

Mormonism 101 Kevin DeYoung

Mormonism is back in the news. And with two Mormon presidential candidates, including Mitt Romney (running for the Republican nomination), there's a good chance we will be hearing much more about Mormonism for the next twelve months. Denny Burk has a very helpful piece on [whether Mormonism is a cult](#), and Albert Mohler has written a thoughtful article on ["Mormonism, Democracy, and the Urgent Need for Evangelical Thinking."](#) I won't repeat their arguments, except to reiterate Mohler's reminder that voting for a president should include examining the candidate's religious beliefs, but should include other considerations as well.

Presidential elections are important. But believing the truth is even more important. With that in mind, I thought it might be helpful to provide a brief overview of Mormon history and theology. I won't try to debunk Mormonism or prove Christianity. But I hope this quick survey will show that the two are not the same.

Mormon History Joseph Smith was born in rural Vermont in 1805, the fourth of nine children. With little success farming in Vermont, the Smith family moved west to Palmyra, New York. There Joseph Smith was exposed to different revival movements, and most of his family became Presbyterians, though Smith later said he leaned toward Methodism.

The presence of so many variations of Christianity bothered Smith. Which one was right? How could he choose? At one revival meetings, a preacher quoted from [James 1:5](#) "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (KJV). Smith, 14 years old at the time, went home, reflected on these words, and went into the woods to pray.

According to Mormon tradition, this is when Joseph Smith had his first vision. In this visions, which is foundational to the Mormon faith, Smith claimed to see two "personages." The one-God the Father-pointed to the other and said "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" Smith asked them what sect he should join. They answered that he should join none of them. They were all wrong. All their creeds were an abomination and their believers corrupt.

Three years later, Mormons believe Smith received another vision. In this vision the angel Moroni told Smith of golden plates buried under a hill near Palmyra. The plates were revealed in 1827 when Smith was provided with two reading crystals—urim and thummim—by which he could translate the writing (Smith claimed the plates were written in hieroglyphics). In 1830 Smith published The Book of Mormon, which contains the story of the lost Israelites who migrated to America in the sixth century BC but were killed in battle in AD 428. Smith later received another vision from John the Baptist giving him the Aaronic Priesthood.

That same year (1830) Smith founded the "Church of Christ." In 1838 he changed the name to "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints."

Smith continued to receive revelations telling him to move from New York to Ohio to Missouri and eventually to Illinois where he and his followers built a town called Nauvoo. There Smith and his followers tried to live out an utopian vision of society. They also instituted polygyny as early Mormon leaders argued that Jesus had had many wives. Smith and his brother were arrested in 1844. Later a mob stormed the jail and killed them both. Mormons consider Smith a martyr. Others say he died in a violent shoot-out.

Following Smith's death there was a schism. A small group called the Josephites became the Reorganized Church with headquarters in Missouri. Most followed Brigham Young, who became their First President and prophet. In 1847, Young took the followers to Utah and built Salt Lake City.

Today there are more than ten million Mormons worldwide-about half in the United States. Mormonism is the largest new religious movement from the West since Christianity (which really came from the Near East). It is also the first homegrown American religion. Mormonism continues to grow because of its missionary impulse and its commitment to doctrinal and ethical distinctives.

Mormon Theology Let me highlight seven areas of Mormon doctrine. I hope you will see the explicit deviation from the historic Christian faith.

1. *View of history.* In Mormon thinking, the rise of Mormonism was not merely a reformation or renewal of the church. It was a complete restoration. Following the death of Christ's apostles, the church fell into complete apostasy. The church lost divine authority and true doctrine. There is no unbroken continuity from the early church to the present. Christianity, for almost all of its history, was false and without the truth—until Joseph Smith and his revelation. As Mohler points out, Mormonism not only rejects historic orthodox Christianity, their whole religion is based on the need for such repudiation.

2. *View of revelation.* Mormons believe the Bible (the KJV version), but do not consider it inerrant. Neither do they consider the Bible complete. What makes Mormonism unique is their belief in continuing revelation sustained through prophets, seers, and revelators. So while Mormons affirm the Bible, they also affirm the inspiration of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Through an elaborate hierarchy of President, First Presidency, Twelve Apostles, First Quorum of the Seventy, and Second Quorum of the Seventy, Mormons can receive authoritative interpretations and new authoritative revelations.

