Mormon Doctrine of Jesus: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at a Mormon view of Jesus, comparing it to an authentic Christian perspective. He finds that the Mormon view is not supported by the biblical text.

Jesus a Procreated Being?

The Mormon Church claims to have restored the true teachings of Jesus. In this article, we will compare the Mormon doctrine of Jesus to the New Testament.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus, God the Son, is eternal and has no beginning. However, Mormonism teaches that Jesus is a procreated being, the literal offspring of God the Father and one of His heavenly wives. According to Mormon theology, God the Father, Elohim, dwells on a planet with His many spirit wives producing numerous spirit children who await to inhabit physical bodies so that they too may one day ascend to godhood as their parents did. Jesus is believed to be the firstborn spirit child of Elohim. The *Doctrine and Covenants*, one of the four sacred books of Mormonism states, "Christ, the Firstborn, was the mightiest of all the spirit children of the Father."{1} The *Gospel Principles,* which is the manual of the Mormon Church, states, "The first spirit born to our heavenly parents was Jesus Christ."{2} James Talmage, one of the early apostles of the church wrote, "[A]mong the spirit-children of Elohim, the firstborn was and is Jehovah or Jesus Christ to whom all others are juniors."{3}

According to the Mormon view, Jesus is not unique from the rest of mankind. He is simply the firstborn spirit child. The *Doctrine and Covenants* states, "The difference between Jesus and other offspring of Elohim is one of degree not of kind."{4} That is why Mormons refer to Jesus as elder brother.

James Talmage wrote, “Human beings generally were similarly existent in spirit state prior to their embodiment in the flesh. . . . There is no impropriety, therefore, in speaking of Jesus Christ as the Elder Brother of the rest of mankind.”{5}

Mormon doctrine deviates significantly from the Bible, which teaches that Jesus is eternal and not procreated. Although Mormons teach that Jesus is eternal, what they mean is that He existed as a spirit child prior to His incarnation. Being an offspring of Elohim means He was created at some point in time.

To support their view, Mormons appeal to John 3:16, which states Jesus is the “only begotten.” The Greek word used there is *monogenes,* which means “unique” or “one of a kind.” It does not mean procreated, but emphasizes uniqueness.

Mormons also appeal to Colossians 1:15, which calls Christ the “Firstborn over all creation.” The Greek word for firstborn is *prototokos*, meaning “first in rank, preeminent one.” It carries the idea of positional supremacy. Christ is the firstborn in the sense that He is preeminent over all creation. Renowned Greek scholar, the late F.F. Bruce, wrote on how the term was used during the time in which Paul wrote. “The word firstborn had long since ceased to be used exclusively in its literal sense, just as prime (from the Latin word *primus*—first) with us. The Prime Minister is not the first minister we have had; he is the most preeminent. . . . Similarly, firstborn came to denote (among the ancients) not priority in time but preeminence in rank.”{6} Psalm 89:27 in the Septuagint calls David the firstborn. We all know David is not the first-born son in his family, nor is he the first king of Israel. “Firstborn” here is a title of preeminence.

These Bible verses do not support the teaching that Jesus is a procreated being. The Bible further teaches Jesus is an eternal being. He had no beginning.

Colossians 1:17 states, “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Christ as the eternal Son of God existed before all creation. Since Christ is “before all things,” He did not depend on anyone or anything for His creation or existence.

John 1:1 shows Jesus is eternal and has no beginning. John wrote, “In the beginning *was* the word.” Scripture indicates that the universe was not created in time, but that time itself was created along with the universe.{7} In other words, time was not already in existence when God created the world. The world was created with time rather than in time. Back before the beginning mentioned in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 lay a *beginningless* eternity.{8} The verb *was* is in the imperfect tense, indicating continued existence. So Jesus did not come into existence at some point in eternity past, He always existed. There has never been a point where He was not in existence.

In John 8:58 Jesus tells the religious leaders, “Before Abraham was born, I am.” Jesus is identifying Himself as the eternal God, quoting the words from Exodus 3:14. For this reason the Jews were seeking to stone Him for the crime of blasphemy. The words “I am” or “Yahweh” in the Hebrew language is the verb, to be. This name conveys the meaning of eternal self-existence. Yahweh, whom Jesus is identifying with, is eternal and beyond the realm of time. Abraham came to exist at a point in time, but Jesus never had a beginning. He is uncreated and eternal. Since the Bible teaches the eternal nature of Christ, He cannot be a procreated being as Mormon doctrine teaches.

Lucifer and Jesus

According to Mormon theology, God the Father lives on a planet with His spirit wives procreating spirit children who await physical bodies to inhabit. As we learned earlier, Jesus is the first son born to Elohim. God the Father had numerous

other offspring, which included Lucifer. This makes him a spirit brother of Jesus and of all human beings. Mormon theologian LeGrand Richards writes, “Satan was just as much a man in the spirit world, as were those spirits who have been given bodies through birth in this world.”{9}

Mormonism teaches that Jesus and Lucifer were involved in planning mankind’s eternal destiny. In order to attain godhood like our heavenly parents, the spirit children needed to leave the presence of their heavenly Father, inhabit a physical body, and live a worthy life. Elohim knew that mankind would sin and thus require a savior to pay for sin and show us how to return to our heavenly father. At the heavenly council, Jesus and Lucifer proposed their plans. Lucifer offered to go to earth and be the savior but he wanted to force everyone to be saved and do everything himself. Jesus desired to give man the freedom of choice. The Father chose Jesus’ plan. Angered by the decision, Lucifer persuaded one third of the spirit children to rebel and a war in heaven took place between Satan’s forces and Jesus and His followers. Lucifer was defeated, cast out of heaven, and denied the right to inhabit mortal bodies.{10} Without the ability to attain physical bodies, exaltation to the Celestial kingdom is impossible. He became known as Satan and his followers became the demons who now exist on earth as spirits opposing God’s work.

Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, “The appointment of Jesus to be the Savior of the worlds was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning. Haughty, ambitious, and covetous of power and glory, this spirit-brother of Jesus desperately tried to become the savior of mankind.”{11}

The Bible teaches that Jesus is not the spirit brother of Lucifer or of human beings. Lucifer is an angel and part of the created order. Ezekiel 28:13-19 reveals that Lucifer, in contrast to Jesus, is a created cherub angel. Colossians 1:16 tells us that Christ is the Creator of all things, including

the angelic realm. The words “thrones”, “dominions”, “principalities” and “powers” were used by rabbinical Jews to describe different orders of angels. In Colossae, there was a problem of worshipping angels. Christ had been degraded to their level. Paul’s argument here is that Christ is superior to the angels for Christ created them. Lucifer falls into this category of a created angel, thus making him a created being. Hebrews 1:4 also reinforces the fact that Jesus, being God the Son, is superior in nature to the angels. Christ is Creator, while Lucifer is creature, two totally different classes and they cannot be spirit brothers as Mormonism teaches.

The Incarnation of Christ

The Mormon doctrine of Jesus deviates from biblical teaching regarding the preincarnate life of Christ. It also deviates in its teaching on the incarnation of Jesus. Mormonism teaches that Jesus’ incarnation was the result of sexual relations between the flesh and bone Heavenly Father and Mary. Jesus is the only earthly offspring so conceived. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, “Christ was begotten by an Immortal Father in the same way that mortal men are begotten by mortal fathers.”{12}

He also writes, “God the Father is a perfected, glorified, holy man, an immortal Personage. And Christ was born into the world as the literal Son of this Holy Being; He was born in the same personal, real and literal sense that any mortal son is born to a mortal father. There is nothing figurative about this paternity; He was begotten, conceived, and born in the normal and natural course of events, for He is the Son of God, and that designation means what it says.”{13}

James Talmage wrote, “Jesus Christ is the Son of Elohim both as spiritual and bodily offspring; that is to say, Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed His mission in the flesh.”{14}

Mormon theology teaches that the Father was the main person involved in Mary's conception, not the Holy Spirit. Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "Christ is not the Son of the Holy Ghost, but of the Father."{15} Mormon Historian Stephen Robinson states, "Mary was in some unspecified manner made pregnant by God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit."{16} Dr. Robinson attempts to remain faithful to Mormon theology and the Bible, but his attempt falls short.

The Bible makes it clear: Jesus was conceived as the result of a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, not a physical union with the Father. John 4:24 says that God is spirit. He is not a resurrected man.

Luke 1:35 states, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The Holy Spirit's supernatural work in Mary's body enabled Christ—eternal God—to take on human nature. Jesus thus had a dual nature. He was fully God and fully man. Mormons reject this teaching.

Stephen Robinson writes, the "unbiblical doctrine of the two natures in Christ was added to historic Christianity by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D."{17} This might be a consistent conclusion for Mormonism, but it is contrary to the Bible. Throughout the Gospels Jesus showed His humanity: He was hungry, He got tired, and His human body experienced death. However, He also revealed His divinity, demonstrating omnipotence (Colossians 1:17), omniscience (John 2:25), eternity (John 1:1), and omnipresence (Matthew 28:20).

There is a wide separation between the Mormon doctrine of the incarnation of Christ and what the Bible teaches.

The Atoning Work of Christ

Another key area in which Mormon theology deviates from biblical teaching is their view of the atoning work of Christ. To understand this, we must understand the Mormon view of the

fall. According to Mormon theology, Adam was given two conflicting commands by God: one to become mortal and the other not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; out of which mortality, children, and death would result. Adam chose to eat of the fruit for it was the only way salvation could come to mankind.{18} As a result of the fall, Adam and Eve left their purely spiritual state and became physical beings. Mortality and child bearing would provide the way to exaltation and godhood. Man then inherited a dual nature, one physical and the other spiritual.{19}

Jesus' death is believed to have atoned for only Adam's sin, leaving us responsible for our sins.{20} Adam's act brought mortality and death. The result of Jesus' atonement is that all humankind will be resurrected. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, "Unconditional salvation, that which comes by grace alone without obedience to gospel law, consists in the mere fact of being resurrected."{21} The Second Article of Faith states, "We believe that men are responsible for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression."{22}

In Mormon theology, there is a distinction between general salvation—resurrection for all, and individual salvation which refers to exaltation. Mormonism teaches that that we have all attained universal resurrection as a result of Jesus' death, but we must now earn our own place in heaven by doing all we can do.

Mormonism teaches there are three levels of heaven: telestial is the lowest level, the terrestrial, and celestial. The resurrection of Christ allows non-Mormons entrance to the telestial or terrestrial kingdom. All Mormons desire the celestial level where they attain exaltation to godhood. Attaining to this level depends on their life here on earth. The Mormon Church and Joseph Smith play the major roles in achieving exaltation. The *Gospel Principles* tell us that Jesus "became our savior and He did His part to help us return to our heavenly home. It is now up to each of us to do our part

and become worthy of exaltation."{23}

The Bible does not equate salvation with resurrection. Jesus' death provides atonement for all of humanity (Isaiah 53:6), but salvation is contingent on one's response to Christ's atoning work. Salvation applies only to those who accept Christ's work on the cross. It is not universal as in Mormonism.

All mankind will be resurrected, but it is at the resurrection that some will be condemned to hell and others to eternal life in God's presence (Rev. 20:11-15). Those who reject Christ will not be saved (John 3:18). So resurrection is not equated with salvation.

Finally, individual salvation is by faith alone, not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9) It is through faith in Jesus alone that one receives the full measure of the gift of salvation. The Bible does not teach three levels of glorification. There is only eternal life with Christ, or eternal separation from God.

Jesus the Polygamist?

