MBAJ

MISSOURI BAPTIST APOLOGETICS JOURNAL

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MISSOURI BAPTIST APOLOGETICS NETWORK

Introduction

Dustin Burdin

On behalf of the members of the Missouri Baptist Apologetics Network (MBAN), I am excited to present the *Missouri Baptist Apologetics Journal*. MBAN is a group of Christians committed to defending the Christian faith and supporting Missouri Baptist churches in doing the same. MBAN consists of Missouri Baptist Convention-approved Christian apologists who equip others to defend the faith through speaking engagements and by providing resources that enable Missouri Baptists to become bolder and more effective in sharing Christ with others.

The publication of this Missouri Baptist Apologetics Journal is one such way that MBAN endeavors to equip the saints to defend the truth claims of our Christian faith. I am honored to serve as the editor. I believe readers will be blessed by this journal, as they will find insightful information that strengthens their faith and helps them defend Christianity's truth claims.

The theme of this year's journal is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), also known as Mormonism. On June 6, 2026, the LDS Church broke ground to build a new 29,000-square-foot temple on a 38-acre site in Springfield, Missouri.[1] As many Missouri residents know, this state is significant to Mormonism. Considering the new Mormon temple construction, we felt it would be most helpful to Missouri Baptists to focus this year's journal articles on Mormonism.

Each article contributor is an MBAN member or affiliate member. I am grateful to each author for their hard work making this journal a valuable resource for Missouri Baptists. I have organized the articles to take readers on a journey of understanding Mormonism, from the big picture to the specifics.

Rob Phillips leads off with an article that provides a brief history of Mormonism and an overview of core LDS teachings. His article provides a helpful orientation to Mormon history and core ideas. Next, Trent Blake's article highlights three specific doctrines on which Mormonism and biblical Christianity disagree. He demonstrates how Mormonism is not another Christian denomination. Lacey Shelton's article further demonstrates that while Mormons may use some of the same Christian theological terms, the LDS understanding of grace and the gospel is foreign to biblical Christianity. She also gives readers tips for having gospel conversations with Mormons.

After these overview articles, the next articles focus on specific areas of Mormonism. Jeffrey Maskrod's article addresses the LDS claim that the true church of Jesus was lost after the death of the apostles (the Great Apostasy). He shows readers that claims of a Great Apostasy lack warrant, especially when considering the evidence for the faithful transmission of the Bible. John Vaughan's article discusses The Book of Mormon and shows readers its many fallacies and counterfeit Christian claims. Vincent Tichenor's article argues that while Mormons may share Christian ethical values, our doctrinal differences place Mormonism outside of biblical Christianity. Roger Sherrer's article closes out the LDS section. He shares his testimony as a former Mormon. He takes readers on a journey exploring how he became attracted to the LDS Church and what eventually led him to leave. He also gives Christians helpful insights for reaching out to Mormons with the gospel.

The final two articles are not Mormon-specific. Hanna Sims helps readers, especially teenagers, know the facts that give us confidence that the Bible we have today is accurate to the original writings. The final article, my own, explains how Christians can use the Natural Law Theory of ethics to defend the Bible's moral truth claims to those who do not accept the Bible as true.

The end of each article shares a brief biography of the author and their contact information. Readers are encouraged to reach out to these authors and other MBAN members for speaking engagements, workshops, and resources for churches and groups. A full list of MBAN members can be found at: https://mobaptist.org/apologetics/mban/.

Special thanks go to Jim Schurke (president of MBAN) and Rob Phillips (associate executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention) for their support of this journal project and for the honor of allowing me to serve as editor. A final note of thanks goes to Trent Blake for agreeing to serve as the illustrator/designer of this journal.

Brothers and sisters, we offer this journal as a resource to help you honor Christ by being a faithful witness to his gospel and by strengthening your faith in him.

Luke 1:4,

Dustin Burdin, *Editor*
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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Brief History and Overview of Beliefs

Rob Phillips

As the official version of the story goes, in 1820, 14-year-old Joseph Smith, Jr. had a vision in which God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him. Caught up in the Protestant revivalism of his day, Smith inquired as to which of the Christian denominations he should join. He was told to join none of them because they were all "wrong" and their creeds "were an abomination" in God's sight. Rather, God would use Smith to reinstate the true church, which had been in apostasy since the death of the apostles.[2] Thus began the saga of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormonism, which today is the largest expression of counterfeit Christianity in the world, increasing by nearly 309,000 baptized converts in 2024.[3]

Today the LDS Church, headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, boasts 17.5 million members in more than 160 countries and territories; about seven million members reside in the United States. Additionally, the church has more than 74,000 full-time teaching missionaries who spread the Mormon message worldwide.[4] Its current leader is Dallin Harris Oaks, who, like founder Joseph Smith and subsequent presidents, is considered the church's *prophet*, *seer*, and *revelator*.

The LDS Church initially stood in defiance of historic Christianity, claiming that after the death of the apostles the Christian church fell into "the great apostasy." Joseph Smith taught that he alone was called to restore the true church, and that the revelations God gave him – particularly as recorded in the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price – would guide the church back to its historic foundation.

In recent years, however, the LDS Church has minimized, refuted, or reinterpreted many earlier teachings of its leaders – such as polygamy, the multiple marriages of Jesus, and the curse of African Americans – and has launched a concerted effort to promote Mormonism as mainstream Christianity.

This leads some to ask legitimately whether the LDS Church can have it both ways. Either Mormonism is true, and all other forms of Christianity are false, or the LDS Church is not really needed, since historic Christianity is true after all, despite Joseph Smith's claims to the contrary.[5]

LDS leaders tend to be vague in their official statements about what the church really believes. A visit to the church's official websites (ChurchofJesusChrist.org and ComeUntoChrist.org) will frustrate any sincere inquirer who wants to know what Mormons really believe about the nature and character of God, the Trinity, the atonement, and man's potential for godhood. Of course, web surfers can always click the link to get a free copy of the Book of Mormon and have LDS missionaries deliver it to their door. However, the answers these missionaries give will likely be as vague as those their leaders provide.

A BRIEF HISTORY

After Joseph Smith's initial visit from Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ in 1820, he reportedly saw the angel Moroni appear at his bedside in 1823. Moroni told Smith about golden plates inscribed with a record of the ancient American people.

During his earthly life, Moroni had been a great warrior who lived among the Nephite people, descendants of Jews who fled Israel for North America around 600 BC. Moroni's father, Mormon, commander in chief of the Nephites, had given the golden plates to his son, who added a few words of his own before hiding them in the Hill Cumorah near Palmyra, New York.

These plates featured "the fullness of the everlasting gospel." In 1827, after further visits from Moroni, Smith dug up the plates and began translating the "Reformed Egyptian" with the assistance of two special stones called "Urim" and "Thummim." The result was the Book of Mormon. By 1830, the book was published, and Smith founded the "Church of Christ" (not affiliated with the Church of Christ denomination) with five of his followers.

From 1831 to 1844, Smith gained converts and established strongholds in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Wherever they went, Smith's followers attracted curiosity and even hostility, either because non-Mormons did not trust Smith or were suspicious of Mormon beliefs and practices. During this time, Smith said he continued to receive revelations. In 1835, he released the Doctrine and Covenants, which later became "inspired Scripture" alongside the Book of Mormon.

LDS history in Missouri is particularly noteworthy. Smith and his followers were driven from Jackson County and then from the state following Governor Lilburn Boggs's "Extermination Order" in 1838. Known as Missouri Executive Order 44, it ordered that Mormons be treated as enemies and driven from the state.[6]

Smith was imprisoned in Liberty, Missouri, from November 1838 to April 1839, during which time he dictated letters that became canonical scripture (Doctrine and Covenants 121-123). His prayer from jail – "O God, where art thou?" – became one of Mormonism's most treasured spiritual texts.

Smith led his expatriated followers to Illinois, where they converted a swampy area on the banks of the Mississippi River into a thriving community called Nauvoo. It was here that Smith claimed to receive revelations concerning the Godhead, the origin and destiny of humanity, eternal progression, baptism for the dead, polygamy, and other unique doctrines.

The fourth "standard work" of Mormonism (after the King James Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants), The Pearl of Great Price was first compiled and published in 1851 and brought into the LDS canon in 1880.

Tensions in Nauvoo arose between Mormons and non-Mormons and came to a head when the local paper, the *Expositor*, published stories divulging the LDS practice of polygamy. Smith, who had risen to power as mayor of Nauvoo and "lieutenant general" of the 4,000-man Nauvoo legion, ordered the paper destroyed. For this, he was arrested and jailed in Carthage, Illinois. While awaiting trial, a mob of 150 attacked the jail, and a gunfight ensued. Smith, using a six-shooter that had been smuggled into the jail, killed at least two attackers before he succumbed to gunshot wounds.

Following Smith's death, Brigham Young emerged as successor and led many Mormons west, where they settled in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. Today, Salt Lake City is home to the LDS Church. Not all LDS members followed Young to the west. Smith's widow, Emma, stayed behind in Illinois. Those who affirmed her son, Joseph Smith III, as the true successor helped found the "Reorganized Church," now called the Community of Christ and headquartered in Independence, Missouri.

FOUR STANDARD WORKS

Latter-day Saints recognize four written volumes as inspired and authoritative:

1. **The King James Version of the Bible** – "as far as it is translated correctly." This caveat enables Mormons to question the Bible's veracity and authority. Joseph Smith made more than 600 "corrections" to its text. According to the Book of Mormon, the Bible is missing "plain and most precious" parts (1 Nephi 13:26), which the other three standard volumes complete.

2. **The Book of Mormon** (also called *Another Testament of Jesus Christ*). According to one of the church's official websites (ChurchofJe-

susChrist.org), "By the power of God, Joseph Smith translated this book from an ancient record written on gold plates. The Book of Mormon is 'a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains, as does the Bible, the fullness of the everlasting gospel.'"[7]

3. Doctrine and Covenants. This volume features 138 revelations given to Mormon prophets, along with two "declarations." Here, much of Mormon doctrine may be found, including teachings on the priesthood, baptism for the dead, exaltation (or godhood), and polygamy.

4. The Pearl of Great Price. This contains Smith's religious history, the Articles of Faith, the Book of Abraham, and the Book of Moses.

BASIC MORMON BELIEFS

"The first difference to grasp between the Mormon Church and biblical Christianity is one of semantics," writes Fritz Ridenour in *So What's the Difference?* "The Mormons use but have redefined many key terms employed by evangelical Christians – a definitive sign of a cult. Analysis of Mormon views, past and present, reveals that they dismiss, twist, change, or add to all biblical doctrines, particularly revelation, the Trinity, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone."[8] Here is a glimpse of several key doctrines of the Mormon Church:

1. One true church. Joseph Smith declared that all Christian denominations are false and apostate. Mormons teach that after the death of the apostles, all churches became heretical and no true saints existed until the LDS Church was established. Full salvation and "exaltation" (godhood) is found only in the LDS Church.

2. LDS president as living prophet, seer, and revelator. Joseph Smith and his successors are considered the sole spokesmen and revelators of God through whom God's will is made known to the church. These revelations are considered authoritative, although more recent ones have superseded some early revelations; others are minimized by the church today; and still others, such as Smith's prophecy that the temple would be built in Independence, Missouri, in his lifetime, have not been fulfilled.

