

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.

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