

MORMONISM AND THE GREAT APOSTASY

September 15th, 2008



Did the Gates of Hell prevail against Christ's church after all?

In my previous newsletter I said I would focus on keeping my subjects shorter. However, this one contained such exciting information about how God kept his church alive down through the ages, that I just couldn't hold back from giving a tad more to you-- especially in view of the explosive 1858 Awakening that pretty much cinches the fact that the Mormon Church could not have been started by God. If you need more detail than what is presented here, see chapter 10 in my book, *The Mormon Missionaries*.

The Mormon Church's claim

The Mormon Church's claim to being God's "only true church" rests upon its assertion that out of dire necessity God and Jesus had to appear to Joseph Smith in 1820 to raise up a latter-day prophet and restore the true church. The reason? There had been no continuation of Christ's church down through the centuries. In other words, it ceased to exist because God was not powerful enough to keep it going. In this 1820 appearance, Jesus allegedly told Joseph Smith that none of the present-day Christian churches were right; they were "corrupt and an abomination," and while they had a "form of Godliness, denied the power thereof."

What's at stake?

The issue at stake is whether Jesus lied, or just didn't know what he was talking about when he stated that the Gates of Hell would never prevail against his church. Here is the scripture:

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and *the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.* (Matt 16:16-18)

Nevertheless, the Mormon Church asserts that the Gates of Hell *did* prevail. Their Apostle, Orson Pratt declared:

Jesus made his appearance on the earth in the meridian of time, and he established his kingdom on the earth. But to fulfill ancient prophecies, the Lord suffered that Kingdom to be uprooted...the kingdoms of this world made war against the kingdom of God, established eighteen centuries ago, *and they prevailed against it, and the kingdom ceased to exist.* (Journal of Discourses, 13:125; 7:212)

Another Apostle, Orson F. Whitney stated:

The Apostles labored faithfully; ...but the power of sin, the power of the evil one was so great that it did not please the Almighty to establish upon the earth in that day a work which should endure forever."(1)

What they both are saying is that God was not capable of keeping his church alive. However, it can be shown from history that Hell did NOT prevail, and that there was indeed a "spiritual" church made up of true believers that survived, regardless of the decaying condition of the early institutional church (Catholic). So, as far as a *total* apostasy, as Mormons believe, there

wasn't one. This is confirmed by I Timothy 4:1 that says "some" will depart from the faith, not all.

It would be easy to assume there wasn't any church of believers left because we don't hear much about them. But, even Elijah was unaware of them in his time:

When Jezebel said she was going to kill him, he escaped into the wilderness and bemoaned his lot to the Lord, telling him all other believers were dead. (I Kings 19:18) "I, even I only, am left," he despaired. But, he was wrong. The Lord told him there were seven thousand believers left in Israel who had not bowed to Baal. Imagine, *seven thousand* that Elijah didn't even know about! And here he thought there had been a complete apostasy.

The problem with the Mormon Church is that the hierarchy refuses to acknowledge what Jesus meant by "church."

What does "church" mean?

The word in Greek (Ekklesia), means those who are called-out, born-again believers (Ek=out; kaleo=to call). *They* are the ones, according to I Cor. 12:27, who make up God's church and the *true* body of Christ. Therefore, "church" means *people*, not a structural institution. Even if believers might be small in numbers, God's presence is never withdrawn from them, for Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 that "where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of them."

But Mormons continue to insist that after the death of the last apostle Christ's church steadily went downhill, the total church collapsed and God had to withdraw his presence from the earth. As their proof, they quote 2 Thessalonians where Jesus said:

For that day (*second coming*) shall not come, except there come a falling away first.
(2 Thes 2:3)

Yes, the structural church indeed fell away from the original new Testament church's teachings by introducing elaborate ordinances, rituals, and exchanging the doctrine of salvation by grace for one of works. Certainly, God would withdraw his presence from *that*. But believers who made up the "spiritual church" continued to exist, otherwise it makes Paul's statement in Ephesians a lie when he said the church would continue forever:

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus *throughout all generations, for ever and ever!* Amen. (Eph. 3:21, NIV).

And Matthew 24:9-14 says:

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations,
and *then* the end will come.

This is what helped the spiritual church continue. They were preaching (*often in secret*) to keep Christ's truths alive. If Christ purchased the church with his blood and it fizzled out, what a waste on his part. One would then wonder why God in his foreknowledge didn't see that Christ's church would fail and not bother with it in the first place? Why not let people continue with the Old Testament practice of sacrificing lambs every year to atone for sin, instead of having Jesus go through such a painful death? On the other hand, while his sacrifice for sin on the cross would still apply to believers, if all believers totally disappeared what would be the point?