3. Mormon scripture. Mormons accept "four standard works" – The King James Version of the Bible ("as far as it is translated correctly"); the Book of Mormon; Doctrine and Covenants; and The Pearl

of Great Price. In addition, LDS presidents may receive new revelations from God, and these may become scripture.

4. God as an exalted man. Elohim, or Heavenly Father, is the god of this world. He was formerly a man, but by keeping the requirements of Mormonism, he was exalted to godhood and inherited his own universe. There are an infinite number of gods with their own worlds; these gods, too, once were men. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three distinct gods. The Father and Son have bodies of flesh and bone; the Holy Ghost is a "personage of spirit."

5. Jesus is God's "Son." Jesus (also called Jehovah) was Elohim's firstborn spirit child in heaven. On Earth, Jesus was begotten by God through Mary in a "literal, full and complete sense."[9] Principally in the Garden of Gethsemane (not on the cross), Jesus atoned for Adam's sin and guaranteed all people resurrection and immortality (general salvation). Jesus visited the Israelites (ancestors of Native Americans) after his resurrection and established the true church among them. We are the spiritual younger brothers and sisters of Christ. Jesus was married at Cana in Galilee (John 2); in fact, he had numerous wives and fathered many children, according to some LDS accounts.

6. Humans are gods in embryo. Every Mormon male has the potential to become a god by keeping the requirements of Mormonism. A key phrase in Mormonism, coined by fifth LDS President Lorenzo Snow, is, "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become." From a prior spiritual existence in heaven, people are born on Earth to exercise the freedom to choose between good and evil and to have a body for the resurrection. By obeying Mormon teachings and performing required duties, worthy Mormon males may pass the celestial guards, bring their wives with them, and achieve a status similar to that of Elohim. In the resurrection, faithful Mormon males receive exaltation (godhood) and have authority over their own worlds.

7. Salvation by works. When Mormons say people are "saved" by grace through faith, they mean "resurrection." In this sense, virtually all people will be saved. To achieve the highest tier of the highest level of heaven (the celestial kingdom), Mormons must exercise faith in the god of Mormonism, in Christ, and in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; exercise repentance; and be baptized in the LDS Church. Additionally, they must keep the "Word of Wisdom" by abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine; tithe to the church; attend weekly meet-

ings; support the Mormon prophet; perform temple works; and be active in supporting the church. "Full salvation" or "exaltation" (godhood) is only available through the LDS Church.

8. Eternal progression. All people, as well as all gods, have existed eternally. There are four stages in "eternal progression" through which people may pass: 1) eternally existing intelligence; 2) pre-mortal spirit; 3) mortal probation; 4) resurrection and eternal life in one of several places: outer darkness; the telestial kingdom (lowest level of heaven); the terrestrial kingdom (next-highest level of heaven); or the celestial kingdom, consisting of three levels, the highest of which leads to exaltation/godhood.

FINAL REMARKS

Smith remains one of the most consequential religious figures in U.S. history. This would not surprise him. While imprisoned in Missouri, he expressed a firm belief that his work would outlive him: "The Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing."[10] But endurance is not truth. And Smith's legacy ultimately must stand, not the test of time, but the yardstick of God's Word – and the LDS founder's counterfeit Christianity is sorely lacking.

Rob Phillips is a Christian apologetics instructor with more than 30 years of experience in preaching, teaching, and training Christians to "earnestly contend for the faith ... once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). He serves as associate executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention. He is the author of 14 books, including *The Apologist's Tool Kit*, *What Every Christian Should Know about the Trinity*, *The Book of Life: What the Bible Says about God's Registry of the Redeemed*, and *Passing the Point of No Return: When God's Mercy Gives Way to His Wrath*. Phillips speaks at churches, conferences, training events, and other venues. Phillips can be contacted at rob.phillips@oncedelivered.net. His website is OnceDelivered.net.

The Big Three Areas Christians and Mormons Disagree

Trent Blake

Members of "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)" (aka "Mormons") have called themselves *Christian* from their founding in 1830. Despite this, members of this organization have historically kept themselves quite separate from traditional Christian denominations present in the United States. It is only recently that LDS leadership has shifted the emphasis away from separatism and more toward seeking common ground with evangelical Christianity. Within this context, it can be difficult for the uninformed Christian to recognize where we differ. Are Mormons just another kind of Christian (albeit a strange one)? Are they just another denomination within the wider fold of Christianity?

To put it plainly, no, they are not. In fact, this is a reality that traditional Mormons have wholeheartedly agreed with until very recently. We know this because of the account of Joseph Smith's first vision in The Pearl of Great Price, where he states:

> My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." (Joseph Smith – History, 1:18-19, emphesis added)[11]

Notice what's being said here? Mormons have never thought of themselves as "Christians too" because from the beginning they did not believe non-Mormons were true Christians. They thought of themselves as the only true Christians. I am a Baptist who holds to the historic teachings of Christianity, and I am not offended by Smith's notion. If it were true, then the most loving thing Joseph Smith could do is tell us, rather than let us believe ideas that God says are abominations. The LDS official church dictionary defines

abomination as "An object that excites loathing (Prov. 12:22); hence an idol (2 Kgs. 23:13; Isa. 44:19). The word is also used to denote any heathen or immoral practice (Deut. 18:9, 12; 20:18); also the flesh of prohibited animals (Lev. 11:10–13), etc."[12] Abominations are so vile before God that he loathes them with extreme hatred. If Joseph Smith was correct, then historic Christians are all corrupt hypocrites and the creeds we hold central to our faith incur the intense wrath of God. This reality may be scary and uncomfortable, but it is what Smith taught.

What are these main differences between Mormonism and historic Christianity? This article highlights three essential differences. These differences truly separate Mormonism from historic biblical Christianity. Without these three differences, it would theoretically be possible to view Mormonism and Christianity as different denominations of the same religion. However, these three differences are real, and any honest observer from either side can recognize that at least one of us is in danger of Hellfire. We would be wise to take these differences seriously.

DIFFERENCE 1: THE NATURE OF GOD

The LDS website states, "Like many Christians, we believe in God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. However, we don't believe in the traditional concept of the Trinity. We believe that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are *three separate beings* who are *one in purpose* (emphasis added by author)."[13] Additionally, their official website shares this account of the church's fifth president, Lorenzo Snow:

> President Snow later recalled, "the Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon me—the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I saw as clear as the sun at noonday, with wonder and astonishment, the pathway of God and man. I formed the following couplet which expresses the revelation, as it was shown me: 'As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be.'" Feeling that he had received "a sacred communication" that he should guard carefully, Lorenzo Snow did not teach the doctrine publicly until he knew that the Prophet Joseph Smith had taught it.[14]

The key takeaway is that official Mormon teaching holds that God is three distinct beings: Heavenly Father (who created the universe we live in, including Jesus and the Holy Ghost), Jesus (his firstborn), and the Holy Ghost. Additionally, Heavenly Father was once a man like us who served his god. Then he was exalted to godhood and became the ruler of the universe we live in. Mormons have historically understood this idea to mean

that Heavenly Father's god was also once a man who attained godhood, and that this process regresses infinitely into the past. However, not all Latter-day Saints hold this view today. In contrast, the historic Christian view is made clear in the Athanasian Creed, which states:

> We worship *one* God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither blending their persons, nor dividing their *essence*. For the person of the Father is a *distinct person*, the person of the Son is *another*, and that of the Holy Spirit still *another*. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal [...] *There are not three eternal beings*; there is but one eternal being (emphasis added).[15]

Likewise, the historic Augsburg Confession states:

> There is one divine essence which is called and is God: *eternal*, without body, without parts, of *infinite* wisdom, power, and goodness, the maker and preserver of all things, visible and invisible, and yet there are three persons of the same essence and power, who also are *coeternal*, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (emphasis added).[16]

These two historic Christian statements demonstrate that biblical Christianity holds that God is a singular being with a single essence. God exists as three Persons (Father, Son, and Spirit). In simple terms, God is one what and three who's. God is eternal, since he has no beginning nor end. God is infinite in his attributes, including his perfect self-sufficiency. God does not grow or change.

Readers should note the differences. The god of Mormonism is a completely different being – one that grows, depends on another god for his existence, whom he worships, and is no different in species than you or me! Therefore, Mormons are ironically atheistic without realizing it, because they do not actually believe in God. Rather, they believe in a human who has progressively attained supernatural, god-like abilities and goes by the title, "God." Truly, the difference could not be more stark.

DIFFERENCE 2: SCRIPTURE

The official LDS church website states:

> The Bible is not inferior to other scriptures. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said, "We believe, revere, and love the Holy Bible. We do have additional sacred scripture ... but it supports the Bible, never substituting for it." The eighth article of faith says, "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is

translated correctly." In Joseph Smith's day, the word translate didn't just mean to take something from one language into another; it also could mean to transfer, convey, interpret, or explain. And although errors do appear in various renderings from the original Hebrew and Greek, the bigger issue is that in the delivery of the ancient texts to the present day, "many plain and precious things [were] taken away." So, as the Bible texts were transmitted to us, certain teachings were lost. That's one reason people have so many different interpretations of the Bible, as Joseph Smith experienced. So one way modern revelation helps clarify and confirm the truths in the Bible is by restoring other truths that were lost.[17] (LDS.org)

The summary position of Mormonism concerning Scripture is that the Bible was a perfectly accurate revelation from God when it was first written. But it has been significantly corrupted over time, resulting in the loss or alteration of several important teachings. Thus, Mormons teach that the new scriptures revealed through the LDS Church are entirely in full alignment with the original message of the Bible. The LDS position is that any contradictions between the Bible and LDS scriptures are due to corruption in the biblical text over time by copyists.

In contrast, historic Christianity teaches that the Bible has not been corrupted over time. The Bible we have today accurately reflects the originals. Therefore, any differences between the Bible and LDS scriptures must be due to errors in the LDS scriptures. Since God's Word cannot contain falsehood, Christians reject the LDS scriptures.

While some Christians believe God may give additional revelation after the completion of the biblical canon, most agree that any supposed additional revelation must be judged according to its consistency with Special Revelation (the Bible). God is not the author of confusion and cannot contradict what he has previously said. Thus, historic Christians believe that Special Revelation (the Bible) always takes precedence over any later claims of supposed revelation.

DIFFERENCE 3: THE AFTERLIFE

Mormons believe that the purpose of life is to become exalted to godhood. While Mormons believe that virtually everyone is saved from Hell (what they call "Outer Darkness") by default because of Jesus's death on the cross, they believe God's best only comes through obeying the rules and regulations of Mormonism. Only then can a person truly attain godhood – what Mormons call *exaltation*. Doctrine and Covenants 132 explains:

> Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them. Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye abide my law ye cannot attain to this glory.[18]

In contrast, the historic Christian position holds that the purpose of life is to glorify God, not become God. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever."[19] Christians do not believe the purpose of man is to attain godhood. Believers in Christ will remain human even in eternity, although in a glorified state conformed to Christ's likeness.

