# Men on a Mission: The Mormons

Today we’re going to discuss a good old fashioned American religion. It was made in America, at least, and most people think of its members as good people. For the most part, they are kind, helpful, polite, and more. They are also seriously misguided. What does the word ‘Mormon’ bring to mind? I would guess it’s probably young men in pairs riding round the neighborhood on bicycles trying to share copies of the Book of Mormon with anyone that will talk to them. Perhaps you’re thinking of those ‘I am a Mormon’ commercials and billboards that have been in circulation for the last few years. What about the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Or perhaps you’re thinking of a friend from school that goes to a Mormon Church. Whatever it is, everyone in America has seen some aspect of the LDS church even if it has never directly impacted their lives.

This religion is unique among the groups we will study in that it hinges more on its history than on what it teaches. The Mormon belief system is important, don’t get me wrong, but you cannot understand it without first understanding the history behind them. To that end, I am going to give you a quick overview of Mormon history. Our story begins in 1816. That is when the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, Jr. **(Slide 2)**, moved to Palmyra, New York. He was 11 years old at the time. In 1820, at least according to the official Mormon version of history, revival broke out in upstate New York. Along with his family, who routinely disagreed about matters of religion, young Joseph was caught up in the fervor. He was confused, however feeling uncertain about which church to join. Then he read James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” Based on this he decided to inquire of the Lord, asking Him which church to join. So far, so good; there’s nothing wrong with praying to understand where God is calling you to go.

**(Slide 3)** He went into the woods to a place that the Mormons now call the Sacred Grove. There, after a brief struggle with the forces of darkness, he claimed to have a vision. This is referred to by Mormons as ‘the first vision’ and it is the root of their entire religion. According to the official Mormon account, the vision was of two men floating in the air. One of them told Joseph, “This is my beloved son, hear him.” Lucky guy… if this is true then Joseph is the first person to have a face to face with the living God since the ascension of Christ about 1,800 years prior. If you could ask God just one question, what would it be? I’m sure it would be the deepest, most mysterious thing you could think of. Apparently, for Joseph it was ‘which church should I join?’ The answer he received was threefold.

1. Don’t join any of the churches; all of them are in serious error.
2. The creeds of all the churches are an abomination (disgustingly wicked).
3. All the people who profess those creeds are corrupt.

This would include the Nicene Creed, the Apostle’s Creed and so on. Apparently, according to Joseph, these creeds are serious problem in God’s eyes though he never explained why or how they are in error. Much to Joseph’s surprise God commissioned him to restore the true church on Earth. I don’t know about you, but I would have passed out right about then. That’s a pretty serious task. Apparently Joseph Smith’s knees were stronger than mine, which is good because the whole of Mormonism stands or falls on the truth of this vision. If you believe that it is true then the Mormon Church must be right. If you don’t believe it then the Mormon Church is the greatest deception sprung upon mankind in generations. How important is this vision? One of the early prophets (Presidents of the Mormon Church), Heber J. Grant, is quoted as saying that, “Any man who does not believe in Joseph Smith as the prophet of the true and living God has no right to be in this church.” Indeed. If it can be proven that the first vision didn’t happen, or that the source of that vision was an impostor, then the whole of Mormonism is a fraud. No vision, no church.

**(Slide 4)** So what does history actually tell us? Lo and behold, there was no revival in Palmyra, New York in 1820. There were four that year, but the closest was 76 miles away. This was hardly a day trip in a pre-industrial society. The citizens of Palmyra might have read about it in the paper, and Smith’s diary indicates it was in the newspaper, but it hardly would have impacted the local churches to the degree he claimed. Indeed, the newspaper article that the church claims supports their version of history is an article about revival that doesn’t mention the name of a town and also includes a report of two men dying after a serious bout of intoxication. Apparently they partook heavily of the sacramental wine. The only thing was can be sure of is that the story appeared in a paper that Joseph and his family could have read: The Palmyra Register. Faced with the absurdity of their story and the lack of revival in Palmyra in the year they claim, the stock response is that ‘evidence for the revivals is less prominent than critics may suppose because they were so common. Newspapers report the novel and unusual; they do not report every-day occurrences’. If revival was a common thing it would not have much of an impact on people’s lives. To be fair, there was a revival in Palmyra four years later, but if we move this part of the story from 1820 to 1824 it throws the entire chronology of the Mormon Church off and causes even more inconsistencies that must be explained.