As we have studied, the Mormon doctrine of Jesus deviates from the Jesus of the Bible in several key areas. Another unique teaching of Mormonism on the life of Christ is in regards to His marital state. Mormonism teaches that while on earth, Jesus was married to at least three women. Although Mormons today try to distance themselves from this teaching, it is clearly a part of their historical record. Orson Hyde, one of the original Twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church and who was ordained by Joseph Smith, cites the gospel of John when he writes, "Jesus was the bridegroom at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, and He told them what to do. Now there was actually a marriage; and if Jesus was not the bridegroom on that occasion, please tell who was. I shall say here, that before the Savior died, He looked upon his own natural children as we look upon ours."{24}

Mormonism teaches that Jesus was not only married, but He had a family. In a speech given by Hyde in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle, he exclaimed, “I discover that some of the Eastern papers represent me as a great blasphemer, because I said, in my lecture on marriage, at our last conference, that Jesus Christ was married at Cana of Galilee, that Mary, Martha, and others were His wives, and that He begat children. All that I have to say in reply to that charge is this—they worship a Savior that is too pure and holy to fulfil the commands of his Father. I worship one that is just pure and holy enough ‘to fulfil all righteousness;’ not only the righteous law of baptism, but the still more righteous and important law ‘to multiply and replenish the earth.’ Startle not at this! For even the Father Himself honored that law by coming down to Mary, without a natural body, and begetting a Son; and if Jesus begat children, He only ‘did that which He had seen His Father do.'”{25}

This would be consistent with Mormon theology, since marriage is a requirement for exaltation to godhood.{26}

According to the New Testament, there is no evidence to indicate that Jesus was married or that He had children. It is even more inconceivable that He would enter into a polygamous relationship, for it was not God’s intended will for marriage. (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, and 1 Timothy 3)

Our study reveals that the Jesus of Mormonism is not the Jesus of the Bible. The Mormon view of Jesus teaches that He was not eternally God, that He was procreated as the first spirit child of the Father, He is a spirit brother of Lucifer, and was begotten of the Father through physical relations with Mary. For these reasons, we cannot consider the Mormon teachings on Christ to be consistent with the New Testament.

Notes

1. *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:21-23.

2. *Gospel Principles*, 11.
3. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 425.
4. *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:21
5. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 426.
6. F.F. Bruce, *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979) quoted in The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 126.
7. Harold Kuhn, "Creation," in B*asic Christian Doctrines*, ed. Carl F. Henry. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983.), 61, quoted in The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 100.
8. Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdman's Publishing Co. 1983), 996, quoted in The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 100.
9. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and Wonder* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Publishng Company), 277.
10. *Gospel Principles*, 16-17.
11. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 193.
12. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 546-547.
13. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 742.
14. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 466.
15. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1975), 1:18-20.
16. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 135.
17. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 78.
18. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 47.
19. "Church News" in *Deseret News*, July 31, 1965, 7.
20. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*, 98
21. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine,* 669.
22. *Articles of Faith* 2.
23. *Gospel Principles*, 19.
24. *Journal of Discourses,* vol. 2, 89.
25. *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, p. 210.

26. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132.

Bibliography

Book of Mormon. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986.

Doctrine and Covenants. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Gospel Principles. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979.

Pearl of Great Price. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.

Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998.

Blomberg, Craig & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.

McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991.

Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America.* San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.

Richards, LeGrand. *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.

Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition, 1984.

Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997.

©2002 Probe Ministries.

Mormon Doctrine of God: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines the Mormon doctrine of God from a Christian perspective. Is their view of God consistent with the biblical view?

Monotheism or Polytheism?

The Mormons consider themselves to be Christian, but many question this claim. In this article we will investigate the teaching of Mormonism regarding the doctrine of God and compare it with Biblical teaching.

Mormon doctrine is derived from four primary sources. The first is the Bible; the second are the sacred texts of Mormonism, the *Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price.* The third comes from the writings of the founder of the church Joseph Smith, and the fourth is the writings of church leaders, especially the church presidents who are considered to be inspired prophets of God. In regard to the God of the Bible, Stephen Robinson, chairman of the Department of Ancient Scriptures at Brigham Young University, writes, "The Latter-day Saints (should) be considered worshipers of the one true God."{1} He also states, "The Latter-day Saints accept unequivocally all the biblical teachings on the nature of God."{2}

Christianity has taught monotheism from its foundation, the belief in the existence of one God. Mormonism believes in the existence of a plurality of gods. According to Mormonism, there are an infinite number of planets like earth in the universe, each with their god or gods who were once men who have evolved into godhood. Mormon theologian and Apostle Bruce McConkie states, "[A] plurality of gods exist . . . there is an infinite number of holy personages, drawn from worlds without number, who have passed on to exaltation and are thus gods."{3}

Joseph Smith wrote, "In the beginning, the head of the gods called a council of the gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and (the) people in it."{4}

The *Pearl of Great Price* states in the Book of Abraham, "And they (the gods) said: let there be light and there was light. And they (the gods) comprehended the light, . . . and the gods called the light Day and the darkness they called Night. . . ." In these two chapters, the plural designation "gods" is used over fifty times.

Although they believe that numerous gods exist, Mormons consider themselves to be monotheists because they focus their worship exclusively on the Godhead of this earth. With this being the case, a more accurate description of Mormon practice is *henotheism*, a form of polytheism that stresses a central deity.

The Bible clearly teaches monotheism. This truth is taught in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Isaiah writes about God, "Before me there was no god formed, nor will there be one after me." There was no god created before or any to come for there is only one God. Later he adds, "You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock: I know not one." God knows of no other, not because God is limited in knowledge, but because

there is no other like Him in existence.

Doctrine of the Trinity

Christians and Mormons share many similar theological terms. We both refer to God, salvation, and heaven. However, the words often have radically different meanings. Such is the case with the doctrine of the Trinity. Biblical Christianity teaches there is one God eternally coexisting in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. As we will see, the Mormon view of the Godhead is quite different.

The Mormons reject the traditional Christian view of the Trinity as being in error. Joseph Smith wrote,

> Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God [anyhow]—three in one and one in three. . .It is curious organization All are crammed into one God according to sectarianism (Christian faith). It would make the biggest God in all the world. He would be a wonderfully big God—he would be a giant or a monster. (Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 372)

Church president James Talmage stated, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are as distinct in persons and individualities as are any three personages in mortality."{5}

Mormons believe that there are an infinite number of planets, each with their own god or gods. On this earth, there are three separate gods, God the Father or Elohim, Jehovah or Jesus the son, and the Holy Ghost who make up the Godhead. Instead of Trinitarian, *tritheistic* would be a better word to describe Mormon belief. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, "There are three Gods– the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."{6} He further explains that, "[T]hree separate personages—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost comprise the Godhead.

As each of these persons is a god, it is evident, from this standpoint alone, that a plurality of gods exists. To us, speaking in the proper finite sense, these three are the only gods we worship."{7}

Jesus is believed by Mormons to be the literal offspring of the Father. The Mormon Church teaches that "Jesus Christ is the son of Elohim both as (a) spiritual and bodily offspring; that is to say, Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed his mission in the flesh. . . ."{8}

The Bible teaches that there is only one true God, not three separate gods. Deuteronomy 6:4 states, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." God has revealed Himself in three coeternal and coequal persons of the same substance or essence, however, distinct in subsistence. The Bible reveals that all three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have the attributes of deity. All three have existed for eternity, took part in creation, and play a role in salvation. The whole, undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three Persons.{9}

God Was Once a Man

As we discussed earlier, Mormon theology teaches that there is a plurality of gods. All gods were once mortal men on other planets who, through obedience to the commands of their God, attained exaltation or godhood. All Mormon men have the potential of attaining godhood as well. God's progression from man to God is clearly stated throughout Mormon literature. Joseph Smith wrote:

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. . .

> . He was once a man like us; yea that God himself, the Father dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did. . . .{10}

Brigham Young, the second president taught "[T]hat God the Father was once a man on another planet who 'passed the ordeal we are now passing through. . .'"{11} The *Doctrine and Covenants* states, "God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones. Inside his tangible body is an eternal spirit." (130:22)

Jesus is believed to have been a mortal man who attained godhood and showed that all men can do the same. The goal of every Mormon man is to achieve exaltation to godhood. Bruce McConkie states, "That exaltation which the saints of all ages have so devoutly sought is godhood itself."{12} Joseph Smith exhorted all Mormon men to strive for this goal. He stated,

> Here then, is eternal life— to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you. . . .{13}

The Mormon Church teaches that if a couple marries according to Mormon ceremony, and each lives an obedient life, they may attain godhood at the resurrection. The *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches,

> [Y]e shall come forth in the first resurrection; . . . and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths . . . (and you) shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to (their) exaltation." (132)

The passage concludes, "Then they shall be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting because they continue. . . . Then they shall be gods because they have all power, and the angels are subject to them." (132:20)

The Bible teaches that God has always been God. Psalm 90 states, “From everlasting to everlasting you are God.” God did not evolve from mortal man. Isaiah 43 reveals, “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” This verse destroys any hope of any man thinking he may become a god.

Celestial Parenthood

In Mormon theology, there are three levels of heaven, terrestial, tellestial, and celestial. It teaches that almost everyone will make it to the first level, terrestrial, but Mormons seek entrance to celestial heaven, because there they are exalted to godhood. Once a man is exalted to godhood, he and his wife will reproduce offspring for eternity. These spirit children will in turn inhabit physical bodies and have the opportunity to become gods as well. This privilege is reserved for those who go through the sacred marriage ceremony in the Temple and live in obedience to Mormon teachings.

As we discussed previously, the Mormon book *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches that Mormons who marry within the context of the church, and remain obedient, shall be resurrected together. They shall then inherit thrones and kingdoms and are then declared gods because they will then rule together for eternity. Church president James Talmage adds, “[W]e are to understand that only resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring . . . and the spirits born to them in the eternal worlds will pass in due sequence through the several stages or estates by which the glorified parents have attained exaltation.”{14}

God the Father is, therefore, believed to be married to God the Mother, and together they are producing spirit children. Bruce McConkie states, “An exalted and glorified man of holiness could not be a Father unless a woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness was associated with him as a Mother. The begetting of children makes a man a father and a woman a mother whether we are dealing with man in his mortal or

immortal state."{15}

All men and women are thus the offspring of this heavenly union. James Talmage wrote, "God the Eternal Father, whom we designate by the exalted name-title 'Elohim,' is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and of the spirits of the human race."{16}

The Bible teaches that God the Father is not married. Isaiah 46:9 states, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God; and there is none like me." The Bible teaches that men and women who receive Christ as their savior will be glorified and live eternally in the presence of God. However, they will never be equal to God, nor will they be married. If marriage were essential to attain exaltation, it seems strange that Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 7, "It is good for a man not to marry." When Jesus was questioned about the state of marriage in eternity he said, "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven." The covenant of marriage is for our earthly existence only. The Bible does not teach a doctrine of celestial parenthood.

God is a Physical Being

Christianity teaches that God is immaterial. Mormonism teaches that God has a physical body. The Mormon *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches, "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's, the Son also. . . ."{17} Brigham Young wrote, "We cannot believe for a moment that God is destitute of body, parts, passions, or attributes."{18}

Although John 4:24 clearly teaches that God is spirit, Mormons like Bruce McConkie teach that this is a mistranslation of the text. He writes:

> False creeds teach that God is a spirit essence that fills the immensity of space. . . . In a vain attempt to support

> this doctrine, formulated by councils in the early days of the great apostasy, it is common for apologists to point to the statement in the KJV Bible, which says, "God is a Spirit." The fact is that this passage is mistranslated: instead the correct statement, quoted in context reads: "For unto such hath God promised his Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth."{19}

However, there is no justification for McConkie's translation. The KJV translation of "God is a spirit" is misleading; modern translators are more accurate rendering the passage "God is spirit." The Greek construction and word order place the emphasis on the essential character of God; thus the essence of true worship must be on God's terms and in accord with his nature.{20} Jesus further taught in Luke 24:36-43, "[A] spirit does not have flesh and bones." 1 Timothy 1:17 states, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God." God is invisible because He is immaterial. 1 John 4:12 and John 1:18 tell us that no one has seen God. The second of the Ten Commandments forbids anyone from making an image of God, partially because nothing physical could accurately reflect God, who is immaterial. If God created the universe, as the Bible teaches, He could not be a physical being.

Scripture often uses anthropomorphic language, attributing human characteristics to God to help describe God's activities. Psalm 17 pleads, "Keep me (Lord) as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings." Mormons have used this kind of language to prove that God has a physical body. In doing so they ignore the use of figurative language. God no more has a physical eye than He has wings and feathers.