The Augsburg Confession helpfully points out that no person can attain righteousness (much less divine status). Instead, God makes us righteous by his own gracious act. "Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight."[20]

In summary, historic Christianity teaches that Jesus's death on the cross is sufficient to spare us from eternity apart from God (what historic Christians call Hell and what LDS members call Outer Darkness) and sufficient to deliver us to God's best and greatest for us in the afterlife. Additionally, we do not believe God's best includes becoming gods who rule our own worlds/universes, which is an idolatrous viewpoint. Instead, we believe God gives us new heavenly bodies (similar to our current ones, but not subject to injury or decay) so that we can live with God forever as worshipers. We do not progressively become greater beings; rather, we progress in knowledge and joy at the sight of God's immense glory.

CONCLUSION

Having pointed out the three major areas of difference, it is important to recognize their significance. If the LDS Church is correct about these three issues, then historic Christianity is wrong and should repent and join the LDS Church. On the other hand, if historic Christianity is correct, then the LDS Church is wrong, and its authority is not valid. Since this is the case, members of the LDS Church need to repent, place their faith in Christ as their Savior, and become genuine Christians who follow historic Christian

theology. Personally, I think they should become Baptist, but as a Baptist pastor, I may be a bit biased.

The stakes are high. Our differences matter, so much so that getting these issues wrong can be the difference between unending death and eternal life. The differences Mormons have concerning the nature of God, Scripture, and the afterlife as compared to historic Christianity place Mormonism outside of Christianity, since it is something altogether not Christian.

Christians reading this article would be wise to prepare themselves to defend the true view of God's nature, Scripture, and the afterlife. Christians should be prepared for this defense to strengthen their own faith and to engage Mormons with the true gospel of Jesus Christ compassionately. Prepare yourself to adequately explain and give reasons for the nature of God, the reliability of Scripture, and the true message of the gospel. Do this, and you will be much more prepared to engage with Mormons.

Trent Blake is a Christian apologist based in Clayton, Georgia, and is an affiliate member of the Missouri Baptist Apologetics Network. His passion is to honor God with his whole heart and ministry. He serves as associate pastor of students at Clayton Baptist Church in Clayton, Georgia, and was an active MBAN member in Kansas City while pursuing his MTS in Apologetics and Evangelism from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Consider Christianity*, an apologetics book that invites unbelievers to accept the Christian message. Blake and his wife, Sarah, have one child. Readers can find Blake's work at BaselineChristianity.com.

When "Grace" Doesn't Mean Grace: Understanding LDS Vocabulary in Gospel Conversations

By Lacey Shelton

WHEN WORDS SOUND FAMILIAR...BUT AREN'T

If you have ever had a conversation with a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), you may have walked away thinking, "We actually agree on a lot." After all, the language sounds familiar: God, Jesus Christ, grace, salvation, and faith. These are not fringe terms for Christ followers; rather, they are the very heart of Christian theology. And yet, as many Christians have discovered, agreement at the level of vocabulary does not always mean agreement at the level of truth. This is not merely a matter of semantics; it is a gospel matter.

The apostle Paul warned of this same danger when he wrote, "if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed... or if you accept a different gospel... you put up with it readily enough" (2 Corinthians 11:4, ESV). The concern was not always the abandonment of Christian language, but the dangerous and damning redefinition of it.

LDS theology retains many of Christianity's core biblical terms, but fills them with completely different meanings. Understanding these differences is essential not merely for the sake of winning arguments, but for the sake of clarity, truth, and love. If we are to share the gospel with our LDS neighbors faithfully, we must first understand what they mean when they use the same theological terms we do.

This article examines four key terms: *God*, *Jesus Christ*, *grace*, and *salvation*, and compares the LDS use of them with historic biblical Christianity. It will then explain why these distinctions matter and offer practical guidance for engaging in gospel conversations with both clarity and Christ-like humility.

WHEN "GOD" IS NOT THE SAME GOD

Both Christians and LDS members speak of "Heavenly Father," "Jesus Christ," and "the Holy Spirit." However, the similarities quickly give way to significant differences.

In LDS theology, the Godhead consists of three separate beings united in *purpose* but not in *essence*. God the Father is understood to have a phys-

ical body[21] and, according to traditional LDS teaching, was once a man who progressed to godhood.[22] Humanity, in turn, has the potential to follow the same path of exaltation.[23]

By contrast, historic biblical Christianity affirms that there is one God in three *persons*—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—co-equal and co-eternal, sharing the *same divine essence* (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). God is not an exalted man but the eternal, unchanging creator of all things (Malachi 3:6; Isaiah 43:10).

This distinction is deeply foundational. A different understanding of God inevitably leads to a different understanding of salvation. If God is not eternally God, then his authority, holiness, and uniqueness are fundamentally altered. The biblical gospel begins with the reality that there is one true and living God, and that we are accountable to him, not becoming like him in essence,[24] but reconciled to him by grace.

WHEN "JESUS" IS NOT THE ETERNAL SON

Closely tied to the doctrine of God is the identity of Jesus Christ.

LDS teaching affirms Jesus as the Son of God and Savior, but defines him as the firstborn spirit child of Heavenly Father.[25] He is distinct from the Father in being[26] and is understood within a broader framework of spirit offspring.[27] In this view, Jesus is divine, but not in the same ontological sense affirmed in historic Christianity.

Biblical Christianity, however, teaches that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God; thus, he is fully God and became fully man. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). He is not a created being, but the creator himself (Colossians 1:16). In him "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

This is not a minor doctrinal nuance. The sufficiency of Christ's atonement depends on who he is. Only a truly divine, fully eternal Savior can bear the full weight of sin and satisfy the eternal justice of God. A diminished view of Christ inevitably leads to a diminished view of his work. We have no good news to share if our Savior is not eternal, but since he is, we have the very best news to give our LDS neighbors.

WHEN "GRACE" COMES AFTER EFFORT

Perhaps the most critical difference, and the one most often obscured by shared language, is the meaning of grace.

LDS teaching includes grace as an important concept, but often frames it in cooperation with human effort. A commonly cited passage from the

Book of Mormon states, "it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23).[28] Grace, in this framework, functions as something that completes or supplements human obedience.[29]

In contrast, biblical Christianity teaches that grace is not a supplement to human effort; rather, it is the very foundation of salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Grace is not given after we have done our part; it is given precisely because we cannot.

Titus 3:5 reinforces this idea: "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy." This difference in terms is not semantic; it is theological at its core.[30] In one system, grace *assists*. In the other, grace *saves*.

WHEN "SALVATION" MEANS SOMETHING EARNED

The concept of "salvation" also contains different meanings within LDS theology. LDS doctrine distinguishes between *general salvation* (resurrection from the dead, granted to most people) and *exaltation* (the highest level of eternal life, achieved through faithfulness, ordinances, and obedience).[31] For the LDS, salvation in its fullest sense involves participation in temple ordinances, covenant faithfulness, and enduring obedience.[32] [33]

Biblical Christianity, however, presents salvation as a definitive act of God's grace, received through faith in Christ alone. Romans 10:9–10 teaches that salvation comes through confessing Jesus as Lord and believing in his resurrection. Hebrews 10:10–12 emphasizes that Christ's sacrifice was "once for all," fully accomplishing redemption. There are no tiers of saving grace based on human performance.[34] Rather, there is one gospel, one Savior, and one finished work.

WHY THESE DIFFERENCES MATTER

It can be tempting to minimize these distinctions in the interest of relational harmony. After all, LDS individuals are often notably kind, extremely family-oriented, and highly moral. Many Christians may find much to admire about a Mormon on a personal level. But the issue before us is not the assessment of character; it is the assessment of truth.

When grace is redefined, the gospel is undermined. If Jesus is redefined, the cross is diminished. If God is redefined, the entire framework of salvation is rendered impotent. LDS' doctrinal redefinitions of these four historically Christian terms result in God made in man's image, and Jesus weakened with no eternal power to save. Under the LDS theological redefi-

nition, salvation becomes a meritorious activity that new believers now spend the rest of their lives keeping, working, striving, and reaching for.

Paul's warning in Galatians 1:8–9 is sobering: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you… let him be accursed." Doctrinal clarity is not about combativeness; it is about faithfulness. The gospel is not ours to adjust or soften. It is a message to be stewarded and proclaimed. After all, it really is the "power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16).

ENGAGING LDS NEIGHBORS WITH CLARITY AND HUMILITY

Understanding these differences is only part of the task. The other part is learning how to engage wisely and graciously.

1. **Ask Clarifying Questions.** Because LDS vocabulary overlaps with Christian terminology, it is essential to ask, "What do you mean by that?" This question avoids assumptions and opens the door for meaningful dialogue. Other example questions include: "What does grace mean to you?" "How do you understand salvation?" These types of questions invite conversation rather than confrontation.

2. **Define Terms Biblically.** Rather than immediately correcting the LDS's mistaken theological understanding, take the time to articulate clearly what Scripture teaches. Walk them through passages like Ephesians 2:8–9, Titus 3:5, and Romans 10:9–10. Let Scripture carry the weight of the conversation.

3. **Focus on the Gospel.** It is easy to get sidetracked into secondary issues when other LDS teachings float into the conversation, such as complex temple practices, murky church history, or distinct cultural differences. While these matters have their place, the central issue is always the gospel: Who is Jesus, and how is a person saved? Keep returning to the finished work of Christ.

4. **Be Patient and Respectful.** LDS individuals are often deeply committed to their beliefs and communities. Fruitful gospel conversations may take time. Approach them not as *projects*, but as *people* made in the image of God. "Speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) is not optional; it is essential.

5. **Trust the Sufficiency of God's Word.** Ultimately, it is not our arguments that save; it is the Spirit of God working through the Word of God. Our role is to be faithful, clear, and compassionate.

6. **Holding Truth and Love Together.** Gospel conversations with LDS neighbors require both discernment and humility. We must be discerning enough to recognize when familiar words carry unfamiliar meanings, and humble enough to engage with patience and grace. The goal is not winning debates. Rather, the goal is to bear witness to the true gospel; the good news that sinners are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In a world where words are often redefined, clarity is an act of love. In every conversation, we have the opportunity to point others, not merely to better definitions, but to the living and eternal Christ. His grace is not earned, supplemented, or completed by human effort, but freely given by the omnipotent God to all who believe.

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Refuting the Great Apostasy: Evidence of Faithful Bible Transmission

Jeffrey Maskrod

INTRODUCTION

One of the keystone claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is that a great apostasy occurred after the death of the apostles until Joseph Smith received his first vision and began the restoration of the church in 1820. Smith claimed that priesthood authority in Jesus's church had been lost and that without it, the church was lost and the gospel corrupted. Mormons refer to this apostasy as the *Great Apostasy*.

In this article, I explain the Great Apostasy, according to LDS scriptures and writings. LDS scriptures include the Book of Mormon, The Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants. LDS also accept the King James Version (KJV) translation of the Bible; however, they believe the other LDS scriptures are always correct when they conflict with the KJV. I will also use Christian Scripture and textual evidence to demonstrate that the Great Apostasy did not occur as Mormons claim, and that the Scriptures we hold in our hands today are not corrupted. If the Scriptures are not corrupted, then the promise Jesus made regarding his church in Matthew 16:18, "that the gates of Hades will not overpower it", is as valid today as it was in his day.