One Mormon told me: "Jesus had good intentions to begin with and while God did not plan on

the apostasy, it happened. After all, every individual has their free agency and God doesn't force people to be righteous believers. But take heart," he assured me, "God had a backup plan."

His "backup plan" was to restore the church through Joseph Smith by formally organizing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Through the structural church, he could endow male members with the priesthood, which Mormons say is "the authority to act in the name of God." Salvation could only come through their organized, structural church. They also believe that God's establishment of their church was necessary because copyists down through the centuries left out vital truths from the Biblical manuscripts, making the Bible totally unreliable. Their Apostle Orson Pratt said: "Every verse has been corrupted and mutilated..."(2)

What do Mormons believe is missing from the Bible? Temple marriage, work for the dead, the true nature of God (a resurrected man from a previous world who has many wives), plurality of gods, men and women becoming gods, and other unique doctrines. This is why, they insist, God had to restore his church through his appearance to Joseph Smith in 1820. It is also why they need their supplemental scriptures, the Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine & Covenants, because it contains the pure Word of God versus the Bible. Never mind that the Book of Abraham (*in the Pearl of Great Price*) has already been proved false by expert Egyptologists. (*Instead of being the writings of Abraham, it's a funeral text.*)

So, let's take a look at history and see if there was a total apostasy and whether the Gates of Hell prevailed against the church or not.

For those of you who don't care for history, press on. You will become quite excited when you read what God not only did down through history, but what he did in 1858!

The corruption of the New Testament church

As the New Testament church continued after the death of the apostles, men with power-seeking drives began to dominate. Bishops soon took over and controlled the churches. But the question kept arising, "Who should control the Bishops?" Influenced by an empire that was ruled by a single authority, they followed the same pattern and appointed a pope.

As time passed rituals, as well as Greek mysticism and pagan rites for the dead infiltrated the church by way of converts.(3) The clergy was elevated and New Testament teachings gradually changed. No longer would salvation come by grace based upon the work done at Calvary, but by specific works and purchase of indulgences which would guarantee salvation. No longer was Jesus the believer's only Advocate with the Father (see I Jn 2:1), but Mary and other saints. No longer could believers have their sins forgiven by prayerfully repenting to God in prayer, but through a priest. By A.D. 120, the Catholic church sank to a *structural* church only...a hollow shell of an institution.

True Believers

However, at the opening of the second century, there were true believers who still made up the *spiritual* church. Some are under the impression that these believers constituted such a small number that they eventually dwindled to zero. Not so.

First, when one realizes that the vast membership of the structural church under the dominion of Rome consisted of *several million*, there were bound to be true believers in that number. "The Christians were everywhere a multitude," according to Pliny in a 112 A.D letter to the Emperor Trajan. Christians were in every land and city from the Tiber to the Euphrates, from the Black Sea to Northern Africa, and some think they extended as far west as Spain and Britain.(4) Archaeological evidence of underground quarries also point to the fact that a great number met in secret.(5) (*see endnote*). Even if there were only two or three who gathered

together, God promised to be in their midst, and *that* constituted Christ's true "church."

By A.D. 380, Christianity, as promulgated by the Catholic Church, was recognized as the official religion of Rome. But, along with the structural church's prosperity came strong political involvement, bribery, bloodshed and immorality that corrupted the hierarchy even more and furthered the deterioration of the church. It soon degraded into the period of the Dark Ages (AD 476 to c. AD 1000). During that decline, members were not allowed to read the scriptures, so ignorance of the Bible grew. Certainly, Amos 8:11 was applicable to that period:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a
famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of
the Lord.

Mormons love to quote that passage. They believe that Amos was predicting a hunger for the words of the Lord in 1820, which necessitated God and Jesus appearing to Joseph Smith. But both Protestant and Catholic churches in 1820 had access to God's Word. Believers could read the Bible for themselves, so there was no famine. Of course, what Mormons really mean to suggest is that the famine in the land for hearing the Word of the Lord meant a famine for hearing unique Mormon doctrines that they believe were contained in the original Biblical manuscripts but left out by copyists.

True believers press on

Believers able to remain faithful to Christ's true teachings during those dark ages may have been admittedly few, but nevertheless existed and constituted the "spiritual church," the called-out believers. We must also base this idea upon the fact that Jesus Himself declared that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against His church, even if there were only two or three in number. To deny that this was so would be as much as saying that Jesus lied about the Gates of Hell not prevailing against his church. Just because we don't hear about *all* of these believers, doesn't mean they didn't exist. We may be like Elijah in this respect.

