

Presentation: Mormonism and the Presbyterian Church

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Why are we doing this...NOW? We are privileged to have a Minister with insight and fortitude...one who is not afraid to take on challenging topics. Doug has set the stage for a dialogue between each of us and our potential neighbors and community leaders, no matter their faith. **As with most things in life, it is better to be prepared with facts than to just accept what the loudest voice in the room says.** This “teachable moment” (Doug’s words!) is courtesy of much media attention (good and bad), intense public debate about the future of our country and who should be our leaders, and entertainment such as the Broadway stage production “The Book of Mormon” and the upcoming movie “Under the Banner of Heaven”. You are here because you are curious and that is good.

Preamble and disclaimer: My memories are clouded by years and only go back to child-friendly lessons not the serious theology study of adults. Those wanting to **learn how to “live next door to a Mormon”, or, perhaps elect one President,** need clearer answers and understanding. There is not time to discuss everything in detail in this presentation and **I don’t want to get lost in debate on things of which I can’t speak authoritatively.** I will begin with background, proceed to what I think are some relevant points and then take questions. I will read some things from my notes so as to not miss-speak.

My faith background: I was raised as a Mormon, but, **converted, as a young adult, to more mainstream Christianity** in Community Church, Baptist, and now Presbyterian congregations. The beginning of **my journey was as simple as idle conversation with a Navy squadron-mate** who had also been raised as a Mormon. We studied some works he had read and I began attending church with his family.

Family background: My Mother, Mary Hatch Jorgensen, of Woods Cross, Utah, is the **great-grand-daughter (maternal side) of Mr. Perrigrine Sessions who entered "The Valley" with Brigham Young in 1847.** This was the first company of *Mormon Pioneers* moving westward as a result of religious persecution over the early years of the church. Their path took them through what is now called *Immigration Canyon*. It now contains I-80 East Bound, a mega-wide highway, but then was barely wide enough for a wagon. **The valley containing the Great Salt Lake would be their promised land.** Mr. Sessions was of the *landed gentry* in New England. His livestock and land management background drew him the **assignment of taking the party's entire livestock collection to the fertile grounds he found, between the eastern edge of the lake and mountains,** just north of what would become Salt Lake City. He is the **founder of the community that is now the Bountiful.** Mother's **paternal family, the Hatch brothers, came shortly after** that to the same area as they were sheep and dairy men. They settled on west edge of Bountiful, closer to the lake to farm the bottom land, and built what is now the **city of Woods Cross.**

Key points for comment:

The idea that Mormons are not “mainstream” Christians gets a lot of press but I don’t really have a good reason for it other than they are rather private as a people so others don’t know any more than what critics write, or say, which is mostly conjecture not fact. Let’s worry less about why and more about learning from the good things they do. We can trust them to be honest, hardworking, conservative citizens who make great neighbors. Who converts who is another discussion all together!!

The lineage of authority, for the “true church” of God is a bit of an unusual item...they believe that God removed that authority and then restored it to the founder of the Mormon Church. Protestant leaders who separated from the Catholic Church had their reasons and goals also, but they do not seem to have much in common with this tenant of Mormon theology. Many faiths have “a few odd” beliefs, so maybe, if we knew more precisely about their foundations, we might not think them so “far out in left field”. It is evident from the success of the missionary work that they tell “their side of the story” well.

The “trinity” is another slightly divergent view point from more mainstream Christianity....yes, they believe, but they do so as three distinct beings.

The Mormons are an exceptionally strong conservative family values people. Only recently, has that emerged in more broad-spectrum public discussion, in part, due to the emergence of two prominent Mormons onto the national political scene. As a people, they represent the original American values, and fervently hold strong to those beliefs.