When considering the veracity of Smith’s claims, we should also consider whether the message lines up with scripture. Galatians 1:8 reminds us to be wary of supposedly sacred messages that are anything but sacred… and 2 Corinthians 11:14 gives a dire warning about the source of many false messages (14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light). I have no doubt that Joseph Smith experienced a vision in the woods that day. What is in question is who he actually saw…

**(Slide 5)** Worse still for the Mormons, there are multiple versions of the first vision account. These are not complimentary versions, like the four gospels. They are flatly contradictory on many points. In some versions, such as one dictated in 1835 by Smith himself, Joseph sees two men as we stated a moment ago and it is Jesus who tells Joseph his sins are forgiven. Joseph’s diary from 1832, however, indicates that only one personage – apparently the Father – appeared and spoke to him. The accounts don’t all agree on how old Joseph was or on what motivated him to go into the woods in the first place. It took decades for the church to sort out the ‘official version’ of what supposedly happened.

**(Slide 6)** Undaunted by the apparent discrepancies, the Mormons’ founder continued to develop his tale. He claimed that in 1823 he was visited by a character named Moroni, supposedly a resurrected prophet from one of four ancient civilizations, the Nephites, which settled the North American continent. Moroni, in his glorified state, was now an angel. After a series of meetings spanning four years, Moroni supposedly guided Joseph Smith to a collection of buried golden plates that contained the text of the Book of Mormon written in ‘reformed Egyptian’ (a language no one else has ever heard of, before or since). Along with the plates was a set of seer’s stones called the ‘Urim and Thummim’ that Smith was supposed to use to translate the plates. Interestingly, about this time Joseph was also in trouble with the law for using occult means to find buried treasure. Seer stones… buried golden plates… hmmm… it’s an interesting side note that, oddly enough, is not mentioned in official Mormon histories.

**(Slide 7)** Throughout 1828 and 1829 Joseph supposedly translated the Book of Mormon by placing the seer stones in his hat and burying his face it in. Somehow this gave him the translation of the plates which he dictated to his wife and several others. This is according to friends of Smith… not people hostile to his movement. You’ll have to take his word for it, though. The angel reclaimed the golden plates when Joseph was done with them. Personally, I believe the Book of Mormon was delivered to Joseph Smith by spirits… but not angelic ones. Also around this time, John the Baptist supposedly appeared to Joseph and restored one of two Old Testament priesthoods (the Aaronic Priesthood, the Levites of the Old Testament). Peter, James, and John (the Apostle) also appeared and restored the other priesthood, the Melchizedek priesthood. We’re not here to study that particular bit of theology, but in short this is the priesthood of Christ. Pastor Donnie preached a sermon on June 14th that talked a bit about Melchizedek if you want to learn more and happened to miss it. Finally, in 1830 Joseph published the Book of Mormon. Only then did he actually found his church, the Church of Christ, in Fayette, New York with just six members. From there they began a long series of moves usually caused by angry residents forcing Smith and his followers to run for their lives. They went first to Kirtland, Ohio where Smith produced another new revelation **(Slide 8)** which he called ‘The Book of Commandments’ (1833) and his own version of the Bible (the Inspired Version). In 1835 he took the original Book of Commandments, reworked it, expanded upon many of the original revelations, and republished it in the form that is used today under the title ‘Doctrine and Covenants’.

**(Slide 9)** Also in 1835, Smith acquired a collection of papyrus scrolls from a travelling showman. These contained hieroglyphs which the oft maligned prophet claimed were the same ‘reformed Egyptian’ that had been on the golden plates given to him by Moroni. From these he translated another revelation from God that he claimed was a lost book of the Bible, the Book of Abraham. This is still used by the Mormons today as part of a larger work named ‘The Pearl of Great Price’. This has been something of a thorn in the side of modern Mormons since the church still owns the scrolls. They are not ‘reformed Egyptian’, they are regular Egyptian and they don’t contain a revelation from the Lord… they detail ancient pagan funerary rites. This fraud was not discovered for many years since at the time of Smith’s acquisition the ability to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs was rather limited, and non-existent among his followers. **(Slide 10)** Their stay in Ohio ended when Joseph and his followers managed to get indicted for bank fraud. They fled to a site he named Adam-ondi-Ahman near Independence, Missouri, which Smith declared was the site of the original Garden of Eden, as well as the spot from which Jesus will reign in the millennial kingdom (The New Jerusalem).

