



STATEMENT DM-415

MORMONISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

by Latayne C. Scott

Summary

The Mormon concept of, and approach to, the subject of truth is radically different from that of the Bible in at least nine ways. A Mormon sees truth as (1) constantly changing, (2) as going, in culture and practice, far beyond written doctrine, (3) as determined by subjective feelings, and (4) as often divorced from its history. (5) The Mormon approach to truth is compromised by a heritage of deception as practiced by leaders from founder Joseph Smith to today's Elder Paul Dunn. In addition, (6) truth to a Mormon is "layered" in the way that it is presented to prospective converts. And (7) the Church itself routinely edits both its own history and doctrine to make it seem consistent and palatable. In practice, therefore, (8) truth often yields to what the Church views as expedient. In the final analysis, (9) the Mormon concept of truth depends upon the character of its god, who as defined by LDS doctrine is constantly changing and himself ultimately human in nature.

The most basic Mormon statement of faith, known as "bearing your testimony," is taught to young children to repeat from their first chance to speak in a "fast and testimony meeting" until their dying day. It consists of a very simple yet psychologically potent affirmation: "I know the Church is true."

I believe from my own past experience as a Latter-day Saint that for most Mormons this statement encompasses two elements. First, to be a member of the only "true" church implies that all other churches are "false." Second, I believed (as wholeheartedly faithful Mormons do) that this emotional confirmation of the Church's truthfulness was supported by continuing revelation.

Now, after eighteen years' distance from the Mormon Church — years in which I have matured as a Christian — I see that the biblical concept of truth is diametrically opposed to the Mormon one. This is borne out in nine major areas which involve not only the Mormon Church's view of history and veracity, but its world view and theology as a whole.

TRUTH AS CONSTANTLY CHANGING

As a faithful Mormon I was confident that, because of continuing revelation from God to the prophet of the church, whatever my leaders told me took into account new developments in human history. I reasoned, for example, that since the birth control pill hadn't been invented until the twentieth century, it was useless to look for clues about its rightness or wrongness in a flawed, 2,000-year-old book (the Bible) when I had a direct line to God through His prophet on such issues. I was proud that Mormon doctrine is flexible, believing that although it can conform to contemporary situations, all new revelation dovetails with previous doctrines without contradiction.

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Of course, even the most unbiased and cursory study of Mormonism reveals that the church's doctrine has undergone *major* changes in the past 160 years (with polygamy being the most obvious example). The official explanation of doctrines which conflict with prior teachings is that the church's "prophet, seer and revelator" — its president — is authorized as the only one who "writes something or speaks something that goes beyond anything that you can find in the standard church works" (i.e., its scriptures).¹

Mormons have told me that such changes are really no different from those Jesus made when He came to earth and dramatically altered the way we are to worship. Indeed, Hebrews 7:12 emphasizes that a change in covenant necessitates a change in law. But the cataclysmic, one-time change in law that Jesus — Himself the "fulfillment of the law" (Matt. 5:17) — instituted can hardly be equated with the way that Mormon doctrine, as formulated by its various prophets, has waffled on major issues throughout its history. (Bible students will note that one's *perception* of truth is often progressive. In 1 Corinthians 3:2 Paul scolded his readers for letting their worldliness keep them on a diet of doctrinal milk when they should have matured in their understanding. However, there is a vast difference between one's own changing perception of truth and the Mormon belief that doctrinal truth *itself* is subject to ongoing revision.)

TRUTH AS WRITTEN ON THE MORMON HEART

As any sociologist can attest, the practices and beliefs of a people are determined by their *world view*. This refers to the way they process information about the world and life based on their preconceptions and past experiences. These preconceptions and experiences often influence attitudes and behavior more than any formulated doctrine. This is especially true in Mormonism, which as a subculture (and not merely a religion) structures a world view that is often beyond an outsider's understanding.

For example, while there is very little written doctrine about the function of the special undergarments to be worn at all times by Mormons who have received their temple "endowments," there is a rich heritage of folklore describing how these sacred garments have saved soldiers from bullets, fire victims from burns, and others from death. Virtually all Mormon children learn such stories and grow up with them as a part of their world view.

In *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn notes that "the magic world view and practice of magic rarely substitute for religion, but do manifest a personal, rather than institutional, religious focus. Although one may label magic and religion in various ways, it is more difficult to differentiate between external manifestations of the two."²

For this reason, the Christian trying to communicate biblical truth to a Latter-day Saint must never forget that the Mormon's substructure of faith often extends far beneath the level of formal, written doctrine. When I began to write *The Mormon Mirage* (Zondervan, 1979), which tells of how and why I left the Mormon Church after ten happy years, I was especially grateful that I had extensive written notes of meetings I'd attended as well as the journal I'd kept. These still illustrate to me that there is often a considerable difference between the way a system of thought is *taught* and the way in which it is *believed* and *practiced*.