God also revealed Himself in temporary physical forms that men could understand called theophanies. Examples are the burning bush, the fiery cloud in Exodus, and the unique incarnation of Christ. God the Son humbled Himself and took on human form. He was not a pre-existent spirit-being, waiting for a body, as the Mormons teach. John 1 reveals that the Son was God from

eternity and became a man to redeem humanity. We must conclude, based on our study of the doctrine of God, that Mormonism and traditional Christianity are indeed two different religions.

Notes

1. Stephen Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 65; quoted in John Ankerberg, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 99.
2. Ibid., 103.
3. Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991), 576-577.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 349; quoted in Walter Martin, Kingdom of the Cults, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 220.
5. James Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 37.
6. McConkie, 317.
7. McConkie, 576.
8. Talmage, 421.
9. Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 54.
10. Smith, 321.
11. Brigham Young, *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 29.
12. McConkie, 321.
13. Smith, p. 345-347. Also quoted in McConkie, 321.
14. Talmage, 426.
15. McConkie, 516.
16. Talmage, 421.
17. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:22.
18, Young, 29.
19. McConkie, 218.

20. *Expositors Bible Commentary*.

Bibliography

Book of Mormon. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986.

Doctrine and Covenants. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Pearl of Great Price. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.

Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998.

Blomberg, Craig, & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults.* Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.

McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine.* Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991.

Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America.* San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.

Richards, LeGrand. *A Marvelous Work and Wonder.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.

Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith.* Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition 1984.

Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young.* Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints, 1997.

© 2001 Probe Ministries International

Examining the Book of Mormon – A Christian View

The book of Mormon needs to be evaluated by the light of scripture and its purported evidence for its reliability. Dr. Pat Zukeran shows that the bad character of the book's witnesses, the lack of archaeological support, and internal errors reveal it to be the flawed work of man, not God.

The Mormon Story

Some people believe the *Book of Mormon* is a new revelation from God given to Joseph Smith. Mormons recognize it as divinely inspired and equal in authority to the Bible, but others have reason to doubt its claims.

Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt wrote in 1851, "The *Book of Mormon* claims to be a divinely inspired record. . . . This book must be either true or false. . . . If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever planned upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who will sincerely receive it as the word of God. . . . If true, no one can possibly be saved and reject it; if false, no one can possibly be saved and receive it."{1}

In this article, we will take a look at internal and external evidences for the *Book of Mormon* to see if it should be considered inspired writing.

The *Book of Mormon* is said to be a record of two ancient

Jewish civilizations that migrated to America. The Jaredites left Babylonia during the building of the Tower of Babel in approximately 2,250 B.C. After establishing a civilization in America that lasted two thousand years. They eventually succumbed to corruption and apostasy and were judged by God and destroyed.

The second group of Jews left Jerusalem in 600 B.C. before the Babylonian exile during the reign of King Zedekiah. This group crossed the Pacific and landed on the west coast of South America. Lehi and his son Nephi led these righteous Jews. This group eventually divided into two warring camps, the Nephites and the Lamenites and spread throughout North and South America. The Lamenites were cursed with dark skin because of their evil deeds and were the forefathers of the American Indians.{2}

Latter-day Saints believe that during the end of the 4th century A.D. the Nephite prophet general Mormon and his son Moroni, compiled the records of these two civilizations using the Reformed Egyptian language and recorded them on gold plates. Moroni hid the plates in the hills of Cumorah near Palmyra, New York to be revealed at a later time. The Lamenites eventually destroyed the Nephites in 421 A.D. on the Hill Cumorah. The Lamenite civilizations continued to degenerate and had forgotten their Jewish history. When Columbus found them centuries later, they had become as the *Book of Mormon* describes them, a "filthy and a loathsome people." (*Book of Mormon* 5:15)

Does the *Book of Mormon* qualify as divinely inspired scripture? In determining the answer, we will take a critical look at several key issues. First we will look at the nature in which Joseph Smith received his revelations. Second, we will investigate the character of the author and the key witnesses. Third, since the *Book or Mormon* claims to be a historical work, we will see if there is evidence to support this claim. Finally, since the *Book of Mormon* says it is the

most perfect book ever written, we will examine it to see if it contains any false precepts. Let's examine the Book to see if it is an inspired ancient historical record or a nineteenth century product.

Origin of the *Book of Mormon*

Mormons believe Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in 1823 as a glorified resurrected being, and delivered to him the golden plates from their hiding place in the Cumorah hills. Using an occult seer stone, Smith translated the history of the Lamenites and Nephites into the *Book of Mormon*.{3}

In studying the origin of the *Book of Mormon*, we must first investigate the issue of the canon of scripture. Christians believe the canon is closed with the 66 books of the Bible. There are no more revelations outside these books. Here are some reasons why.

First the authority to write the Holy Scripture was given to the Old Testament prophets of God and the New Testament Apostles of Christ. The last apostle died at the end of the first century A.D. and there has not been anyone who fulfills the qualifications for apostleship since then.

Second, the canon is confirmed to be closed by Judaism, Jesus, the Apostles, and the early church. According to the writings of eye witnesses—Emma Smith (one of Joseph Smith's wives), William Smith (his brother), and David Whitmer (one of the three key witnesses), Smith used a common occult practice of crystal gazing.

In 1877 David Whitmer wrote,

> I will now give you a description of the manner in which the *Book of Mormon* was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of

> something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the *Book of Mormon* was translated by the gift and power of God and not by any power of man."{4}

Emma Smith wrote to her children, "In writing for your father, I frequently wrote day after day. . . . He sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us."{5} So according to these accounts, Joseph Smith received his revelations word for word and used a seer stone.

By contrast, the Bible was not given to us in a word for word dictation form, nor is there a case of any biblical writer using an occult object to receive revelations from God. Mormons point to the use of the Urim and Thummim but their purpose was quite different. The Urim and Thummim were used for a time by the Aaronic priests only to gain answers of Yes or No from God to particular questions. Lots were cast to discern God's will, not to receive content for revelation. Finally, we must understand, the Aaronic priesthood and its practices are replaced by the finished work of Christ (Hebrews 7:12). Occult methods, such as crystal gazing, are forbidden in the Bible (Deuteronomy 18:9-14, Leviticus 19:26, 31). Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie even denounces using objects to gain new revelation. He condemns Hiram Page, one of the witnesses of the *Book of Mormon* for using a seer stone to gain new revelations. Joseph Smith obtained his revelations contrary to the method of inspiration received by the biblical Prophets and Apostles.

Character of the 11 Witnesses

Joseph Smith claims that after he translated the plates, he returned them to the angel Moroni. Therefore, there is no way to verify the veracity of the plates or Smith's translation. Smith's only defense of his account is the eleven men who signed statements claiming to have seen the golden plates. Therefore, the credibility of Smith's account rests on the testimony of these eleven witnesses. There are three key witnesses who claim to have seen the angel show the golden plates to them. The remaining eight allege to have seen the plates but not the angel. The LDS church asserts these men never denied their testimony. However, when we examine the lives of the witnesses, we find they were untrustworthy, wavering, and gullible witnesses.

Six of the eleven witnesses, including the three key witnesses were eventually excommunicated from the church. Former Mormon President Ezra Taft Benson summed up the legacy of the eleven witnesses this way. "Six of the original Twelve Apostles selected by Joseph Smith were excommunicated. The three Witnesses to the *Book of Mormon* left the church. Three of Joseph Smith's counselors fell—one even helped plot his death. . . . The wolves among our flock are more numerous and devious today than when President Clark made a similar statement [in 1949]."{6}

Let us first examine the character of the three key witnesses since their testimony is the most important. In a letter dated December 16, 1838, Joseph Smith stated this about the three key witnesses and John Whitmer, one of the eight. "John Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris are too mean to mention."{7}

Martin Harris' testimony shows him to be a gullible and unstable man. He changed his religious conviction approximately thirteen times. He had joined several Christian denominations and other cult groups that include the

Universalists, Strangites, and the Shakers. {8}(Ankerberg, 196) In *Doctrine and Covenants*, Joseph Smith gave revelations in which he denounces Martin Harris and calls him a "wicked man."{9} The Mormon leaders published an article in the *Elder's Journal*, a Mormon publication edited by Joseph Smith, in which they accused Harris guilty of "swearing, lying, cheating, swindling, drinking, with every species of debauchery. . ." (*Elders Journal*, August, 1838, 59).{10} Here the leaders of the Mormon Church strongly criticize the character of Harris.

Oliver Cowdery was also shown to be a very gullible man. He was led astray by Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses who himself claimed to have divine revelations from his own seer stone. Although Joseph Smith denounced Hiram as a false teacher, Smith stated "to our grief, however, we soon found that Satan had been lying in wait to deceive. . . . Brother Hiram Page had in his possession a certain stone, by which he obtained certain 'revelations' . . . all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God's House, . . ."{11} Despite Smith's condemnation, Oliver Cowdery joined Page's movement. Not only was he a gullible man, he was also indicted on several accounts of fraudulent business practices. The Mormon Church in a letter wrote, "During the career of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer's bogus money business, it got abroad into the world that they were engaged in it. . . . We have evidence of a very strong character that you are at this very time engaged with a gang of counterfeiters, coiners, and blacklegs . . ."{12} Cowdery was eventually excommunicated and he later joined the Methodist Church.

David Whitmer wrote, "God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to 'separate myself from among the Latter- day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them." In the spring of 1838, the heads of the church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness. . . . About the same time that I came out, the

Spirit of God moved upon quite a number of the brethren who came out, with their families, all of the eight witnesses who were then living (except the three Smiths) came out; . . .”{13} Here David Whitmer denounced the Mormon Church and encouraged people to follow his example and the example of the other witnesses and leave the church.

Joseph Smith in response attacked the character of David Whitmer. Smith stated, “God suffered such kind of beings to afflict Job . . . this poor man who professes to be much of a prophet, has no other dumb ass to ride but David Whitmer, to forbid his madness when he goes up to curse Israel: and this ass not being of the same kind as Balaam’s . . . he brays out cursing instead of blessings. Poor ass!”{14}

The character and life of the eleven witnesses to the *Book of Mormon* are very different from the Apostles of Christ. None of the Apostles wavered in their defense of Christ, even though all suffered and most died for their faith. The Apostles remained consistent in their teaching and never fell into any type of apostasy. Their lives were marked by honesty and integrity. They were never indicted for any criminal activity except for preaching Christ. The character of the *Book of Mormon’s* eleven witnesses does not strengthen Smith’s defense but cast further doubt on its authenticity.

Archaeology and the *Book of Mormon*

According to the *Book of Mormon*, Jews migrated from the Middle East to Central and South America and established great civilizations on the continents of North and South America. The *Book of Mormon* states that large cities were built so that by 322 A.D. “The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings and the people were as numerous almost as it were the sand of the sea.” (Mormon 1:7) Thirty-eight cities are specifically mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*. Also in the final battle between the Nephites and Lamenites, 230,000 Nephites were killed near the hills of Cumorah in New York.

With such a vast population and cities, one would expect to find numerous archaeological evidences to substantiate such large civilizations. However, there is no evidence to validate the claims of the *Book of Mormon*. Despite expeditions financed by the Mormon Church, archaeologists have concluded the *Book of Mormon* is not historical but a work of fiction.

