

# The Latter Day Saints (the Mormons)

## History

### What is Mormonism?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the LDS Church and as the Mormon church, is one of the largest religious cults in the world. As of 2019, the Mormon religion counts more than 16.3 million members (the SBC has 12.7 million members as of 2024).<sup>1</sup> Mormonism teaches that there are many gods, with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit being three separate gods among many others. Furthermore, it is also possible for humans to ascend to godhood. Obedience to moral laws and observance of religious rituals are central to the Mormon faith.

### When did it begin?

The Mormon church was founded by Joseph Smith Jr. Born in Vermont in 1805, Smith attended Methodist and Presbyterian churches growing up. In 1820, Smith claimed to have a revelatory vision of two divine beings who he said were God the Father and Jesus Christ. They taught him that all Protestant denominations were wrong.<sup>2</sup> In 1823, he said that an angel named Moroni showed him several golden plates with religious inscriptions on them. This angel supposedly also gave him a pair of seer stones set in a frame like a pair of spectacles, which he called the Urim and Thummim, with which he could interpret the inscriptions. In 1827, Smith began translating these plates, receiving assistance from his acquaintance Oliver Cowdery. Smith did not translate in a conventional sense by working from the text, but he would instead put his face in a hat and peer through the seer stones, and the English translation would appear before his eyes. Cowdery wrote down what Smith dictated, and the result of this collaborative process was the Book of Mormon.

In 1830, Smith founded an institution that he called the Church of Christ. In 1838, he changed the name to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In addition to the Book of Mormon, Smith wrote most of another book of Mormon scriptures called the Doctrine and Covenants and a final book of scriptures called the Pearl of Great Price. Smith moved around the country until officials arrested him in Illinois in 1844 for treason, public disruption, and polygamy. A lynch mob stormed the prison and killed Smith and his brother Hyrum. Brigham Young, a leader in the early Mormon community, succeeded Smith after a succession crisis and led Smith's disciples to the Great Salt Lake basin in the Utah territory, where they founded Salt Lake City.

### Who are the key figures?

Seventeen presidents have presided over the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since its inception. Next to Smith, Young—the second president of the church—is the most prominent figure in the church's history.

## Interesting Facts

There have been numerous influential Mormons in education, media, entertainment, sports, and politics. Among the most celebrated Mormon athletes are NFL quarterback Steve Young (a descendant of Brigham Young); heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey; Don Leslie Lind, who served as a NASA astronaut and Senator Jake Garn, who flew two weeks after Lind, is also noted as a Latter-day Saint. Former U.S. senators Harry Reid and Orrin Hatch were/are practicing Mormons. Senator Mitt Romney is one of the most recognized members of the LDS Church today. Prominent current and former Mormons in entertainment include Glenn Beck, Aaron Eckhart, Gladys Knight, and Donny and Marie Osmond.

Mormon temples and Mormon churches are not the same.

- Mormon churches are regular worship buildings where members gather for Sunday services, community events, and other activities.
- Mormon temples, on the other hand, are sacred places where special ordinances and ceremonies are performed, typically open only to members who have been recommended by their local leaders.
- Temples are considered the most sacred places in the Mormon faith

## Core Teachings

1. **Continuing revelation.** The four written sources of revelation in the LDS Church are the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and the King James Version of the Bible. However, in Mormonism, divine revelation is not limited to these books but also includes the utterances of living prophets. The church has developed its doctrine and practice over time, even after the death of its founder. Its president is considered a living prophet, and individual members are encouraged to seek personal revelation. According to the church, “Latter-day Saints believe in an open scriptural canon, which means that there are other books of scripture besides the Bible (such as the Book of Mormon) and that God continues to reveal His word through living prophets.”<sup>3</sup>
2. **Humanized deity.** Belief in a plurality of gods, who preexisted as material spirits, is foundational to LDS belief. The God of this world was once a man who became a god. Smith said: “God himself was once as we are now and is an exalted man. . . . We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea. . . . God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did.”<sup>4</sup> As God ascended to godhood, so also righteous men and women can become gods. This idea was summarized by former church president Lorenzo Snow like this: “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God; however, He is not the supreme God. Smith wrote, “The Apostles have discovered that there were Gods above . . . there being a God above, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> According to Smith, Jesus was an eternal spirit being, who—together with his spirit brother Lucifer—was made incarnate to be tested and to become a god.