DEFINING THE GREAT APOSTASY

To avoid constructing a straw man of the Great Apostasy teaching, I will define it according to LDS scriptures. To begin, 1 Nephi 13:24-29 in the Book of Mormon contains a prophecy about the coming Great Apostasy. Two key verses from that prophecy stand out. In verse 26, it says "many parts" of the gospel have been taken away, while verse 27 says that this Great Apostasy was purposely crafted to lead people astray:

> And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. And all this have they

> done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men.

Doctrine and Covenants also describes the Great Apostasy in chapter 1, verses 15 and 16:

> For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall.

Joseph Smith's vision took place during the latter part of the Second Great Awakening in America. Due to disagreements among Christian denominations, young Smith was confused about which denomination to join. He prayed to God about which one to join. According to Smith, he was visited by two personages: God the Father and God the Son. One thing to keep in mind about the "First Vision" is that there are no early mentions of it in LDS writings. Smith does not speak or write about it until 1832. Also, there are four different versions of the "First Vision" – the official version found on the LDS Church website is the 1838 version and is canonized in The Pearl of Great Price. Below is the account as recorded in The Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith - History 1:18-19:

> My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."

The official LDS website provides a helpful summary of the verses quoted above. "Because of this widespread apostasy, the Lord withdrew the authority of the priesthood from the earth. This apostasy lasted until Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820 and initiated

the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel."[35] Their website also says, "the gospel was removed from earth as a result of the Great Apostasy."[36]

It is worth noting that LDS believe that since Smith brought about the restoration of the true gospel and Jesus's church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will not be overcome by general apostasy, "unlike the church in times past."[37] This idea is also taught in Doctrine and Covenants 18:5 and 33:13. Note that 33:13 says, "And upon this rock I will build my church; yea, upon this rock ye are built, and if ye continue, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you." Here are five key summary points concerning the LDS view of the Great Apostasy:

1. The Great Apostasy was purposefully coordinated to lead people astray.
2. The gospel, along with the priestly authority, was removed from earth during the Great Apostasy.
3. During the Great Apostasy, people have been following their own covenants and doctrines and not those of God.
4. God restored the true church through Joseph Smith, and this church will not be overcome.
5. The Great Apostasy is not localized to one church or group, but is complete and widespread.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE FOR THE GREAT APOSTASY

Now that we understand the LDS Church's claim about the Great Apostasy, we need to examine the evidence for it. If the revelations of Joseph Smith and the LDS scriptures were correct that "plain and precious" things were taken away from the New Testament as we know it, then one should expect to see evidence of parts being removed from it. Let us examine what the historical evidence shows concerning the New Testament documents.

The claims of New Testament corruption and textual removal can be tested through textual criticism. Experts in textual criticism study ancient documents, such as the New Testament, and examine textual variations and textual accuracy to reconstruct the original writings. Prominent textual critic Daniel Wallace defines textual criticism as "the study of the handwritten copies of the New Testament whose original, the autograph, is unknown or non-existent, and so the primary purpose of determining the exact wording of that original text is the fundamental goal."[38]

Interestingly, there are approximately 5,800 Greek manuscripts (including fragments) of the New Testament discovered to date. These were largely discovered in three regions of the world so that the manuscripts can

be divided into three families: Alexandrian - manuscripts found in Egypt; Western - manuscripts found in Italy, North Africa, and the Western Mediterranean; and finally, Byzantine - manuscripts found in the Eastern Mediterranean.[39]

If Joseph Smith were correct, then substantial differences between the New Testament manuscripts should be evident – especially between families of the texts. When these manuscripts are systematically compared, the consensus among textual experts is that there are no variations or missing parts in the New Testament that affect Christian doctrine. Influential textual scholar F.F. Bruce (1910-1990) said:

> The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.[40]

Bruce's point is that the sheer volume of discovered New Testament manuscripts gives more confidence in the Bible's transmission accuracy than any other work of antiquity. Furthermore, Wallace said in an interview, "For more than two centuries, most biblical scholars have declared that no essential affirmation has been affected by the variants."[41] Prominent New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who is critical of Christianity, admits that the New Testament manuscripts accurately portray the original writings. When considering the variations between the manuscripts, he said, "most of the changes found in early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology."[42]

It is also important to note that Tertullian challenged people of his day, who were following heresy, to verify doctrine by examining the writings of the apostles. He asserted in *De praescriptione haereticorum* (On the prescription of heretics) that the *authentic writings* of the apostles were still being read in places such as Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Rome. He also said, "How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood!"[43]

It is fair to say that the New Testament we have in our hands today is an accurate copy of the original writings, and that no doctrine has been lost. The evidence from textual criticism casts serious doubt on Joseph Smith's claims of New Testament corruption.

THE PROMISE FROM JESUS

One must also consider the promise Jesus made concerning his church. As previously quoted, Doctrine and Covenants 33:13 says, “And upon this rock I will build my church; yea, upon this rock ye are built, and if ye continue, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.” This LDS scripture should sound familiar to Christian Bible readers since it is, for all practical purposes, a rephrasing of Jesus’s words in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said, “And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18, CSB). Given the summary evidence outlined in the previous section on New Testament textual reliability, we must conclude that Jesus did not lie and that this passage is not a later scribal addition.

We must also consider the fact that the God of the Bible has consistently provided evidence for himself. He does not ask us to take a blind leap of faith nor believe in him based on a “burning in the bosom.” In Exodus chapter 4, God provided evidence to Moses when Moses was afraid. Jesus provided evidence to John the Baptist while John was in prison. Jesus provided his apostles with evidence that he had, in fact, physically resurrected.

The accounts of these events have been accurately transmitted to us. Anyone can view the manuscripts at will. Websites like the New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room (https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/) and the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (www.csntm.org/) are digital catalogs of viewable New Testament manuscripts. In stark contrast to the New Testament textual evidence, the Book of Mormon was supposedly translated from golden plates that no longer exist and from a language for which there is no evidence it ever existed.

CONCLUSION

After examining the evidence, it seems more likely that no Great Apostasy has occurred. Christians have more than sufficient reasons to believe that the New Testament manuscripts have not been corrupted and that no Christian doctrine has been adversely affected. Since no Great Apostasy occurred and the New Testament is accurate, there was no need for a restoration. The church Jesus built has remained intact from the time of the apostles to today. What the apostles passed down and taught has been faithfully preserved in the New Testament.

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Jesus and The Book of Mormon: The 15 Books, The Prophets, and the Witnesses

John Vaughan

Now, not tomorrow, is the time for churches and church leaders to be aware of and learn how to communicate bottom-line issues with Mormons that distinguish them from biblical Christianity. Benjamin E. Park, an LDS academic and author of *American Zion*, notes that the LDS Church has split into more than 400 splinter groups.[44] In 2030, all of them will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Book of Mormon and the birth of the church it launched in 1830. Get ready for the celebration publicity to be live before 2030. It officially began in 2026 with the 100th anniversary of the Tabernacle Choir concert in the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles.

If you think the coronation of the new American Catholic Pope was a global event, get ready for TV screens, news announcements, social media, and blog site QR codes to be filled with free copies of the Book of Mormon, followed by visits to Christian homes from a Mormon missionary. Trust me, get ready for the celebration in 2029-2030.

The purpose of this article is to identify three critical topics for conversation with our Mormon friends. While we can easily discuss more than 35 topic areas related to LDS doctrine, beliefs, and practices, the main topics of conversation in this article will focus on the gut-level issues of Jesus, the prophets, and the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, since these are Mormons' core sources of authority.

"JESUS" BEFORE JESUS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Joseph Smith said, "Take away the Book of Mormon and revelations, and where is our religion? We have none."[45] Smith also claimed, "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth."[46] The authority of all Mormon sects centers on the Book of Mormon, its eleven "witnesses," the authenticity of "revelations" given to the prophet/presidents of the church, and the authenticity of the role of that prophet/president.

Before there can be any meaningful conversation with your LDS friends and their missionaries that may come knocking at your door, readers need to be aware of several important factors. Most of the commonly

known beliefs and practices of your Mormon friends are not found in the Book of Mormon. Instead, they are found in their three other "scriptures" - Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price (made up of five books), and the Joseph Smith version of the King James Bible. Mormons use no other version of the Bible. It is worth noting that approximately 15% (27,000 words) of the Book of Mormon comes directly from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible.[47] Given that many Bible verses have been incorporated into the Book of Mormon, many Mormon leaders, such as Sidney Rigdon, believed that the Book of Mormon rendered the Bible less important than itself.[48] It is common in Mormon worship services to hear familiar Bible verses quoted without being attributed to the Bible, but rather to the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is composed of 15 books. They tell the story of two major migrations from both Babylon and the Holy Land to modern-day America. The books are named after prophets, some of whom were also generals and kings. The primary migration was led by Lehi and his three sons, Nephi, Lemuel, and Laman. The Book of Mormon recounts the multi-generational struggle between the good son, Nephi, and his two rebellious brothers. The book ends with Moroni burying golden plates on a New York hillside around AD 400. Joseph Smith later discovered these plates, and thus the Book of Mormon resulted.

The Book of Ether records the first migration, led by Jared at the time of the Tower of Babel around 2,200 BC, and the second major migration, led by Lehi from Jerusalem around 600 BC, before the fall of Jerusalem. The books of 1 Nephi and Ether both mention the name Jesus and specific details of his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. They mention details beyond those of Old Testament prophets quoted by Jesus. They may reference Jesus, but Jesus never mentions them. Most Mormons, not just Salt Lake City LDS, know about the references to Jesus in the Book of Mormon, but many have not connected the dots nor publicized that Jesus never mentions these prophets. The reason for this silence may be that these "prophetic" books were manufactured in the 1820s for the Book of Mormon. This fact is critical for Christians to know. Christian church leaders also need to be familiar with these LDS books so they can effectively protect their congregations from the false teachings of Mormonism.

Some examples of these "Jesus before there was Jesus" references come from the Book of Ether (claiming to be from circa 2,200 BC). Ether mentions Jesus seven times in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 12. There are also several mentions of Jesus in the Book of Nephi (claiming to be from circa AD 600), such as Nephi 26:1, 6, 17, 20, 21, 27; 27:1, 2; 28:23, 29.

1 Nephi 10-14 provides many more detailed references said to be from around 600 BC. For example, the date of Jesus being "six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem" (10:4); "city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin" (10:5, 11:13-21); "a prophet to prepare the way of the Lord…and baptize," implying John the Baptist (10:5); "Holy Ghost…in the form of a dove" (11:27); "Multitudes healed" (11:31); "Gentiles…shall be grafted in and come to…the true Messiah" (10:11-14); "crucified upon a cross and slain for the sins of the world" (11:3); "and after slain he should rise from the dead" (10:44); "multitudes persecute the apostles" (11:34); and a great apostasy (11:35-36).

WHEN IS A "PROPHET" NOT A BIBLICAL PROPHET?