History records that some of these true believers headed major movements. There were the Albigenses and the Waldensians in France (A.D. 1170.), John Wycliff in England (A.D. 1300), Jerome Savonarola in Italy (A.D. 1498) and many others, including John Huss in Bohemia (A.D. 1372-1415) who influenced Luther. Their attempts alone prove the existence of true believers. They knew that what was desperately needed--a return to the basic fundamentals of the gospel--New Testament truths of repentance from dead works and salvation through faith in the grace of Christ. They were instrumental in keeping the true church from dying out.

God's commitment to keep His church alive

God continued to keep his church alive through Martin Luther. He was such a key figure in God's plan, that one hundred years earlier John Huss, who was burned at the stake, prophesied of him.(6) (*see his prophecy in the endnote*) Now, Mormons agree that God used Luther and the other reformers. But, they believe God's only purpose in using them was to bring people out of Catholicism, even if it was into Protestant churches, so he could prepare them for Mormonism.

God's continuation of his work began that memorable day, October 31,1517, when Luther walked up to the Wittenberg Cathedral and nailed his ninety-five theses to the door.

From there, the Holy Spirit took hold of believers and revival spread like wild fire. The Reformation broke out in Italy, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway. And it is important to note, that whenever God begins to restore his truths, they are always the same truths that Jesus and his Apostles taught, never doctrines foreign to the New Testament such as polygamy in heaven, plurality of gods, believers becoming gods, work for

the dead or salvation by works and temple rituals. (*We may show our faith by our works, but we don't earn salvation that way.*) So, God's reformation begun by Luther, brought even more believers out of the decaying Catholic church and increased the body of Christ's *spiritual* church.

God's periodic revivals

As the spiritual church rolled down the centuries, God saw to it that his truths were continually kept alive through periodic revivals. Historians call these, "The Great Awakenings."

The first Awakening, known as the *Great Awakening*, started in the 1700s. It revived New Testament truths and brought mass conversions into Protestant churches. In late 1791 it spread to Britain and Wales where the Holy Spirit packed churches, drawing "crowds of many thousands in the open air."⁽⁷⁾

The Second Awakening was 1795-1835, and consisted of four periodic surges:

Surge 1: 1795-1810
Surge 2: 1810-1825
Surge 3 1825-1835
Surge 4 1858 into 1900s. *This particular surge is called by some as the "later Resurgence of the Second Awakening;" others call it the "Third Great Awakening."*

The first and second surge of 1795-1825 spread to the Netherlands, the Orient and West Indies, and after Napoleon's defeat swept through Switzerland, France and Germany.

In the third surge of the 1830s, God's Spirit swept through New England, New York and Philadelphia with converts numbering *three hundred thousand*.⁽⁸⁾ Then it spread to the frontier where one report says "*Five, ten or fifteen thousand* would gather in...forest clearings."⁽⁹⁾ Then to Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. From there it spread to Wales, Scotland, Ireland and South Africa. Polynesia and Hawaii followed suit in 1837. At a single church in Hilo, there were *1,705* converts in *one day*; *7,557* during the whole movement.⁽¹⁰⁾ All these revivals were a wonderful move of God to keep his church alive.

The 1858 fourth surge, or Third Great Awakening *A more detailed account will be given for this one because it provides proof that God did not start the Mormon Church.*

By the second and third generation after the end of the third surge (1825-1835), things began to die down and believers drifted into lethargy and apathy (*this is not uncommon after revivals*). So, God planned another stupendous revival for 1858, which lasted forty years.

God moved so mightily, that this worldwide movement surpassed all previous ones as far as its effects and lasting impact. And here's the important thing to note: This Awakening occurred *twenty-eight years AFTER* the Mormon Church was officially organized. If God intended His true church to be restored through Joseph Smith, why did He send the Holy Spirit to convert people within Protestant structures instead of leading them into the Mormon Church?

Here's what happened. It's so exciting that it's almost unbelievable!