3. **Preexistent humanity.** Every human existed before birth as an eternal spirit child. Smith taught, “Man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body.”<sup>7</sup> Man should seek to become a god in the afterlife by living a righteous life.
4. **Atonement and afterlife.** Mormons believe that Jesus is the Redeemer who died on the cross not to atone for sin but to guarantee the resurrection of all people. After death, people’s souls go to the spirit world, where they await the resurrection and final judgment. There are three levels of glory to which people may be assigned after the final judgment depending on their acceptance of and obedience to Mormon teachings and ordinances: the telestial kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, and the celestial kingdom. The outer darkness is reserved for those who do not attain to one of those levels of glory.

## **1. Apostasy and Restoration**

*Mormons claim that “total” apostasy overcame the church following apostolic times, and that the Mormon Church (founded in 1830) is the “restored church.”*

## **2. God**

*Mormons claim that God the Father was once a man and that he then progressed to godhood (that is, he is a now-exalted, immortal man with a flesh-and-bone body).*

## **3. Polytheism**

*Mormons believe that the Trinity consists not of three persons in one God but rather of three distinct gods. According to Mormonism, there are potentially many thousands of gods besides these.*

## **4. Exaltation of Humans**

*Mormons believe that humans, like God the Father, can go through a process of exaltation to godhood.*

## **5. Jesus Christ**

*Mormons believe that Jesus Christ was the firstborn spirit-child of the heavenly Father and a heavenly Mother.*

*Jesus then progressed to deity in the spirit world.*

*He was later physically conceived in Mary’s womb, as the literal “only begotten” Son of God the Father in the flesh (though many present-day Mormons remain somewhat vague as to how this occurred).*

## **6. Three Kingdoms**

*Mormons believe that most people will end up in one of three kingdoms of glory, depending on one’s level of faithfulness. Belief in Christ, or even in God, is not necessary to obtain immortality in one of these three kingdoms, and therefore only the most spiritually perverse will go to hell.*

## **7. Sin and Atonement**

*Mormons believe that Adam’s transgression was a noble act that made it possible for humans to become mortal, a necessary step on the path to exaltation to godhood.*

*They think that Christ’s atonement secures immortality for virtually all people, whether they repent and believe or not.*

## **8. Salvation**

*Mormons believe that God gives to (virtually) everyone a general salvation to immortal life in one of the heavenly kingdoms, which is how they understand salvation by grace. Belief in Christ is necessary only to obtain passage to the highest, celestial kingdom—for which not only faith but participation in Mormon temple rituals and obedience to its “laws of the gospel” are also prerequisites.*

## **Comparison with Historic Christianity**

### **1. Apostasy and Restoration**

*Mormons claim that “total” apostasy overcame the church following apostolic times, and that the Mormon Church (founded in 1830) is the “restored church.”*

If the Mormon Church were truly a “restored church,” however, one would expect to find first-century historical evidence for Mormon doctrines like the plurality of gods and God the Father having once been a man. Such evidence is completely lacking.

Besides, the Bible disallows a *total* apostasy of the church (e.g., Matt. 16:18; 28:20; Eph. 3:21; 4:11-16), warning instead of *partial* apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1).

### **2. God**

*Mormons claim that God the Father was once a man and that he then progressed to godhood (that is, he is a now-exalted, immortal man with a flesh-and-bone body).*

However, based on the Bible, God is not and has never been a man (Num. 23:19; Hos. 11:9). He is a spirit (John 4:24), and a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39).

Furthermore, God is eternal (Ps. 90:2; 102:27; Isa. 57:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) and immutable (or unchangeable in his being and perfections; see Ps. 102:25-27; Mal. 3:6). He did not “progress” toward godhood, but has always been God.

### 3. Polytheism

*Mormons believe that the Trinity consists not of three persons in one God but rather of three distinct gods. According to Mormonism, there are potentially many thousands of gods besides these.*

However, trusting in or worshiping more than one god is explicitly condemned throughout the Bible (e.g., Ex. 20:3).

There is only one true God (Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; Isa. 43:10; 44:6, 8; 45:18; 46:9; 1 Cor. 8:4; James 2:19), who exists eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

### 4. Exaltation of Humans

*Mormons believe that humans, like God the Father, can go through a process of exaltation to godhood.*

But the Bible teaches that the yearning to be godlike led to the fall of mankind (Gen. 3:4ff.). God does not look kindly on humans who pretend to attain to deity (Acts 12:21-23; contrast Acts 14:11-15). God desires humans to humbly recognize that they are his creatures (Gen. 2:7; 5:2; Ps. 95:6-7; 100:3). The state of the redeemed in eternity will be one of glorious immortality, but they will forever remain God's creatures, adopted as his children (Rom. 8:14-30; 1 Cor. 15:42-57; Rev. 21:3-7). Believers will never become gods.

