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MORMONISM: CHRISTIAN, CULT, OR ???

by Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson

SYNOPSIS

In recent years, many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormons) have demanded that they be considered Christians. After all, they argue, the name of Jesus is in their Church's title, and members generally follow a strict moral code. Because both traditions utilize the same religious terminology, it can become very difficult for laypeople to grasp the inherent differences unless one is familiar with how these words are defined in a Mormon context. The result is that too many end up believing that the differences that separate Mormonism and Christianity are minimal. When the two religions are studied, however, important doctrinal distinctions do exist, such as the Godhead and the nature of salvation. Many also struggle classifying Mormonism as Christian because the LDS Church insists that it is the only true Church on earth. If Mormonism does not fall within the parameters of Christianity, then what is it? Some might call it a *cult*. While the theology of Mormonism certainly can be defined by this word's traditional meaning, to many it conjures up images of the People's Temple, Branch Davidians, or Heaven's Gate. Because of this, some feel this word is more of a hindrance than a help. Still, the cult label has stood as a warning sign, assisting many who are less informed to quickly identify groups whose doctrines are considered heretical. Regardless of the label we give the religion of the Latter-day Saints, to associate the Mormon Church with "Christianity" serves only to confuse rather than clarify what this unique religion is all about.

When we speak to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormons), it is not uncommon to hear them say, "We're Christians, too." Such an attitude was readily apparent in a talk given at the biannual General Conference in April 2007 by Mormon General Authority Gary J. Coleman. According to the story, fourteen-year-old Cortnee, the daughter of an LDS mission president, became confused when her high school classmates questioned her Christianity. She went home and

talked to her mother, who reassured her child by saying, "As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you are a Christian, and I am, too. I am a devout Christian who is exceedingly fortunate to have greater knowledge of the true 'doctrine of Christ' since my conversion to the restored Church. These truths define this Church as having the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I now understand the true nature of the Godhead, I have access to additional scripture and revelation, and I can partake of the blessings of priesthood authority. Yes, Cortnee, we are Christians."[1]

In the past year, Mormonism has taken a front seat in the American public limelight. For example, the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*—created by the originators of the irreverent cartoon series *South Park*—pokes fun at the religion by focusing on Mormon missionaries. The production became a hit and won nine Tony Awards in June 2011, including Best Musical, Best Original Score, and Best Book of a Musical. It is natural for audiences to become endeared to the actors depicting the wide-eyed and devoted teenagers, as the religion is portrayed as being a bit quirky though certainly innocuous. In addition, the Church targeted a number of U.S. cities with purchases of television and city bus ads as well as billboards in the "I'm a Mormon" campaign. This advertising blitz is meant to show how Mormons belonging to a variety of backgrounds and professions are normal, everyday people.

Probably the biggest Mormon-related issue during the past year involves the 2012 presidential election. Spending many months campaigning for the GOP nomination, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman (who dropped out after the New Hampshire primary) did not shy away from their membership in the LDS Church. In 2008, Romney's run for the presidency was scrutinized by many, including the media. Many will remember candidate Mike Huckabee's question, "Don't Mormons believe that Jesus and the Devil are brothers?"[2] Even though Mormon leaders have consistently taught that everyone, including Jesus and Lucifer, are spiritually related in a premortal existence before being born into this world, the question was generally considered insensitive and even outrageous by many, including Romney. Huckabee later apologized despite the accuracy of his question.[3]

Because the Mormon Church headquarters is located in Salt Lake City, the issue of whether or not Mormonism is a Christian religion has been raised in Utah on a regular basis. For example, on December 10, 2011, Pastor Bryan Hurlbutt of Lifeline Community, a Christian congregation located fifteen freeway minutes away from Salt Lake City, wrote a guest editorial in the *Salt Lake Tribune* titled "Mormonism Christianity?" Explaining how Mormonism does not fall within the bounds of the historical definition of "Christian," Hurlbutt concluded his piece, "So my request to my LDS friends is to offer another term that shows eternally defining distinctions, and to please stop ignoring historical labels like they don't matter."