TRUTH AS DETERMINED BY SUBJECTIVE TESTIMONY

If one asks any Latter-day Saint for the primary proof that the Book of Mormon is true, he or she will assuredly point to the promise it gives in Moroni 10:4-5: "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost." A physical sensation called a "burning in the bosom" is the spiritual confirmation from the Holy Ghost often said to accompany the conviction that a given thing is "true."

Not only written scripture is subject to such subjective confirmation. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., who was a counselor in the church's First Presidency to three of its prophets, once advised members that "we can tell when the [General Authorities] are 'moved upon by the Holy Ghost,' only when we, ourselves, are 'moved on by the Holy Ghost.' In a way, this completely shifts the responsibility from them to us to determine when they so speak."³

Mormon truth, then, is in one sense the domain of the heart and its perceptions. This is in distinct contrast to biblical teachings (which nowhere invite the reader to subjectively "test" them) and in direct opposition to the Bible's repeated warnings that the heart is deceitful and unreliable (e.g., Jer. 17:9; Prov. 19:21).

The introduction of new doctrine is a touchy subject for Mormons, showing that there are limits to this subjective approach. As noted earlier, only the church's president can "go beyond" previous doctrine in giving the church new revelation. Mormon doctrine also states that one can only receive revelation — personal communication from God — for oneself and for those of inferior rank in the church.⁴ For a woman (or a man low in the priesthood echelons), recourse to "revelation" to determine truth is severely limited — and, consequently, so are viable criticism and reform. This is quite unlike the biblical profile of prophets like Jeremiah who were called by God to challenge and rebuke their priesthood leaders.

TRUTH AS DIVORCED FROM HISTORY

When I was a Mormon I knew that the original printing of the Book of Mormon had some errors in it, but that Joseph Smith had nonetheless declared it "the most correct of any book on earth."⁵ I later learned that there were over four thousand "errors." Most were errors in grammar and punctuation, but some that were later "corrected" represented significant doctrinal changes.⁶ This process has continued for over 150 years, and includes the 1981 change of the Book of Mormon prophecy that "Lamanites" (Indians) who become Mormons would become "white and delightsome" (which now reads "pure and delightsome").⁷

The Mormon Church has been peerlessly cavalier in changing not only its own scriptures, but even its history, as Mormon scholars themselves repeatedly and publicly lament.⁸ Historical events such as the Mountain Meadows Massacre; doctrinally inspired practices such as "blood atonement" (the taking of life as an atonement for a person's sins), administered by the church's "Avenging Angels," the Danites;⁹ and teachings like Brigham Young's repeated identification of Adam as God the Father between 1852 and 1877¹⁰ are conspicuously absent from many Mormon historical and doctrinal books.

Such alterations and omissions accompany the astounding doctrinal changes of Mormonism. A member of Joseph Smith's 1831 flock, Book of Mormon in hand, would be aghast at a church which teaches that God has a physical body and once lived on another earth; that man can himself progress to godhood; or that temple worship, eternal marriage, and genealogical research are essential for "exaltation" or eternal life. All of these are, of course, basic twentieth-century Mormon doctrine, but they appear in neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon.

TRUTH AS BETRAYED BY HISTORY

Many Mormons were shocked and ashamed when it came to light in 1991 that one of the church's most sought-after inspirational speakers, Elder Paul H. Dunn of the First Quorum of the Seventy, had blatantly lied for years about having played baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals and being the only uninjured survivor of his thousand-man combat group in World War II. Dunn's best-selling books and tapes have inspired generations with their dramatic, eyewitness stories of professional athletics, miraculous rescues, and divine protection.

The trouble is, not one of his best-known stories is completely true; they are — according to Dunn's own admission — fabrications and combinations of events that he felt were necessary to "illustrate points that would create interest."¹¹ Unfortunately, this tendency to exaggerate and fabricate — and, in some cases, to lie outright — is one that Dunn inherited, at least in spirit, from his predecessors in the church's leadership.

Joseph Smith concealed his youthful occultic pursuits as a peepstone-gazer and treasure-digger.¹² After introducing the doctrine of polygamy, he practiced it while denying that he was doing so. Later, when polygamy was renounced, Mormon prophets such as Joseph F. Smith continued to practice it in secret and to solemnize plural marriages.¹³ Even today, faithful Mormons in Utah and other places turn a blind eye to the activities of friends and neighbors who illegally practice polygamy.