More than 133 prophets are named in the Bible, including 16 women. Numerous others prophesied, such as the 70 elders of Israel (Numbers 11:25) and the 100 prophets rescued by Obadiah (1 Kings 18:4). The first person called a prophet in the Bible is Abraham. In Genesis 20:7, God spoke to Abimelech in a dream, saying, "Now then, return Abraham's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you will live."

A high level of prophetic activity marked the time of Elijah and Elisha. Even a school for prophets thrived during their lifetimes (see 1 Kings 20:35). In the New Testament, John the Baptist was as a prophet and forerunner of the Messiah (Matthew 3:1). Jesus likewise came as prophet, priest, king, and Messiah, fulfilling many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.[49]

The Bible clearly defines the features of true and false prophets as well as the penalty for falsely claiming to speak for God (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:20-22). True prophets must be (1) 100% accurate, (2) in agreement with God's already existing revelation of truth, and (3) must lead others in their walk with God, not away from him.

The two primary sources of authority in Mormonism are: (1) the authenticity and unwavering authority of the church's prophets and their prophetic "revelations" from God; and (2) the authenticity and unwavering authority of "revelations" revealed through the writings that result from these prophetic revelations. For example, Mormons accept Joseph Smith's revised KJV, the Book of Mormon, and The Pearl of Great Price as authoritative prophetic revelations.

In the Bible, whenever a true prophet delivered a prophecy, it was considered final and unalterable by the people, and it was not subject to contradiction by later prophecies. The current LDS prophet/president, however, follows a process for declaring a "revelation" as "official church doc-

trine." For LDS, the prophet/president's "revelation" must be confirmed by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Quorum of the Seventy, and eventually presented to representatives of the congregations at large. In the case of the Preface to the Book of Mormon, authentication may include sworn signatures of the Eleven Witnesses.

Also, in the LDS Church, a prophet/president's revelation can later be changed, edited, or even voided by the leadership of future prophets/presidents. Even Joseph Smith's revelations could theoretically be subject to future revisions or voidance. LDS leaders understand that Joseph Smith's or Brigham Young's statements made through LDS publications and sermons are not necessarily official or binding as doctrine in the LDS Church. LDS ecclesial statements of doctrine can change without apology because, for them, divine revelation is evolving and progressive. Two examples of later doctrinal revisions in the LDS Church are official statements on polygamy and admission of black members to the priesthood and to LDS Church temples. In contrast, Jesus never altered any statements of Old Testament prophets. He also never quoted any Mormon prophets, even though the Book of Mormon frequently refers in detail to New Testament events in the life of Jesus.

WHEN IS A WITNESS' SWORN TESTIMONY OFFICIAL?

The front matter of every Book of Mormon contains a page listing the names of eleven men who swore before Joseph Smith that they saw the gold plates and the angel Moroni. That page was, and is still, the authentication of the Book of Mormon for all Mormon sects. Despite various Mormon groups' doctrinal differences, they all claim allegiance to Joseph Smith as God's Prophet and the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon. The signatures of these eleven witnesses are essential to the LDS Church.

Many Mormons may not be aware that all but one of the eleven witnesses (Martin Harris) were either blood relatives or related by marriage to only two families – the David Whitmer and Joseph Smith families. Also, the document they signed was a single page where they were asked to sign only their names. Their written testimonies are not in that document.

On the other hand, LDS churches reject numerous lengthy handwritten sworn testimonies by numerous people that claim the Book of Mormon to be a fabrication from a stolen historical novel in Pittsburgh, 20 years before the Book of Mormon was published in 1830. Though the stolen book disappeared, its author enthusiastically read its contents to friends, neighbors, and strangers. When these "living witnesses" read the pages of the Book of Mormon, they recognized it immediately as taken from the stolen

book manuscript. These sworn witnesses included judges, attorneys, pastors, businessmen, farmers, neighbors, and relatives. Mormons accept the eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon but reject any other sworn witnesses who testify against the book's legitimacy.

In summary, Jesus never quoted the supposed 2,200 BC and 600 BC Mormon books that referred to him in more detail than the Old Testament prophets did. Second, Jesus never referenced any of the prophets in the Book of Mormon. Third, while revelations of LDS prophets/presidents can and have been edited and/or voided, Jesus consistently affirmed the legitimacy of Old Testament prophets and never contravened them. Finally, each Mormon and potential Mormon must decide which witnesses they consider trustworthy when considering the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. As Ken Hemphill put it, "Eternity is too long to be wrong!"

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More Than Skin Deep: Mormonism Looks Like Christianity, But the Substance is Different

Vincent Tichenor

In 2022, Netflix released a game show called “Is It Cake?”, following a viral internet trend in which individuals would craft cakes that look like everyday objects. The show turned this into a competition, with bakers creating cakes that could look astonishingly similar to everyday objects like paintings or bowling balls. Once completed, the cakes would be placed among the ordinary objects they mimicked, with the dramatic climax of the competition occurring when a knife cuts into the cake, revealing the identity of the confectionary imposter. While the cakes looked like other objects, the true substance was obviously much different. When comparing Mormonism to Christianity, there may be similarities on the surface, but beneath the skin, things are completely different.

In Missouri, there are around 83,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormon Church.[50] That is about 1.3% of Missouri's population, which, while not a huge number, makes it likely that most of us have met Mormons before. When talking and interacting with Mormons, it is easy to see how wholesome and “normal” they are. In the Mormon Church, moral conduct and family growth are extremely important to their soteriology (or doctrine of salvation). According to Mormon belief, a Mormon must live in specific moral ways to be commended to the highest heaven.[51]

While there are aspects of Mormon teachings about salvation that are uniquely Mormon, such as temple rites, it also includes behaviors that many evangelical Christians might agree with. For instance, avoidance of alcohol, a commitment to marriage and the nuclear family, and a broadly Christian sexual ethic. As such, the everyday life of Mormons and Christians can appear indistinguishable. However, despite how similar Mormons seem to Southern Baptists (or evangelical Christians in general), the similarities belie significant differences in what our two groups believe, and these superficial similarities can make it incredibly difficult to witness to our Mormon friends.

For the most part, we tend to judge belief systems by how members of that faith conduct themselves. For many, the outward actions of the adherents of a particular faith define that faith, and convincing them that there

is indeed a difference can be difficult. Because of this, the general public is broadly unaware that Christianity and Mormonism have vastly different theologies. Broadly speaking, the general public likely believes that Mormons are Christians. Even Christians and Mormons are not immune to this assumption. One study found that 97% of Mormons believe that Mormons are Christians.[52] Many Christians mistakenly believe Mormons are Christians as well. Rather than digging deeper than the surface level and finding out what Mormons believe, many Christians observe that they seem a lot like us and leave it at that.

However, once you look beyond that which is easily seen, the differences between Mormonism and Christianity become as stark as the differences between a real bowling ball and a cake. There are many beliefs which are absolutely foundational to Christianity that Mormons do not believe. While a full treatment of the differences in these beliefs is outside the scope of this article, here are a few foundational Christian beliefs that Mormonism rejects:

1. **Monotheism:** Mormons are polytheistic.[53] They believe in a cosmic system of reiterative godhood bestowed on faithful believers. Their "god" was once a man who became a god through obedience.[54] Faithful Mormons in this life will eventually be gifted a planet to become the god of and populate, thus continuing the cycle. This system has apparently been in place for all eternity, meaning that Mormons believe in many (potentially infinite) gods.

2. **The Trinity:** Given that they believe in many gods, particularly that each member of the Trinity is a separate god,[55] they do not affirm the doctrine of the Trinity.

3. **Deity of Christ:** In Mormonism, Christ is a created being.[56] This is starkly different from Christianity, which believes Christ is the second person of the Trinity, co-eternal with the Father and Holy Spirit.

4. **Salvation:** Mormons practice a broadly works-based salvation and do not believe that Christ's work on the cross is sufficient for securing full salvation, but rather believe that one must have participated in ordinances/rites within the LDS church.[57]

These are only a small sampling of the differences between Mormon and Christian beliefs. What should be evident at this point is that even if every other doctrine besides these listed above were the same between the two faiths, these doctrinal differences alone would be sufficient to separate Mormonism into a religion that is completely removed from Christianity. One

might think that it would then be easy to articulate the distinction between the two to a Mormon and thereby possibly witness to them, but this is often incredibly difficult — typically because, as stated above, Mormons believe that they are already Christians.

Christians should avoid the mistake of viewing good works as the defining characteristic of our religion. Our faith in Christ is the core of our belief system, not moral behavior. Someone can act in ways that we perceive as not fitting Christian behavior, but if they truly have faith in Christ, we can fellowship with them. There might be someone in your church with a background similar to yours, but who is a new believer and still struggles with habits from their previous life. So long as their faith in Christ is genuine, you can call them a brother or sister in the Lord. Or perhaps you meet a believer from another culture in a different part of the world who also loves Christ but whose lifestyle is different from your own. They, too, can be considered fellow heirs with Christ. However, this is not true for Mormons. Because Mormonism rejects the core beliefs of Christianity,[58] we cannot consider them to be Christians, despite how similar our lives may appear.

However, moral behavior is not unimportant. Indeed, our sinful behavior makes us unholy and separates us from God. But our good behavior is not at the heart of the gospel; Christ is. His atoning sacrifice is the cornerstone of our faith and is one of the key beliefs that separates Christianity from essentially all other religions in the world, Mormonism included. In most every other religion, moral behavior leads to salvation (in whatever way a given religion defines "salvation"). In Christianity, the opposite holds: salvation leads to moral behavior. When Christ truly saves a person, their gratitude should compel them to live a life that is pleasing to him. While we acknowledge that believing Christians will still struggle with besetting sins, we can simultaneously affirm "by grace (we) have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8) and "faith without works is dead" (James 2:6). If good works are the necessary consequence of saving faith, then an absence of good works in a person's life means that there is an absence of saving faith.

Consider the implication of the Christian doctrine that salvation is by faith alone, not works. We do not have the burden of our salvation on our shoulders. Paul says this plainly in his letter to the Romans: "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God brought salvation and assurance to us prior to good works. We can rest in the fact that it is not our performance that brings us to God in the end. Mormons do not have this assurance.

Given that similarities in Mormon and Christian ethics obscure the vast divide between our beliefs, how can we witness to our Mormon friends?

First, you must be willing to invest time to be genuine friends with Mormons before you can effectively witness to them. You need to build rapport and trust with them before they will ever be willing to consider that their life (which looks so similar to yours) is truly lacking something. Given that family and marriage are a large part of their moral code, their faith can seem like a family heirloom, and coming to Christ would be like declaring an heirloom counterfeit. Mormons are also a close-knit group who support each other well (something we Christians may benefit in re-learning); thus, it can be hard for Christians to *break into* their world in a meaningful way. It may take time for such an opportunity to arise.

Second, Christians need to be grounded in their own faith. Before being able to recognize that something is counterfeit, you need to be keenly familiar with the real thing. For example, the U.S. Currency Education Program is a free online anti-counterfeit training program offered by the U.S. government. One would think that such training would involve learning about common methods of counterfeiting money. However, the focus of the training is learning what *real* money looks like. That way, no matter what counterfeit currency one encounters, it can be identified. Undoubtedly, there have been Christians who, never having been taught the essentials of Christian doctrine, have been deceived into thinking that Mormonism is just another variety of Christianity. Some have even converted to Mormonism. In order to identify and faithfully articulate why Mormonism is not part of the Christian faith, Christians must *know* Christian doctrine.

