

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Seeing life through Mormon eyes: The past, present, and future
- » The Mormon view on God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost
- » Exploring how Mormons are different from other Christians
- » Discovering Mormonism from its beginnings
- » Finding out what it's like to be a Mormon

## Chapter 1

# A New World Religion

**B**uddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, traditional branches of Christianity — and Mormonism? If you ask some demographers and sociologists, the idea of Mormonism emerging as the newest major world religion isn't far-fetched. In the Christian sector, although Protestantism grew out of Catholicism (as outlined in Book 5, Chapter 5), Mormonism bills itself as a completely fresh start, with enough distinctive beliefs and practices to back up that claim.

Mormonism isn't the newest kid on the religious block, but its start during the 1820s seems relatively recent — in fact, compared to other world religions, Mormonism is a toddler, still maturing in terms of culture, identity, growth, government, and other aspects. This chapter gives an overview of what it means to be a Mormon.

## Following the Mormon Worldview

The following equation best sums up how Mormons understand the universe and the purpose of life: As humans are, God used to be; as God is, humans may become.



REMEMBER

One main key to getting the gist of Mormonism is the belief that a person's existence doesn't begin with birth on this earth. Rather, Mormons believe that all people lived as spirits before coming here. For Mormons, this belief helps explain a whole lot about the conditions and purposes of this earthly life, which they view as God's test of his children. In addition, Mormons hold some unusual views about the afterlife, particularly regarding what human beings can become. (For more detailed information on the Mormon view of the afterlife, see Book 7, Chapter 2.)

## Life before mortal life

If life doesn't start with conception and birth, when does it start? For Mormons, it never really started, because each person has an eternal essence that has always existed. However, Mormons believe that God created spiritual bodies to house each person's eternal essence, so he's the spiritual father of humankind. All human spirits were born before the earth was created.

Sitting at the knee of God and his wife, many spirit children expressed a desire to grow up and become like their Heavenly Parents. So God set up the *plan of salvation*, which involved creating an earth where his children may gain physical bodies and go through a challenging test of faith and obedience. Those who pass the test with flying colors get the chance to eventually start an eternal family like God's.

In *premortality*, as Mormons call this stage, two of the oldest spirit siblings made a big impression. The first spirit, named Jehovah, volunteered to help everyone overcome the sin and death they'd unavoidably encounter during the earthly test, and this brother was eventually born on earth as Jesus Christ. Mormons believe he's their Savior and strive to be like him. The other spirit, named Lucifer, rebelled against God's plan of salvation, convincing a bunch of siblings to follow him and start a war. God banished Lucifer and his followers to the earth without bodies, and Mormons believe that these spirits are still trying to win humans to their side and thwart God's plan.

## Life on earth

Good news: In the Mormon view, everyone who's born on this earth chose to follow God's plan of salvation and come here. Even those who give in to evil during earthly life will still receive an eternal reward for making the correct choice during premortality. Mormons don't believe that humans are born carrying the stain of Adam's original sin, as Catholics and some Protestants do (see Book 5). But they do believe that each individual's circumstances in this life are at least partly influenced by what that person did in premortality.

One of the most difficult aspects of this mortal test is that humans can't remember what happened in premortality, so they must rediscover their divine origins through faith. However, God sent Jesus Christ not only to overcome sin and death but also to establish the gospel, which serves as a road map back to God. Two kinds of messengers help people understand and follow this gospel: prophets and the *Holy Ghost*, a spiritual being who speaks directly to the human spirit (for more on him, read on later in this chapter). By listening to these guides, people can figure out the puzzle of life. Unfortunately, the devil strives to fill the world with distractions and counterfeits.



WARNING

Another hard aspect of the earthly test is that God generally won't interfere with people's freedom to act, even when they do terrible things to each other or fail miserably. In addition, God allows accidents, natural disasters, illnesses, and other difficulties to challenge his children and prompt them to seek him out. For Mormons, it helps to remember that these temporary trials represent a mere blink of the eye on an eternal scale, and they exercise faith that God will comfort and protect those who ask for his help to endure suffering.