Sometimes such disregard for truth is displayed in deliberate cover-up tactics, as when high church leaders "stonewalled" the investigation of the connection of the Mark Hofmann forged-documents scam (a scam for which prominent church leaders had fallen) to the nationally publicized bombings in Salt Lake City in October of 1985.¹⁴

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Years ago I would have said that such deceptive practices were an aberration for both the church and its adherents. However, I have found too much evidence to the contrary. As a further example, Robert Lindsey, the respected investigative reporter who covered the Hofmann case in his best-selling book *A Gathering of Saints* (Simon and Schuster, 1988), characterized spying in the Mormon Church as "commonplace." I have corresponded with at least one individual, Steven L. Mayfield (a.k.a. Stan Fields), who wrote me claiming that he had left the church and needed my emotional support. Later I learned from Jerald and Sandra Tanner's book *Unmasking a Mormon Spy* (Modern Microfilm, 1980) that this man was in the employ of a church official and infiltrated ex-Mormon groups to dig up information to impugn the character of ex-Mormons.

TRUTH AS A LAYERED REALITY

Truth, as presented to a prospective convert to Mormonism, is layered much like plywood: the outer surface is attractive, but, like the inner layers, is incapable of sustaining much weight until bonded with the others. Missionaries are trained to present carefully structured "lessons" that are designed to force conclusions based on incorrect premises. For instance, an "investigator," or prospective member, will conclude that there was a need for the true church to be divinely restored if he or she *first* accepts the faulty premise that it was utterly lost from the earth in the second century A.D. The investigator is carefully guided down a specific doctrinal path and urged to commit to a baptismal date, while missionaries postpone answering questions about "hot" issues like polygamy. Other basic Mormon tenets are skimmed over — issues like the Heavenly Father's prior existence as a mortal man — while the Book of Mormon, priesthood authority, and the church's ecclesiastical structure are stressed. The most overtly unbiblical issues are not covered until much later, after the convert is less inclined to dispute them.

What an enormous contrast with the Christian life, which has no hidden doctrines or ceremonies and where access to the "mysteries" is determined only by one's personal relationship with the Mystery-Giver and His Word.

THE CHURCH AS THE GUARDIAN OF THE TRUTH

In Mormonism, as in other pseudo-Christian cults, the organization's leadership sets itself up as a shield to protect its members from factual information it regards as potentially harmful. Thus, instead of defending its members from outside attack, it must concentrate its efforts on guarding them from their own past; not only defining truth, but regulating how and when it will be disseminated.

As a young Latter-day Saint I was continually admonished not to read anything critical of the Mormon Church, and I obeyed without question. Recently Apostle Boyd K. Packer offered a definition of "faithful history" as "history that bolsters belief and avoids awkward or embarrassing detail."¹⁵ Thus, in the Mormon mind, to read anything unsupportive of Mormonism, far from reflecting openmindedness, is actually an act of faithlessness.

And how does the church deal with people or facts that include "awkward or embarrassing detail"? Consider the case of BYU teacher Lynn Packer. Packer publicly revealed the glaring discrepancies in Elder Dunn's stories. He found, for instance, that Dunn's legendary tale of how his closest wartime buddy, Harold Lester Brown, died in his arms in Okinawa couldn't be true because Brown is very much alive in Odessa, Missouri. When these and many other lies and embellishments came to light, the church gave Dunn "emeritus" status due to "factors of age and health."¹⁶ But "shortly afterwards...[Dunn] was traveling and speaking, and...took young men around the nation on a baseball tour."¹⁷ His books and tapes are still carried by the church-owned Deseret Book chain.

Packer, on the other hand, was sternly warned not to publish his findings about Dunn's stories; when he did, he was terminated from his BYU teaching position "in part because [he] was violating church and university policies that prohibit public criticism of church leaders, even if the criticism is true."¹⁸

TRUTH AS WHAT IS PRACTICAL

The Mormon concept of truth often has little to do with what is historically verifiable, nor with how a concept fits with prior Mormon "revelation." In many cases, it is more closely identified with expediency: If it works, it's right.

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LDS history is rife with examples. The "eternal doctrine" of plural marriage was rescinded as an *earthly* practice (Mormons believe it will be enjoyed in the next life) by means of a revelation known as the Manifesto, given by Mormon president Wilford Woodruff. This "revelation" came to Woodruff after the Supreme Court's landmark 1879 decision *Reynolds v. the United States* upheld the prohibition of polygamy in the Utah territory. Woodruff realized that Utah would never achieve statehood unless plural marriages were dropped.

