

EXPLORE  
+  
ENGAGE



# LATTER DAY SAINTS

*Fundamental  
Mormon Beliefs*

JEREMY JENKINS

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## EXPLORE & ENGAGE

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**A**t the ministry I founded and run, All Things All People, we have a two-fold mission: to explore the darkest places and least-reached people in the United States and to engage them with the gospel. Those two words, explore and engage, mean everything to us.

This mission stems from my experience in church ministry and academia. I spent years learning under amazing professors and academics. These men and women taught me the intricacies of the world's religions and prepared me for missionary work. They equipped me with research, teaching, and writing skills I depend on daily. However, I often find the smartest people in the evangelical world, people who have explored the deepest theological questions to be explored, are content to talk about evangelism without putting what they learn into practice.

I have also spent my entire adult life serving in church ministry and interacting with gifted missionaries and evangelists. These men and women are passionate about seeing people cross from death to life and follow Christ with abandon. Yet I often find that these missionaries deprive themselves of invaluable tools by refusing to study the worldview of the people they try to reach. Our academics

and intellectuals would do well to learn from our evangelists and missionaries, and vice versa.

To “explore *and* engage” is to refuse to fall into either of these traps. We should be explorers in that we should be curious and adventurous in learning about the people we reach out to. We should know what they believe as well as they do, if not better. Not all of us need to be experts, but we cannot be uneducated. And we should use what we learn to interact with people who are far from God with a gospel-driven passion.

This is the first book of the “Explore and Engage Field Guides” series, a series meant to equip and challenge you to witness boldly to those who do not know Jesus as their Lord. I kept these field guides short so they can find their way into your backpack or pockets, available as you prepare for the witnessing that will hopefully stem from your study. If one day these books are bent and dog-eared from overuse and being loaned to friends, that would make me very happy.

This book helps equip readers in witnessing to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I do not hide that I believe their doctrine is not only flawed but spiritually dangerous and devoid of the true gospel. Despite this, I have done my best to present an accurate picture of what Latter-day Saints believe. The gospel does not need their doctrine to be mischaracterized or weakened to show that it is counterfeit.

In accordance with our mission, I divided this book into two sections. The first, “Explore,” is a brief history of the origins of the Latter-day



Saints, a concise explanation of their theology, and a depiction of how their faith plays out in daily life. In this section, I almost exclusively cite Latter-day Saint sources—to be as accurate as possible when explaining their beliefs. Given the length of this book, I couldn't explore every concept in-depth, but I did my best to be both concise and accurate. In the second section, "Engage," I discuss how to answer the claims of the Latter-day Saints from a biblical perspective. This section is less academic and based on my experiences.

Exploring other faiths and worldviews is important, but also challenging—especially to believers not yet familiar with the essential teachings of their own faith. I encourage you to seek discernment from the Holy Spirit in how you read these books. Continuing to "explore" the teachings of Christianity will help you understand how the beliefs of others contrast with your own. Then we might together realize not only the urgent need before us but also the great adventure. Whenever I have conversations like the ones in these books, I experience inexplicable excitement. We venture into the same harvest that the earliest apostles did and with the same message—the God who created us not only wants to know us and be known by us: He made a way for that to happen despite our sin and brokenness. I hope you find this great missionary call exciting and adventurous as well.

In Christ,

Jeremy Jenkins

*Executive Director—All Things All People*



*Explore*



## Do we Worship the Same God?

Three miles into my four-mile walk—returning from an In-N-Out in Orem, Utah—I received an Instagram message. I went to Utah to witness the spring General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints. The stunning Rocky Mountains and proximity to In-N-Out, a Western burger chain I wanted to try, were bonuses despite the shortage of transportation. But that Instagram message made me pause:

“I love what you do, but this trip bothers me. My neighbor is LDS, and she is the nicest neighbor I have. She is a great mother and a great wife. We have become great friends. Do you really think she isn’t Christian just because she has a few different beliefs than us?”

I have received countless comments with similar undertones, and I do not take joy in causing these feelings. Latter-day Saints often make great neighbors and parents. The businesses they run are often templates for success and achievement. The cultures they construct, like the one I walked through in Orem, are on the surface, idyllic. Yet, comments like the one I received on Instagram proved the value of my trip.

It is a harmful error to assess the truth of doctrine by its cultural appearance. On the surface, LDS beliefs seem to align with core Christian doctrine. Many even claim that they worship the same God as the rest of Christendom. But this is not true. While introductory Bible studies that their missionaries walk people through do not begin with the startling differences, at the core of their worldview, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes the rest of Christianity has departed from the truth.

What do Latter-day Saints believe that is so different from orthodox Christian doctrine (“orthodox” as in adhering to historical Christian faith as taught in Scripture and affirmed by the Church)? To truly understand the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you must first understand their history.

## **A QUICK LSD HISTORY LESSON**

The Latter-day Saint story began in 19th-century Northeastern United States with a man named Joseph Smith. Smith was born on December 23rd, 1805, in Vermont. His family moved to New York when he was ten. During this time, religious fervor and revival filled

the Northeast. At fourteen, Smith had deep spiritual frustration with denominations within Protestant Christianity: he struggled to discern which sect taught the truth. Prompted by 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,” Smith retreated to the woods to pray and seek God. What he claimed to witness that day changed his life.

### *Two Visions*

While praying, Smith claimed an overwhelming darkness overcame him. He felt certain this spiritual power would kill him, but after resigning himself to that fate, he saw a pillar of light above his head brighter than the sun:

“It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—“This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!””<sup>1</sup>

Smith asked these personages which Christian sect he should join. He claimed he was told to join none of them because all had departed from the truth of Jesus.