REMEMBER

During mortality, Mormons believe that everyone needs to participate in certain rituals in order to live with God in the afterlife and become like him. Someone holding God's priesthood authority, which Mormons believe currently comes only through the *LDS Church* (Latter-day Saints), must perform these rituals. If a person dies without receiving these ordinances, Mormons perform the rituals in temples on behalf of the deceased person, whose spirit then decides whether or not to accept. These ordinances are

- »» Baptism
- »» Confirmation, which includes receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost
- »» Priesthood ordination (for all worthy males)
- »» Washing and anointing
- »» Endowment
- »» Sealing, including celestial marriage for those wedded on earth

For more on many of these ordinances, see Book 7, Chapter 3.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Throughout this Book, we use the terms *Mormon*, *LDS*, and *Latter-day Saint* interchangeably to refer to the doctrine, teachings, practices, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Life after mortal life

Mormons believe that when humans die, they slough off their physical bodies and return to the spiritual state. Some go to spirit paradise, and some go to spirit prison. Mormons believe that the spirits in paradise visit the spirits in prison and teach them the gospel, and some choose to accept it and cross over into paradise. Whether they're in paradise or prison, the stopover in the spirit world is only temporary, because God has greater things in store.

Eventually, after God's spirit children have experienced their earthly tests and paid for their sins either by receiving the Savior's Atonement or suffering themselves, he'll resurrect everyone with perfect physical bodies that will last forever. Then he'll sort people into three heavenly kingdoms:

- » **Telestial kingdom:** Those who live in sin, die without repenting, and never accept the Savior's Atonement go here, after suffering for their own sins in spirit prison.
- » **Terrestrial kingdom:** Those who live good lives but don't embrace the full gospel will inherit this kingdom. Jesus pays for their sins.  
  
(Both the telestial kingdom and the terrestrial kingdom are glorious paradises, not hell or places of torture.)
- » **Celestial kingdom:** This highest kingdom is reserved for those who live the full gospel and receive the proper ordinances. This kingdom is where God lives and where his children can become like him.

For more on the three heavenly kingdoms, see Book 7, Chapter 2.

## The Head Honcho: God the Father

The Mormon God — usually referred to as *Heavenly Father* — is quite different from the God most Christians worship. In fact, Mormons reject the traditional concept of the *Trinity*, the idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are different forms of one entity whose ethereal substance fills the entire universe.

Rather, Mormons believe in a *godhead*, which is made up of God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Ghost, staffed by three individual beings — Mormons call them *personages* — who are one in mind and purpose:

- » In the CEO position is God, a physically resurrected man who's achieved a glorified state of eternal *omnipotence* (meaning, he has all the power you

could ever want and infinitely more). He's the literal father of human spirits and ruler of the universe.

- » Second in command is God's son, Jesus Christ. He's a separate man whose spirit and physical body were literally procreated by God.
- » Number three is a being whom Mormons commonly call the *Holy Ghost*, *Holy Spirit*, *Spirit of God*, or simply the *Spirit*. As a spiritual personage without a physical body, the Holy Ghost is able to directly communicate God's messages to the human spirit.

In addition, Mormons believe that God has a better half. He's eternally married to a glorified, deified woman who's known as *Heavenly Mother*, with whom he has spirit children. Most Mormons discuss their spiritual mother only rarely and briefly — but they do know that Heavenly Mother is like Heavenly Father in glory, perfection, compassion, wisdom, and holiness.



TIP

To Mormons, God is the same species as humans, but he's infinitely more advanced. To make a comparison, if humans are like newly hatched tadpoles, then God has already progressed through the frog stage and become a handsome prince. In the Mormon view, God isn't so much a *creator* as an *organizer* of raw materials.

Mormonism's founding prophet Joseph Smith taught

*If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.*

More specifically, Joseph taught the following as life's great secret:

*God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!*

To Mormons, this means that God himself has gone through everything his human children have experienced, are now experiencing, and will yet experience. Nineteenth-century Mormon leaders taught that untold eons ago, God's eternal essence was born as a spirit to Heavenly Parents, just like human spirits would later be born to him. He received a physical, mortal body on an earthlike planet and passed his mortal test — evidently with flying colors. After his mortal body died and was resurrected, he advanced to his current position as supreme ruler of this universe. Of course, all this happened long ago and via a more advanced process than any human can comprehend. Modern-day LDS leaders are more reticent about God's origins than those 19th-century freewheelers, though they continue to emphasize that God has a glorified, resurrected physical body.

At some point after giving birth to their first spirit child (see the next section), God and his eternal wife had other spirit children as well — billions of them. To enable these children to start the cycle all over again by growing up and becoming like their own Heavenly Parents, God taught them the *plan of salvation*, which we describe in detail in Book 7, Chapter 2. All humans who pass through this earth are God's spirit children who agreed to undergo the most difficult phase of this plan: demonstrating their faith and obedience away from God's presence and thus determining their eternal status.

## Second Mate: Christ the Son

Mormons view the New Testament as a mostly accurate account of Jesus's earthly ministry (for more on Mormon views regarding the Bible, see Book 7, Chapter 5). However, additional revelations to Mormon prophets have clarified aspects of what Jesus did before, during, and after his short mortal life, as well as what he's expected to do in the future.

