
Christians Should Study Mormonism

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Between the death of Christ's apostles and the Council of Nicaea, Christianity changed dramatically. It is impossible to account for all that happened to cause the changes. Although some of the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers (Christian leaders before Nicaea) have been preserved, the records are wholly inadequate to understand everything that happened, and why it happened.

A new religion rarely appears in history. When one does, it presents a unique opportunity for us to study the process.

Religions begin with an inspired leader whose confident vision opens new light and truth into the world. If there is no new vision, then the religion won't survive. But an original, inspired leader is difficult to replicate. Within a short time, the founder's work is overtaken by others. Their insecurities and fears leave them without the confidence once present at the foundation. Believers donate, and contributions aggregate. A new generation of believers begin to notice the wealth of their movement, and aspiring leaders who would never sacrifice their name, reputation, security, and lives are drawn to management and seeking personal benefit from the institution. Bold claims become hollow echoes, and leaders' insecurity results in defensive and protective steps. Instead of moving forward with inspired new light and truth, the established religion fears and fights against threatened losses.

William James explained the process:

A genuine first-hand experience like this is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand

exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. The new church, in spite of whatever human goodness it may foster, can be henceforth counted on as a staunch ally in every attempt to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit, and to stop all later bubblings of the fountain from which in purer days it drew its own supply of inspiration. Unless, indeed, by adopting new movements of the spirit it can make capital out of them and use them for its selfish corporate designs!" (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, Lectures XIV and XV: The Value of Saintlessness.)

Mormonism was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith who claimed that ten years prior to founding a church he had been visited by God the Father and Jesus Christ. In the intervening years between the first visit and the time a church was organized, Joseph claimed to have been visited by an angelic messenger who delivered to him a new volume of scripture, the Book of Mormon. He claimed to have received revelations before founding the church, and then many more after its organization.

Whether you believe Joseph Smith's claims or not, he and his followers give a unique opportunity to witness how founding a religion sets in motion a series of predictable events that happen every time a new religion begins. Perhaps the best way to decipher the transition of Christianity from the original Primitive Christianity to its replacement, Historic Christianity, is to study Mormonism. Similar to the way the Primitive Christian church passed away after the death of the apostles, Mormonism has passed away following the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. The same process was at work in both.

Primitive Christianity and Mormonism set out to change the world, and after some initial success, both enjoyed worldly success. Their success diverted attention from saving souls to managing people and property. Paul observed, "the love of money is the root of all evil." (1 Tim. 6:10.) A new religion is not profitable for the first believers. They are persecuted. They sacrifice their lives and property to follow what they believe to be God's burden laid on them. Because of their sacrifices, they have faith and know they please God. Without sacrifice, it is impossible to obtain the faith required for salvation. Founders make sacrifices, successors enjoy the fruit of those sacrifices.

In time, the founding gives way to popular approval. John Wesley observed the price that is paid for popular acceptance is the loss of the Spirit.

“It does not appear that these extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were common in the Church for more than two or three centuries. We seldom hear of them after that fatal period when the Emperor Constantine called himself a Christian;...From this time they almost totally ceased;...The Christians had no more of the Spirit of Christ than the other heathens....This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer to be found in the Christian Church; because the Christians were turned Heathens again, and had only a dead form left.Churches all come to depend on money for survival.”

Churches, like the men who belong to them, are just as vulnerable to the “love of money” which leads to “all evil.” People can have the gifts of the Spirit, or they can acquire riches in this world, but cannot have both. Catholicism grew wealthy from the offerings of its members. When it owned most of the European lands and ruled over all people within Roman Catholic boundaries, it was cold, corrupt, violent and cruel. The transition from persecuted minority to dangerous majority took three centuries. With that status the original was lost.

Mormonism has followed the same path and achieved the same end in less than half the time. If a Christian wants to know how Primitive Christianity was lost to apostasy, the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is where it can be found. Mormon beliefs are so unstable that they now “unequivocally condemn” 10 of the first 11 of their church presidents, including Brigham Young, John Taylor, and David O. McKay.

In order to progress forward, we must go back. Since we have no way to recover enough information to understand Christianity’s trek from Jerusalem to Rome, Mormonism allows Christians a view into the transition from Nauvoo to Salt Lake. Both paths followed the same tragic topography.