### 5. Jesus Christ

*Mormons believe that Jesus Christ was the firstborn spirit-child of the heavenly Father and a heavenly Mother.*

*Jesus then progressed to deity in the spirit world.*

*He was later physically conceived in Mary's womb, as the literal "only begotten" Son of God the Father in the flesh (though many present-day Mormons remain somewhat vague as to how this occurred).*

Biblically, however, the description of Jesus as the "only begotten" refers to his being the Father's unique, one-of-a-kind Son for all eternity, with the same divine nature as the Father (see note on John 1:14; cf. John 1:18; 3:16, 18; see also John 5:18; 10:30).

Moreover, he is eternal deity (John 1:1; 8:58) and is immutable (Heb. 1:10-12; 13:8), meaning he did not progress to deity but has always been God.

And Mary's conception of Jesus in his humanity was through a miracle of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20).

### 6. Three Kingdoms

*Mormons believe that most people will end up in one of three kingdoms of glory, depending on one's level of faithfulness. Belief in Christ, or even in God, is not necessary to obtain immortality in one of these three kingdoms, and therefore only the most spiritually perverse will go to hell.*

But the Bible teaches that people have just two possibilities for their eternal futures: the saved will enjoy eternal life with God in the new heavens and new earth (Phil. 3:20; Rev. 21:1-4; 22:1-5), while the unsaved will spend eternity in hell (Matt. 25:41, 46; Rev. 20:13-15).

### 7. Sin and Atonement

*Mormons believe that Adam's transgression was a noble act that made it possible for humans to become mortal, a necessary step on the path to exaltation to godhood.*

*They think that Christ's atonement secures immortality for virtually all people, whether they repent and believe or not.*

Biblically, however, there was nothing noble about Adam's sin, which was not a stepping-stone to godhood but rather brought nothing but sin, misery, and death to mankind (Gen. 3:16-19; Rom. 5:12-14). Jesus atoned for the sins of all who would trust him for salvation (Isa. 53:6; John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

## 8. Salvation

*Mormons believe that God gives to (virtually) everyone a general salvation to immortal life in one of the heavenly kingdoms, which is how they understand salvation by grace. Belief in Christ is necessary only to obtain passage to the highest, celestial kingdom—for which not only faith but participation in Mormon temple rituals and obedience to its “laws of the gospel” are also prerequisites.*

Biblically, however, salvation by grace must be received through faith in Christ (John 3:15-16; 11:25; 12:46; Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:22-24; Eph. 2:8-9), and all true believers are promised eternal life in God’s presence (Matt. 5:3-8; John 14:1-3; Rev. 21:3-7).

In contrast to the four main beliefs of Mormonism list above, Scripture teaches the following:

1. The Old and New Testaments alone are the inspired and infallible revelation of God written (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). God has given grave warnings about adding to or subtracting from His Word (Rev. 22:18–19). The Bible teaches that many false prophets will propagate destructive heresies (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). The Apostle Paul charged believers to be diligent in preserving the truth of the gospel against false gospels proclaimed by men or angels (Gal. 1:8).
2. The God of Scripture is the true and living God (Deut. 6:4; 29:18; Ps. 96:5; 1 Thess. 1:9). God was, is, and forever will be the eternally unchangeable God (Ex. 3:14; Mal. 3:6; John 8:58). God is spirit and eternally exists in three persons (Matt. 28:19; John 4:24; 2 Cor. 13:14). Jesus is the second person of the Godhead and is God incarnate (John 1:14). The Son is equal to the Father and the Spirit in all things (John 1:1; 10:30; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:3).
3. God made us in His own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Gen. 1:26; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Man did not exist before creation. Scripture nowhere teaches that people become gods.
4. Jesus died in the place of His people on the cross in order to atone for their sins (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24) and propitiate the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 John 2:2). Jesus died to save His people from their sins and from eternal wrath (Matt. 1:21). On the last day, all who believe in Christ will be raised to eternal life (Mark 10:30; John 3:15–16, 36; 5:24), and all who did not believe will be raised to everlasting punishment in hell (Matt. 18:8; 25:46; Mark 9:44; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 6–7).

## Suggestions for Sharing the Gospel

1. **Understand Authority and a “feeling” approach to truth.** A Mormon will give you his testimony by saying, “I have read the Book of Mormon and have a burning witness in my heart that it is true and Joseph Smith is the prophet of God.” The idea that a “warm feeling” is evidence that Mormonism is true is based on a passage in another LDS scripture which reads: “But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind, then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 9:8). Since Smith received clear instruction not to join any denomination for “they are all corrupt”, the one true church of Jesus Christ is the LDS church and all authority for truth is in the church and its prophet.
2. **Understand spiritual anthropology.** Regardless of the evangelical “technique” used to share the gospel, man is unable to believe unless the H.S. regenerates the heart and makes him alive (Eph. 2:4-9). Sanctify Christ as Lord and give a humble defense (apologetic) of the truth.
3. **Focus on the infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture.** The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God (Prov. 30:5; John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). If possible, work from the King James Version of Scripture when witnessing to Mormons. Because Mormons use the KJV, using it in encounters with Mormons will make witnessing to them much easier than trying to do so with a modern English version. Focus on the Bible’s closing prohibition against continuing revelation (Rev. 22:18–19).

