be viewed as purely fictional. There is no external evidence for any of its claims. It also overemphasizes the role of America as “blessed land of God” and attempts to give it a “godly justification” for the prevalent racism of the 1800’s.

So altogether the Mormons know three sources of authority – the Bible, as long as it fits (“is translated correctly”) – the Book of Mormon – and revelations to their prophets. The role of the Bible is inferior for them and it is by no means the final authority anymore. Apart from using a similar terminology the Mormons have little in common with true Christianity.

2.2.2 God

We believe in God the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost

At a first glance Mormons seem to have the same concept of God as we have. But Mormon theology clearly teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate Gods “*composing the great presiding council of the universe*”. They deny the doctrine of the trinity, because they view the blending of personalities as unnatural and impossible.

If something cannot be explained in human terms, it cannot be true. This argument, which seems to dominate the Mormon theology, leads to a belief system that appears to have a very limited view of God and consequently relies on complicated and often somewhat strange concepts.

Mormons believe in an *eternal progression*. God has once been as we are and is just much further ahead of us. In fact, every man can eventually become a God if he is faithful enough. Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have already entered the state of exaltation and become Gods.

Mormon theology denies the possibility of immaterial bodies and thus believe that God must have a body of flesh and bones – a direct contradiction to **John 4:24** or **1. Timothy 1:17** and even their own teaching about the Holy Spirit.

Because of God being a material, Mormons have to re-interpret the meaning of *omnipresence*, *omniscience*, and *omnipotence*— doctrines that they seem to share with

orthodox Christianity. For them, God can only have a limited extension in space, but his senses and powers are infinite. So he can transfer himself to any place and is thus omnipresence. He is *omniscient*, and *omnipotent* only because of the support of angels and ministering servants.

It is also taught that the Gods have wives in heaven and through them, God is literally our father. We see a progression of Gods evolving from the human spirits who have once been fathered by some other Gods and now themselves create new human spirits. Mormonism calls this doctrine “celestial parentage”.

So, a closer look reveals that the concept of God taught by Mormonism is quite different from the God of the Bible.

2.2.3 Man

The Mormon doctrine of man is very different from that of orthodox Christianity and is the key to an understanding of all the other doctrines. According to Mormonism, all life begins at the time of *spirit creation*. However, for a Mormon creation does not mean that God brought man into being, but only that he organized the elements which are co-eternal with him and thus turned them into *spirit children*.

Man’s advance in the scheme of *Eternal Progression* involves at least four stages: (1) a premortal or *spirit existence*, (2) *mortal life* on earth with spirit and body temporarily joined, (3) the *spirit world* for the disembodied spirits after death, and (4) *immortality* after the resurrection with spirit and body inseparably connected.

Already in the premortal stage the spirit children have the freedom to choose good or evil. Their choices determine to a degree their later stage. Satan and one third rebelled at this stage and were excluded from eternal progression but became *sons of perdition* (we’ll come back to that when we discuss the things to come). The rest stood with Christ, but some were less “valiant” and therefore had to live an inferior life as humans. This is the explanation for the “*millions of insane and afflicted people on earth and those living in filth, poverty, and degradation*”. For the Mormons until 1978, black skin was one of the signs of this degradation and for this reason Black People were denied any spiritual rank.

This is a pretty unbiblical view of humans. The bible nowhere teaches that sickness and poverty are the result of one individual’s sin, nor does it tell us that people with a different skin color are to be viewed as spiritually inferior.

But Mormonism also has quite a different understanding of the fall of mankind. For them, Adam was the archangel Michael in his premortal state. Together with *one of his preincarnate wives* (note the “one of”), Eve, he was placed in the Garden of Eden, which the Mormons of course locate in America (Jackson County, MO). Both had immortal bodies but Eve sinned and became mortal. This created a dilemma for Adam, because he had to follow two conflicting commands: to *multiply and replenish the earth* and *not to eat from the tree*. He deliberately and wisely chose to stand by

the first and greater command and took of the fruit. So *he fell that men may be*. Mormonism thus completely *denies the original sin*. What God has declared sinful is now declared as one of the great advances toward eternal exaltation, because it opened the door for billions of pre-existing spirits to become mortal and further proceed in the scheme of eternal progression. For the Mormon, Adam did not sin at all: only Eve did, while the man – apparently viewed as ethically superior to women – had a good excuse for his transgression.

Consequently we don't inherit sinfulness from Adam and Eve but are innocent until we reach the *age of accountability*, which Mormons determine to be eight. Again, this is not what the Bible teaches. Although I am not quite sure what will happen to children who die before they can distinguish good and evil, the Bible clearly says that the heart of man is evil from childhood – there is no innocent stage.

2.2.4 Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the eternal Jehova, the promised Messiah, Redeemer and Savior, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Although this statement seems to be in keeping with Bible teaching, the Mormon's beliefs about Jesus Christ differ a lot from that of orthodox Christianity.

Mormons make a distinction between *Elohim*, the exalted name reserved for the father, and *Jehova*, which they see as Jesus Christ. To them Jesus Christ is the first-born of all the *spirit children of God*, a term that includes angels, demons, and human beings. The difference between Christ and them is not one of kind but only of position. Any thought of Christ's distinctive deity is rejected. In fact, it is said that by obedience and devotion to the truth he *earned the rank as God* while yet in his pre-existing state. He was already God before he became mortal, but this is the only distinction from normal humans who can attain godhood only after their mortal life. As first-born child of Elohim, he was the executive of the Father in the creation, being aided in his work by angels and many humans.