The Smithsonian Institute in a letter to the Mormon Church states, "The Smithsonian Institution has never used the *Book of Mormon* in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian Archaeologists see no connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the Book."{15}

The National Geographic Society writes, "With regard to the cities mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*, neither representatives of the National Geographic Society nor archaeologists connected with any other institution of equal prestige have ever used the *Book of Mormon* in locating historic ruins in Middle America or elsewhere."{16}

Even Mormon archaeologists admit there is no conclusive evidence. Dr. Hugh Nibley, a Mormon apologist, states in his book *Since Cumorah* that no real archaeological proof for the Nephite civilization exists. He writes regarding the Nephites, "All that we have to go on to date is a written history . . . there is nothing whatever that an anthropologist or archaeologist as such can say about the *Book of Mormon*."{17}

Dee Green, professor of anthropology at Weber State University and a respected Mormon scholar states, "The first myth we must eliminate is that *Book of Mormon* archaeology exists . . . no *Book of Mormon* location is known with reference to modern topography. Biblical archaeology can be studied because we do know where Jerusalem and Jericho were and are, but we do not know where Zarahemla and Bountiful (nor any other location for that matter) were or are. It would seem that a concentration on geography should be the first order of business, but . . . years of such an approach has left us empty-handed."{18}

Another prominent Mormon scholar is B.H. Roberts. He was described as one of the most valiant writers and speakers in defense of the *Book of Mormon*. However, after years of research he concluded at the end of his life that the *Book of Mormon* was a fictional work created by Joseph Smith. He wrote, "the evidence I sorrowfully submit, points to Joseph Smith as their creator. It is difficult to believe that they are the product of history, that they come upon the scene separated by long periods of time, and among a race which was the ancestral race of the red man of America."{19}

Another prominent defender of the *Book of Mormon* was Thomas Ferguson, who was president of the New World Archaeological Foundation, which was funded by Bringham Young University and the Mormon Church. He hoped to discover archaeological support for the *Book of Mormon*. In 1962 he announced, "Powerful evidences sustaining the book are accumulating."{20} However, after years of research and many fruitless expeditions, his original hopes were shattered.{21} He eventually wrote,

> With all these great efforts, it cannot be established factually that anyone, from Joseph smith to the present day, has put his finger on a single point of terrain that was a *Book of Mormon* geographical place. And the hemisphere has been pretty well checked out by competent people I must agree with Dee Green, who has told us that to date there is no *Book of Mormon* geography. I, for one, would be happy if Dee were wrong.{22}

In contrast, biblical archaeology has provided thousands of discoveries that have confirmed biblical references. Hundreds of ancient civilizations, artifacts, historical records and inscriptions have been discovered that prove the historical accuracy of the Bible. Archaeological discoveries confirming biblical accounts have been acknowledged by Christians as well as skeptics. Foremost Middle East archaeologist Dr. William Albright wrote, "Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased

recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history."{23} When asked if archaeology confirms the accuracy of the New Testament, scholar John McCray states, "Oh, there is no question that the credibility of the New Testament is enhanced."{24} A historical faith should have historical proofs. Historical research has led both Christians and skeptics to affirm the historicity of the Bible. However, historical research has proven damaging for the *Book of Mormon*.

Errors in the *Book of Mormon*

Mormons claim the *Book of Mormon* is the most perfect book ever written. Joseph Smith stated, "I told the brethren that the *Book of Mormon* was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other book."{25}

Is Joseph Smith's claim true? Errors in the B*ook of Mormon* should cause one to question its divine inspiration.

In studying the *Book of Mormon*, one soon finds numerous historical, geographical, and scientific errors. First, in Mormon 9:32 the *Book of Mormon* claims to have been written in Reformed Egyptian, but Egyptologists say this language does not exist. Second, in Alma 7:10, Jerusalem is called a land or country when it is a city. In Alma 46:15 the saved in America take on the name Christian in 73 B.C. In the Bible, believers are not called Christian until 50 A.D. in Acts 11:3. Nephi 17:7 teaches that leprosy occurred in America in 34 A.D. but no cases of leprosy here are known until 1758. Mormon 9:2 and other references teach that the Indians had official records, scrolls, and other writings, but historical research shows no such records were kept. (Mormon 5:23, 3 Nephi 9:18, 12:18)

Not only are there historical errors, but there are false teachings as well. Alma 24:16 teaches that burying swords deep in the earth will keep them bright. Basic science proves that

burying steel objects causes decay and rust. 2 Nephi 13:24 teaches that baldness is caused by sin. Other absurdities include the teaching that God curses Indians with dark skin and anyone who marries an Indian will be cursed (2 Nephi 5:21 Jacob 3:3-9, Mormon 5:15-17, Alma 3:6-10). However, when Indians accept the Mormon teaching, they will become white and delightsome. (2 Nephi 30:5-7)

There appear to be internal contradictions also. In 3 Nephi 9:18, Jesus allegedly preached to the Nephites who fled Jerusalem in 600 B.C. with concepts communicated in the Greek language. But the Nephites are said to have written and spoken in Reformed Egyptian. Therefore, they would have no knowledge of Greek since Alexander, who lived in the 4th century, had not Hellenized the world yet. Jesus preaching to the non-Greek Nephites declaring, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," would have not made any sense. Moreover, Joseph Smith and the Mormons claim the gold plates from which the *Book of Mormon* was translated had no Greek or Latin in them.{26} However, Alpha and Omega are Greek, not Egyptian terms. Even stranger is that the French word "adieu" is used as a farewell in Jacob 7:27.

In contrast to the *Book of Mormon,* the Bible proves to be historically accurate and internally consistent. It also does not have the absurd teachings that we find in the *Book of Mormon*. The evidence appears to point to the fact that the *Book of Mormon* is not an ancient historical text, but an 18th century work created by Joseph Smith.

Notes

1. Orson Pratt, "Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," *Orson Pratt's Works,* (Liverpool: 1851), 1, quoted in Richard and Joan Ostling, *Mormon America*, (San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishing, 1999), 263.
2. Joseph Smith, *Book of Mormon*. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Introduction page.
3. Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*. (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991), 98.

4. David Whitmer, “An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon” (1887 reprint, Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing Company, 1972), 12, quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *What do Mormons Really Believe?* (Eugene, OR.:
Harvest House Publishers, 2002), 167-168.
5. *The Saints Herald*, May 19, 1888, 310, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, *What do Mormons Really Believe?*, 167-168.
6. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson,* (Salt Lake City, UT.: Bookcraft, 1988), 89.
7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 3, 232.
8. John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism.* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 196.
9. Joseph Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants* 3:12-13 & 10:7.
10. Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 96.
11. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 1, 109-110, quoted in Tanner, 96.
12. Letter quoted in Senate Document 189, February 15, 1841, 6-9, quoted in Tanner, 98.
13. David Whitmer, “An Address to All Believers in Christ,” 1887, 27-28, quoted in Tanner, 97.
14. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 3, 228, quoted in Tanner, 97.
15. Official Letter from the Smithsonian Institution, Summer, 1979.
16. Ankerberg & Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism,*
184.
17. Tanner, 138-139.
18. Ibid., 139-140.
19. B.H. Roberts, *Studies in the Book of Mormon,* (Urbana, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 243, quoted in Richard Abanas, *One Nation Under Gods,* (New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), 76.
20. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *One Fold and One Shepherd* (1962),

263, quoted in Tanner, 140.
21. Tanner, 140-141.
22. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, “Written symposium on the Book of Mormon Geography:
Response of Thomas Ferguson to the Norman and Sorenson Papers,” 4, 7, 29, quoted in Abanas, 77.
23. William Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, Pelican Books, 1960, 127, quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict,* (San Bernadino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1979), 65.
24. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing
House, 1998), 96.
25. *Book of Mormon,* Introduction page.
26. Times and Seasons, 4:194; J.N. Washburn, Contents, Structure and Authorship of
the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City UT; Bookcraft, 1954), 161, cited in Tanner, 124.

Bibliography

- *Book of Mormon.* Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981.
- *Doctrine and Covenants*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.
- *Pearl of Great Price*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

  Abanas, Richard. *One Nation Under Gods*. New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002.

  Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism.*
  Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.
- _____. *What do Mormons Really Believe?* Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2002.
- Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism.* Eugene, OR: Harvest

House Publishers, 1998.
- Blomberg, Craig, & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Givens, Terry L. *By the Hand of Mormon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.
- McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991.
- Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America.* San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.
- Richards, LeGrand*. A Marvelous Work and Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.
- Richardson, Allen and David, & Anthony Bentley. *1000 Evidences for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.* Salt Lake City: Envision Press, 2001.
- Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition 1984.
- Tanner, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Changing World of Mormonism*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.
- Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997.

©2002 Probe Ministries.

The Mormon Veneer

Having spent many hours of conversation with those in Mormon leadership, Don Closson considers some of the theological assumptions behind today's evangelical-sounding Mormon proponents.

The Need for Precision

Recent events have helped to pull Mormonism from the fringe of American culture to a place much closer to mainstream thinking about religion and family. Mitt and Ann Romney's campaign for the presidency is only one factor among many contributing to a changing perception of Mormons and their beliefs. For instance, in March of 2011 a musical called *The Book of Mormon* opened on Broadway depicting Mormon missionaries in Uganda. It went on to win multiple awards including nine Tonys and a Grammy. We have also seen the production of popular cable TV programs depicting both real and fictional polygamous families in ways that make them much less controversial. The result is that modern and historical Mormonism seems a little less foreign or isolated from our everyday experiences.



A 2012 Pew Research Center poll found that while eight in ten Americans said they learned little or nothing about the beliefs of Mormons or about the church itself during the past presidential election, it found that Americans are now more likely to describe Mormons as "good people," "dedicated," and "hardworking."{1} This adds to the evidence that Mormonism has gained a favorable mainstream standing among typical Americans. This growing acceptance of individual Mormons adds to the perception that Mormonism itself is less controversial and perhaps different from other self-labeled Christian groups in only a denominational sense. Some, even in our Bible Churches, feel that we have been too harsh on Mormons and should seek to find common ground rather than point out

distinctive theological differences that keep us apart.

While finding common ground is an important part of sharing our faith in any setting, it is essential that when talking with Mormons we clearly distinguish between Mormon and traditional Christian beliefs. This is because both traditions place Jesus Christ at the center of worship and theology, creating an appearance of commonality when, in fact, little exists. The rest of this article will make these differences explicit.

Our society's heavy emphasis on tolerance places pressure on Christians to be more accepting of other belief systems, to focus more on loving people and less on insisting that our beliefs are in some sense universally true. However, it is possible to express love for people without sacrificing the truth that the gospel of Jesus Christ stands on. In the end, it is neither loving nor honest to sacrifice the good news found in the New Testament in the name of a redefined tolerance that refuses to admit that real differences divide orthodox Christianity from Mormon beliefs.

The Person of Christ

Mormons are highly offended when others question whether or not they are Christian. They point out that in 1830 Joseph Smith initially named their religious movement the Church of Christ and that Christ is at the center of every Latter-day Saints Sacrament service. So let me begin by acknowledging that Mormons do place *a* Jesus Christ at the center of their theological system and that I do not doubt for a minute the sincere faith of my Mormon friends in the Jesus taught by the Mormon Church. However, this leaves us with the problem of defining who this Mormon Jesus is. After all, it is the object of our faith that saves us, not faith itself.

The Mormon view of Jesus is dramatically different from the

traditional view held by Christians for the last two thousand years. Although we use the same names to identify him—Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, and the Word—and we agree on many of His sayings and actions, we differ widely on what kind of being He is. This is important if we are to place our salvation in His hands.

Mormons believe that all conscious entities—God the Father, Jesus the Son, angels, and humanity—are the same kind of beings. As Mormon Apostle John Widtsoe has written, "God and man are of the same race, differing only in their degrees of advancement."{2} They also believe that everyone on earth has existed from eternity past, first as disembodied intelligences, then as spirit beings born of God the Father and an unnamed Goddess, and finally incarnated into bodies of flesh and bone. It is interesting to note that, although Jesus is God the Father's firstborn son, Satan and all of humanity are His spiritual brothers and sisters.

The only difference between you, me, and Jesus is that He has advanced further along the path of spiritual progression to Godhood than we have. According to Latter-day Saints teachings, Jesus is a god today because of His obedience to our heavenly Father and Mother, and to a set of eternal spiritual guidelines. What makes Mormonism dramatically different from traditional Christian belief is that it teaches that we, too, can become Gods just as Jesus has. In fact, it is the Father's, or Elohim's, desire that we all become gods and have our own spirit children just as He has.

Are we the same kind of being as God the Father and Jesus Christ? Since Mormons accept the Bible as revelation from God, is this what the Bible teaches? We need to grasp that Jesus is different from every other living thing in the universe, and very different from the way He is represented by the Later-day Saints.