When God's Holy Spirit began moving in this 1858 Awakening, it started in the United States. From there it spread to the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa and South India. While the numbers of conversions were small at first, they gradually increased. Christian newspapers reported it first, then New York newspapers. Prayer meetings broke out everywhere. The masses were so desirous of prayer, that in New York the striking of the five bells at twelve o'clock was "known as the signal for the hour of Prayer."⁽¹¹⁾ Business houses closed just for

the noon prayer meetings with buildings packed and hundreds unable to get in. In six months, 50,000 New Yorkers converted to God.(12) One report said prayer meetings “were crowded and solemn, with the whole assembly sometimes in tears under the melting power of the Spirit.”(13) A letter from Chicago, dated March 21, 1858, stated:

The Metropolitan Hall is crowded to suffocation. The interest in the First Baptist Church is beyond anything ever known in this city, and exceeds anything I have ever seen in my life. Some who have come to the city on business have become so distressed about their condition as sinners before God that they have entirely forgotten their business in the earnestness of their desire for salvation.(14)

In Brooklyn, local merchants financed and organized a large theatre to be thrown open for these meetings. Over six thousand “packed in every corner from the pit to the roof ...no amount of elbowing could force an entrance. ...The street in front was crowded with vehicles, and the excitement was ‘tremendous’.”(15)

It was a move toward prayer that had never been witnessed before. But, the amazing thing is that there was no fanaticism, hysteria or excitement. “Simply an incredible movement of the people to pray.”(16) Neither did it have anything to do with denominationalism. Eight thousand Episcopalians from all over America were converted in *Methodist* churches! This was because Christ’s true body of believers has nothing to do with denominations. His church is “spiritual.”

As the Awakening spread to other states, the national press carried the news from coast to coast. A New York editor in May of 1858 collected interdenominational figures showing that 96,216 people converted in six months, with an average of *fifty thousand* a week.(17) A Baptist Journal reported 17,000 converts. For a period of two years, there were *ten thousand additions a week* to church memberships.

In Buffalo, 200 towns reported 6,000 conversions. Newark reported 2,785 in two months. A Washington newspaper reported that in New England there were 10,000 converts in two months.

In Kentucky, churches were required to stay open day and night. Ohio’s 200 towns reported 12,000 conversions in two months. In the Confederacy and Union armies, converts numbered 150,000.

At the sight of multitudes flocking to Protestant churches, it was reported that it left the “Pope biting his nails.”(18) High Church Anglicans could not understand why converts of the Revival were entering other churches and not the “*true church*.”(19) No doubt, Mormon leaders were wondering the same.

Then Europe began praying. In four months, Ireland estimated that 10,000 were converted. Every denomination was packed and open-air meetings brought crowds as large as 20,000. Crime was reduced and prostitutes were seeking rehabilitation. Irish evangelist Grattan Guinness wrote in 1859:

The predominating feature was the conversion of people of all ranks and positions, in ways sudden, startling, amazing... Before that time, I had seen tens or scores brought to Christ under Gospel preaching; but this new movement of 1859 was something quite different. Ministers were occupied until midnight, or even till two or three o’clock in the morning, conversing with crowds of inquirers who were crying: What shall I do to be saved?(20)

Thousands continued to be converted and hundreds were turned away at church doors. In Wales, conversions “did not fall short of a *hundred thousand* souls.”(21)

England was next. On New Year’s day in 1860, seven theatres opened with a nightly aggregate

attendance of over 20,000. Seasonal aggregate attendances numbered over 250,000.

Australia, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Germany and Russia were next. Amazingly, South Africa, with no link of communication with other countries to know what was happening, also went into revival. Then, in India:

Old and young, men and women and children, suddenly seemed crushed by the agony of a deep conviction of sin, and then, as suddenly, seemed to believe in the forgiveness of sins.

The people could hardly bear to leave the churches and came to them day after day.(22)

This refreshing of God's remained effective for forty years, *free* of any sectarian spirit. More importantly, there was nothing new in the way of theology--only New Testament teachings and salvation based on God's grace through Calvary.

These souls were the *true* church--the spiritual body of Christ. When Jesus comes back, he is not coming back for an institution or denomination, but a *people*, made up of born-again Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals, Episcopalians--all true believers wherever and in whatever denomination they may be found.

So, we can see from history that despite Mormon claims, God kept his true church alive. He began with Martin Luther and continued through periodic revivals down the centuries to make sure the Gates of Hell would not prevail. Satan did not prove more powerful than God, and contrary to Joseph Smith, there was a true church on the earth in 1820—and there still is today.

Mormon response to the 1858 Awakening

Mormon missionaries are unable to respond effectively. When they are first asked about it, they can only do the one thing they've been trained to do in difficult situations--fall back on their personal testimony, which usually has no relevance to the question they've been asked. Here is a sample:

I *know* beyond a shadow of a doubt that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God; that through him God restored the "fullness" of his Gospel, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church upon the face of the earth.