Third, pray for your Mormon friends. Pray that the Holy Spirit would open their eyes to the deficiencies in their faith. Pray that they would hunger for more. Pray that they would encounter the evidence that demonstrates that both their doctrine and their church history are fraught with error and counterfeit claims. Sometimes, this may even mean praying that something goes wrong in their otherwise comfortable lives so that they can be awakened to their true spiritual needs.

When interacting with and witnessing to your Mormon friends, do not be deceived by the false idea that Mormonism is just another Christian denomination. While they do seem to live relatively good lives, the similarities between Christianity and Mormonism only go skin deep.

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Why I Became Mormon: The Enticing Realities of the LDS Church

Roger Sherrer

In the fall of 2012, I got a knock on my door that would change my young adulthood and faith journey as a recent atheist who had accepted Christ just a few years earlier. As a 19-year-old college student yearning for more, this afternoon door knock would lead to a three-year membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). On that day, I met two elders with the LDS Church. From the outside looking in, it seemed odd that these two gentlemen referred to themselves as "elders," since they looked to be the same age as me. After a few minutes of dialogue, my intuition proved true. Both were 19 years old – one from Utah and one from Oregon – and they had each left the comfort of their middle-class homes to come to Lebanon, Missouri, to share the gospel. A gospel that, although it is a counterfeit, is equally enticing to many. I was no exception to that.

Before the elders stopped by, I already had a strong Christian testimony. I grew up nonreligious and devoted my life to atheism up until my junior year of high school. A suicide attempt on Halloween of 2009 led me to surrender my life to Christ, which immediately began a radical transformation. Unfortunately, I sprinted into my Christian faith and exhausted myself. Moreover, I was a black sheep Christian in a family where church was demonized. I continued to yearn for family intimacy.

When the Mormons introduced themselves on my doorstep, they quickly learned that I was a single man who wanted more in my daily Christian walk. They informed me that they were just as Christian as my Southern Baptist roots, even including "Jesus Christ" in their name. They told me that while most Christians believe that marriage is "until death do us part," Mormons believe that families can be together forever in heaven. What an incredible thought! All of the insecurities and frustrations I had as a Baptist were being reversed.

As the elders left, they gave me a Book of Mormon and quoted James 1:5 to show its contents are true. As James promised, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." In 72 hours, I read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover and was invited to their Sunday morning church. In my three years as a Baptist, I saw church members staring at the clock 45 minutes into a Sunday service, fearing they would miss their lunch reservations.

In the LDS Church, services were three hours, and it appeared people didn't want to leave. In my Baptist church, I often felt overlooked and not part of the congregation. In just a few short weeks visiting the LDS Church, they all knew my name, and many families even invited me to their home for a weekly "family home evening" that Mormons have. I was always introduced as "Brother Roger!" by the bishop. He was a jovial man who appeared to be as genuine and loving as they come.

After a month of investigating the church, I was convinced I wanted to be baptized. Now that I am a pastor at First Baptist Church in Lebanon, Missouri, many people ask me why I didn't scrutinize the doctrine of Mormonism more before deciding to jump in. My answer is unfortunate but sincere: I wanted the Mormons so badly to be right. As a young and immature believer, the Mormons had tapped into everything my flesh desired. Families together forever, church services resembling reverent worship halls and not rock concerts, and even a "plan of salvation" that exalted the importance of works. I felt Mormonism gave me a roadmap to actually become a good person, not just a Christian who accepts Christ as a means of fire insurance.

The LDS doctrine, while false, is extremely enticing to young men like I was. This is one of the primary reasons that the LDS Church is growing like never before in modern history. In 2025, the LDS Church reported a membership of 17.89 million, a net increase of 377,431. Moreover, the church saw 308,000+ convert baptisms in 2024, the highest number in over 25 years.[59]

Once I was baptized into the church, my Mormon experience skyrocketed. I was given a calling in the church, which each baptized member receives upon becoming a member. For me, I was assigned as a ward missionary, which meant I had the privilege of going around the community and sharing the LDS gospel alongside the elders. I was also given multiple speaking engagements on a Sunday morning, including Easter of 2013. I was given my patriarchal blessing, which revealed I would share the gospel for many years as a Mormon, and I received the Melchizedek Priesthood – a prestigious priesthood in the church that gave me the title of "elder." As a church member, I felt on top of the world and fulfilled. Church was not simply a social gathering that calmed my stress, but my identity. Unbeknownst to me, my faith in the church began to surpass my faith in Jesus Christ.

A couple of years after I was baptized, my bishop called me on the phone to instruct me to pray about serving an LDS mission. At the time, I was in my early 20's and working as a radio DJ. I told him I would pray about it and if it were God's will, I would start working on my mission pa-

perwork promptly. As I began praying and reading my Bible like never before, I felt conviction as I read the Apostle Paul. In a few weeks, I read Romans, Philippians, Galatians, and Ephesians, underlining and marking them. The verse that jumped out of my Bible and into my heart was Galatians 2:16: "Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." This verse hit me like a ton of bricks.

In LDS doctrine, a person can only receive exaltation through their works. At its core, the divide between Mormonism and biblical Christianity is not merely an emphasis, but an essence: whether salvation is received entirely as a gift of grace or achieved through a combination of grace and human effort. In the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 25:24 states, "We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." Early on in my Mormon journey, this passage spoke to me as someone who desired a more moral life. However, I was now at a crossroads.

I scheduled a meeting with my bishop and told him I would go on a Mormon mission contingent on one question: Is the blood of Jesus on the cross sufficient for my salvation? His answer felt like a punch in the gut: "It depends." I politely thanked the bishop and told him I would be in touch shortly. It was the last time I ever set foot in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Four years later, I received a call from the new bishop asking me to resign or be excommunicated. The reason? He found out I had been preaching the gospel at local Baptist churches in my community.

Using my own story as an example, I have spoken with countless youths and young adults who can relate. Some of them are current LDS members, while others have investigated the faith. In Christian apologetics, we so often focus on *what is true* when arguing the Christian faith. However, as a former youth pastor, I can confidently say that this current generation is less concerned with what is *true* and more concerned with what is *beautiful*. They want answers to questions like, "How much meaning can I get from church? Will I feel loved and accepted? When I join a church, do I become part of a village of people who will love me, or will I be a weekly bystander?" Southern Baptists need to examine these questions thoroughly. While we can poignantly articulate a defense for the Christian faith and present the gospel as clearly as possible, many people need evidence beyond "2+2=4." As one Mormon told me a few years ago at an apologetics conference, "Even if it were proven to me that Joseph Smith was a fraud, I still wouldn't leave the church."

With that deeply committed faith - even in the face of contrary evidence - no wonder the LDS Church is growing the way it is.

How do we combat this? By presenting Jesus to people accurately and biblically, and by highlighting the internal transformation that comes when Jesus is Lord over our lives. As someone who once left First Baptist Church of Lebanon because I felt lost and alone, I now have the privilege of pastoring that same church. Because of my experiences, I now do my best to let our church seem as small and intimate as possible while still bringing in hundreds of people each Sunday.

When I speak to other pastors, I strongly recommend having membership classes (ours does Growth Track) and promoting small groups and life groups as much as possible. I know "church happens in circles, not rows" is a cliché in Christian lingo, but it is one that the Mormons mastered when I was investigating the LDS faith. We must do our best to break down every barrier between lost people and the gospel. As I often say on Sunday mornings, "The only thing I want you to wrestle with today is the gospel itself." In the end, we can learn things from the Mormons when it comes to forming *community*, while also rejecting their *theology* as false. And above all else, we can continue to pray for them and love them as Jesus does.

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How Can We Know That the Bible We Have Today Is a Reliable Record of the Original Writings?

Hanna Sims

This article was originally written for teens and published on 412teens.org—a ministry of Got Questions Ministries. Hanna is a regular writer for 412teens.org—helping to answer questions teens have about the Bible. The original article can be found here: 412teens.org/qna/is-the-Bible-a-reliable-record-of-the-original-manuscripts.php. The editor thanks 412teens.org for granting permission to republish the article for this journal. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to explore Hanna's website, where she has several videos that teach the concepts in this article and offers downloadable handouts, cards, and puzzles to help kids and teenagers build confidence in the Bible's trustworthiness (www.networkerstec.com/bible-true.html).

Have you ever played the game "Telephone," where one person creates a phrase then whispers it to the next person who passes it on to the next until it reaches the last person? At the end, the phrase is usually nonsensical because it's so different from what the first person originally said. Some people believe that this method of passing a message from one person to the next is how we got the Bible. They wonder how confident we can be that the Bible we have today is a reliable record of the original writing. But we did not get the Bible through a game of Telephone!

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS VS. MANUSCRIPTS

The easiest way to see if today's Bible is a reliable record of the original writing would be to compare the two versions. Unfortunately, the original books of the Bible (called the autographs) haven't been found in an archaeological discovery. One reason why they may not have survived is due to the type of material the Bible was written on—such as animal skins or thin papyrus. These materials naturally deteriorate, and ink fades over time.

For nearly all other ancient authors, we also do not have access to the first writings penned by the original writers. There is no museum that has the original writings touched by Caesar, Plato, or Homer. The Bible is not

at any greater disadvantage for not having any surviving original documents. If there are no original documents, though, how can we be sure the Bible we read today contains the same message?

Our certainty of its accuracy is thanks to the manuscripts that ARE available. During biblical times, people couldn't store documents on the cloud, take pictures, or make exact replicas on a copy machine. So in order to make a copy of something, they would have to make a handwritten copy called a manuscript.

HOW RELIABLE IS THE OLD TESTAMENT?

If you were copying text by hand, you might look at a few words or a sentence, then copy it from memory, right? But the scribes that copied the Old Testament manuscripts didn't do that; they were much more meticulous.

When they copied a new manuscript from an old one, they didn't just look at the words or a phrase to copy. They intentionally looked at each letter at a time to copy into the new manuscript. If there were more than three mistakes in the new manuscript, they would bury it and not use it because they were dedicated to a reliable transmission of God's Word.[60]

After the scribe was finished with a new manuscript, he would count the letters of each word to determine the total number of letters and the total number of words to see if the letter count and word count matched between the old manuscript and the new one to make sure that the new one was reliable.[61]

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

The scribes' accuracy in copying the Old Testament is proven by examination of the Dead Sea Scrolls—the most important Old Testament manuscripts we have. These scrolls were discovered in 1947 inside clay pots located in the caves near the Dead Sea in Israel. They contained manuscript fragments from every book of the Old Testament except the book of Esther.[62]

Some manuscripts dated from the third century BC to AD 68, which puts them about 1,000 years older than any previously known biblical manuscript, yet the scrolls' content was essentially unchanged.[63] We can have confidence in the preservation of the Old Testament because, even though the manuscripts are over 1,000 years apart, they have the same words and message. This shows us that God has preserved his word from significant error throughout the centuries.[64]

Now that we know how the Old Testament manuscripts were copied and we can even compare today's Scripture with manuscripts thousands of

years old, we can be confident the Bible is a reliable record of their original writings.