3. View of man. According to Mormon theology, men and women are the spirit sons and daughters of God. We lived in a premortal spirit existence before birth. In this first estate we grew and developed in preparation for the second estate. In this second estate we walk by faith in this second state. A veil of forgetfulness has been placed over our minds so we don't remember what we did and who we used to be in our premortal existence. Our purpose in this life is to grow and mature in a physical body to prepare us for our final eternal state. Mormons do not believe in human depravity. We are not implicated in Adam's fall. We are basically good in our eternal nature, but prone to error in our mortal nature. The human is a being in conflict, but also a being with infinite potential.

4. View of God. In Mormon thought, God has a physical body. According to Doctrine and Covenants, "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also;" but "The Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit." Whether God the Father is self-existent is unclear. There was a long procession of gods and fathers leading up to our Heavenly Father. Brigham Young once remarked, "How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds." What is clearer is that the Mormon God is not a higher order or a different species than man. God is a man with a body of flesh and bones like us. Mormons do not believe in the Trinity. They will talk about the unity of three personages, but the unity is a relational unity in purpose and mind, not a unity of essence. The three separate beings of the Godhead are three distinct Gods.

5. View of Christ. Mormons believe Jesus is Redeemer, God, and Savior. He is endless and eternal, the only begotten son of the Father. Through Jesus, the Heavenly Father has provided a way for people to be like him and to live with him forever. But this familiar language does not mean the same thing to Mormons as it does to Christians. Jesus was born of the Father just like all spirit children. God is his Father in the same way he is Father to all. Whatever immortality or Godhood Jesus possesses, they are inherited attributes and powers. He does not share the same eternal nature as the Father. Jesus may be divine, but his is a derivative divinity. As one Mormon theologian puts it, Jesus "is God the Second, the Redeemer."

6. View of the Atonement. Mormons believe Jesus died for sins and rose again from the dead. The atonement is the central event in history and essential to their theology. And yet, Mormons do not have a precise doctrine of the atonement. They do not emphasize Christ as wrath-bearing substitute, but emphasize simply that Christ somehow mysteriously remits our sins through his suffering. While the atonement itself is not overly defined, the way in which the atonement is made efficacious is much more carefully delineated. Salvation is available because of the atoning blood of Christ, but this salvation is only received upon four conditions: faith, repentance, baptism, and enduring to the end by keeping the commandments of God (which include various Mormon rituals). Finally, it should be noted Mormon theology stresses the suffering in the garden rather than the suffering on the cross. Atonement may have been completed on Golgotha, but it was made efficacious in Gethsemane.

7. View of salvation. The goal of Mormon salvation is not about escaping wrath as much as it is about maximizing our growth and insuring our happiness. Salvation is finding our way back to God the Father and recalling our forgotten first estate as his premortal spirit children. Mormon theology teaches that we cannot receive eternal reward by our own unaided efforts. In some respects, salvation is based on what we have earned, but what we earn is by grace. How this plays out in Mormon life may differ from person to person, but they stress that the gift of the Holy Ghost is conditional upon continued obedience. Mormons must keep the First Principles and Ordinances, which consists of the Ten Commandments, tithing, chastity, and the "Word of Wisdom" which prohibits tobacco, coffee tea, alcohol and illegal narcotics.

Temples are also important in Mormon doctrine and practice. Couples must be married in a Mormon temple to have eternal marriage, and every Mormon must be baptized in one of their 135 (and counting) authorized Temples. Because of the importance of baptism in the Temple, baptisms for the dead are extremely common. Mormons keep detailed genealogical records so that their ancestors can be properly baptized. By one estimate more than 100 million deceased persons have been baptized by proxy baptism in Mormon temples. Those who received this baptism are free in the afterlife to reject or accept what has been done on their behalf.

Death in Mormon thinking is seen as another beginning, complete with opportunities to respond to postmortem preaching in the world to come. We will live in the spirit world, and at some point our spirit and body will be reunited forever.

There are four divisions in the afterlife. The Lake of Fire is reserved for the Devil, his demons, and those who commit the unpardonable sin. The Telestial Kingdom is where the wicked go. It is a place of suffering but not like the Lake of Fire. Most people go to the Telestial Kingdom where they are offered salvation again. The lukewarm-not quite good, not quite evil-go to the Terrestrial Kingdom when they die. This Kingdom is located on a distant planet in the universe. The Celestial Kingdom is for the righteous. Here God's people live forever in God's presence. We will live as gods and live with our spouses and continue to procreate. This is the aim and the end of Mormon salvation.

Conclusion I encourage you to study Mormonism for yourself if you have more questions. I think you'll find that though the language sounds similar at times, the beliefs are quite distinctive. ***Mormons do not understand history, God, man, salvation, heaven, hell, the cross, Jesus, or the Trinity as the canonical Scriptures teach, nor do they agree with the doctrine taught by the holy, catholic, apostolic church over two millennia.***