In 1995, at the church's world-wide semi-annual conference, the church President delivered a very specific message called "The Family: A Proclamation to the World". It is printed on a single page but is a succinct statement of their beliefs. Deep study of some of the statements will provoke theological discussion, but without getting needlessly deep, here are some of the points...it is hard to find fault with most:

- **marriage is between a man and a woman who have solemn responsibility for each other and children;**
- **all human beings are created in the image of God;**
- **those who violate covenants of chastity or abuse or fail to fulfill family responsibilities will stand accountable before God;**
- **all responsible citizens and officers of government must promote measures that maintain and strengthen family as fundamental unit of society.**

The family unit is the basis for all of the activities of the church members. I played organized competitive sports in church leagues, not in school, as girls do now. As children grow, they learn more about their faith and are given more responsibility for personal development. One of my memories as a youngster is that in Primary (age 3-12) each of us had to prepare and deliver a "3 minute talk" at the Sacrament Service (main Sunday service). I was absolutely terrified to do so...years later, when I became a frequent guest speaker on the civic lunch and dinner circuit, because I was one of the first Women Naval Aviators, I was glad for having had that experience!

There are no professional Mormon clergy, and **to my knowledge, no one is paid, not even the President of the**

Church, for his work except perhaps headquarters professional office staff employees. All local congregation work is done by volunteers. (DETAILS IN WORK)

By way of terminology, you will hear members refer to each other as “Sister” and “Brother”...Mother is “Sister Jorgensen”...and Doug would be “Bishop DeCelle”. This very formal address tradition is always used in public even with close friends. They are quite formal in prayer by using “thee” and “thy”, not more common speech. Generally, God is referred to as “Our Heavenly Father”. The Mormon Church’s official name is: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and is often abbreviated as LDS.

Much has been said already about the Church education system. They put a high price on all the efforts to teach members the theology and also value a good education for success in life...that means members have the means to support the church! Remember the example of the college student with a Mormon roommate losing the battle early in the theological debate...they are serious. Education begins in the youth organization called Primary (age 3-12) with lessons and activities centered around things that send a good message to children. Next is Mutual Improvement Association (MIA or Mutual) for teens. This includes a good amount of social interaction. I remember Mother allowing me to go to social events at a young age that were either church or Girl Scout sponsored...high standards always prevailed in those two places. I remember my *first un-chaperoned date...*as a 13 year-old high school freshman...was allowed because the boy, a senior, was from our church AND was a student assistant in Mother’s classroom at “our” high

school. In some parts of the country, high school students are expected to attend Seminary...an extra class period every day either in the early morning or after school. This is serious theological study taught by church members with a specific curriculum for each grade. The next level of formal church education comes when the 19-year-old boys or 21-year-old girls go on a Mission for two years. They spend several weeks in training for language, if appropriate, and the rest on their faith and how to convert. As a side note...boys who are in college on athletic scholarships get a two year leave of absence to do this so they do not forfeit any eligibility by going on a mission.

The basic organization is very structured, much like a business, but then the Mormon Church is a huge business. Congregations are defined geographically and members are assigned to a Ward or congregation. More than one Ward may occupy a single church building in areas with dense Mormon population. The hours of use are adjusted so that the congregations can use the facilities to their maximum potential but without “tripping over each other”.

The activities are conducted in the same way in every Ward. A few years ago, in response to the ever-busy-family’s requests, a change of plan from something nearly every day of the week to now concentrate most of the activities on Sunday. Each Sunday each Ward has 3 hours of meetings, classes and service. Each group meets for a structured lesson plan given by assigned teachers...everyone has a job:

First hour...groups that met weeknights:

Nursery...up to 3 years

Primary...like Children’s Church

Mutual...teens like Presbyterian Youth
Relief Society...adult women like Circle
Elders and High Priests...adult men like Deacons
Second hour: Sunday School for all in respective age
Third hour: Sacrament Meeting...everyone like our main
service...the sacraments are included the first
Sunday of the month, called “Fast Sunday”
because members fast before “breaking the fast”
with the sacrament service.

The congregation’s leadership: The Ward has a
Bishop...like our Minister; First and Second Counselor...like
vice presidents; organizations mentioned before have
presidents (Relief Society President, etc.), attendance clerks
and others. They combine 8 or more Wards to form a Stake.
There is a Stake President and he has a council of Elders as
advisors. Several Stakes form a Region.