4. **Focus on the scriptural truth about the triune God.** The Bible's teaching about the Godhead is essential to helping a Mormon see the truth (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). Explain that the Bible sometimes speaks of the triune God as He is in Himself and sometimes of the various roles of the members of the Godhead in the work of redemption. Explain those passages that speak of the deity of Christ (John 1:1–3; Rom. 9:5; Col. 1:15–16; Heb. 1:1–3, 8–12), as well as those passages that speak of His submissive role as the Mediator in the work of redemption (John 10:29; 1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:5–6).
5. **Focus on the Bible's teaching about the gospel.** Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Gal. 1:8; Eph. 2:8–9). Jesus is God "manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16; see John 1:14). A mere created being could never substitute himself for the sins of another, let alone for the sins of a multitude. Only Jesus, the infinite and eternal God incarnate, could come and place Himself on the cross as a substitute for the sins of His people. He did not merely make salvation possible by guaranteeing our resurrection; He actually accomplished it for His people through His once-for-all, perfect sacrifice. Salvation is not based on our obedience; it is based entirely on the finished work of Christ.

The Christian Gospel	The Mormon Gospel
"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. (Romans 11:5-6)	Grace consists of God's gift to His children wherein He gave His Only Begotten Son that whosoever would believe in Him <u>and comply with His laws and ordinances</u> would have everlasting life. ( <i>Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson</i> , pp. 353-354).
Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound (Romans 5:20). Therefore <i>it is</i> of faith, that <i>it might be</i> by grace (Romans 4:16).	Grace is granted to men proportionately as they conform to the standards of personal righteousness that are part of the gospel plan. (Bruce R. McConkie, <i>Mormon Doctrine</i> , p. 339).
For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10).	Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, <u>then</u> is his grace sufficient for you (Moroni 10:32, <i>Book of Mormon</i> )
he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, (Titus 3:5)	As with all other doctrines of salvation, justification is available because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, <u>but it becomes operative in the life of an individual only on conditions of personal righteousness</u> (McConkie, <i>Mormon Doctrine</i> , p. 408).
because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)	Certain saved-by-grace-alone fanatics flatter their followers into believing they can be saved through no act other than confessing Christ with their lips (McConkie, <i>Mormon Doctrine</i> , p. 287).

## How does Mormonism hold up against biblical Christianity?

In contrast to the four main beliefs of Mormonism, Scripture teaches the following:

1. The Old and New Testaments alone are the inspired and infallible revelation of God written (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). God has given grave warnings about adding to or subtracting from His Word (Rev. 22:18–19). The Bible teaches that many false prophets will propagate destructive heresies (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). The Apostle Paul charged believers to be diligent in preserving the truth of the gospel against false gospels proclaimed by men or angels (Gal. 1:8).
2. The God of Scripture is the true and living God (Deut. 6:4; 29:18; Ps. 96:5; 1 Thess. 1:9). God was, is, and forever will be the eternally unchangeable God (Ex. 3:14; Mal. 3:6; John 8:58). God is spirit and eternally exists in three persons (Matt. 28:19; John 4:24; 2 Cor. 13:14). Jesus is the second person of the Godhead and is God incarnate (John 1:14). The Son is equal to the Father and the Spirit in all things (John 1:1; 10:30; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:3).
3. God made us in His own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Gen. 1:26; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Man did not exist before creation. Scripture nowhere teaches that people become gods.
4. Jesus died in the place of His people on the cross in order to atone for their sins (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24) and propitiate the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 John 2:2). Jesus died to save His people from their sins and from eternal wrath (Matt. 1:21). On the last day, all who believe in Christ will be raised to eternal life (Mark 10:30; John 3:15–16, 36; 5:24), and all who did not believe will be raised to everlasting punishment in hell (Matt. 18:8; 25:46; Mark 9:44; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 6–7).

## How can I share the gospel with those who hold to this false teaching?

1. **Focus on the infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture.** The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God (Prov. 30:5; John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). If possible, work from the King James Version of Scripture when witnessing to Mormons. Because Mormons use the KJV, using it in encounters with Mormons will make witnessing to them much easier than trying to do so with a modern English version. Focus on the Bible's closing prohibition against continuing revelation (Rev. 22:18–19).
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