In June of 1978 the church's leadership found itself in similar circumstances as it faced two difficult situations. First, missionary efforts in places like Brazil had reaped large numbers of converts, most of whom had at least some African ancestry (disqualifying them for the priesthood, thereby making it difficult to cultivate indigenous Mormon leadership). LDS leaders also perceived threats in both the outcome of a recent court case on racial discrimination and in the possibility of an IRS review of the church's tax-exempt status. So, in a tersely-worded statement (a far cry from earlier revelations, which began with "Thus saith the Lord") the church announced that blacks were suddenly eligible for the priesthood it had denied them for almost 150 years.

The Mormon Church is most anxious to present itself to the Christian world as "one of us." Its slick magazine advertisements, its polished *Home Front* television spots stressing moral values, and its desire to air television programs on Christian stations all reflect a concerted effort to be accepted. "We believe just like you do," I've heard many a Mormon say; "We're Christians, too."

Quite a different picture, though, is presented in *Are Mormons Christians?* (Bookcraft, 1991), a recent book by BYU professor Stephen E. Robinson. Not only does he call Mormonism the only "true Christianity," he also identifies all other groups bearing Christ's name as practitioners of the bastardized offspring of Greek philosophy and a supposed "original Christian" (i.e., Mormon) doctrine. However offensive a Christian may find this idea, at least Robinson is telling the truth — the *real* truth — about where honest Mormons place their religion in relation to orthodox Christianity.

TRUTH AS A REFLECTION OF THE MORMON GOD

The ultimate key to understanding how Mormons view and treat truth is not found only in looking at the way they deal with history, or doctrinal issues, or even integrity in stating facts. We make a crucial mistake when we look at any cultic group and try to ascertain its motives by examining only its teachings or earthly leaders. People make mistakes, tell lies, and go to great lengths to uphold and protect individuals and ideals they believe in.

Historical, orthodox Christianity has always focused on truth as absolute and unchanging precisely because its God is absolute and unchanging. In the words of Hebrews 13:8, "He is the same yesterday, today and forever."

Similarly, the key to Mormon truth is found in its ultimate truth-giver; its god. Mormons believe that the being who made this earth was himself once a mortal human. Their doctrine of eternal progression — that their god is changing, becoming more perfect each day — necessarily implies that this being was less perfect each day we look backward into his past.

Thus, if one accepts the untenable premise that such a being exists, then one must also accept the logical implication that Mormon truth is also like its creator — constantly changing and ultimately human in origin.

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NOTES

¹ President Harold B. Lee, "The Place of the Living Prophet, Seer, and Revelator," address to Seminaries and Institutes of Religion faculty, Brigham Young University, 8 July 1954, 14; as quoted in *Teachings of the Living Prophets* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, n.d.), 148.

² D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), as quoted on the book's jacket. A more detailed treatment of this idea appears on page x.

³ J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Church News*, 31 July 1954, 9; as quoted in *Teachings of the Living Prophets*, 149.

⁴ *Teachings of the Living Prophets*, xiii.

⁵ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 194.

⁶ See, e.g., Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1965).

⁷ 2 Nephi 30:6. In *Major Problems of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1989), 49, Jerald and Sandra Tanner note that "the original handwritten manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the first printing (1830 edition) and the 1837 edition all agree that the wording should be 'white.' The change, therefore, appears to be a deliberate attempt to change the original teaching of the Book of Mormon."

⁸ Vern Anderson, "Mormon Publisher Willing to Shake the 'Sacred' Tree," *Albuquerque Journal*, 27 July 1991, E4.

⁹ *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saint's Book Depot, 1854-56), Vol. 4, 49-50, 53-54, 173, 219, 220, and elsewhere, records the teachings of Brigham Young and other leaders that some sins are so grievous as to be beyond the power of the atoning blood of Christ, and mid-nineteenth century diaries and other writings by Mormons (e.g., John D. Lee's *Mormonism Unveiled*) tell of groups of Mormon priesthood holders who designated themselves "Avenging Angels" or "Danites" and went about shedding the blood of adulterers and murderers so that these sinners could receive forgiveness.

¹⁰ See, e.g., David John Buerger, "The Adam-God Doctrine," in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15:1 (Spring 1982), 14.

¹¹ "LDS Speaker Admits Spicing Up Stories," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 February 1991, B1.

¹² See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1988).

¹³ See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

¹⁴ As assessed by Robert Lindsey in *A Gathering of Saints*, 236, 238-39. This was also the conclusion reached by Stephen Naifeh and Gregory White Smith in *The Mormon Murders* (New York: Onyx Books, 1989).

¹⁵ Anderson, E4.

¹⁶ Richard R. Robertson, "Mormon Leader Admits Exaggerating Stories," *The Arizona Republic*, 16 February 1991, B10.

¹⁷ Elbert Eugene Peck, "Casting Out the Spell," *Sunstone* 83, 12.

¹⁸ *Salt Lake Tribune*.