

Reorganized Latter Day Saint Distinctives

By Chris B. Hartshorn

For a church to be different in doctrines and practices from all other denominations is not in itself meritorious. These differences must first stand the test of religious and social evaluation. This is especially true of the smaller and newer churches. They must justify their existence by presenting distinctive elements which have received the sanction of God and the respect of men.

Questions on Identity and History

When and where was this church founded?

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which for the sake of brevity will hereafter be called the Reorganized Church, was founded in 1830, at Fayette, New York. Its leaders and the main body of believers soon moved to the midwest where they have since remained as the nucleus of a world-wide movement. Joseph Smith, Jr., was its original leader and prophet.

Is yours a Christian religion?

Positively, yes. We accept all that Christ ever taught, and try to live up to the spirit and letter of the Christian gospel. We pledge ourselves not to teach nor countenance any doctrine incompatible with Christ's words. The name of Jesus Christ is part of our official title. Our membership regards every word in the long title as significant, but the most important part of it is "Church of Jesus Christ." One of our most important services is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Are you Protestants?

Not in the usual sense of the word "Protestant." Ours is a Restoration Movement. The protest emphasis had largely spent itself by 1830. Our founder presented the claim that through this movement there was restored to earth the same ministerial authority with the same scriptural doctrine and organizational pattern of the New Testament church. This seemed to be a logical consequence of the departure from the faith (Apostasy) which brought on "dark ages" and the need for the Reformation. Protestantism prepared the way for the Restoration.

Our founder Joseph Smith, Jr., testified that in a daytime vision in 1820 he saw two heavenly personages, one of whom said, "This is my beloved Son, hear him." This young prophet did hear the voice of the Son from time to time and, obedient to the directions of the divine voice, he again set up a church after the New Testament pattern and ordained men with priesthood authority to administer its ordinances.

What conditions brought about the rise of the movement?

The establishment of this American republic had much to do with it. Many of those who founded our democracy were seeking religious liberty. History shows two trends developing during the first 150 years of colonization. The pioneer fathers sought to control the economics and politics of the colonies through religious power. Old-world ideas and intolerances were still strong. In the second place, atheism -- especially among college people -- was in the ascendancy near the close of the eighteenth century. The pendulum had swung far to the left. Early in the nineteenth century a reaction set in. A spiritual renaissance brought forth some dynamic movements which stirred the leaders of existing churches and produced new churches, such as Unitarian, Adventist, Disciples of Christ, and Latter Day Saints. Men of great vigor, faith, and persistence provided a virile religious leadership for the times.

What affirmations were made by the founders which differentiated this movement from other denominations?

We have selected only four of these for discussion:

1. That God and Christ appeared in vision and charged Joseph Smith, Jr., to prepare for leadership in a Restoration Movement. This young leader affirmed that God told him to join none of the churches as their man-made creeds were not acceptable in his sight, that religious teachers "draw near me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; for they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." This seems to be a harsh statement until one is faced with evidence that fundamental changes have been made in the creeds of all the churches since the year 1820. Such creeds, therefore, must have been manmade rather than divinely inspired.

2. That the canon of Scripture (accepted as divine) is not closed, but that God, by his Spirit, will continue to reveal his word to man until the end of time.

3. That ministerial authority, like other manifestations of divine power, comes from heaven. In the Restoration Movement, one of the most important elements restored was priesthood. This manifestation of divine grace came through angelic ministrations under the hands of John the Baptist upon Joseph Smith, Jr., and Oliver Cowdery. From those thus commissioned, others have been ordained as they have received the call to the ministry from God through church leaders.

4. That the church should be organized with all the officers existing in the New Testament church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, bishops, high priests, elders, priests, and deacons.

Do not most of the books and encyclopedia articles about your church lead readers to an adverse opinion of its claims to have had divine guidance?

Only in recent years have writers manifested much interest in sifting the conflicting statements about the church for the sake of historical accuracy. The reasons for many of the glaring misstatements might be put in three classes:

1. The careless use of secondary sources. The rights of minority groups were ignored more willfully a century ago than they are today.

2. The claims put forth by the leaders of the church that they were moving in response to divine direction were regarded as inferring favoritism. The "chosen people" idea has always been resented on the grounds of its exclusiveness. The fact that God has always done such choosing of priests and prophets as pleased him was without appeal to religious partisans. Before Stephen was stoned, he asked the Jews, "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" Religious intolerance being what it is, perhaps it was inevitable that these strong antagonisms should appear in print against the leaders and the church of the nineteenth century just as in Paul's day. The Jews in Rome reminded him, "As concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

3. Much of the stigma which has been fastened upon the church was instigated in Utah. In 1852 the Mormon church made polygamy, or "plural marriage," an official doctrine of that church, basing it on an alleged eight-year-old document left unannounced by Joseph Smith, Jr. However, no original documents nor direct testimony support these claims but actually deny them, and the courts of our land have so concurred.

Why did your church withdraw from the Mormon Church?