The Latter-day Saints teach that all of humanity is

essentially the same kind of being as Jesus, just not as spiritually advanced. Rather than saying that Jesus is God in the flesh, they would emphasize that He is a man of flesh who has become a god. Mormons also reject the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that there is one God, one being, revealed in three Persons. Instead, they teach that there are three separate beings united in purpose in the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who cooperate together in order to accomplish the Mormon plan of salvation.

As a result of this thinking, Mormons teach that Elohim in the Old Testament refers to the Father, while Jehovah or Yahweh refers to Jesus. But is this supported by the Bible? The OT uses Jehovah and Elohim as interchangeable titles for the Godhead, of which both the Father and Jesus are part. Deuteronomy 6:4 is a good example of this. It reads, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD [Jehovah] our God [Elohim] is one LORD [Jehovah]." It would be difficult to make this verse fit the Mormon view. Using their ideas it would have to be translated "Hear, O Israel: Jesus our Father is one Jesus." This doesn't make sense, especially if Jesus and the Father are two discrete beings.

The Mormon view runs into more difficulty in the New Testament. I asked a Mormon Bishop to confirm that Mormons believe that all sentient beings existed from eternity past, which he agreed to. Then I asked him to read Colossians 1:16-17 which states that Jesus created all things visible and invisible, that He existed before all things, and that all things are held together in Him. At this point I asked him to tell me which idea about Jesus he believed, that we have all lived in eternity past with Jesus or that Jesus made all things and was before all things. He thought for a moment and then replied that both statements are true. At which point I suggested that these are mutually exclusive ideas; we cannot have lived in eternity past with Jesus while at the same time Jesus was before us and made us. He finally admitted that when

faced with logical contradictions like this he has to trust in what his prophet Joseph Smith taught.

This is a pretty important idea. Either Jesus is eternally God who, with the Father and Spirit, brought into existence all things and holds all things together moment by moment as the Bible teaches, or He is merely a human being who happens to be more spiritually advanced than we are.

The Atonement of Christ

If you ask a Mormon what he is trusting in for salvation, he will most likely say that it is the atoning suffering and death of Jesus Christ in the garden called Gethsemane and on the cross. They also believe that there is no other hope by which we can be saved. Although this sounds pretty good to an evangelical's ears, these words mean something quite different than what traditional Christianity teaches.

According to the Latter-day Saints, Christ's death and suffering made it *possible* to be saved from sin, *if* we do our part.{3} What this means becomes clearer when we read a parable given to explain what Christ's death accomplished in a chapter on the atonement in the Mormon book *Gospel Principles*.

The parable tells of a foolish man who ignored warnings about going too far into debt. Although he made payments along the way, he could not pay the debt in full when it came due. The creditor (God the Father) appeared and threatened to repossess all that the man owned and throw him into prison. The man begged for mercy, but the Father was only concerned about justice and the law. The parable weaves a picture of two eternal ideals, mercy and justice, in conflict.

Christ is depicted as a friend of the debtor who knew him to be foolish but loved him anyway. As mediator, Jesus stands before the Father and says "I will pay the debt if you will free my friend from his commitment so he may keep his

possessions and not go to prison." Sounds good so far, but then Jesus turns to the debtor and says, "If I pay your debt, will you accept me as your creditor?" And then he adds, "You will pay the debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible."

Although mercy is offered in the Mormon view, the word *grace* is nowhere to be found. This isn't a parable that teaches grace and forgiveness; it's a description of a loan being refinanced. Mormons believe that trusting in Jesus' atonement creates a path to salvation in that it provides for our resurrection and the forgiveness of past sins. However, to reach exaltation or complete salvation, in their view, one must earn it through celestial marriage, tithing, attending sacrament meetings, and sustaining the current Prophet, among other responsibilities.

Rather than earning our salvation, Paul teaches grace in Galatians 2:16, writing, "And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."

The Priesthood

We come now to what Mormons believe to be at the heart of their theological system, the priesthood. They argue that along with the birth of their church in 1830 came a restoration of a priesthood that had been lost since the end of the apostolic period around A.D. 100. According to the Mormon Church, one cannot receive the Holy Spirit, be baptized or be married for time and eternity without proper priestly authority.

Mormons teach that priesthood power literally created heaven and earth; it is the power and authority of God himself. Mormon men can tap into this power, eventually obtaining to

two levels of priesthood. At the age of twelve, most Mormon boys are ordained as deacons of the Aaronic priesthood. By the time they are finished with secondary school, most have become elders within the priesthood order of Melchizedek. Throughout these years Mormon young men receive training, usually prior to the beginning of each school day, for various offices or positions within the two priesthood levels.

Mormons believe that every miracle in the Bible is an example of priesthood power. This is problematic for evangelicals. First, we don't associate miracles with priests. In the Old Testament it was usually prophets who performed miracles, not priests. In the New Testament, miracles are performed by Jesus and his disciples without mention of a specific priesthood. In fact, Peter says that all believers as priests{4} and their function, according to Paul, is to proclaim the gospel of God.{5}

The book of Hebrews teaches that the Mosaic covenant along with the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood was passing away because it was useless for making us righteous or holy. The author tells us of a better covenant and a better priest entering the picture as a result of Christ's ministry. We now have a new covenant in Christ's blood and Jesus is our permanent, perfect, and eternal high priest, replacing the limited imperfect priests of the Mosaic covenant.{6} Nowhere are the followers of Christ told to train for or to seek entry into a priesthood. And Jesus is the only person given the title of priest according to the order of Melchizedek in the New Testament.

Although Mormons and Christians use similar language to describe their faith, they represent two very different belief systems. Mormons see themselves as eternal creatures working their way towards becoming gods and populating a planet with their offspring in the future. Traditional Christians draw a clear line between the creator and creation. We are not gods and will never become one.

Notes

1. www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/attitudes-toward-mormon-faith.aspx accessed on 12/21/12.

2. Apostle John Widtsoe (Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel through the Ages*, SLC: Stevens and Wallis, 1945, p. 107).

3. *Gospel Principles*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, SLC, Utah, 1997, p. 75.

4. 1 Peter 2:9-10.

5. Romans 15:16.

6. Hebrews 8:6-7.

© 2013 Probe Ministries

Mormon Beliefs about Prophecy, Heaven, and Celestial Marriage

Russ Wise demonstrates some ways in which Mormonism cannot be true because of false prophecies. He also examines their beliefs about three levels of heaven, and the concept of being married for eternity, even though scripture contradicts these doctrines.

The Book of Mormon: A Superior Revelation

or a Hoax?

Missionaries for the Mormon Church have converted millions of people to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by convincing them that the Book of Mormon is true and superior to the Bible.

The Book of Mormon claims to be history of "the period from 600 BC to 421 AD during which the Nephite, Lamanite, and Mulekite civilizations flourished."{1} It is also believed by the Mormon Church that these civilizations were descendants of Lehi, a Jew who led a colony of people from Jerusalem to the Americas in 600 BC.

The Nephite prophet Mormon and his son Moroni played major roles in bringing the lost story of these civilizations to light. War broke out among the descendants of Lehi, and as they were about to annihilate one another, Mormon wrote their history on golden plates and hid them in the hill Cumorah in New York state.

According to Bruce R. McConkie, a Mormon scholar, the Book of Mormon has three purposes:

> *• To bear record of Christ and clarify his Divine Sonship and mission, proving that he is the Redeemer and Savior;*
>
> *• To teach the doctrines of the gospel in such a perfect way that the plan of salvation will be clearly revealed;*
>
> *• To stand as a witness that Joseph Smith was the Lord's anointed through whom the latter-day work of restoration would be accomplished.{2} (According to the Mormon Church, Christianity was corrupted after the death of the last apostle and Joseph Smith was anointed by God to restore the true church.)*

Referring to the Book of Mormon, the Mormon apostle Orson

Pratt, said: “This book must be either true or false. If true, it is one of the most important messages ever sent from God…. If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked…impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions.”{3}

It is imperative that we recognize the Book of Mormon for what it is and challenge those who continue to perpetuate the false idea that it is true. In order for the Book of Mormon to be accepted as divine truth, the Bible must be discredited.

The book of 2 Nephi in the Book of Mormon says: “Because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words.”{4} Joseph Smith said, “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”{5}

The underlying problem with the Book of Mormon is that there is absolutely no objective, external evidence for much of the information found in the book. And the information that is trustworthy was plagiarized right out of the King James Bible. Beyond the fact that the Book of Mormon cannot be verified externally, the potential convert is told that the Smithsonian Institution uses the Book of Mormon to aid its archaeological work. However, in a letter referring to this Mormon claim, the Smithsonian Institution Department of Anthropology states: “The Smithsonian Institution has never used the Book of Mormon in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian archaeologists see no connection between the archeology of the New World and the subject matter of the Book.”{6}

Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth President of the Church, has unintentionally summarized my thoughts about the Book of Mormon exactly as he stated, “If Joseph Smith was a deceiver, who willfully attempted to mislead the people, then he should be exposed; his claims should be refuted, and his doctrines shown to be false, for the doctrines of an impostor cannot be

made to harmonize in all particulars with divine truth. If his claims and declarations were built upon fraud and deceit, there would appear many errors and contradictions which would be easy to detect."{7}

It is interesting to note that there have been close to four thousand corrections made in the Book of Mormon to date. What an epitaph for a "perfect" book of divine teaching.

Prophesies That Didn't Come True

Mormon writers have influenced millions of people over the years and have been instrumental in developing less than truthful statements concerning the church. These statements, or prophesies, must be looked at carefully, then refuted when they miss the mark of legitimacy.

It is imperative that we understand the biblical teaching regarding a prophet. Deuteronomy 18:20-22 says:

> *But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken, the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. . ."{8}*

If the prophecy does not come to pass, the scripture is plain in stating that the individual is not a prophet of God and that he should be put to death. There is no acceptable average of correctness other than 100% correct, 100% of the time. Anything less had grave consequences.

The president of the Mormon Church is known as the "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator" of the church. It is their duty to divine the word of God, to be His mouthpiece.

Perhaps the most embarrassing prophecy that did not come to pass is the prophecy regarding the temple in Zion. The Doctrine and Covenants, a later book of revelations given by Joseph Smith, says this about the temple:

"Verily this is the word of the Lord, that the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gathering of the saints, beginning at this place…. For verily this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord. . ."{9}

This prophecy was in reference to Jackson County, Missouri. It is interesting to note that this prophecy was given in September of 1832 and that there has not been a temple built as of this date nor within the generation of those living in 1832.

Another prophecy related to the temple in Zion is found in Doctrine and Covenants 97:19. It states: "And the nations of the earth shall honor her, and shall say: Surely Zion is the city of our God, and surely Zion cannot fall, neither be moved out of her place, for God is there. . ."

Once again it is noteworthy that a temple was not built in Missouri, but that a temple WAS built in Salt Lake City. If the prophecy is true, Salt Lake City cannot be Zion. However, if Salt Lake City is indeed Zion, the prophecy is utterly false.

On another occasion, February 14, 1835, Joseph Smith said that "it was the will of God that those who went to Zion, with a determination to lay down their lives, if necessary, should be ordained to the ministry, and go forth to prune the vineyard for the last time, or the coming of the Lord, which was nigh even fifty-six years should wind up the scene."{10} The truth regarding this prophecy that Jesus would return in 56 years is obvious to any living today. His bride is yet waiting His return after one hundred and fifty-five years.

The fact that these and other prophecies of Joseph Smith were not fulfilled leads us to only one conclusion in light of Deuteronomy 18:20-22. Joseph Smith was indeed a false prophet.

The Great Restoration or the Great Fabrication?

The Book of Mormon tells us that many of the truths of the early church were lost when the church fell into apostasy. Joseph Smith taught that after the death of Jesus Christ and the apostles, there was a total apostasy. They further teach that the churches of our day do not represent Christ and have, in fact, done away with many of the original truths of the early church. The Book of Mormon states, "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away."{11}

One major aspect of the restoration which Joseph Smith was called to establish was that of the priesthoods—both the Aaronic and the Melchizedek.

The Mormon Missionary Handbook indicates that the only ones who have the authority to baptize new believers are those who hold the Priesthood in the Mormon Church. However, when one takes a critical look, it is obvious that the concept of reintroducing the priesthoods into the church is an unbiblical endeavor.