The article generated more than seven hundred online comments, including replies from incredulous Mormons who chose to mock and ridicule rather than provide thoughtful replies to his arguments. One responder wrote, "Wow, I just discovered this thread and read every post. Nobody proved anything and no one changed his mind, I dare say. With that, I would like to add my two cents: I am a Mormon and I am a

Christian. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Hurlbutt." The controversy continued the following week when the newspaper's popular humor columnist delivered a scathing front-page response to Hurlbutt's article.[4]

IS MORMONISM CHRISTIAN?

Many Latter-day Saints today are easily offended when their claim to Christianity is challenged, as the issue is obviously important and especially emotional to them. Since they apparently equate Christianity with morality, perhaps they think that their character or conduct is being judged. While there are many noble Latter-day Saints who are striving to lead exemplary lives, there are also many honorable Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even atheists who are working very hard to live in a right manner. Few would confuse any of these other groups as "Christian."

For three weeks in late October and early November 2011, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a survey of more than a thousand Mormons across the United States that was advertised as "the first of its kind ever published by a non-LDS research organization." Released in January 2012, the poll discovered:

• Ninety-seven percent of the Mormons believe they belong to a Christian religion (compared to fifty-one percent of the general public who agreed and seventeen percent who were "not sure");

• Sixty-two percent believe the American people are uninformed about Mormonism;

• Fifty-six percent said that the most important problems facing Mormons living in the United States were "misconceptions about Mormonism, discrimination, lack of acceptance in American society and the like";

• Forty-six percent felt there was "a lot of discrimination against Mormons," compared to thirty-one percent who thought there was a lot of discrimination against blacks.

• Seventeen percent used "Christian" or "Christ-centered" and five percent used "Jesus" in response to the question about which word best describes Mormonism.[5]

The report said that three-quarters of the membership was raised LDS while the other quarter had converted. Asked what caused them to become Latter-day Saints, almost sixty percent claimed the main reason was the Church's doctrines. Yet there are more than just minor doctrinal disagreements existing between Mormonism and biblical Christianity. The very idea that Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith, Jr., claimed that he was told by God the Father and Jesus in the First Vision account from 1820 how all the Christian churches were "wrong" and that their creeds were an "abomination" should show outsiders that the LDS Church does not view itself as just another Christian denomination.[6] According to a church manual, the period of the "great apostasy" that took place after the death of the apostles "lasted well over a

millennium. During this period, man-made creeds and practices were substituted for the plan of salvation that Jesus had taught."[7]

When it comes to determining the "Christianity" of churches outside Mormonism, LDS leaders have clearly differentiated between "them and us." Mormonism teaches that Joseph Smith brought a "restoration" of authority to Christianity, as it had been lost soon after the death of Jesus' apostles. For example, the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods given to Mormon males and the existence of a living prophet and living apostles who speak with scriptural authority set this religion apart. Those who are married for "time and eternity" in a Mormon temple and repent of *all* their sins and keep *all* of the commandments hope to one day receive the highest reward offered in Mormonism, which is godhood in the "celestial kingdom." Here is where a husband and wife anticipate living with their family into eternity.

In a talk at the October 2010 General Conference, LDS Apostle Neil Anderson explained: "So ask, 'Aren't there many of other faiths who love Christ?' Of course there are! However, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, having a witness of His reality not only from the Bible but also from the Book of Mormon; knowing His priesthood has been restored to the earth; having made sacred covenants to follow Him and received the gift of the Holy Ghost; having been endowed with power in His holy temple; and being part of preparing for His glorious return to the earth, we cannot compare what we are to be with those who have not yet received these truths."[8]

A church manual written for Mormon missionaries defines the differences between Mormonism and Christianity: "The priesthood authority needed to perform this ordinance, which was lost centuries ago through apostasy, was restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Only through membership in the Church can one receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. This authority makes the Church different from any other religion in the world. By the Lord's own declaration, it is 'the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth' (D&C 1:30)."[9] Saying that his Church "accepts many of the same biblical doctrines as other Christian churches," LDS apologist Gilbert Scharffs explained that "the LDS Church also believes in numerous biblical concepts changed or forgotten by many Christian denominations, which could arguably make the LDS Church more Christian than other Christians."[10]