Finally they ended up in Illinois, gracing several towns with their presence. The church’s history of infighting, criminal complaints, and debauchery during these years is certainly interesting, and I encourage you to read about it, but in the name of saving time we’re going to skip a few years. **(Slide 11)** In short, between 1835 and 1844 Smith declared polygamy to be God’s will (he had been practicing it in secret for years already), ran for president of the United States, became general of his own private army, and secretly had himself crowned King of the Earth. Yep. He was a pretty stable, grounded guy. Reality finally caught up to Joseph Smith on June 27th 1844. He was in prison awaiting trial for ordering the destruction of a newspaper that had been critical of him and his church when an angry mob (is there another kind of mob?) attacked the jail where he was being held and killed him. Obviously the story doesn’t end there. One of his few remaining loyal confidants, a man named Brigham Young (for whom a rather famous university is named) took over. It was Young that eventually guided the Mormons to Utah (which was part of Mexico at the time) wisely deciding that it would be best for them to settle on land no one else wanted. Again, the history is fascinating but I think we’ve looked at enough of it to show you that the standing of the Mormon Church upon their own history is weak at best.

1. On what do Mormons base their beliefs? **(Slide 12)**
   1. Four “standard works”
      1. The Bible – Only KJV. Dovetails linguistically with the book of Mormon
         1. “As far as it is correctly translated”
      2. Book of Mormon
         1. “Most correct book on Earth”. Literal history.
         2. If Bible contradicts, the Bible must be wrong…
         3. Lamanites & Nephites – Wicked Lamanites, dark skin (Native Americans)
            1. Problem: No one can find a single city mentioned in the Book of Mormon in any other ancient record or in archeology. You may search the Book of Mormon for a map if you wish, but it will be in vain. The church has never produced one, and somehow I suspect they don’t plan to in the future.
         4. Jesus visits the Americas – Pinnacle event
      3. Doctrine and Covenants
      4. Pearl of Great Price
         1. Grab bag of random revelations
   2. Living prophets and quorum of twelve
      1. Continuing revelation (word of a new revelation can supplant an older one) – God changes his mind, apparently.
2. Mormon Teachings
   1. God is not a Trinity **(Slide 13)**
      1. God is a glorified man who had a god he worshiped, who had a god he worshiped, who had a god he worshiped and so on back to time immemorial.
      2. God was a good Mormon on another planet and thus was given a world of his own – Earth – to rule over
      3. As god was so man may become – Eternal progression
      4. Lives near the planet Kolob today with one or more wives
      5. Brigham Young taught that God the Father was Adam – this view held for 50 years but is now denied by the Mormon Church.
   2. “Holy Ghost” is a personage, but “holy spirit” is different – a fluid-like substance.
   3. Jesus is the first of God’s many children with numerous wives.
      1. We all begin as ‘disorganized intelligence matter. Organized into ‘spirit children’ by God and one of his wives sexually. Sent to Earth (the Second Estate).
      2. The gods held a council of sorts to decide on the plan of salvation for our world. Jesus volunteered and so did his brother – Lucifer. Jesus’ plan was selected.
      3. Lucifer rebelled, led a third of the spirits in his rebellion and lost. Was cast down to become the devil and his angels.
      4. ‘Choice spirits’ are born into Mormon families (one of the reasons for their prolific childbearing).
   4. Adam fell ‘up’; no sin nature – his transgression was necessary. Adam had to sin in order for us to have a shot at being born, growing up, becoming saved Mormons, and getting to be gods of our own planets.
   5. Jesus, or at least his body, was the product of God the father having sex with Mary. Explicit denial of the virgin birth. Jesus was a good Mormon polygamist.
   6. Jesus’ atonement was for Adam’s sin, not all sin, and happened not on the cross but when he sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. You will never see a cross on a Mormon Church. Mormons don’t like the idea of the cross. It is a challenge for them to explain. They do teach a physical resurrection – one of the few cults that do.