We didn't. When the leaders, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, were killed by a mob of masked men who stormed the Carthage (Illinois) jail, the church was left without leadership. Before his martyrdom, the Prophet Joseph Smith had indicated and blessed his son, Joseph III, to be his successor. However, being only twelve years old, "Young Joseph" was in no position nor mood to lead the church. Several leaders arose and claimed the right to head the church. A scant 10,000 of the 250,000 members headed for Utah under Brigham Young's leadership

and formed the Mormon Church. Great numbers remained in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa; and in 1852 they held a conference and became known as The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Joseph Smith III became their leader in 1860. In the only contests over the title to property held by the church before 1844, both were decided in favor of the Reorganized Church by courts in Ohio (1880) and Missouri (1894). These judgments were given the Reorganized Church on the grounds that it was the same church in succession as to organization, doctrine, and practice.

Is the organization of your church practically the same as that of the Mormon Church?

The organic patterns have similarities. Both have a Presidency, Council of Twelve Apostles, Seventies, high priests, Presiding Bishopric, etc. However, there are some important differences. Their book of latter-day revelations ends with the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. Many new revelations have been added to our book from time to time.

Their tithing system requires each member to pay a tenth of his income to the church. This may even be used for commercial enterprises of which the Mormon Church has many. Our tithing system is based on a tenth of the increase (that remaining after the necessities of life—food, shelter, and clothing—are provided); and is used only for religious and welfare purposes. Both churches try to aid their poor and needy members, and both utilize the help of tax-supported welfare agencies.

Why was Joseph Smith persecuted by his Christian neighbors?

Intense rivalry existed among all denominations in that period. Meetings were violently broken up, churches were burned, and men were killed over religious differences. History shows that some "religious" people took their denominational loyalties too seriously. Of course, the irreligious were always ready to help with mob action. The Palmyra Courier-Journal, published in the town where Joseph Smith lived as a young man, declared editorially July 21, 1932: "Joseph Smith was arrested and acquitted thirty-nine times." With all this prosecution some legal penalty should have resulted had real evidence of wrongdoing existed.

There is no valid evidence that Joseph Smith, Jr., was of ignoble or unstable character. One of the familiar epithets used against him was that he was "an ignoramus." He received at least an average frontier school education. He continued his education tirelessly by his own efforts. When his literary and administrative works are fairly considered, the real problem is how he could achieve so much with so little formal education, as judged by present-day standards.

Questions on Our Social Beliefs and Program

It is important to know that an organization has a good root system, but its value to society will be judged by the quality of its fruit. Let us turn then to an examination of the adequacy of the organization and program of the Reorganized Church to meet present-day social and religious needs.

Has the church already made its contribution, or has it yet something significant to offer?

Its primary objective is to help people to identify themselves with the church which is the "body of Christ." The first step is that of saving men from the evils of the world and the temptations of the flesh. This need will continue as long as time lasts, and no group should be hindered from helping. Denominational size is not the gauge of truth or merit. History has shown that new knowledge was received and applied first in small groups.

What distinctive emphases has the Reorganized Church offered?

1. Our kingdom of heaven concept, frequently referred to as Zion, is given much prominence among us. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven" has immediacy and group challenge. Jesus was trying to make his disciples conscious of group needs. The importance of the individual stressed in Jesus' parables of the lost sheep, the coin, and the son is not overlooked in the social aspect of the gospel. "The body of Christ" is made up of individual members, but it functions only in the integration and cooperation of the group.

The Reorganized Church senses its mission to work out this kingdom concept. It is more than sanctuaries, preaching, and prayers. It is essentially a brotherhood organized for group action, while promoting individual regeneration. It involves a stewardship program with the consecration of our surplus, which we have by no means completed, in fact have only well begun. It involves social and economic organization, face-to-face contacts of real men and women working out the problems of better living, and the use of buildings, machines, and land. An effective "kingdom" cannot be built in a vacuum nor in men's hearts. Rather it must be built 'among you' and "in your midst" as a more careful rendering of Luke 17: 21 gives it.

2. Another emphasis this church has given is that God the Father and Christ the Son live and are in communion with the men of great faith today. Most Christians accept the scriptural teachings that God's Word was revealed and his kingdom set up some two thousand years ago, but they close the channels of communication and organization about the end of the first century. The Restoration Movement of 1830 opened those channels by the key of faith. By instruments of God's own choosing in these latter days his unchangeability has been sustained.

The Reorganized Church does not affirm that it has a favored claim on divine grace nor does it assume a familiarity with Deity. God is no respecter of persons. Because we have torn down the barriers of unbelief, we have shared more richly in universal love. The claims of the Restoration Movement of power and organization rest solely on the principle of faith in such promises as "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." -John 7:17. And "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God . . . nothing wavering." -James 1: 5, 6.

Why do you need the Book of Mormon; isn't the Bible enough?