This is of primary importance when one realizes that the structure of the Mormon Church is based on the revelation of Joseph Smith.{12} According to the past president of the Mormon Church, Spencer W. Kimball, "The priesthood is the power and authority of God delegated to man on earth to act in all things pertaining to the salvation of men. It is the means whereby the Lord acts through men to save souls. Without this priesthood power, men are lost."{13} Bishop H. Burke Peterson declared that the effectiveness of the priest's authority, or

“the power that comes through that authority—depends on the patterns of our lives; it depends on our righteousness.”{14} It is interesting to note that the priest’s power to do the will of God is not given by the Holy Spirit but comes from one’s personal righteousness.

David Witmer, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, had this to say about the Priesthoods: “This matter of ‘Priesthood,’ since the days of Sidney Rigdon, has been the great hobby and stumbling-block of the Latter- Day Saints. Priesthood means authority; and authority is the word we should use. I do not think the word priesthood is mentioned in the New Covenant of the Book of Mormon.”{15} Witmer goes on to say that it was in fact Sydney Rigdon who gave Joseph Smith the idea of reintroducing the Priesthoods. The Mormon Church had been operating for two full years before the establishing of this new line of authority. About two thousand followers were baptized into the church and confirmed without the advantage of a recognized priest.

David Witmer addresses his remarks to Joseph Smith as he continues his address to all believers in Christ by saying, “You have changed the revelations from the way they were first given and as they are today in the Book of Commandments…. You have changed the revelations to support the error of a President of the high priesthood…. You have altered the revelations to support you in going beyond the plain teachings of Christ in the new covenant part of the Book of Mormon.”{16}

Not only does Joseph Smith have problems with his revelation concerning the priesthoods with the authority of the Book of Mormon and David Witmer, but the Bible does not help him either.

It is apparent that when young Joseph was plagiarizing the Bible that he did not look very closely at the book of Hebrews. If he had, he might have realized that God had sent His Son to be the eternal High Priest.

Three Chances at Heaven

Joseph Smith was a man of revelation. Perhaps the most welcome revelations from young Joseph were his new teachings about salvation. The idea that all people would receive a measure of salvation was widely received by the Mormon Church.

As well, his teaching regarding the celestial kingdom found wide acceptance. According to Bruce R. McConkie, author of Mormon Doctrine, "Heaven is the celestial Kingdom of God."{17} LeGrand Richards, a presiding bishop of the Mormon Church, says that we have "at least five places to which we may go after death."{18} He says we "have three heavens, paradise, and the hell so often spoken of in the scriptures. . . ."{19} Joseph Smith taught that "in the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees."{20} However, according to the Holy Bible, Joseph's teaching about man's disposition after death is anything but scriptural.

The revelation or "The Vision," as it came to be known, is found in the Doctrine and Covenants and was given to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon on February 16, 1832.{21} This revelation was given by Jesus {vs. 14} to those individuals who will be in the first resurrection of the Firstborn. The Firstborn are those who held the priesthood.

The Celestial Kingdom is made up of three levels or degrees of heaven. The first, or the lower level of heaven, is known as the telestial glory. This degree of heaven is held for those "who received not the gospel of Christ, neither the testimony of Jesus,"{22} but who, nevertheless, did not deny the Holy Spirit. The Telestial Kingdom is for those who chose wickedness over godliness.

The second degree of heaven is the terrestrial glory. This level is held for those "who, though honorable, failed to comply with the requirements for exaltation, were blinded by the craftiness of men and unable to receive and obey the

higher laws of God."{23} Likewise, it is for those who rejected Christ in mortal life but accepted Him afterwards.{24}

The third, or the highest level, of heaven is that of the celestial. This degree is held for those who have received the Temple ordinances. They have been married in the Temple for all time and eternity and they are gods.{25} According to James E. Talmage, they "have striven to obey all the divine commandments,. . .have accepted the testimony of Christ, obeyed 'the laws and ordinances of the Gospel,' and received the Holy Spirit."{26} Therefore, they are entitled to the highest glory.

The remaining options for the individual who does not qualify for the celestial glories are paradise and perdition, for the Latter- day Saints do not believe in a hell. Joseph Smith put it this way: "There is no hell. All will find a measure of salvation."{27}

At death the individual's spirit goes either to paradise to later be judged and offered one of the three degrees of heaven, or his spirit is sent to perdition where it is given a chance to repent and thus gain a higher heavenly option.

Perdition, commonly known as Spirit-Prison Hell, is a temporary state even though it lasts more than a thousand years. It is interesting to note that the Book of Mormon does not seem to agree with the Doctrine and Covenants where it clearly states there is no second chance for repentance after death. Alma 34:32 states,

> *"For behold this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God….Do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end…if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place*

> *in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked."{28}*

Once again it becomes evident that Joseph Smith changed his mind regarding another key revelation, since the teaching of the Bible does not correspond to the changeableness of the Mormon prophet. We must conclude that Mormonism completely lacks of any biblical basis and is truly another gospel.

Celestial Marriage: Fact or Fiction?

Eternal Marriage is essential for exaltation. A key element of Mormon doctrine and the foundation for exaltation in the highest heaven is celestial marriage. Exaltation is the primary goal for each Mormon to achieve. To understand the Latter-Day Saints' desire to enter into an eternal marriage it is important to understand the term "exaltation."

Exaltation, according to an official Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints publication, "is eternal life, the kind of life that God lives. He lives in great glory. He is perfect. He possesses all knowledge and all wisdom. He is the father of spirit children. He is a creator. We can become gods like our Heavenly Father. This is exaltation."{29}

We find in the Book of Moses in Mormon scriptures God saying, "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."{30}—in other words, to help man and woman become gods and goddesses in the celestial kingdom.

"An eternal marriage must be performed by one who holds the sealing powers and authority"{31}—one who holds the priesthood authority. The marriage "must also be done in the proper place. The proper place is in one of the holy temples of our Lord. The temple is the only place this holy ordinance can be performed."{32} Mormons believe that if they are married by any other authority the marriage is for this life only and therefore negates their opportunity for celestial exaltation.

William Clayton, Hyrum Smith's clerk, was present when Joseph Smith first announced the revelation regarding plural and celestial marriage. Clayton wrote that from Joseph he "learned that the doctrine of plural and celestial marriage is the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on earth, and that without obedience to that principle no man can ever attain to the fullness of exaltation in celestial glory."{33}

This revelation was first given publicly at Nauvoo, Illinois, July 12, 1843. In May of that year Joseph revealed that "In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; and in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; and if he does not, he cannot obtain it."{34} Joseph goes on to reveal that "if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned."{35}

It has already been pointed out that the individual will receive a measure of salvation regardless of his disposition. The recurring question that remains is, Why should I subject myself to the regimen of the church (ie. the hassles) if I will receive salvation anyway? We find the answer further in the revelation. "We must be obedient to every covenant that we make in the temple of the Lord. He (God) has said that if we are true and faithful we shall pass by the angels to our exaltation. We will become gods."{36} The Mormon hopes to become a god himself but only if he is in complete compliance with the church.

It is noteworthy that the teaching that reveals the foundation for celestial marriage {exaltation} is not to be found in the Book of Mormon, the "most correct" of any book on earth.{37} Therefore, it seems that the motivation for entering into celestial marriage is not based on fact but on the possibility of being a god or a goddess.

The teachings of the Mormon church often go unchallenged and many in the church, along with a growing number outside its

doors believe it to be a Christian institution. Those in the church have in many cases been “fellowshipped”; that is, they have been catered to for the specific reason of gaining their membership in the church. Often these members have not clearly discerned the doctrine of the church.

Those outside the Mormon Church see the good works of its members and because of their lack of understanding of Christian teaching and their acute lack of knowledge regarding Mormon sources, they tend to think that the Mormon church is as Christian as the Baptists, Methodists and the Presbyterians.

Brigham Young, second President of the Mormon Church, challenged the world to test the teachings of the Latter-Day Saints. This essay is an answer to his challenge.

Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1979), 98.
2. Ibid., 98-99.
3. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Liverpool, 1851), 1-2.
4. Joseph Smith, Jr., The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 29:10 (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982).
5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 194. See also, The History of the Church (Vol. 4, November 28, 1841), 461.
6. Letter from the Smithsonian Institution (SIL-76, Summer 1979).
7. *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 1, p. 188.
8. The Holy Bible, New King James Version, Deuteronomy 18:20-22) Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982).
9. Doctrine and Covenants 84:1-5 (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968). See also verse 31.
10. *The History of the Church*, Vol. 2 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 2nd ed. revised, 1976), 182.

11. The Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 13:26.
12. Joseph Smith, *Pearl of Great Price* 2:68-73 (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968).
13. "The Example of Abraham," *Ensign* (June 1975):3. See also Gospel Principles, First Quorum of the Seventy, (1986), 103.
14. "Priesthood Authority and Power," *Ensign* (May 1976), 33.
15. David Witmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 64.
16. Ibid., 49.
17. McConkie, 348.
18. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1950), 263.
19. Ibid.
20. McConkie, 348.
21. Doctrine and Covenants, 76:11-119.
22. Ibid., 76:82.
23. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), 92.
24. Doctrine and Covenants, 76:73-74.
25. Doctrines and Covenants, 76:58.
26. Talmage, 91.
27. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News Press, 1951) 177-78.
28. Book of Mormon, Alma 34:32.
29. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, revised 1986), 289.
30. Ibid., 290. The Doctrine and Covenants, Moses 1:39.
31. *Gospel Principles*, 233.
32. Ibid.
33. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1977), 345.
34. Doctrine and Covenants 131:1-3.
35. Ibid., 132:4.
36. *Gospel Principles,* 234. See also Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20 and the Mormon publication by Oscar W. McConkie, Jr., God and Man (The Corporation of the Presiding Bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1963), 5.

37. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 194.

©1994 Probe Ministries.

Mormon Beliefs About the Bible and Salvation – Attacking Salvation through Christ's Grace

Russ Wise helps us understand Mormon beliefs from a Christian worldview perspective. He looks at their core teachings on the Bible and salvation and demonstrates their inconsistency with the truths of Christianity. He concludes that Joseph Smith attempted to strip Jesus Christ of His fundamental gift to humanity—salvation through grace.

The Foundational Vision of Joseph Smith

Mormonism has become America's most successful home-grown religion. An Examines Mormon doctrine about the Bible, Mormon scriptures, and salvation.April 1987 news brief in the *Dallas Morning News* reveals a nine percent rise in the conversion rate to Mormonism. The Mormon church boasts a four million membership in the United States and 6.2 million members worldwide. In fact, the Mormon church is doubling in size every ten years. It took 117 years for the Mormon church to reach one million members and a short five years to add a fourth million to its membership.

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon church in 1830, declared that he was chosen by God to restore true

Christianity to human kind. Think about it, Christianity was lost after the death of the last disciple; and Joseph Smith, a young man fourteen years of age would be used by God to restore the lost truths of Christianity. The young prophet was not greeted by enthusiasm but received ridicule instead.

Brigham Young, the successor to Joseph Smith said this about Mormonism: "I say to the whole world, receive the truth, no matter who presents it to you. Take up the Bible, compare the religion of the Latter-day Saints with it, and see if it will stand the test."{1}

According to Spencer W. Kimball, the past president of the church, the goal of the Mormon church is to bring light into the world and the charge to convert the people of the world to accept the truth. He stated: "This is what we want—the total membership of all the world as indicated by the Lord."{2} The Latter-day Saints are not only interested in converting the living to their truth but the dead as well.

In the mid 1820's a great revival broke out in the Methodist Church in upstate New York and quickly spread to the Baptist and Presbyterian churches. As a new convert, young Joseph was confused as to which church he should join. Because of his unrest he went into the woods to pray for God's guidance in the matter. It was there that he saw a vision that set a new course for his life and millions of others. However, this foundation block has been rehewn over the years.

There are no less than nine versions of this one vision. There are three versions given by Joseph Smith himself. The first version was dictated by Joseph Smith in 1838 and published in 1842. It stated that he was fourteen years of age, that God and Jesus had appeared to him and told him that all churches were wrong.{3} Another version was dictated with portions in Joseph Smith's handwriting in 1831 or 1832. It stated that he was sixteen years of age, that Jesus had appeared and that by searching the Bible, he had found that all religions were

wrong.

