



STATEMENT DM387

Marching Toward Respectability

After 97 days of walking, riding, pushing handcarts and pulling wagons over more than 1,100 miles, the survivors came to the end of the trail....” reports Kathy Stickel in the 23 July 1997 *Los Angeles Times*.

Stickel was a participant in the 150th anniversary retracing of the Mormon Trail, and a descendant of some of the original 60,000 to 70,000 Mormon pioneers who blazed the trail in the last century.

Designed to commemorate the trek of Mormon emigrants who journeyed from Illinois and surrounding areas 150 years ago to flee religious persecution after the death of Joseph Smith (founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), the event and the publicity surrounding it speak volumes about the modern LDS’s quest for respectability.

Paying homage to their founder, nearly 10,000 people partook in this year’s strenuous wagon train experience for anywhere from a day to several weeks.

Outfitted with period costumes and covered wagons (plus with a few modern amenities like walkie-talkies and portable toilets), they tried to recreate the experience of their forebears. Participants may have found the recreation a little *too* real at times. For example, when near the end of the trail three travelers were hospitalized after their mules bolted on a steep hill, throwing them from their wagon.

(The original march was a much more dangerous affair, claiming more than 6,000 lives before it became obsolete with the opening of the railroad in 1869. Gordon B. Hinckley, President of the LDS church, describes the migration for *The Wall Street Journal* as “at once one of the most brilliant and tragic experiments in all western migration.”)

Remarkably, all of the 150 full-time crew members who pledged to travel the length of the trail completed the trek. They were greeted by more than 50,000 people at This Is the Place State Park in the mountains above the Great Salt Lake, Utah. (The park’s name derives from what Brigham Young is said to have declared upon leading the first pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley.)

CRI staff member Marian Bodine, who has researched Mormonism for more than 23 years, notes that the LDS church has been sponsoring small Mormon Trail wagon trains for many years. But this year’s commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the opening of the trail was an opportunity for an all-out campaign for good publicity.

Bodine points out that this is consistent with the Mormon church’s recent attempts to pass as a “mainstream” Christian church. Ironically, while the original migration was a response to persecution, recreations of the march are used to gain public favor and further Mormon acceptability within mainstream life.

The church’s efforts seem to be paying off. The 4 August 1997 issue of *Time* magazine reports the Mormon church now has an estimated worldwide membership of almost 10 million (4.8 million in the U.S.) and is one of the fastest growing religions in the world.

In its growth, the Mormon church has had to disguise or overcome its long history of unpopular — even repugnant — doctrines, such as polygamy and barring black men from church office, and its opposition to such essential Christian teachings as the doctrine of the Trinity and the historical continuity of the Christian church, among others.

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For example, *Time* reports that Mormons reject being called “polytheistic,” because while they do claim the existence of other gods presiding over other worlds, they believe that humans deal with only one God.

But this is a distinction without a difference. Technically known as “henotheism,” this *is* a form of polytheism and explicitly denies that the biblical God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the one true and eternal God who is sovereign over all, including whatever “other worlds” there may be. “This is what the LORD says... I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God” (Isa. 44:6).

Time also points out the infamous statement of Lorenzo Snow, an early president and prophet of the Mormon Church, who said, “As man is now, God once was; as God is now, man may become.” But the God of the Bible says, “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me” (Isa. 43:10).

Even nontheologians are noticing the Mormons’ attempts to cover up their real beliefs. *Time* comments that in their interview with president Hinckley, the prophet of the LDS church “seemed intent on downplaying his faith’s distinctiveness.”

Undeniably, much of the LDS’s public appeal relates to their tremendous financial savvy. What may not be so obvious is that the Mormon church requires its members to pay a 10 percent income tax (tithe). “So great is the tithe flow that scholars have suggested it constitutes practically the intermountain states’ only local counterbalance in an economy otherwise dominated by capital from East and West coasts,” *Time* notes.

Time also points out that the church sustains an internal welfare system that depends solely on gifts given by church members above and beyond the tithe. Moreover, the church also invests vast amounts of money, which *Time* estimates to be \$6 billion strong and largely “invested directly in church-owned for-profit concerns.”

The newsmagazine hits the nail on the head when it observes, “In a country where religious unanimity is ever less important but material achievement remains the earthly manifestation of virtue, their creed may never face rejection again.” In an era when image is everything, what president Hinckley describes as the “sociability of Mormonism” is very appealing. The apparent success of the Mormon church has little in common with biblical truth, but speaks to the heartfelt wants of many hurting and needy people.

While the teachings of Mormonism are deeply unbiblical, as evangelicals we should ask ourselves whether we are willing to do as much for the truth, and with as much zeal, as Mormons appear to have mustered in contending for a lie.