HOW RELIABLE IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

When it comes to historical writings, the more manuscripts that are available to compare for accuracy, the more confidence scholars have that they can determine the original message (this is called textual criticism). Imagine that you're going to a school event next week. Your teacher writes the event's location on the board and instructs each student to copy the address on a note card to use as invitations. These copies could be called "manuscripts." After school, a friend asks you for the address because she didn't have time to write it down before it got erased from the board. So you and your friends compare cards to reconstruct the original address, but they don't all match. Maybe they read:

Card #1: 123 Pear St., Garden, CA 55000

Card #2: 123 Pea St., Garden, CA 54000

Card #3: 123 Pear Street., Garage, CA 54000

Card #4: 123 Pear St., Garden, California 54000

Could you accurately reconstruct the original address that was given by your teacher even though some of them were slightly different? Yes! Because you have multiple copies of the address to compare with, you can confidently sort out what was part of the original address and what was in error.

This is the same case when scholars are attempting to reconstruct any ancient writings—including the New Testament. The more manuscripts that are discovered for an ancient writing, the more comparisons scholars can make to reconstruct a copy of the original accurately. The more, the merrier!

Here are some numbers for ancient manuscripts that were originally written before the New Testament.[65] The original writings of these documents do not exist, but through comparison of their manuscripts, scholars are confident in their reconstruction.

1. Plato's Tetralogies – 210 discovered manuscripts
2. Caesar's Gallic Wars – 251 discovered manuscripts
3. Homer's Iliad – 1,700 discovered manuscripts

Do you think the New Testament has more or fewer discovered manuscripts than secular literature? Drum roll please... The New Testament has more—

MANY MORE! Greek copies of the New Testament manuscripts number 5,800![66] Scholars are 99% certain that the New Testament has been accurately reconstructed to match the original.[67]

EVIDENCE PROVES THE BIBLE IS RELIABLE

Understanding how the Old and New Testaments have been preserved can help us be confident that the Bible we read today is a reliable record of the message first given by God. "The sum of [God's] word is truth, and every one of [his] righteous rules endures forever" (Psalm 119:160). Believers can read God's Word with eagerness and confidence, knowing that these words are truly God's. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

WANT TO SEE SOMETHING COOL?

The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts preserves ancient New Testament manuscripts in digital format so that anyone can view these precious pieces of our history. You can view the ancient writings they have documented at www.csntm.org.

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Defending the Bible's Moral Claims to Those Who Reject the Bible

Dustin Burdin

Christians in Western societies live in secular societies. With each new generation, America seems to grow more secular, especially morally. Cultural environments like this make it increasingly challenging for Christians to convince non-Christians that the Bible's moral vision is objectively right and binding on all people. How can Christians effectively defend biblical, objective-based moral truths in a secular society? What can Christians do when they say, "the Bible says…" but an unbeliever replies, "I do not accept the Bible as a valid source for truth?"

This article shares how Christians can defend the Bible's moral truth claims without necessarily appealing to Scripture, thereby avoiding the accusation of circular reasoning. Christians who learn this strategy will be able to rationally defend the Bible's objective-based morality to unbelievers who deny the Bible's authority. To do this, Christians must become acquainted with the Natural Law Theory. Despite this theory's immense value for Christian moral reasoning and the defense of Christianity's moral claims, many Christians have never heard of it. This article aims to correct this gap.

This article explains the Natural Law Theory of Ethics, demonstrates its biblical justification, and lays out a strategy for Christians to use Natural Law reasoning to defend the Bible's objective moral truth claims. Christians who learn the Natural Law Theory and apply it will discover a helpful strategy for defending the Bible's ethics to those who may deny biblical truth.[68]

WHAT IS NATURAL LAW THEORY?

Natural Law Theory has its roots in the thought of the Medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274). Aquinas took what he thought was right from ancient Greek philosophy and married it to Christian theology. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) reasoned that every living creature has its own distinct nature and possesses an ultimate purpose that corresponds to it. Aristotle called a creature's ultimate purpose its *telos*. *Telos* can also be thought of as a creature's end goals, or ultimate ends, that it aims to secure. Aristotle argued that a creature's unique nature determines its ultimate ends (*telos*), and its ultimate ends will drive its actions

to secure these end goals. Consequently, to know how a person should act, and what they should value, requires that one discern the *telos* (end goals, ultimate ends) of human nature. To say it another way, Aristotle thought that to tell a person what they ought to do morally, you must first know what the ultimate purpose for a person's existence is. Aristotle believed human *telos* was to be happy and fulfilled (*eudaimonia*).[69] Humans will seek what is good for human nature, just like any creature, and what is good for them is that they are happy and fulfilled. Therefore, he reasoned that human ethics derive from whatever virtues are necessary to secure human nature's happy fulfillment.

Aquinas realized that Aristotle was right in one respect but wrong in another. Aristotle was right to suspect that humans have an ultimate purpose for existing, and he was also right that human nature largely drives human actions to achieve this purpose. But Aristotle wrongly assumed that the ultimate purpose of humans was our own happiness and fulfillment (Aristotle was pagan, after all). Aquinas reasoned that since God created mankind, human nature finds its ultimate purpose (*telos*) in God's purposes for humanity. Thus, whatever is required for humans to flourish is whatever God has decided and designed to be good for human nature's flourishing.

Since humans have a unique nature, there are certain goods that they must secure through their actions to achieve God's intended ends (*telos*) for human flourishing. For example, what is good for a human to flourish may not also be good for a kangaroo to flourish because humans and kangaroos have different natures and therefore require different goods to achieve their unique ultimate ends. The purpose God has for a human is different from the purpose he has for a kangaroo, and therefore human flourishing will look different from kangaroo flourishing.

THE BASIC HUMAN GOODS

Aquinas further surmised that since humans are created in the image of God,[70] people have the natural and rational capacities to discern what is good for humans to flourish (according to God's design). Aquinas called these concepts the *Basic Human Goods*. By "goods," he means that these concepts are necessary to secure human goodness and flourishing (*telos*). By "basic," he means these concepts are intrinsically valuable, worth pursuing for their own sake since they require no higher reason for their value. In summary, these basic human goods are necessary and right for people to secure and uphold since God has designed human nature to require them for human flourishing and human *telos*.

Aquinas identified at least five basic goods for human flourishing:[71] *God, Life, Family* (including marriage, sexual union, procreation, and raising children), *Truth* (including what is true and what is proper knowledge), and *Reason*.[72] God is the source of all life and existence. Without God, there is no humanity, and humans cannot flourish without seeking God. Life is an obvious self-evident human good since when human life is destroyed, humans do not flourish. The same idea applies to Family, since without marriage to protect and define the families through which children are raised, there can be no future human flourishing or stable human societies. Truth is a self-evident human good since only truth can lead to flourishing, while falsehood leads to destruction and pain. Finally, since God has made people in his image, he has given them the rational capacities to reason (i.e., to think logically). Without right reasoning, humans will not find truth and virtue and therefore not flourish.

Now that we understand the basic human goods, we can learn how they help us reason morally. We can derive moral precepts from the basic human goods. Any actions or virtues that uphold and secure the basic human goods are morally right. On the other hand, any actions or virtues that deny securing or negate the basic human goods are morally wrong. For example, lying is wrong because it denies the basic human good, truth, and when people deny the truth, they do not flourish according to God's intended ends for humanity.

THE LAW OF NATURE (NATURAL LAW)

The title Natural Law Theory suggests it is a theory pertaining to natural law. Therefore, readers must understand what is meant by the natural law. David VanDrunen helpfully defines natural law as, "the law of God made known in the created order, which all human beings know through their physical senses, intellect, and conscience, although they sinfully resist this knowledge to various degrees."[73]

Simplistically put, natural law refers to God's moral law that he encoded in the created order and made known to all people through conscience and reasoning. As VanDrunen points out, God has revealed this natural moral law through the created order, and all people possess God-given natural and rational capacities to discern it. While the effects of sin on human nature cause people to resist the natural law sinfully, they nonetheless intuitively and rationally know God's natural moral law. In other words, sin causes people to rebel against God's natural law that they instinctively know in their conscience. Sin does not eradicate the knowledge of the natural law; rather, it empowers people to reject it.

God's natural law is like moral gravity. Gravity holds the planets in proper order, and the natural law holds together God's moral design and vision for creation. God created people in his image, giving them rational capacities and a moral conscience. As such, people possess the instinctive and rational capacities to discern God's natural moral law. God has encoded it within human nature, embedded it within creation, and designed human nature to aim at what is morally good for human flourishing. We know from the Bible that there are kinds of law (moral precepts):

1. **Eternal Law:** God's secret will and counsel for his divine governance.[74]

2. **Divine Law:** the portion of God's secret Eternal Law that he reveals through Scripture.[75]

3. **Natural Law:** The portion of God's secret Eternal Law that he reveals through the natural order of the created universe and is discernible through human reason and conscience. Also called the moral law written on the heart.[76]

4. **Human Law:** Laws created by societies that are derived from the natural law and sometimes the divine law to promote civil order and flourishing.[77]

Natural Law Theory is an ethical theory that aims to derive a moral framework from God's natural law. Natural Law Theory is an attempt to turn the basic human goods for human flourishing and the reality of God's natural law into a usable moral theory.

> In essence, Natural Law Theory is an ethical framework that affirms: (1) objective moral laws exist, (2) God has encoded them within the natural order, forming a natural law, (3) humans have the rational capacities to discern these natural laws, (4) God designed human nature so that aiming at these laws secures human goodness and flourishing, (5) all people are accountable to God for obeying these universally knowable moral laws.[78]

IS NATURAL LAW THEORY BIBLICAL?

Remember we must distinguish between the *theory* of Natural Law and the concept of Natural Law. The Bible never mentions Natural Law *Theory*, but it certainly teaches the existence of a natural moral law that is knowable by all people, and God holds all people accountable to it.

PURPOSEFULLY ORDERED CREATION

Genesis chapter one reveals that God created the world with orderliness. This divinely created orderliness forms a natural orderliness towards goodness (God's purposes for all things). After each day of creation, God declared what he made to be "good."[79] The Hebrew word *ṭôḇ*, translated as "good" in English Bibles, suggests that what God made was not only pleasant, but also properly ordered according to its intended function. The fact of God-designed orderliness in creation towards a designed purpose strongly suggests God created a natural moral order in the universe.

PRE-MOSAIC LAW ACCOUNTABILITY

Before God gave the Law of the covenant through Moses at Mt. Sinai, he still held pagans accountable for sin.[80] How could God justly judge people for their sins if they had no divine revelation bluntly teaching them about sin and righteousness? Some speculate that perhaps God gave his divine revelation (divine law) through Adam and Eve and that they passed it on to their descendants. While it seems feasible that Adam and Eve handed down to their children what God told them about morality, it does not seem likely that this can explain how God held pagans accountable for their sins hundreds of years after Adam and Eve. Rather, it is more logical to infer that God held pre-Mosaic Law pagans accountable through his natural moral law, which is available to all people through conscience.