The Bible is sufficient for the needs of many people. It is the greatest book the world has ever known and is still gaining in popularity. The Reorganized Church puts it first in its canon of law and doctrine. However, Bible believers are still in the minority on this globe. Even among believers there are many who know little of "The Book" and are not grounded in the faith of Christ. Perhaps they, as well as the other two thirds of the world's population who are non-Christian would be helped by reading this "second witness," as the Book of Mormon is called, to the truth that "Jesus is the Christ." In plain language easily understood by humble people, it tells an amazing story of God's guidance to men, climaxed by the visit of Jesus Christ to ancient Americans. Recent archaeological explorations have heightened interest and established truths in the historical elements of the Book.

According to the testimony of those who brought it forth, the God of heaven provided that this record of those who lived anciently upon the American continent should be kept, preserved, and translated for a wise purpose. It seems much wiser to consider the Book of Mormon on its merits. A tree should be judged by its fruits.

Each printed copy of this record contains in its preface the solemn testimony of eleven men who, in addition to its translator, saw and handled the golden plates. Soon after their testimony was given, Joseph Smith, Jr., says that the same heavenly messenger who aided him in obtaining the plates called for them and took them away. Each of these witnesses continued to reaffirm his testimony as long as he lived. Under such remarkable circumstances attending the issuance of this record, you would hardly expect us to say that the Bible is enough, and we have no need for any more of the Word of God.

Since the Reorganized Church accepted the testimony of the young prophet that he was directed to the place where these imperishable records were hidden and that he translated them "by the power of God" as he alleges, we are thereby committed to accept the product of such guidance. Should we refuse consideration of

them as Holy Scriptures it would be tantamount to allowing prejudice rather than reason to control us and put us in the class of those who "reject the counsel of God against themselves" (Luke 7: 30).

What is your concept of revelation; or how is God supposed to speak to the church today?

We believe in an unchangeable God. If he speaks to men today, it would follow the scriptural pattern. Recorded experience shows that God has communicated in various ways with his servants. Elijah heard "a still small voice." The Prophet Isaiah's lips were touched with a "live coal . . . taken . . . from off the altar." God spoke to Moses from a bush that burned but was not consumed (Exod. 3: 3). Later he "spake unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exod. 33:11).

It is easy to oversimplify such statements in the Scriptures. It is also easy to conclude that human intelligence is the beginning and end of all knowledge, and to reject experiences with which we are unfamiliar. Revelation is certainly linked with the natural thought processes but just as certainly not limited by them. Peter said, 'Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost.'" -II Peter 1: 21 This is a supernatural process, in that it is uncommon to ordinary men, yet it implies a cognitive function on a different level. Paul declared, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." -I Cor. 14: 32.

How does one become a member of your church?

The first step is to have faith in God and his Son Jesus Christ, and consequently in the message the church brings in his name. The next is to repent of one's sins and give evidence of the desire to live as Christ has taught. Then the door is baptism by immersion; this is followed by the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit. This is the door of entrance, but to become a true member one must grow in grace and a knowledge of the truth. The only covenant one makes is that he is willing to take upon him the name of Jesus Christ and always remember him and keep his commandments that he may have his Spirit. This covenant is renewed at each Communion service.

Does your belief in an authoritarian church and ministry mark you with intolerance?

Intolerance is an ugly fact which has been associated with denominational loyalty from the days of Christ to the present. Name calling is not resorted to so frequently nor so vehemently among Christian believers now as formerly. However, between those who admit that their church is only "one of the many roads to heaven" and those who maintain that they have the same organic and doctrinal structure in their church for which Christ gave his life (Ephesians 5: 25) there is a great gulf fixed. On this issue a large majority of Christian believers are in authoritarian churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglicans, and Lutherans. Such differences are honestly held and need not lead to intolerance. Each can respect the other and work together in civic and religious matters which do not compromise the faith of any.

What is the major emphasis or program of your church?

The primary objective for which the church exists is that all men might have eternal life. Concurrent with this endeavor, we hope to produce a Christian community life. Men are called that they might teach and preach the gospel of Christ here and abroad with power and assurance. Our evangelizing work is carried on in churches, in homes, or wherever men may be reached. Each member is a witness for Christ to win his neighbor. We hold reunions, or camp meetings; youth camps, institutes, and conferences. Extensive use is made of printed tracts, books, and periodicals.

Our program of social regeneration includes a brotherhood that shares in Christian fellowship through mutual service. Basic to this is our system of tithing, stewardship, and consecration of surplus for the common good.

How does the Reorganized Church conceive of its program of Zion as fitting into the larger social order?

In America and other free countries, the church expects to vindicate its philosophy by a type of life that is superior to that produced by the world or its religious groups. Its individual and group life should be able to exist side by side with the prevailing social order, for its objectives are altruistic and beneficent. We are directed to "be in the world but not of it." Good citizenship and a sharing of civic responsibilities are minimum requirements of kingdom builders.

Jesus gave the answer to this problem when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole lump was leavened."-Matt. 13: 33. It is the hope of the Reorganized Church to make its interpretation of Christ's way of life so attractive that it will appeal to all men. There is nothing secret nor reserved about the gospel we preach. Each person is invited to share with us on the same terms with life eternal as the goal.