

Genesis 1:1–2, 27, 2:5–7 (NIV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, ⁶but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. ⁷Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

from John 1:1–5, 14, 16–18 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

This week, we turn to an important religion that was born right here in America.

In the big scheme of world religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS church, or, informally, the Mormon church) is small potatoes. Worldwide, there are about 15 million Mormons, of which about eight million are in the U.S. But it is also one of the fastest growing religions in the world and the U.S. Once relatively isolated, the LDS church has spread significantly to other areas creating more issues about the mutual relationship between the Mormon church and the traditional Christian denominations.

Over the last twenty years, the large Christian denominations have had to consider the question of whether the LDS church is merely another Christian denomination or a different religion entirely. Should Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian and the other churches treat Mormons who desire to join as they would transfers from other denominations, or should the Mormons be baptized as incoming Hindus or Jews or Muslims would be? In other words, should Mormons wanting to join the UMC, for example, be baptized as new members in the body of Christ?

The United Methodist Church has had to tackle this question recently, particularly out west, and in 2000 published the findings of a committee that had spent a couple of years examining the conclusion. Because the UMC has a reputation as such a “big tent,” one might have thought that the UMC would embrace Mormons as fellow believers in Christ. But the UMC did not arrive at that conclusion. Instead, in the paper adopted by the UMC General Conference in 2000, the UMC found that:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by self-definition, does not fit within the bounds of the historic, apostolic tradition of Christian faith. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the LDS church itself, while calling itself Christian, explicitly professes a distinction and separateness from the ecumenical community and is intentional about clarifying significant differences in doctrine. As United Methodists we agree with their assessment that the LDS church is not a part of the historic, apostolic tradition of the Christian faith.

In this study, I'll try to help you see why the UMC reached its conclusions, but I urge you to read the UMC paper for yourself. It is entitled *Sacramental Faithfulness: Guidelines for Receiving People from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, and is readily available on the Internet. If you want to go further, the best book on the LDS church that I've found is *Mormon America*, by Richard and Joan Ostling. Richard was the religion writer for Time magazine for many years.

The story of Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith was born in 1805 in upstate New York and grew up when that area was undergoing a fervent religious revival. The fires of religious intensity grew so hot that the region was sometimes called "the burned-out district." Smith claimed that at 14 he had a vision in which God told him that his sins were forgiven and the existing religions were all corrupt. In 1827, he claimed that he had been visited by an angel named Moroni, who told him where some golden plates were buried that told the story of Israelites who had made their to the American continent in 600 BC and had been visited by Jesus. Mormon was the name of a Nephite prophet, one of two principal peoples in the account, who was claimed to have been the author of the narrative.¹ Smith called the account the *Book of Mormon*. Smith told friends that he had gone out to dig up the plates and had also found glasses and seer stones that enabled him to read the plates.

Later, Smith used a sheet to divide his living room in two. Smith sat on one side and a friend, Martin Harris, sat on the other. Smith claimed to be reading from the plates as he dictated to Harris on the other side of the sheet. The product of this was the *Book of Mormon*, which was first published in 1830.

Smith claimed many other revelations from God, all of which form the basis of the distinctive Mormon understanding of God, Jesus, and ourselves. Smith would go on to attract many followers and found a new religion. He and his followers were persecuted in their communities and moved ever westward to find a place to call home. Smith was killed in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844. Led by Brigham Young, his followers fled further west, finally settling in Utah.

But why did the UMC, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and others conclude that the LDS church is a not a Christian denomination?

Understanding why the UMC and other denominations concluded the LDS church is not Christian takes a bit of work. The problem is that Mormons and Christians use the same words – we just mean very different things by them. For example, we both refer to the Bible. Christians mean the 39 books of the OT (the Hebrew Bible) and the 27 books of the NT as they came to us in the history of the church. Still today, biblical scholars work to ensure that our modern Bibles are as close to the original Hebrew and Greek texts as possible. Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Assemblies of God and so on all use English translations of the same Hebrew and Greek texts.

But Joseph Smith claimed that the Bible had become corrupted and that God had revealed to him what needed to be changed in the Bible. Thus, Smith claimed to have received revelations from God that enabled him to revise the KJV, making it conform more closely to Smith's beliefs. Smith's revision contains substantial additions, deletions, and changes to the books of the Old and New Testaments. For example, the first chapters of Genesis in Smith's revision are *five* times longer than they are in the Hebrew Bible.

Though the LDS uses the Christian Bible, the Smith revisions/translation are used to clarify and interpret the Christian Bible. A bit confusing isn't it. It is important to grasp that the Mormon religion is built on what Smith claimed were revelations from God to him over a period of years.

Thus, because Mormonism is based in what they believe were revelations of God given to Joseph Smith, there are other sacred texts in Mormonism as well: *The Book of Mormon*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

¹ Not a single archaeological discovery has ever been made that supports any event recounted in the Book of Mormon.

Getting to the heart of it: Mormon theology

These writings, as well as others, such as Smith's famous "King Follet Discourse,"² set forth a theology very different from that of the Christian church. The essence of it was summarized in a couplet written by Lorenzo Snow, the fifth president of the LDS. The president of the LDS church is the highest office and its holder is the only person believed to receive direct revelation from God for the church and the world. The office has always been held until death. Here is Snow's couplet:

As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become.

