

# MORMONISM AS THE ‘MOST TRUE’ CHURCH

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint’s claim that it is the “only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30) evokes strong response both from insiders and outsiders. Believers presuppose the validity of this special, chosen status with appreciation and sometimes smugness; non-believers balk at the audacity and absurdity of the assertion that a tiny minority of the human population contains the only keys to heaven.

Here is the thing though... through a selective emphasis on certain elements of Mormon tradition, I think a strong case can be made that Mormonism has the potential to be, if not the “only true” Church, the *most* true Church.

The question is, how similar would this “Most true Mormonism” look to the current LDS Church? My answer would be “Not very”. That said, I have hope that current social shifts will impel that gap to lessen. I also want to make it clear that I am not discussing what I think is *likely* to happen, but rather making a statment of the potential I find within Mormonism itself.

A quote from Joseph Smith drives home my thesis that the LDS Church has the potential to be the “Most true Church”:

“Mormonism is truth. . . . The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds, and we have the highest degree of evidence of the same.

“Have the Presbyterians any truth? Embrace that. Have the Baptists, Methodists, and so forth? Embrace that. Get all the good in the world, and you will come out a pure Mormon.

“One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.”<sup>1</sup>

He expressed the same ideal on another occasion: “We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true Mormons.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 199

<sup>2</sup>*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 316

Take a moment to digest the meaning and power of these quotes. It may seem tautological to say that a religion that incorporates the best of every religion ends up as the best of religions, that a religion that incorporates everything good and everything true becomes most good and the most true. But wouldn't it WORK? I see in this the genius of Mormonism, the path to this Church as the "Most true Church".

The ideas of continuing revelation, open canon, and revered leaders who speak for God result in the ability to make significant shifts quickly when needed. We should not take for granted or underestimate the significance of this ability to make dramatic changes when called for.

Other sources confirm this idealized view of the Mormon perspective on truth.

One of Brigham Young's sons attending West Point asked about attending an Episcopal service. Young answered, "With regard to your attending Protestant Episcopal service, I have no objections whatever. On the contrary, I would like to have you attend, and see what they can teach you about God and Godliness more than you have already been taught."<sup>3</sup>

The prophet Alma states in the Book of Mormon, "For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true." (Alma 29:8)

Finally, a First Presidency Message to the Church in 1978 stated, "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals... Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come".<sup>4</sup>

More recently, President Gordon Hinckley framed LDS missionary work this way: "Let me say that we appreciate the truth in all churches and the good which they do. We say to the people, in effect, you bring with you all the good that you have, and then let us see if we can add to it. That is the spirit of this work. That is the essence of our missionary service."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Cited in Leonard Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>"God's Love for all Mankind"

<sup>5</sup>Message spoken at a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in 1998.

<http://lds.org/liahona/1999/04/words-of-the-living-prophet?lang=eng>

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the final Article of Faith states that “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things,” not “If there is anything good we seek after these things...as long as they are already in our correlated Church manuals.”

So this view of Mormonism as a religion that incorporates every good and true idea and principle is certainly present in the foundation. The question is, do we live up to these principles?

The answer is clearly no. Converts can bring “all the good that [they] have” in theory, but if a belief or practice does not fit the status quo of the LDS Church, it is rejected. Even very simple and beneficial practices such as having a broader range of instruments at Church, or clapping during services, or superior dietary practices of other cultures are rejected in favor of conformity to cultural, American-rooted, Protestant-influenced norms of spirituality and reverence.

Not only does a “most true” rather than “only true” approach fit within Mormon authoritative tradition, I believe it to be superior logically, theologically, and ethically. Isn't it preposterous to assume that a loving God would wait tens of thousands of years of human history to reveal the one true religion? Plus, how is it that with roughly 100 billion humans having lived on the earth,<sup>6</sup> how is it that a group of several million or so claims to have the only door to God's favor and a beneficial afterlife? In our world of instant globalization, pluralism, and tolerance, a tiny group claiming to have exclusive rights to truth comes across as insular, cultish, backwards, and snobbish.