   7. Afterlife – Salvation is by works. Period. Do your temple rituals, study genealogies, believe in Joseph Smith, etc.
      1. Paradise – the destination of good Mormons
      2. Spirit prison – for everyone else. Sit tight and wait for Mormon spirit missionaries to preach the Mormon gospel to you. Baptism for the dead.
      3. Three “degrees of glory” or heavens (Telestial – bad guys like Hitler and Stalin, Terrestrial – nice guys, Celestial – really good guys)
      4. Outer Darkness – for people who apostate from Mormonism. The closest Mormon equivalent to hell.
3. Mormon Practices
   1. “Word of Wisdom”: No caffeine drinks, alcohol, or tobacco (Doc & Cov sec 89:1-9)
      1. Also ‘hot drinks.’ For years Mormons wouldn’t even eat soup.
   2. **(Slide 14)** Temple rituals: Endowment Ceremonies. Rituals preparing people for godhood before going on a mission. Modified masonic rituals that will allow faithful Mormons to pass by angelic sentries and enter the celestial kingdom.
   3. Temple underwear – if you’ve been married in the temple or gone on a mission. Have masonic markings at the breast, navel, and right knee.
   4. What happens in the temple stays in the temple. Supposedly sacred, not secret, but they are absolutely forbidden to discuss it with anyone – even other Mormons.
   5. Individual Blood Atonement – Some sins so serious even Christ’s blood can’t atone. You get to atone with your own blood. That’s why Utah allows execution by firing squad.
4. It’s so weird… What is the appeal of Mormonism? The missionaries don’t tell you the weird parts… but they will tell you about:
   1. They say they are Christians. “Jesus Christ is in our name, after all’. The church appears wholesome on the outside.
   2. Family emphasis – Very popular in an era of surging divorce and when people are afraid to make commitments to family and each other.
   3. Social activities. The church is internally very supportive and welcomes non-members in regular (non-temple) activities. Now joiners are given a job to do right away. Adds to self-esteem and self-worth.
   4. Baptism on behalf of dead (lost) relatives. Don’t worry. You can be baptized for your dead grandma who never knew Jesus. You can be baptized by proxy for the dead since she’s in spirit prison!
5. What does the Bible say? Use KJV for all references. **(Slide 15)**
   1. Other revelations. “Even if an angel…” **(Slide 16)**
      1. Galatians 1:6-8
   2. No gods before or After God **(Slide 17)**
      1. Isaiah 43:10; 44:685
   3. God is not a man **(Slides 18 & 19)**
      1. Numbers 23:19, Hosea 11:9, Romans 1:22-23
   4. Jesus Christ has always been God **(Slide 20)**
      1. John 1:1
      2. Matthew 1 and Luke 1 (Virgin Birth) **(Slide21)**
   5. The gospel of salvation – By faith. **(Slides 22 & 23)**
      1. Romans 3:20-23; 6:23
      2. Ephesians 2:8-10 – Good works are not the cause of salvation, they are the result.
   6. Jesus preserves his church – Mormons teach that the original church was lost after the death of the Apostles. Christ says he will preserve it… **(Slide 24)**
      1. Matthew 16:18
   7. Testing prophets **(Slides 25 & 26)**
      1. 1 John 4:1
      2. Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:21-22

**Do’s and Don’ts (Slide 27)**

1. Don’t question their motives
2. Don’t ridicule their beliefs
3. Don’t let them pray for you – to pray with is to agree with, to have communion with.
4. Don’t agree to pray about the Book of Mormon. – This is not how we are told to test the validity of a message!
   1. Test it with scripture: Acts 17:11
5. Do take them through the scriptures – I keep a KJV on hand for their benefit.
6. Do tell them what Jesus has done for you. Give them hope!
   1. 1 John 5:10-13
7. Do end on a positive note

*If you do this, you may leave two young men wondering if perhaps they are dedicating two years of their lives to a lie.*

Homework for next week:

* Memorize your two minute testimony.
  + I will be asking for two volunteers – one guy and one gal – to give their testimony out loud. I’m not afraid to pick the quietest people in class if no one volunteers…
  + Yes, there is a prize for the volunteers.   
    No, I won’t tell you in advance what it is.
* Study for next week by completing pages 50-59 in your participant guide. The notes and slides from tonight will be posted online by tomorrow afternoon.