What are some of the concepts? For starters, how about God? A church manual describes how the Mormon "God was once a man and has progressed to become a God."[11] The historical view of the Trinity is rejected in Mormonism, as Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland told an October 2007 General Conference audience that "any criticism that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not hold the contemporary Christian view of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost is not a comment about our commitment to Christ but rather a recognition (accurate, I might add) that our view of the Godhead breaks with post-New Testament Christian history and returns to the doctrine taught by Jesus Himself."[12]

As far as the LDS view of Jesus, fifteenth President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "As a church we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional

Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say."[13] When it comes to salvation, twelfth President Spencer W. Kimball stated: "One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation."[14] And Apostle Bruce R. McConkie explained that "it would be difficult to assemble a greater number of myths into one philosophical system than are now found in the philosophies of modern Christendom."[15]

These unique teachings that deviate from biblical Christianity are apparently believed by the vast majority of Mormons who were interviewed in the Pew Forum survey, meaning they hold firmly to their church's teachings. In fact, ninety-five percent believe families can be bound together eternally in Mormon temples, ninety-four percent believe God the Father and Jesus Christ are separate physical beings, the same percentage accept the LDS president as a prophet of God, and ninety-one percent believe the Book of Mormon was written by ancient prophets. In addition, eighty percent said believing that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and Christ during his First Vision is "essential to being a good Mormon."[16]

IS MORMONISM A CULT?

The definition of *cult* varies depending on the source. The Latin word *cultus* originally meant worship of a god. In the twentieth century, it came to refer to a religious group—oftentimes considering itself Christian—that contradicted essential teaching of biblical Christianity. Alan W. Gomes, a professor of historical theology at Biola University in California, defines the word this way: "A cult of Christianity is a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible."[17] Among these central teachings are "the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and salvation by grace through faith. These doctrines so comprise the essence of the Christian faith that to remove any of them is to make the belief system non-Christian."[18]

Although some think the word *cult* should be discarded altogether, Gomes believes it should be retained for several reasons. For example, it has an "established history of usage, long before the secular media or social sciences got hold of it," and it is "well suited to describe theological heterodoxy, which is determined by an absolute, objective, and unchanging standard."[19] While the word has been used pejoratively, Gomes adds that a label, when applied objectively, can be "exceedingly helpful" because "the purpose here is objective classification. Of course, some or even many cults have unsavory aspects about them, but that must be determined on a case-by-case basis."[20]

While Mormonism certainly denies important doctrines of the Christian faith, the use of "cult" in a typical dialogue could unnecessarily offend the hearer and possibly hinder what otherwise might be a very positive conversation. At the same time, this

hasn't stopped past LDS leaders from using this term to describe others outside of their faith. Referring to the role of the Mormon leadership, Apostle Mark E. Petersen said, "They will protect you from the false teachings of cultists and splinter groups and from the misleading philosophies of men."[21] McConkie wrote, "Only when the Church is fed the bread of life are its members kept in paths of righteousness. It is the spiritually illiterate who become cultists and who forsake the faith."[22]

In a complaint about polygamous groups who call themselves "Mormon," Apostle M. Russell Ballard told an October 2011 General Conference audience, "Others may try to use the word *Mormon* more broadly to include and refer to those who have left the Church and formed various splinter groups. Such use only leads to confusion."[23] How is Ballard's effort to protect the word "Mormon" any different from professing Christians who want to protect the word "Christian" from those who are doctrinally outside the traditional definition? Regardless, we recommend using the word "cult" cautiously, as it should be used in a descriptive, not an accusatory, manner.

A common complaint among Christians is the difficulty they have trying to get Mormons to be completely candid about their faith. This frustration does not assuage the suspicion many have toward their claim of being Christian. As with the Islamic doctrine of *al-Taqiyya*, it is not uncommon for many Mormons to conceal or disguise their beliefs or, at the very least, insist that controversial teachings from past leaders are nothing more than mere opinion. Apostle Boyd Packer chided LDS Church teachers and historians who "want to tell everything, whether or not it is worthy or faith-promoting. Some things that are true are not very useful." In his talk, Packer reminded them about their obligation to guard the LDS Church in public matters: "In the Church we are not neutral. We are one-sided. There is a war going on, and we are engaged in it. It is the war between good and evil, and we are belligerents defending the good. We are therefore obliged to give preference to and protect all that is represented in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we have made covenants to do it."[24]

DESPITE OUR THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES...