His earthly life began with the virgin birth of Mary, which assures his *unique status*. But Mormons emphasize that Elohim is literally the father of both the spirit and the human body of Christ. Mormon's agree with orthodox Christianity that Christ was the only person to live a sinless life, that he died on the cross for the redemption of mankind, and arose in the body on the third day. But in addition to his appearances recorded in the Bible the book of Mormon also claims that he came to the Americas as resurrected being and organized his church among the Nephite people.

2.2.5 The Holy Spirit

For the Mormon, the Holy Spirit is an entirely spiritual person without flesh and bones and thus different in nature from the father and the son. He emanates from the deity and is everywhere present, although only in one place at a time.

This again is superficially identical with what the bible says, but contradicts both the Mormon teaching about persons and the biblical teaching that father, son, and spirit are the same in every divine aspect.

2.2.6 Salvation

We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.

Again, Mormonism uses a formulation of an article of faith that is very close to orthodox Christianity. But as before, the Mormon understanding of the atonement is different from ours. For Mormons, there are two aspects of salvation.

1. The first aspect is the *unconditional salvation* for all of mankind. Weakness, disease, and death came upon all men because of the transgression of Adam. Through the atonement of Christ physical resurrection – or immortality – is guaranteed for all living beings. This kind of salvation doesn't require faith in Christ but includes everyone. The only exception are the sons of perdition.
2. The second aspect is *conditional salvation*. It determines the course of eternal progression for the individual soul and depends entirely on obedience, works, and choices made during the mortal life.

While all men become immortal, only the faithful and obedient are allowed to enter the highest sphere of existence in eternity. Faith alone is not sufficient for such an “exaltation”. The *celestial kingdom* can only be entered through obedience to the laws and ordinances, devotion, and faithfulness. In other words, individual salvation is by works, not by faith.

Faith in Jesus Christ thus does not play an important role in the Mormon doctrine of salvation. It is not necessary to escape eternal punishment and it does not help to enter the exalted eternal life. The biblical understanding of salvation is quite different from that. You cannot escape eternal punishment if you don't turn to Christ and your right to enter the heavenly kingdom does not depend on works (**Ephesians 2:8–9**). Salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Mormonism also puts a very strong emphasis on baptism. Without baptism, your sins cannot be forgiven and you cannot enter the celestial kingdom. To redeem those who believed but died without being baptized properly, Mormons practice baptisms for the dead and keep meticulous records about the life of millions of people. Again, it must be said that although baptism is an important act of obedience, the Bible nowhere teaches that it is necessary for salvation.

2.2.7 Things to come

The Mormon doctrines about the last things use similar elements as we know from the Bible but differ severely from orthodox Christianity. It would lead too far to discuss

them in detail so I will focus on a few important aspects.

The book of Mormon teaches that Israel will literally gather, which today is interpreted as joining the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, and that Zion will be built in the American continent. Afterwards Christ will return, and those who made it into the celestial kingdom will be resurrected to meet him in the air, to reign together with him. The other believers will be resurrected next and live on earth during the millennial reign. The wicked will be destroyed and sent into a “the prison house” for cleansing. Satan will be bound during the 1000 years. The second resurrection will then separate those destined for eternity from the sons of perdition. There will be three eternal kingdoms of widely differing glories and one place for the sons of perdition.

The sphere of exaltation in the celestial kingdom is reserved for the faithful and obedient. They will be gods and shall dwell in the presence of God, the father, and His Christ forever.

The terrestrial kingdom is for the lukewarm believers and those who accepted the gospel only while in the spirit world, that is after death. They remain without exaltation and receive the presence of the Son but not of the father.

The lowest sphere in the celestial world is reserved for the rest who rejected Christ (or the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints) and lived wickedly. They will never experience the presence of God or of Christ, but shall live eternally as servants of God.

Perdition is for those who have no hope of any degree of salvation, that is Satan and the angels who rebelled with him, and all men who committed the unpardonable sin. They are doomed to everlasting fire.

However, eternal punishment is not really eternal, because God has the power to pardon them after an appropriate time. So, in the end, nobody will stay in the state of punishment forever.

So we see that the Mormon doctrine of the last things is filled with phantasies that integrate biblical concepts but have little to do with the word of God. The terminology is often the same as in orthodox Christianity but – as we have seen over and over again – Mormonism twists the meaning of this terminology so much, that their doctrines have nothing in common with true Christianity.

2.3 Special Aspects

Besides their religious beliefs certain Mormon practices deserve a brief discussion.

Polygamy: was established as a result of a direct revelation to Joseph Smith, which emphasized the eternity of the marriage covenant and the plurality of wives. Mormons believed that the Gods had multiple wives and felt that they were

divinely commanded to do the same. However, all marriages had to be duly established and gave a lot of responsibilities to the man who wanted to lead such a large family. Polygamy became a controversial issue later and the practice was discontinued in 1890 in order to remove obstacles that kept Utah from joining the United States.

Polygamy is a severe misuse of the word of God. The fact that God permitted polygamy in ancient times does not mean that he sanctified it. In a time where many men were killed in wars and women could not survive alone except by prostitution this was the lesser evil, but by no means good.

Racism: The book of Mormon and its interpretation in Mormon doctrines clearly identifies Black and Native Americans as spiritually inferior beings, which is in strong contradiction to the word of God. It appears that the Mormon doctrines tried to give a “godly justification” for the racism and sexism that was so common in the time of Joseph Smith and his followers. The Bible, however, nowhere teaches that certain people are superior to others just because of their race, skin color, sex, or other physical differences.