Most people have heard of the Mormon Temples. What
is the difference between a church and a temple? Well, I can
address only the big picture: church is where you meet on
Sunday or whenever to do the “congregational” things. A
temple is used for private ceremonies that have to do with
what they believe to be God’s holy work. Most often
weddings are the source of confusion and unhappiness
when Mormons marry and have non-Mormon family and
friends. Those people are not allowed at the temple service,
hence, over the years, wedding receptions have taken on a
more elaborate nature to be a bit more inclusive of non-
believers. I have never discussed the details with anyone,
but know that when someone uses the Temple for a wedding
they do contribute to the church, just as we would here, but

how that is determined I don't know. Mormons can marry outside a temple, in civil services, or can use regular church building for the ceremonies that anyone could attend, but it isn't a common a practice.

The Church holds [world-wide conference](#) in Salt Lake City, in April and October, to which the organizational groups send representatives. Members are to watch on television (BYU TV world broadcast) if not attending, and, there are no Sunday services at the church building. Stake buildings are larger than churches and usually host mass group viewings for those who so desire or do not have the TV access.

The Church has a [President](#), also referred to as [Prophet](#), who they believe to have absolute authority ordained by God...somewhat like the Catholics consider the Pope. The President has a First Counselor and Second Counselor as assistants. There are top leadership positions for each organization such as Relief Society or Primary (only positions held by women). There are two groups that serve as advisors called The Quorum of The Twelve and The Seventy, perhaps somewhat like the Catholic Church has the College of Cardinals.

They believe strongly in [tithing](#) but do not “pass the plate” in services. Members pay their 10% on a schedule that works for them. It is possible to designate additional funds for specific purposes such as the church construction fund, welfare, college education loans, etc. The church collects from all and returns to each Ward what is determined to be its proper budget amount. The church is a [very large, world-wide, business](#), and seems to run its

leadership, missions, buildings, welfare and other programs efficiently within that business model.

The Mormons run their own [welfare and assistance](#) programs. The Deseret Industries is an organization like Goodwill which takes donations of goods and services for distribution to those in need. Each Bishop has control over a “Bishops Store House” that is literally or figuratively responsible for fulfilling needs of the members.

[Taking care of their own...](#)We wouldn't need much government social welfare in this country if everybody did as good a job as the Mormons of taking care of their own. The church owns or leases many canneries and farms from which they feed those in need and sell to those who can pay to cover the operating costs. Most of the labor to operate these places is "mission work" or donated labor. My Aunt and Uncle, a retired couple, accepted the obligation to operate a mill for about 2 years as a mission. Neither they nor the other day-labor were paid. The members have many assigned jobs having to do with either running the "business" of the church or looking after the people: every household has a "visiting teacher" which is an adult male with high school aged young man assisting; and, every lady has Relief Society visiting teacher, usually two women. The church sends missionaries to the field and the homes they live in are owned/operated/donated for the purpose. The 19-23 year olds out spreading the word are well cared for but not paid. Typically, as the young missionary departs his Ward for a Mission, there are personal gifts of money to help defray the expenses of clothing, food, etc. while away.

It might be interesting to review the history of the church's "take care of our own" attitude and how it developed. It was expedient that the church help in ways not understood by many in the early years. On March 17, 1842, 20 women met with Joseph Smith to learn about a position the church wanted the women to fulfill: help those with needs for their families such as care for the sick, food, clothing, housing, etc., and, also to report back to the leadership of the those special needs. This began the Relief Society program. So this foundation was well established by the beginning of the 1900's when the world suffered the effects of wars and natural disasters, work shortages, and financial crises. They firmly believe that this is a manifestation of how The Lord works in mysterious ways, when we least understand. This is most equivalent to most denomination's "mission" work but it is almost always done "at home" not with a single trip on Spring Break to build a school in a foreign country.

The sisters never lost sight of the institution, nor the promise of "good deeds are always rewarded" made to them by President Joseph Smith. There is a part of the theology that addresses "earning your way to heaven" but I don't know much about it so will not try to address that subject here. They were always ready with willing hands and tender sympathies to perform deeds of love and charity, hence the motto: "LOVE AND CHARITY".