God said to Abraham in Genesis 15:16 that he will judge the Amorites for their sin. Therefore, God judged pagan nations according to a moral standard before the Law was given through Moses. Since God held these pagan people accountable for their sins, they must have had access to God's moral standards yet chose to ignore them. They were aware of God's moral standards because he made them known through the created order and human conscience, yet the pagans chose to rebel.

God also referred to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as "very grave" in Genesis 18:20. They incurred God's harsh judgment for these sins. In fact, their sins were sexually deviant in nature, and Jude referred to them as "unnatural" desires (Jude 7). These facts strongly suggest the people of Sodom and Gomorrah intuitively knew their actions were immoral since they went against nature's order.

These brief examples demonstrate that God's natural moral law is the process by which he held sinners accountable, even pre-Mosaic Law, since

they had full awareness and moral knowledge available to them, informing them as to what was naturally moral.

GENTILE LAWKEEPERS

Perhaps the clearest biblical case for natural moral law comes from the Apostle Paul. In Romans 1:18-20, Paul asserts that the ungodly Gentiles actively *suppress* (*κατέχω*) the truth they already know to be true. Paul is clear that these pagan Gentiles he has in mind know *the truth* of God's moral righteousness, but they engage in active, willful suppression of that moral truth. They already know God's righteous moral standards through God's created natural order, and therefore they are left *without excuse* for their sinful actions. Paul adds in Romans 1:32 that these sinful pagans intuitively understand God's righteous moral standards yet engage in volitional rebellion.

What Paul implies in Romans chapter one, he makes explicit in Romans chapter two regarding natural moral law. He explains that even Gentiles who were never taught the Mosaic Law (the divine law) still perish under the condemnation of sin according to the Mosaic Law. In fact, although they lacked the moral clarity of the Mosaic Law, they, *by nature*[81], *instinctively* know God's moral demands. How can it be that these Gentiles, who never had God's special law like the Jews, instinctively and naturally know portions of God's moral standards? It is because "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts…" (Romans 2:15a, ESV).

Paul pointedly explained that there is a natural moral law discernable by all people. This natural moral law is God's moral law written on the hearts of all mankind. Paul further explained that these Gentiles also have a conscience (*syneidńsis*) that God has implanted within human nature that excuses or convicts people concerning their moral choices.[82] This demonstrates that God has established a natural moral law within the created order. This natural moral law is discernible through human conscience and is written on the hearts of every person. The natural moral law is how God holds all people accountable to uphold his moral precepts, even though some have never been explicitly taught the Bible's moral truths

THE MORAL UNDERPINNING OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

A final biblical justification for natural law involves exploring the Ten Commandments and the moral precepts that establish them. The Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:1-17 are an example of God's revealed divine law articulating God's natural moral law precepts. Each commandment is un-

derpinned by a moral precept that was already in operation before it was written down in the Law of Moses. The Ten Commandments do not *make* anything moral or immoral; rather, they *express* what God has previously ordained to be moral or immoral. For instance, actions like murder, theft, lying, and adultery were *already* immoral before they were penned into written divine law.

Furthermore, the Ten Commandments also explicitly aim to protect the basic human goods for flourishing. Notice the connection between the basic human goods and corresponding commandments:

> **God:** have no other gods, no idol worship, do not take God's name in vain, keep the Sabbath (1st-4th commandments).
>
> **Family:** honor one's parents and preserve one's marriage (5th and 7th commandments).
>
> **Life:** do not murder (6th commandment).
>
> **Truth:** do not steal, do not bear false testimony, and one can argue that coveting a neighbor's property or wife is a form of not living according to the truth of one's possessions and marriage (8th- 10th commandments).

In summary, the Bible never mentions Natural Law Theory. Still, it explicitly and implicitly affirms the existence of a natural moral order God has encoded within the created order and human nature. It contains sufficient moral knowledge to hold all people accountable to God, regardless of how much divine special revelation they have encountered.

HOW CAN CHRISTIANS USE NATURAL LAW THEORY?

Natural Law Theory does not remove a Christian's obligation to be in the Bible and know how to reason from the Bible with unbelievers. To be clear, Natural Law Theory is not a substitute for biblical truth. Rather, it is an amplification of the Bible's moral truth claims. Christians can use the tools provided by Natural Law Theory to enhance their defense and articulation of Christian ethics. Below are some examples of how Christians can adopt natural law theory reasoning and defend the Bible's moral truths.

I labored to make the case for Natural Law Theory earlier because, for it to help Christians defend biblical morality to nonbelievers, Christians must accept the following idea. If the Bible is true, and we know it is, then it is true that even nonbelievers know basic morality through their conscience. God has made his natural moral law plain to them by writing it on

their hearts. Reasoning according to natural law thinking means we press in on the nonbeliever's moral conscience and call them to admit what they already intuitively know to be morally true.

The caveat is that not every nonbeliever whom you use natural law reasoning on will admit the Bible's moral truths are valid. In fact, in their sinful rebellion, they may strongly resist your moral case. However, according to Scripture, even though the nonbeliever may resist your moral case, they know in their hearts the Bible's moral claims are true.

The basic steps are, first, to identify which of the basic human goods (God, Life, Family, Truth, and Reason) are affected by the moral issue in question. Next, the Christian explains to the nonbeliever, through sound reasoning, how this moral issue violates a particular basic human good for flourishing. The Christian further explains how violating this basic human good is a denial of human goodness and virtue. Then, the Christian presses on the nonbeliever's conscience by calling out that they must intuitively know that violating this basic human good is morally wrong and has no valid justification. Finally, the Christian can call upon Scripture to further demonstrate why God calls the action in question a sin (a moral wrong).

Essentially, what one does when using Natural Law Theory is explain, through logic, reason, and conscience, that violating the basic human goods is unsustainable for human flourishing and that we know, through our conscience, it is wrong. Then the Christian brings in Scripture to add further clarity, explaining why the moral action in question violates human goodness and God's moral order. Notice that natural law thinking gives the Christian a logical and conscience-appealing way to answer a nonbeliever before needing to appeal to Bible verses.

EXAMPLE OF LYING

An easy example is lying. The Bible is explicitly clear in multiple places that lying is a sin. God is a God of truth, and lying is an affront to his holy nature. Suppose a nonbeliever asks you, a Christian, why Christians think lying is wrong. You could share Scriptures that explicitly teach that lying is a sin. Then suppose the nonbeliever replies that they do not accept the Bible as truth. How else can you explain that lying is morally wrong? You can use natural law reasoning.

A natural law response as to why lying is wrong might go as follows: All humans know, instinctively, that truth is preferred over falsehood. We see this through simple observation in life. Lies hurt people, destroy relationships, and can even cause nations to go to war! Lies do not build stable societies and governments. Humans cannot flourish and achieve our good

purposes through falsehood. Therefore, we intuitively know that truth is a virtue humans require. We instinctively know what it means to tell the truth versus lie. There is a reason we try to conceal lies but are proud of the truth. Thus, lying is morally wrong. We naturally know through our consciences that truth is good and lying is wrong.

At this point, you could then shift to the Bible. After explaining what the nonbeliever already knows to be true in their heart - that lying is wrong - you can go the next step and explain that this is why the Bible is abundantly clear that lying is a sin. Because God's nature is that of truth, and he has made our natures to desire the truth and know it is right.

EXAMPLE OF ABORTION

A contentious issue in American culture is abortion. How might a Christian articulate the Bible's position on abortion to someone who does not accept biblical truth? To be clear, Christians must learn the relevant biblical texts that pertain to murder and that the life of an unborn child in the womb is a full human worthy of protection. But natural law reasoning helps the Christian tap into human conscience and rational thinking to make a case against abortion.

Natural law reasoning about abortion could go as follows: All humans intuitively know that life is necessary for human flourishing. Without the preservation of human life, human societies dissolve into chaos, and humans have no lives upon which to build goodness and flourishing. We cannot function without protecting human life. Additionally, we know that family is the building block of society. Without a clear protection of marriage, through which children are conceived and raised, humans cannot flourish and build meaningful futures.

Embryologists universally agree that a human embryo is a human person. It is not less than a person, nor something other than a person. An embryo is a person with all the necessary components to develop into a mature human adult. Therefore, aborting an unborn baby at any stage of development is intentionally killing human life.

Furthermore, if families are essential to human flourishing, and we know they are, then the mother's womb should be one of the safest places for an unborn child to develop and flourish. The mother's womb is the sustainable future for human flourishing. Therefore, when mothers decide to abort their unborn child, they are committing one of the greatest of travesties. They are violating their natural role as the nurturer of their child and are destroying the purpose of a family to bring in future children for human flourishing.

We know that intentionally killing our unborn children is a violation of the natural order and purpose for a mother, her womb, and the purpose of a family. We know that intentionally killing a human is wrong, and an unborn child is a human. Whether we want to say it out loud or not, we all intuitively know that electively killing an unborn child is wrong. Nature cries out against us that this is a great moral crime, and our hearts convict us that abortion is a grave immoral action.

These two examples are just some of the ways a Christian might employ natural law reasoning. Natural Law Theory can be applied to a host of other moral issues as well.

CONCLUSION

Natural Law Theory is not without its gaps. I am not suggesting that this theory is the divinely authorized plan for proving Christian morality. I also admit that a Christian may encounter a tricky moral issue that Natural Law Theory does not seem to address. Furthermore, I am not claiming that using Natural Law Theory will convince every nonbeliever.

Then what is the value of Natural Law Theory? It is an incredibly helpful strategy for giving an effective moral defense for Christian ethics. Its primary power lies in helping the Christian explain to a nonbeliever why certain actions are objectively right, and others are wrong, without first appealing to the Bible. Christians who adopt the Natural Law Theory in their moral defense of the Bible's ethics will show nonbelievers that our morality is not solely based upon "because the Bible says." Rather, this ethical theory helps us show nonbelievers that the basic moral truths found in the Bible are logical, reasonable, and even instinctively already known to everyone.

I challenge every Christian to consider using Natural Law Theory to defend the Bible's moral vision so that we can offer a robust moral defense of Christian ethical claims. Natural Law Theory lets us tap into the moral law God has written on every person's heart.

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When "Grace" Doesn't Mean Grace: Understanding LDS Vocabulary in Gospel Conversations

[21] Doctrine and Covenants 130:22: "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." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013).

[22] The Lorenzo Snow couplet, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be" was formulated ca. 1840 and affirmed by Joseph Smith. See Gospel Topics

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[24] Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20 describes the highest degree of exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom, in which the faithful "shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths… and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things." See also Gospel Topics Essays, "Becoming Like God."

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[33] Doctrine and Covenants 131:1-4: "In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot obtain it." See also Doctrine and Covenants 76:50-70 for the full requirements of Celestial Kingdom inheritance.

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[80] See Romans 5:12-14; 5:20-21; Galatians 3:19.

[81] Paul uses the Greek word *physis* in reference to the natural character disposition of these Gentiles. Their nature and natural dispositions still inclined them to be naturally aware of God's moral standards.

[82] See the rest of Romans 2:15.

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