It's amazing to me, and I suppose you, too, that these accounts—as divergent as they are—could lend credibility to young Joseph's vision. If you were a witness of a crime and gave views as different as these, one would question your presence at the event.

Prophet David O. McKay says that: "The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this church."{4} I find it ludicrous that so many would place their faith on such a shaky foundation. Jesus called Peter the rock and that on that rock he would build his church.

Sources of Mormon Doctrine

The Book of Mormon is believed by Mormons to be the "fullness of the everlasting gospel."{5} If this is true, then why so many additions to it?

Mormon doctrine is primarily received by the Prophet of the church. The Prophet Ezra Taft Benson, spoke at Brigham Young University on February 26, 1980. During his remarks he gave the current teaching regarding the absolute authority of this high office. He stated: "Keep your eye on the President of the church. If he ever tells you to do anything, and it is wrong, and you do it, the Lord will bless you for it."

The Living Prophet is the first line of authority for the Mormons. The present Prophet can overturn any prior teaching of a past Prophet, including that of Joseph Smith. Brigham Young said that (paraphrased) when compared with the living Prophet, the Bible, the Book of Mormon and other standard works of the church are nothing to him. They do not convey the word of God as does the Prophet.

President Joseph Fielding Smith declared that at every General Conference of the church the speakers are giving forth scripture that is equal to anything in the Bible or the Book

of Mormon.

To contrast the teaching of this evolutionary prophet, the Bible tells us that God is an unchanging God. Malachi 3:6 says: “For I the Lord do not change…” God’s character does not change; He is the same yesterday, today and forever; nor does he change his mind.”

The second source of authority for the Mormon is the Doctrine and Covenants and was written after the Book of Mormon. The Doctrine and Covenants contains revelations received by Joseph Smith after the publication of the Book of Mormon. For the Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants has authority over the Book of Mormon since it reveals “latter-day” truth. It’s interesting to note that there are a large number of contradictions between the two.

The History of Joseph Smith, another source of authority, states this regarding the Book of Mormon: “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates. . ., he also said that the fullness of the everlasting gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the saviour to the ancient inhabitants.”{6}

Let me underscore the phrase “the fullness of the everlasting gospel was contained in it.” If we can allow the English language to speak for itself, I think one would have to agree that what Joseph Smith is saying here is that the Book of Mormon is the full presentation of the everlasting gospel—that God has “said it all”—right here. If this is true, then the prophet has shot himself in the foot. Where, then, lies the authority for the Doctrine and Covenants and the other standard works of the Mormon church?

The Pearl of Great Price is made up of three books: The Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham and the writings of Joseph Smith.

The Book of Abraham is unique in that it was translated much

the same way as the Book of Mormon. The Book of Abraham was translated from some ancient records from the catacombs of Egypt. Joseph Smith believed these records to be written by Abraham's own hand and called it "The Book of Abraham."

To shed light on the veracity of Joseph Smith's translation, three well-known Egyptologists were allowed to give independent translations of the papyri. Each one, independent of the other, came to the same astonishing conclusion. The Book of Abraham, as translated by Joseph Smith, was a farce. He had taken one proper name and translated it into some 85 words with eleven proper names. Joseph Smith did not get even one word correct in the whole translation. However, the manuscript was plagiarized from the Egyptian "Book of Breathings."

It is hard to reach any other conclusion than that Joseph Smith's explanations were products of his creative imagination. If, in fact, Joseph Smith's credibility concerning these sources is faulty, then can we dare assume that the balance of his teaching represents the truth?

Why Mormons Reject the Bible

Mormonism has become America's most successful home-grown religion; but are they the only true church, as they believe?

The Mormons insist that they do not reject the Bible—in fact, you might have seen their missionaries use the Bible. However, they consider it only partially complete.

The *Church News*, a Mormon newspaper, carried this statement concerning the Bible: "It is the Word of God. It is not perfect. The prophet Joseph made many corrections in it."{7}

The Book of Mormon echoes this idea in First Nephi 13:26: "… a great and abominable church which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the lamb many parts which are plain and most

precious…”

To better understand the Mormon disregard for the Bible, we need to be aware of how they view the Christian church. The apostle Orson Pratt, in his book *The Seer* says this about the Christian community: “Both Catholics and Protestants are nothing less than the ‘whore of Babylon’ whom the Lord denounces by the mouth of John the Revelator as having corrupted all the earth by their fornications and wickedness.”{8}

The Mormon church views the Christian pastor or priest as a hireling of Satan. But where did Joseph Smith get this idea?

Shortly after the religious awakening in upstate New York, Joseph Smith had a vision. In the vision he asked God which Christian church he should join. Joseph Smith writes in The Pearl of Great Price: “I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.”{9}

I believe that one could safely say that Joseph Smith considered the Christian church to be a false church. Because of this basic premise, the logical conclusion would be, if the church is false, then the source of its doctrine—the Bible—must be false as well. Therefore, one can better understand the motivation behind the eighth article of faith of the Mormon church: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.”

Joseph Smith has, in effect, set the stage whereby he can rewrite the Bible,{10} or add to it, to establish his personal theology. The Mormon church believes that Joseph Smith is God’s instrument to bring about His truth, in its entire fullness.

Whenever this attitude toward Christianity and the Bible prevails, the individual is drawn away from the Bible and to

the writings of Joseph Smith and the Mormon church. Orson Pratt said: “No one can tell whether even one verse of either the Old or New Testament conveys the ideas of the original author.”

An attempt at credibility is given the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith in Volume Four of the History of the Church where he says; “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”{11}

In essence, Joseph Smith has attempted to strip the Bible of its authority and place that authority upon the Book of Mormon and the standard works of the Mormon church.

The Bible speaks for itself. We find in scripture that God’s word will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8), that it will never pass away even though heaven and earth will someday pass away (Matthew 24:35).

According to 2 Timothy 3:16, the Bible is inspired by God; and 2 Peter 1:20 indicates that all scripture was written by men moved by the Holy Spirit.

God’s word has withstood critics, skeptics, and others who have sought to destroy it.

Mormon Doctrine

“As man is, God once was. As God is, man can become.” Is it possible that we, too, can become like God, that we can *become* God?

A chief source of doctrine for the Mormon church has been the book titled *Mormon Doctrine*{12} by the late Bruce R. McConkie. However, there are those who strongly disagree with him. The problem is simply this: McConkie contended that the true source of authority for the church is the standard works which

include The Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

The presidents of the church, however, have attempted to establish *themselves* as the final authority of the church on doctrinal matters. McConkie gives us a glimpse of the primary teachings of the church. First is the belief that, "As man is, God once was. As God is, man can become."{13} The Mormon church teaches that God was once a man and that he progressed to godhood.{14} So for the Mormon, the good news is that you too can become as God. In contrast, the Bible clearly teaches that God has been God from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 90:2).

Another belief is that individuals have to learn how to become gods themselves.{15} The road to godhood is paved with good works, and the responsibility is squarely on the shoulders of the individual.

Another belief that has received much attention is that godhood is not for men only, but for men and women together. This doctrine has spawned the teaching that God originally intended for man and woman to be joined together throughout all eternity—that the marriage covenant was to extend beyond death. The Mormon church further teaches that the practice of marrying "until death do you part" did not originate with the Lord or his servants, but is a man made doctrine.{16} This system of holy matrimony, involving covenants as to time and eternity, is know distinctively as "celestial marriage"—the order of marriage that exists in the celestial worlds.

The apostle James E. Talmage, in his book *The Articles of Faith*, says this about those who may aspire to such a marriage: "The ordinance of celestial marriage is permitted to those members of the church only who are adjudged worthy of participation in the special blessings of the House of the Lord…"{17} The use of the word "worthy" is another indication of the works orientation of the Mormon Church.

The Bible plainly teaches in Matthew 22:30 that in the resurrection men and women are no longer given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

The fourth doctrine we will look at is: God is a resurrected man. This doctrine puts forth the idea once again that God was once a man who discovered his personal godhood and elevated himself to become a god.

Joseph Smith says: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's."{18} But he contradicts himself in the Book of Mormon; in Alma 31:15 he writes: "Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, we believe…that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever." At this point Joseph is agreeing with the Bible, for we find in John 4 that "God is a spirit."

The problem of inconsistency arises for the Mormon church, when Joseph Smith contradicts himself between the Book of Mormon and the other standard works of the church—inconsistencies which point to the man-made nature of the religion. On the other hand, the Holy Bible is unique in that it has incredible unity in its message, even though it was written over a span of sixteen hundred years.

Josh McDowell, a defender of the Bible, writes: "Biblical authors wrote on hundreds of controversial subjects with harmony and continuity from Genesis to Revelation. There is one unfolding story: 'God's redemption of man.'"{19}

The Mormon Plan of Salvation

The Mormon church teaches that it is the only hope for salvation. If this is true, then why did Jesus suffer on the cross?

For many in this world, salvation is truly a slippery slope. Oftentimes the problem is that one does not really know if he possesses it or not. One of the greatest barriers to realizing

our position in Christ is that we do not have a clear understanding of the gospel. To understand the Mormon church's teaching regarding salvation we must first realize what it believes the gospel to be.

By definition the Mormon church teaches that the gospel is the Mormon church system and its doctrine.{20} The church and its doctrine becomes the good news—their gospel.

For the Christian it's not an organization but a Person who represents the gospel, and that Person is God's only begotten son, Jesus Christ. It is the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ that embodies the gospel for the true Christian. Jesus is man's savior. The Bible tells us that *JESUS* is the only way to God the Father.{21}

By contrast, Brigham Young says: "No man or woman in this dispensation will ever enter into the celestial Kingdom of God without the consent of Joseph. . . ." "He reigns there as supreme a being in his sphere, capacity, and calling as God does in heaven."{22} So for the Mormon, Joseph Smith has become the savior.

Volume One of Doctrines of Salvation says this about Joseph Smith: "No salvation without accepting Joseph Smith. If Joseph Smith was verily a prophet, and if he told the truth…then this knowledge is of the most vital importance to the entire world. No man can reject that testimony without incurring the most dreadful consequences, for he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."{23}

The Mormon church teaches that all men will receive a degree of salvation and that there is no place known as hell.{24} By incorporating this doctrine into the church, they have attempted to undercut the explicit teachings of the Bible. Furthermore, the church teaches that it ALONE is the only hope for salvation. Bruce McConkie, the Mormon scholar, says this regarding salvation: "If it had not been for Joseph Smith and

the restoration, there would be no salvation. There is no salvation outside of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."{25}

Many Mormons who may no longer fully believe the church's teachings find themselves in a dilemma. They have been so persuaded that only the Mormon church offers a hope for salvation that they lose all hope for ever obtaining it. To better understand this instruction, we need to recognize the twofold approach to salvation taught in the Mormon church.

First, is general salvation. Grace comes to the Mormon by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and there is no need for obedience to the Mormon church and its doctrine or gospel law. However, to obtain individual salvation one must meet the conditions set by the church.{26} For the Mormon, this salvation, called "eternal life," means godhood.

For the most part, the Mormon has never clearly understood the gospel of Jesus Christ because his church has so distorted Christian teaching. The outcome of this distortion is that Joseph Smith has stripped Jesus of His gift to mankind and he, Joseph, has taken the rightful place of our Lord and Savior. The Bible simply teaches that man must humble himself and receive the work Jesus did for him at the cross. Romans 10:9 put it this way: "…if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Notes

1. *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 16, 46.
2. *Church News* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, October 23, 1976), 5.
3. *The History of the Church*, Vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 536.
4. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News Press, An Improvement Era Publication, 1953), 85.