To me, it makes far more sense that any God worth worshiping would give all people as much truth and saving principles as possible. Then those people would accept those truths according to their cultural understandings, presuppositions, and limitations. Imagine that an accomplished artist assigns her students to replicate the Sistine Chapel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.prb.org/Articles/2002/HowManyPeopleHaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sistine\\_Chapel\\_ceiling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sistine_Chapel_ceiling)



The students would capture the essence of this masterpiece to differing degrees based on their ability. Others would use it as a starting point to paint a more interpretive work. Still others would look at the Chapel and paint something different. This is one way to explain the diversity of religions in a theologically satisfying way.

Now, a logic that balances this nicely is the idea that since all cultures are limited in their receipt of truth, so is the LDS Church. I would love for this approach to encourage people to look at all cultures to see the good in them and bring it into their lives, just as LDS encourage others to do the same. We have seen that this theology and rhetoric exists in the Church; it is just not emphasized.

A recent articulation of the two-way street of learning falls short in my estimation: In the October 2011 General Conference Elder Ballard said, “Your associates are not inviting you to teach, preach, expound, or exhort. Engage them in a two-way conversation—share something about your religious beliefs but also ask them about their beliefs. Gauge the level of interest by the questions they ask.”<sup>8</sup> You get the idea that we should ask others about their beliefs merely to gain the opportunity for us to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://lds.org/ensign/2011/11/perfect-love-casteth-out-fear?lang=eng>

do the same, rather than the idea that their beliefs could be equal to or even superior to ours. Thus we fall into the classic communication error of not really listening to or valuing another's input, but rather spending the time others are speaking to formulate our own brilliant and valuable response.

The key shift that would pave the way for this “Most True Church” model would not even be to weaken the truth claims of the Church, but to **be open to the idea that other religions and cultures have truth that the Mormon Church does not**. So even if Mormonism is “most true”, it does not have a monopoly on everything good and true. This shift would radically change the dynamic of both inter- and intra-Church relationships.

It is self-evident that people are more receptive to others when others are receptive to them. Can you imagine how much more effective missionary work would be if the sharing went both ways? If the Mormon Missionaries stopped by and said, “We would like to share our beliefs with you, and we also want to learn what we can from you”. Instead of projecting the message that everyone in the world must abandon their beliefs in favor of Mormonism, a cycle would be created that simultaneously improves Mormonism while encouraging more people to associate with it.

Here is how I imagine it could play out, in a hypothetical statement by the LDS leadership:

Our dear brothers and sisters,

We as a First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have been pondering, praying, and fasting concerning the relationship between agency, knowledge, and revelation. As we did so, the feeling came into our hearts that God would be pleased if we made some changes in current Church culture and doctrine. These changes will be hard for some, just as the shift away from polygamy or toward all men having the priesthood was hard for some. But we feel a renewed commitment to coming to the Lord humbly with our very best knowledge and questions and to seek His will.

We will therefore be instituting policies of listening and seeking knowledge and principles from a variety of sources. We want to hear from you, and we will be adjusting the responsibilities of General Authorities and the Apostles so we have time to hear your concerns, which we will then take to the Lord.

Many of our early revelations came as Joseph studied matters out and took questions to God. Drawing on this heritage, we will be studying the scriptures and traditions of many faiths and even professional literature. We will be talking to therapists and teachers, theologians and social activists. We believe that because God gives inspiration to all people, as we listen to a variety of voices and test these ideas by the Spirit, we will draw closer to how God would have us run his Church. We will

progress slowly and carefully, but you can expect an outpouring of new revelation and key changes to policies.

Finally, we want to wish a heartfelt apology to those hurt by the limited views we have advocated in the past. We will be issuing detailed apologies and statements to women, blacks, homosexuals, divorced members, and others damaged by past and present Church policies. Know that there will be changes as we humbly strive to bring the Church of Jesus Christ into conformity with his will.

It is difficult to admit being wrong. We are trying to show an example. We invite all of you to consider and pray about the policy changes and new revelations to come in the next few years with an open heart and mind. We will all be better for it.

Sincerely your Brethren (and soon Sistren),

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve

So, this seems radical right? Would this approach transform the LDS Church into a wishy washy institution blown about by every wind of social-scientific theory? I don't think so. This approach draws upon Mormon tradition such as the example of Joseph Smith and actually lives up to the idea of "continuing revelation".