The concept of on-going revelation has served the church in a very practical sense. Sometimes there are reasons to change an organization's policy and Mormons do so only through revelation. There is very little separation

between their governance as a group and theology. Two examples are the use of polygamy and the previous exclusion of Blacks as members...

Polygamy...This gets a lot of publicity because there are “break-away” sects who call themselves various versions of the church’s name and consequently cause confusion. The hard fact about polygamy is that it had a very real and important part to play in the very existence of Mormonism today. Their faith says “revelation” instructed the President that this was to be used...it was a solution to a huge problem in the early years...so many eligible men had been killed in various persecutions of members and in militia service, that the literal reproduction of the membership was in question. Polygamy served to solve that issue and ensure growth of the people. A few years later, when the US government said no statehood was coming to people practicing such a belief, the “revelation” came to end polygamy...it had served its purpose. By way of answering questions from non-Mormons about this, I try to take a more light-hearted approach, as is often needed when discussing our families...I call it great cocktail party conversation to explain that “NO” they don’t do that now, but my Great-Great-Grandfather Sessions, mentioned before, had 8 wives and 56 children! The impact of this is staggering and widespread. For instance, one Sunday as a teenager sitting with my friends in church service, the man speaking was new to the Ward and in his message he made passing reference to his ancestor, Perrigrine Sessions, who had traveled with Brigham Young...yikes, this was Southern California and he was a stranger to me but we were related! Many years later, while

attending a Navy briefing in the Pentagon, an officer stepped forward for his part of the presentation, introduced himself as Captain Sessions, in a very “Utah twang”, and I about fell down. Afterwards, I introduced myself by name followed with ...you are from Utah and we are related! After he recovered from that surprise, we discovered I was correct! He had some interesting statistics: at our generation there were estimated to be 33,000 descendants of Mr. Sessions; at our children’s generation it was estimated to be 45,000. Do you think this period of polygamy served them well?

Other than Caucasian church members...My age makes me a “child of integration” in a sense, but there were virtually no Blacks in my school or neighborhood. I never thought about not seeing Black Mormons. The story about why there were none is too sketchy a memory for me to explain, but as you can well imagine, the modern day social pressure from NAACP, ACLU and the US Courts mounted on all organizations that discriminated in any way. I was long gone from any Mormon theology lessons by the time I noticed that the church had Black members so I checked with my Aunt about it. She said that in 1978, the church president received a revelation from “Our Heavenly Father through prayer and fasting” that they were to be proselyted to and given a chance to become members. Many countries in addition to the US, in which the Mormons have extensive missionary efforts, have significant Black populations...they needed answers to the policy and theology question. Anyway, blacks are full members now...singing in the Tabernacle Choir, serving in official capacities, and, of course, playing football for BYU!

The Bible... I was given a New Testament in the youth organization. I do not remember studying the Old Testament but that could be because of the age at which I stopped attending church. I also was given the three widely used texts of the faith: Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price. **In the late 1970's, long after leaving the church, I took a friend to SLC who was interested in visiting Temple Square.** The docent began the tour with a short speech in which he stated many people had the **misconception that Mormons did not use the Bible.** He had one with him and spoke from it. I was surprised but after some thought realized that the Mormons used the same ideas, lessons, and history of the Old Testament, but perhaps not with the same emphasis. **Their focus was always on “modern day” guidance for their faith which is mostly resident in the other three books.** There is still the issue of “closed cannon” vs. modern day “revelations” to contend with but they do use the Bible.

Summary:

History has shown that dominant Christian churches often used **persecution** to solve what they didn't understand. That isn't really a good idea, in fact, never was, so we can use **intelligent dialogue, learn from others, and try to be tolerant.** An **informed opinion** is always the **best opinion**, AND, it may **not be the same opinion** as your neighbor's but that is OK. I changed **my opinion** on what theology meant in my life and where to sustain that meaning. **I do not need Mormonism as a faith but it is very essential to my personal history and I desire that all who encounter Mormons do so with an open heart and mind...they are family!**