In 1823, Smith claimed he had another heavenly vision. This time,

he was visited by the angel Moroni who, through a series of instructions, told him to unearth a treasure buried on a hill in Palmyra, New York. This treasure was:

“...a record, engraved on plates of gold, giving a history of the nations that had formerly lived upon the western continent and an account of the Savior’s ministrations among the people on this land...with the plates were two sacred stones, known as the Urim and Thummim, by the use of which, men in olden times had become seers, and that through those instruments God would enable Joseph to translate the record engraved on the plates.”<sup>2</sup>

The content of these tablets was published as the Book of Mormon. The followers Smith gained through preaching this additional testament of Jesus Christ were first known as the “Church of Christ” and later renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

### *Nauvoo and Assassination*

Smith’s following increased into the thousands. As their numbers grew, they first assembled in Ohio and then migrated to Missouri. When they experienced hatred from the surrounding community in Missouri, they settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, where Smith built what could be described as a small empire. They built a government, an



army, and a church with a growing assortment of beliefs. Many of the most famous LDS doctrines took shape in this era: multi-tiered heaven, a god of flesh and bone, polygamy/plural marriage, baptism for the dead, etc. It was in Nauvoo—on April 7, 1844—that Smith gave the famous “King Follett Sermon.” Author Alex Beam says about this speech: “In one long, loud sermon, [Smith] had dynamited the entire Christian cosmology, the underpinnings of every credal prayer to have emerged in the previous 2,000 years.”<sup>3</sup> These teachings contributed to the surrounding community’s rising hatred towards the Latter-day Saints. This hatred ultimately led to Smith’s death.

While jailed in Carthage, Illinois, under suspicion of treason and inciting riots, Smith was murdered by a mob outside the jail. This caused a succession crisis within the LDS church. Brigham Young, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and a close confidant of Smith’s, eventually took the presidency. As opposition to the LDS continued to rise, Young led the community west and eventually settled in Utah. Young served as the first governor of Utah, and the Latter-day Saints were instrumental in setting up the infrastructure of the new state.

This history is well documented by the LDS church and secular historians alike. Today, much of Utah is still influenced by Latter-day Saints culture, and the largest population of LDS reside there. Young was succeeded as president of the LDS church by John Taylor. Since then, seventeen consecutive presidents have acted as prophets over the church. As of the writing of this book, the president is Russell

M. Nelson.

### **SACRED TEXTS & AUTHORITY**

Now that we understand how the Latter-day Saints came to be, we must look at what the LDS church is today. The President of the Church and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (a leadership group believed to hold apostolic authority) have removed many of the most controversial teachings, including the practice of plural marriage and the church's early views on other races. Before we dig deeper into LDS beliefs, we must first understand their sacred texts, church structure, and views on authority.

2 Nephi, from the Book of Mormon, paints a good picture of how the Latter-day Saints view their extra-biblical scripture:

“Thou fool, that shall say: A Bible, we have got a Bible,  
and we need no more Bible.”<sup>4</sup>

Latter-day Saints believe in four sacred scriptures, referred to as the “Four Standard Works.” These are the Bible, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. The LDS church also believes in the continued revelation of God through the current President of the Church.

### **THE BOOK OF MORMON**

Joseph Smith said the Book of Mormon was, “The most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion,” and “A man would

get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book”<sup>5</sup>

The Book of Mormon is an account of the tribes of Israel that allegedly migrated to North America around 2000 B.C. It tells of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to these tribes and a revelation of the gospel that was lost in the Great Apostasy.<sup>6</sup> The LDS church believes the “Great Apostasy” is the period between the death of the original apostles and the revelations of Joseph Smith where: “the priesthood authority—including the keys to direct and receive revelation for the Church—was taken from the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Doctrine & Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price*

While LDS missionaries will hold the Book of Mormon when they come to your door, many of the defining aspects of their faith come from the last two of the Four Standard Works. The LDS church describes Doctrine and Covenants this way:

“The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations given for the establishment and regulation of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days. . . Most of the revelations in this compilation were received through Joseph Smith Jr., the first prophet and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Others were issued through some of his successors in the Presidency.”<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, *The Pearl of Great Price* is a compilation of various texts Joseph Smith was said to have discovered and translated. It includes selections from the “Book of Moses,” the “Book of Abraham,” an excerpt of Joseph Smith’s translation of Matthew, excerpts from Joseph Smith’s personal writings, and the Articles of Faith.<sup>8</sup>

### *Continuing Revelation*

Latter-day Saints believe that the President of the Church holds the same authority as Christ’s apostles: in the same way God used those early apostles to reveal God’s word, they believe God uses the LDS president to reveal God’s intent for humanity today. The inspired words of the presidents come to the church through “conferences, Church publications, and instructions to local priesthood leaders.”<sup>9</sup>

One difficulty in understanding LDS beliefs—specifically in discussing those beliefs with members of the Latter-day Saints church—is determining what counts as “official” doctrine. Some theological questions remain unanswered by the prophets and presidents, and when a church leader speaks (especially before or after their appointed time of leadership) it can be unclear what is divine revelation and what is human illustration. This leads to gaps or gray areas in their theology. Latter-day Saints often do not formulate beliefs to fill these gray areas beyond what is specifically set forth by their leaders.

As we explore LDS theology, we will consider both official doctrine and the logical conclusions these doctrines lead us to. However, we mustn’t mischaracterize these conclusions as “official doctrines” of the

church. Only direct quotes and affirmed sources reflect the official doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.