5. Pearl of Great Price, The Writings of Joseph Smith 2:34 (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968). See also, Doctrine and Covenants.
6. Writings of Joseph Smith 2:34.
7. *Church News* (March 6, 1983, editorial page).
8. Orson Pratt, *The Seer*.
9. Joseph Smith, The Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith 2:19.
10. James E. Talmadge, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), 2.
11. *History of the Church*. See also, William E. Berrett, Doctrines of the Restored Church, 325.
12. Bruce R. McConkie is perhaps the foremost Mormon scholar of this century. His book, *Mormon Doctrine*, is a pivotal book in understanding what Mormons believe.
13. Talmage, 430. See also Oscar W. McConkie, Jr., *God and Man* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Corporation of the Presiding Bishop, 1963), 5.
14. Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 5, 613-14. See also, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, 333.
15. Oscar W. McConkie, Jr., 5.
16. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1950), 193.
17. Talmage, 445.
18. Talmage, 48. See also Doctrine and Covenants 130:22.
19. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers), 19.
20. Interview with Hyrum Dalinga, fourth generation Mormon, 1985.
21. John 14:6.
22. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, 289. See also, Doctrines of Salvation, Vol. 1, 198-90.
23. *Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 1
24. Richards, 271. See also, John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith, Seeker After Truth*, 177-78.
25. John Taylor, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 6.
25. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978, revised 1986), 291.

© 1994 Probe Ministries.

Understanding Our Mormon Neighbors – As Evangelical Christians

Mormon missionaries are sounding more and more like evangelical Christians. Has something changed in Mormon theology? A group of evangelical theologians have opened a dialogue with their Mormon counterparts and argue that the LDS movement is indeed changing. Don Closson considers these changes in Mormon thinking and how it affects our dialogue with our Mormon neighbors.

Mormon Neo-orthodoxy?

Have you noticed that Mormons are sounding more and more like evangelical Christians? In the last few decades individuals inside the Mormon Church, and many outside, have noticed a shift in the content and presentation of the Mormon faith. Certain aspects of Mormon theology, like the physical, limited nature of God, are either downplayed or left unsaid. Other aspects, like salvation by faith in the justifying work of Jesus Christ, are highlighted. Is something significant happening within Mormonism? Although Mormon theology has been somewhat fluid over the decades, some feel that a new band of Mormon scholars are indeed moving the religion in a new direction and that Christians need to be aware of these changes if we are to have effective dialogue with our Mormon neighbors.

Mormon sociologist Kendall White has been writing about this

change in Mormon thinking since the 1960's. He writes that traditional Mormon theology produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by B. H. Roberts, James Talmage, and John Widtsoe, centered on an "optimistic humanism, finite theism, and [an] emphasis on human merit in attaining salvation."{1} The new movement, called neo-orthodox Mormonism by some, "stresses the omnipotence and sovereignty of God, human sinfulness and inability to merit salvation, and the necessity of salvation by grace."{2} The primary theological sources for neo-orthodox Mormons are the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The later writings of Joseph Smith, including sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and the King Follett Discourse are seen as less helpful.

White argues that this theological trend is actually a return to the earliest form of Mormon beliefs found in the 1830s. It's interesting to note that, while White admits that Mormon neo-orthodoxy is a valid form of Mormonism, he's not in favor of it. On the other hand, Robert Millet, past dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, argues that the neo-orthodox movement is a positive trend and more in line with the teachings found in the Book of Mormon.

In the book *The New Mormon Challenge* evangelical theologian Carl Mosser writes that neo-orthodox Mormons "promote an understanding of the relationship between works and grace that is openly modeled after noted evangelical pastor John MacArthur's expositions of 'Lordship salvation.'"{3} Mosser also argues that it is these neo-orthodox Mormon writers and teachers who are influencing typical Mormons today rather than those who support a more traditional Mormon theology.

The result is a new Mormon synthesis that may cause the traditional Christian to ask himself, Have the Mormons returned to the historic orthodox Christian faith? In what follows we will highlight some of this new Mormon theology in order to help the reader decide how orthodox neo-orthodox Mormonism really is.

Recent Events and Historical Patterns

It was a bit of a shock recently when I discovered that Ravi Zacharias, a highly respected Christian apologist, had addressed a mixed crowd of Mormons and evangelicals at the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. Even more interesting is the fact that after his hour long discussion on the exclusivity of Christ, Zacharias received a standing ovation from the entire crowd. The apologist was introduced by Dr. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary. Dr. Mouw began his comments by saying "Let me state it clearly, We evangelicals have sinned against you . . ." He added that not every evangelical has sinned against Mormons, but he feels that too often we are guilty of misrepresenting what most Mormons believe and ignoring their pleas when they protest. He went on to argue that traditional Christians and Mormons have enough in common to profit from a dialogue. He explained that, "when my good friend [and Brigham Young University professor] Bob Millet says that his only plea when he gets to heaven is 'the mercy and merit of Jesus Christ,' I want to respond by saying with enthusiasm, 'Let's keep talking!'" Topped off with the music of Michael Card, this was a unique event. It had been over 100 years since the last evangelical spoke in the Temple; Dwight L. Moody preached there in 1871.

When considering the traditionally negative view that evangelical Christians have of Mormons, this kind of event can be difficult to evaluate. Also challenging are the results of a recent George Barna survey that found 26% of those Mormons that participated were classified as "born again" by their responses. How can this be? Are all these Mormons being disingenuous regarding their true beliefs? Part of the answer lies in the fact that at any given moment there are more first generation converts within Mormonism than there are second generation. Since Mormon evangelism is primarily aimed at the Christian population, it is not surprising that many who attend Mormon worship services have carried with them a more

traditional theology and are often there because of the youth programs and the accepting community that often exists within Mormon Wards.

But another part of the explanation is a movement within Mormon circles that began with the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson. It has called Mormons back to their roots by focusing more on the Bible and the Book of Mormon and away from the later writings of Joseph Smith. The leaders of this movement have worked hard to distance themselves from the more speculative thoughts and writings of past LDS authorities.

Many evangelicals are hoping that the Mormon Church will go through something similar to the recent changes in the Reorganized Latter Day Saints Church. This group was an early offshoot from the main LDS Church which never did accept many of the later writings of Smith. In recent years, its numbers have declined significantly because many have turned back towards a traditional evangelical theology.

The Mormon Neo-Orthodox Movement

Stephen Robinson is professor of ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He and Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, co-wrote the book “How Wide the Divide” which explores both the similarities and distance between evangelical and Mormon theology regarding revelation, the nature of God, the person of Christ, and what one must do to be saved. Robinson passionately implores evangelicals to not give into a caricature of Mormon theology, one that few Mormons actually believe. He argues that there are legitimate reasons for misunderstanding between Mormons and evangelicals. They both use identical theological terms in different ways; in fact the LDS Church as a whole lacks a sophisticated theological language. Also, Mormonism’s lack of professional clergy, creeds, catechisms, or theologians in the strict sense often contributes to the confusion.

In his book with Blomberg, Robinson complains that Mormons are chastised because they take the Bible too literally, actually believing everything in it that is written about God. He accuses evangelicals of accepting second and third century explanations of biblical truth that are dependent upon Greek philosophical thought rather than on what the Bible actually says. Both Blomberg and Robinson agree that the two sides hold to a very different description of God and humanity. But they also conclude that many of our differences are found in areas where the Bible is silent and where the Mormon canon has claimed to fill in the void with new revelation.

However, Robinson's greatest concern is that evangelicals take him and other Mormons seriously when they claim to believe certain things to be true. For instance, Robinson believes that "through the atonement of Christ, fallen humanity may be saved by accepting and obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ."{4} He also argues that Mormons believe in the God of the Bible, "the Eternal Father, and in God's Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost."{5} He adds that they accept the biblical description of God as three and also one, but not the post-New Testament attempts to explain how this can be reconciled.

It would be more than impolite to accuse Dr. Robinson of being less that genuine when he personally claims to believe something. However, he admits that there is much theological speculation within Mormon circles and that it can be difficult to discover exactly what represents official Mormon doctrine.

Let's consider some specific examples of Dr. Robinson's beliefs and compare them to both traditional Mormon and Christian theology.

Robinson describes God as omniscient, omnipresent, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. However, he also believes that God and man are of the same nature or species, and that God has a body of flesh and blood. He denies that this constitutes a finite theism, a charge often attributed to Mormons. Robinson

also states that salvation is only acquired through grace by faith in Jesus Christ. He argues at length that Mormons do not believe that one can be justified by works in the eyes of a righteous and Holy God, but instead that works follow justification and conversion. He attributes evangelical claims that Mormons believe otherwise to confusion about Mormon terminology and a deficient desire to really understand what Mormons teach.

How do these theological positions compare with traditional Mormon thought? Is this a new or neo-orthodox Mormonism? Mormonism has always held that God has attained his position via a path of eternal progression, and comments to that effect by past Mormon leaders seem to conflict with Robinson's statements. For instance, when Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde said that God was once a child who rose step by step to be where he is today, it appears to contradict the idea of an unchangeable deity. Apostle John Widtsoe states the issue even more plainly. He says that God "must now be engaged in progressive development and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today."{6}

Robinson argues that there was once a time, before the beginning of our creation, that God was human. But he adds that any speculation about the events of that time is done so without support from the Bible or LDS literature. Robinson is different from earlier Mormons in being unwilling to speculate on how, or even when God rose from a finite human to an infinite God, but he still believes that it happened.

Robinson's beliefs about God are dramatically different from traditional Christian, and I believe biblical, teachings. The Mormon god is contingent or dependent on matter rather than its creator. He is finite in the sense that there was a time when he was not God, no matter how long ago that might have been. He is obviously not the First Cause or only self-existent being. Even though Robinson refuses to speculate on the origin of God, Mormon views imply that God is the

offspring of other Gods, leading to polytheism which the Bible calls idolatry. As God said through Isaiah long ago, “I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.”{7}

Are Mormons Christian?

Above we introduced ideas about salvation from the Mormon scholar Dr. Stephen Robinson, professor of Ancient Scriptures at Brigham Young University. He states that individuals are saved by accepting the gift God has provided in his perfect Son, Jesus Christ. Robinson believes that “If humans accept this gift and enter the gospel covenant by making Christ their Lord, they are justified of their sins, not by their own works and merits, but by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ accepted on their behalf.”{8} He admits that the LDS Church is thoroughly Arminian, rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of eternal security, but that this shouldn’t remove them from the sphere of biblical Christianity.

While not doubting that Dr. Robinson believes all this to be true, it is difficult to interpret Mormon doctrine in light of past statements by Mormon leaders and in Mormon writings. For instance, how do we interpret the Book of Mormon when it states “for we know that it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do”?{9} Or when Joseph Smith writes “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel”?{10} Even more disconcerting are statements made by Bruce McConkie, a popular Mormon writer. He writes that, “Repentance is a gift from God conferred upon those who earn the right to receive it. It comes by obedience to law.” And again, he writes, it is a gift “reserved for those who abide the law that entitles them to receive it.”{11} These statements point to an earned salvation based upon individuals fulfilling legalistic obligations, the kind of religion that Paul condemns in the book of Galatians.

Mormon teaching tools, such as the booklet *Gospel Principles,* also make statements that appear to contradict a gospel of grace. In a chapter titled "Freedom to Choose" the book states, "We began to make choices as spirit children in our Heavenly Father's presence. Our choices there made us worthy to come to earth. Our heavenly Father wants us to grow in faith, power, knowledge, wisdom, and all other good things. If we keep his commandments and make right choices, we will learn and understand. We will become like him."{12} Not only does this teach that salvation depends on works during this life, but also on works performed during a pre-existence as spirit beings.

In spite of the recent changes in Mormon theology, a person who holds to the full spectrum of Mormon teachings has a view of God, salvation, and particularly the relationship between mankind and its creator, that is radically different from what traditional Christians believe and what we think the Bible teaches. This is not a reason to stop talking with Mormons; in fact, it is why we need to continue to express the reasons for the hope that we have in Christ.

Notes

1. Carl Mosser, *The New Mormon Challenge,* ed. By Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) p. 78.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 79.
4. Blomberg and Robinson, *How Wide the Divide* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL., 1997) p. 16.
5. Ibid.
6. Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2000) p. 28.
7. Isaiah 45:5
8. Blomberg and Robinson, 144.
9. 2 Nephi 25:23
10. Blomberg and Robinson, 177.

11. Ibid., 178.
12. *Gospel Principles* (Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), p. 19.

© 2005 Probe Ministries