One thing that most excites me about this approach is that it would work for people on every level of development. If recognized religious authorities were to take to God the very most enlightened and beneficial ideas and principles of which we are aware,

- 1) The people who do things "because God says so" would stretch to live principles that would demonstrably improve their lives.
- 2) The people who do things because the institution asks them to would also live these principles.
- 3) The people who insist on thinking for themselves would also follow these principles, because their goodness would be independently confirmed.

Thus this approach would meet the needs of those for whom a clearer, more concrete model works and also maintains the distinctiveness of Mormonism. Though this might have an echo of Socrates' "Noble Lie", I think it conforms to the very best conceptions of the theology and function of Divinity. I thrill at the idea of presenting the most exalted ideas known to humans in a way that maximizes peoples' receptivity on every level.

One issue that needs to be addressed is the role of ordinances in Mormonism. Priesthood and temple ordinances of the LDS Church (beginning with baptism and confirmation and continuing with endowment and temple marriage) function not only as a primary point of distinction, but also as a functional justification for the

high investments of time and resources that the Church demands. Mormon culture glorifies those who make tremendous sacrifices to gain the “blessings of the temple”, and members respond.

How would these “saving ordinances” fit into the model of “most true Mormonism”? Once again, Mormonism itself holds the theological answer, a quite brilliant answer actually. A critical problem with Christianity is that if Jesus provides the only one true path to salvation, believers much either damn to hell the vast majority to have never heard of Christ, or acknowledge that Jesus can save those who don’t believe, in which case, why do you need Christianity?

In Mormonism, Jesus saves everyone who does not “have the law”.<sup>9</sup> This has been worked out through the idea of vicarious temple ordinances. It is an obvious mathematical fact that despite the diligence of LDS temple goers, the vast majority of saving ordinances will take place during the Millennium.<sup>10</sup>

So why could the Church not continue to value the saving ordinances of the temple, but also put them in proper perspective? Why could we not take seriously the fact that most of the work will take place during the Millennium, and so encourage members to receive the temple ordinances if they can, but also put the resources that currently go to temples and put them to the purpose of *caring for members and others in THIS life?* Surely God’s commandment to care for the hungry and homeless, the naked and needy is at least as important as to push temple work that can be accomplished posthumously anyway.

You could argue that temple covenants enable us to be more godlike and loving, to be transformed more easily. For years this is exactly how I saw them. But if this is the case that could be demonstrated, and there are plenty of other ways to draw closer to perfection that work *whether or not* we will all be doing temple work with Jesus and angels in the Millennium. Similarly, members still argue for the efficacy of the priesthood for ecause it is a more direct conduit to divine power than other rituals-- but also acknowledge that it is not the *only* way. Similarly, you could argue that the doctrines in the LDS Church present a more perfect theology than the whole of other systems. You could even still argue that eventually everyone will need the benefit of the temple rituals, but giving full weight to the good in other religions, and even incorporating the best of them, would do much to increase good will toward the Church.

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Ne. 9:25: “where there is no law given there is no punishment, andd where there is no punishment there is no condemnation; and where there is no condemnation the mercies of the Holy One of Israel have claim upon them, because of the atonement; for they are delivered by the power of him.”

<sup>10</sup> As is acknowledged in the “Gospel Principles” chapter on “Millennium”.

I need to emphasize the fact that there is a great deal that Mormonism does very well, *as it is now*. In order to embrace Mormonism I would not need it to become something completely different, but this is a way to turn President Hinckley's counsel on ourselves, to keep and preserve every good thing and add to it.

It would be so wonderful if we had the idea that we are the "One True Church" precisely because we are open to gathering truth wherever it is. This would put "continuing revelation" to WORK and put us at the cutting edge of ethics and good, healthy religion rather than being decades behind because leaders want to preserve the good ol' days.

By fully owning up to not being perfect, the Church will draw closer to perfection. By softening the claim to be the "only true Church", the LDS Church will have greater claim to becoming the "most true Church". Because, to preserve the wording from D&C 1:30, it will be more than ever a LIVING Church that grows and progresses and adapts to the needs of members in the present, incorporating the best principles of which we are aware. Thus this vibrant, living character could become the distinctive feature of Mormonism, without neglecting the heritage of our past.