When pressed further about why God didn't lead the millions of 1858 converts to the Mormon Church, one missionary told me: "I believe it was a plan of Satan to lead people away from the true church."

I was dumbfounded. "You mean that Satan would bring over two million souls to God, just so they wouldn't join the Mormon Church?" At that point, he became somewhat tongue-tied.

I then volunteered my testimony and included emphasis on the words, "I know," which is interpreted by Mormons to mean that the testimony is inspired by the Holy Ghost.

I *know* that the Bible is the Word of God and that he carefully preserved it and made sure that although there were parts missing, the necessary doctrines about salvation were kept intact.

I also *know* by the power of the Holy Ghost that every statement and promise Jesus uttered in the Bible is true, and if he said the Gates of Hell would not prevail against his Church, then

they didn't. I also know that God raised up Martin Luther to bring back New Testament truths

and inspired periodic revivals down through the ages to keep his true church from dying out.

My testimony is that I belong to the only true church--the spiritual body of called-out believers who claim Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, and that I am saved only by His good grace and shall obtain heaven upon his promise.

The only response that came from this missionary and his companion was silence.

Conclusion

If the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church upon the face of the earth, as members believe and are taught to declare in their testimonies, God would have created a mass exodus of those millions of converted souls to Utah. But this is *not* what the Holy Spirit moved over two million people to do:

- They were *not* led to Utah.
- They were *not* led to embrace teachings that taught that the Bible is so corrupt it isn't reliable, or that God was too weak to preserve His church.
- They were *not* given a new revelation that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross could only bring partial salvation; that full salvation was only possible through works, blind obedience to church leaders and temple rituals.
- They were *not* told that the grace of God has no power to save them in heaven unless they have Joseph Smith's approval.
- They were *not* told they had to memorize passwords so they could pass by the angels who guard heaven, do work for the dead, or prepare for polygamy in heaven.
- They were *not* told that some day they would become gods.
- They did *not* receive a revelation that God, contrary to the Bible, is a resurrected man from a previous world who has many wives.

Instead, true believers were moved upon to embrace the simple doctrines of the Bible that Christ and his apostles taught: faith in God's grace through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, and assurance that they would be saved in heaven and enjoy His presence.

Structural or institutional churches may have decayed, but God saw to it that he kept his church alive.

So, we ask:

Is the Mormon Church "the only true church upon the face of the earth," as Mormons declare in their testimonies?

Did Jesus lie when he said the Gates of Hell would never prevail against his church?

The answers to these questions should be apparent.

Until next time.
Janis

END

ENDNOTES

(1) Whitney, Orson F. Journal of Discourses, Vol. 26, p. 262. 1885.

(2) Pratt, Orson. The Seer. 212-213. 1854.

(3) John Chrysostom (345-407 A.D.) tells of Marcion in the first century, practicing baptism for the dead. It is understandable that the Greeks of Asia Minor, in their zeal for their newfound religion, especially upon the subject of baptism, would have a desire to baptize the dead. Chrysostom stated that it was the practice of heretics. This is proved by the fact that this ordinance was never considered a legitimate practice of any of the other branches of the church, even in New Testament times. Although Paul mentioned some who were doing this at Corinth, he was speaking of the Gnostics, not the Christian believers to whom he was speaking.

(4) Jesse L. Hurlbut, The Story of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1970), 48-49.

(5) Hurlbut states in The Story of the Christian Church: One remarkable line of evidence has been found in the catacombs of Rome. Underground quarries of vast extent, which for two centuries became the hiding places, the meeting-places, and the burial-places of the believers, where in the graves of Christians, as shown by the inscriptions and symbols upon them, are estimated by some to number in the millions. Add to these millions many not buried in the catacombs; and then consider how vast must have been the aggregate in the Roman empire. (54)

(6) His prophecy stated: You are now roasting the goose (Huss means goose in Bohemian) but in a hundred years there will rise up a swan whom you shall not roast nor scorch. Him, men will hear sing and God will allow him to live. Cited in The Eternal Church by Bill Hamon (Christian International Publishers, n.d.), 126.

(7) Orr, J. Edwin, The Fervent Prayer (Chicago, Moody, 1974) xii.

(8) Orr, xiv.

(9) Orr, v.

(10) Orr, viii.

(11) Orr, 7.

(12) Orr, 9.

(13) Orr, 13.

(14) Orr, 24.

(15) Orr, 8.

(16) Orr, 8.

(17) Orr, 10-11.

(18) Orr, 38.

(19) Orr, 38. (*Italics mine.*)

(20) Orr, 118.

(21) Orr, 63.

(22) Orr, 105.

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