What attitude should Christians have in their dealings with Latter-day Saints? First of all, 1 Peter 3:15–16 says we should be willing to provide answers in a gentle manner. It behooves every Christian to not only understand his or her beliefs but to study those from other faiths as well. Since there are more than seven million Mormons in the United States, there's a good chance every American Christian knows at least one member. Therefore, some effort ought to be exerted in better comprehending the background and doctrines of this religion.

If Mormonism is not Christianity, some guidelines for believers must be followed. According to 2 John 10, anyone who preaches anything other than the true gospel should not be allowed to take a church's pulpit. This includes ecumenical services where Protestant pastors think nothing is amiss by combining their and Mormon congregations to produce Christmas musicals and sharing the pulpit with leaders of Latter-day Saint congregations.

If the Bible is taken seriously, the flock should not be addressed by false teachers who, according to Jesus in Matthew 7:15, are "ravenous wolves" dressed as sheep. Meanwhile, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14 that Christians should not be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers; there needs to be a separation between Christianity and other religions. Among other things, this admonition could include the importance of not mixing and matching marriages, business partnerships, and the like, because, as Paul asks, what fellowship "has light with darkness?" Of course, this doesn't mean that Christians should have an arrogant attitude toward Latter-day Saints. Positive relationships with Mormon family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers are important. Paul associated with Jews and Gentiles alike in order to have the opportunity to share the truth. As 1 Corinthians 9:22 puts it, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

When it comes to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, we cannot compromise. The word *Christian* is an important title held dear by many followers of the biblical Jesus. Brigham Young University professor Daniel Peterson summed it up well when he wrote, "Cherry-picking similarities while failing to mention major differences is a powerful way to misrepresent and mislead."[25] And because words do have meaning, we agree with Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield when he declared, "People who set upon calling unchristian things Christian are simply washing all meaning out of the name. If everything that is called Christianity in these days is Christianity, then there is no such thing as Christianity. A name applied indiscriminately to everything, designates nothing."[26]

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NOTES

1   "Mom, Are We Christians?" *Ensign*, May 2007, 94.
2   http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22239946/ns/politics-decision_08/t/huckabee-apologizes-mormon-remark/#.Tw8RiG-XT40.
3   See http://www.mrm.org/lucifers-brother.
4   "Robert Kirby: Mormons Not Christian? Here's a Vocabulary Lesson for You," http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/53117020-80/christian-bryan-kirby-ancestors.html.csp.
5   http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/mormons-in-america-executive-summary.aspx.
6   Joseph Smith, *History* 1:19, Pearl of Great Price.
7   *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual: Religion 430 and 431* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 59.
8   "Be Thou an Example to the Believers," *Ensign*, November 2010, 41.
9   *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 65.
10 Gilbert Scharffs, *The Missionary's Little Book of Answers* (American Fork: Covenant Communications,

2002), 10.

11 *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 34.

12 "The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent," *Ensign*, November 2007, 40. Emphasis in original.

13 "We Look to Christ," *Ensign*, May 2002, 90.

14 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 206. Also see *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121 and 122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 36.

15 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 525.

16 http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/mormons-in-america-executive-summary.aspx.

17 Alan W. Gomes, *Unmasking the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 7.

18 Ibid, 10.

19 Ibid, 15–16.

20 Ibid,16.

21 "Evidence of Things Not Seen," *Ensign*, May 1978, 62.

22 Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 2:179.

23 "The Importance of a Name," *Ensign*, November 2011, 81. Emphasis in original.

24 Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 106, 110.

25 "Focus on Similarities Can Prove Misleading," *Mormon Times*, November 6, 2011, 8.

26 "Redeemer" and "Redemption," http://www.theologue.org/Redeemer&Redemption-BBWarfield.html.