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.

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