These few words express the Mormon belief that they are progressing toward godhood. They believe that the god who called Abraham and came to Moses at the burning bush, has a flesh-and-bones body, is male-gendered, and has a female-gendered wife. God is not eternal, but is an exalted, perfected man. Each of us is one of the begotten children of this Heavenly Father and Mother. Here is the relevant portion from the UMC paper, *Sacramental Faithfulness*:

"Not only was God the Father once a human being, but he was and still is clearly male gendered and married to a heavenly mother of clear female gender. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*³ states:

Latter-day Saints infer from authoritative sources of scripture and modern prophecy that there is a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father. . . . A Heavenly Mother shares parenthood with the Heavenly Father. This concept leads Latter-day Saints to believe that she is like him in glory, perfection, compassion, wisdom, and holiness.

At another point, this encyclopedia reads:

The Father, Elohim, is called the Father because he is the literal father of the spirits of mortals (Heb. 12:9). This paternity is not allegorical. All individual human spirits were begotten (not created from nothing or made) by the Father in a premortal state, where they lived and were nurtured by Heavenly Parents. These spirit children of the Father come to earth to receive mortal bodies; there is a literal family relationship among humankind.

Such belief regarding a gendered, married, and procreating god is at the core of LDS doctrine of God and makes claims about the essential nature of God that are in sharp contrast to the doctrinal statements of United Methodism."

And Jesus? He is the first-born son of this heavenly couple. You and I are later-born children of the same couple. All of us were nurtured as spiritual children before our time on earth and there are countless more spiritual children waiting to be born still. Thus, the incarnation is not a unique event. A Mormon couple can work toward their own exaltation and deification so that they can create their own world and have spirit children of their own, just as did our own heavenly father and mother.

This progression toward godhood is what salvation is about in LDS theology. It is a journey that involves living by the tenets of the LDS church and progressing through the Aaronic priesthood. This priesthood is open to men only, thus, progression to deity by Mormon women is accomplished through marriage to a suitable Mormon man. There is no path to Godhood for a woman alone. Here is more from *Sacramental Faithfulness*:

[from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*] "The important points of the doctrine for Latter-day Saints are that Gods and humans are the same species of being, but at different stages of development in a divine continuum, and that the Heavenly Father and Mother are the heavenly pattern, model, and example of what mortals can become through obedience to the gospel.

These theological claims identify the end or goal of salvation as the achievement of godhood. The way of salvation is following the model set by those who have already attained that status. They leave ambiguous the precise salvific role, if any, of the already existing gods. They do, however, make it clear that according to LDS theology, there are

² You should be able to find this on-line. It is also an appendix in the book *Mormon America*. The speech was a eulogy given by Smith in 1844, only months before his death. It reflects his mature and innovative theology of God and human progression to godhood.

³ A semi-official publication of the LDS church. Their website says it is available on-line.

already in existence the three gods of the Godhead and a god who presumably presided over the mortality of the Father. There will be more gods to come, as at least some of those at an earlier stage of the “divine continuum” will become gods, as did the Father. Thus by traditional Christian definition, the LDS faith is polytheistic, and the role of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is decidedly compromised.”

In the end, in keeping with the other major Christian denominations, The United Methodist Church concluded that Mormonism is religion purposely distinct from Christianity. The conclusion in *Sacramental Faithfulness* is worth repeating:

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by self-definition, does not fit within the bounds of the historic, apostolic tradition of Christian faith. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the LDS church itself, while calling itself Christian, explicitly professes a distinction and separateness from the ecumenical community and is intentional about clarifying significant differences in doctrine. As United Methodists we agree with their assessment that the LDS church is not a part of the historic, apostolic tradition of the Christian faith.”

The LDS church views the Christian churches as having become corrupted and lost. Mormons view their work as one of restoration, including restoring all non-Mormons into the one, true church – the LDS church. Thus, they baptize Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, and other Christians who wish to join the LDS church. Likewise, Methodists, Presbyterians, and the other Christian denominations baptize Mormons who want to join one of the Christian denominations, for we believe that we are receiving them into the body of Christ.

Common values

Mormons and Christians share many of the same values. Some of the kindest and hardest-working people I’ve known have been Mormons. Talk about family values! In his research, George Barna consistently finds that Mormons and Christians hold the same life values and that the Mormons often do a better job of living out those values.

When Mitt Romney was running for President, I was asked if I could vote for a Mormon to be President. I said, “Yes, of course.” Though we have very different theological worldviews, Christians and Mormons are called to love God and to love our neighbor. Together, we acknowledge that every human is known and loved by the Creator. All that’s a lot . . . even as we respect the differences that divide us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

These questions are taken from the paper, *Sacramental Faithfulness*. A copy of the paper is posted with this Weekly Bible Study at www.scottengle.org. If you are part of a Connection Group, I strongly urge you to read the paper before the group meeting.

1. What experience do you have with members of the LDS Church?
2. What do you know about the beliefs and practices of the LDS Church?
3. What is appealing about the LDS view of God? What are some of the dangers of such an understanding? How does it differ from the traditional Christian understanding?
4. What are some of the effects of the emphasis upon God as being married and as continually procreating offspring? What are the implications for the lives of human beings?
5. The LDS Church is an American-born religious movement and some aspects of its theology are quite compatible with some typical American attitudes. What examples of this compatibility do you see? Why is the LDS understanding so appealing to many people today?
6. What are the implications of United Methodism's rejection of the LDS Church's identification of itself as Christian?
7. Consider what is "a sufficient doctrinal and practical grasp of Christianity for [a church] to be considered essentially Christian." Examine the question, not only in evaluating the LDS Church, but focusing on The United Methodist Church as well.