### First and best

In Mormon theology, the being who would become known as Jesus Christ was born first among all God's billions of spirit children, and he was by far the brightest, strongest, and most advanced of all God's children. In the premortal world, where human spirits dwelt with the Heavenly Parents and prepared for earthly birth, this eldest son took a primary leadership role and was known as *Jehovah*. Many people believe the names *Jehovah* and *the Lord* in the Old Testament refer to God the Father, but Mormons believe these names refer to the personage who would later be born as Jesus Christ.

God instituted the plan of salvation so that his spirit children can progress to become like him. In order for this plan to work, a savior was required to help everybody recover from the sin and death they'd encounter as part of the earthly test. Guess who volunteered? Jesus.

But also among God's oldest spirit children was another gifted and talented son, named Lucifer. Lucifer developed the worst ever case of sibling rivalry and rebelled against God and Jehovah/Jesus Christ, which got him and his followers kicked out of heaven. In the Mormon view, Jesus, the devil, and all humans everywhere are spiritual siblings.

Well before coming to earth to perform his saving mission, the Savior began serving as God's second in command. While God created the earth spiritually, the Savior (Jesus) took primary responsibility for the earth's physical creation. After

mortals started wandering the planet with no memory of their premortal life, the Savior communicated with them through prophets and the Holy Ghost. On the rare occasion when God himself directly speaks or appears to a human, it's generally to introduce his Son.

## Both mortal and divine

In the Mormon view, God fathered everybody's spirit, but the Savior's *physical* body was the only one literally procreated by God, in partnership with the mortal Mary. (We can discuss what some early Mormons believed about the logistics of that situation, but we won't go there.) Possessing both eternal and mortal DNA, Jesus was able to die and then be resurrected in glorified immortality, thus opening the way for everyone to eventually be resurrected.

Equally as importantly, Jesus paid the price for all the sins of humanity. In the Mormon view, whenever a moral law is broken, justice must be satisfied, and the Savior accomplished that for humankind on a spiritual, eternal level. Having paid this bill that mortals can't pay for themselves, he forgives the debt for all people who sincerely repent of their sins and strive to live his gospel. Although many Christians believe that Jesus extends his grace to anyone who simply asks, Mormon Christians believe the Savior picks up the slack as a person makes their best effort to be good.



REMEMBER

Together, the Savior's overcoming of death and sin is known as his *Atonement*. Mormons believe that the hardest, most significant phase of the Atonement occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane, during that long night when Jesus literally sweat drops of blood (as described in the Bible, Luke 22:44). Although crucifixion was a horrible way to die, numerous others died that same way. Consequently, Mormons don't place heavy religious significance on the sign of the cross. To Mormons, the most important aspects of the story are that Christ's sacrifice atoned for people's sins and that he lives today.

## The Savior's post-crucifixion checklist

After his mortal body died on the cross, the Savior immediately got busy with the following tasks:

- » **During the three days between Christ's death and resurrection, Mormons believe his spirit visited the realm of the dead.** Wanting to extend his atonement to every human who ever lived, he organized the righteous spirits to start preaching the gospel to those who died without

hearing or accepting it. Until then, an impassable gulf had lain between the righteous and the wicked in the spirit world.

- » **Jesus transformed his physical body into a perfect, glorified, immortal vessel for his eternal spirit.** At the time of his resurrection, all the righteous people who'd died before him got resurrected too, all the way back to Adam. Most of the righteous who died after him will wait until his *Second Coming* (the time when Jesus Christ will return to judge the world and bring about one thousand years of peace known as the "Millennium," more on that later in this chapter) to be resurrected. Mormons view the Savior's resurrection as the single most significant and miraculous event in human history.
- » **As recorded in the New Testament, the resurrected Savior spent time teaching his apostles.** In addition, Mormons believe he visited the people living in the Western Hemisphere, part of the "other sheep" that the Bible's John 10:16 says he mentioned. Lasting several days, this visit is recounted as the centerpiece of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's translation of the sacred account left behind by these people. He may have visited additional peoples around the world, who presumably have their own scriptures and sacred records about those encounters.
- » **After the resurrected Savior ascended to heaven, he kept working behind the scenes among humans.** Mormons believe that, within a few decades after Christ left the earth, persecution and corruption ruined his church. For about 1,700 years, the Savior didn't reestablish an official church or prophet on the earth, although he continued blessing and inspiring worthy, faithful individuals, especially those who sought religious freedoms.
- » **Finally, when conditions were right for the restoration of the true religion, God and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820.** During the subsequent 24 years, Jesus restored his church, his gospel, and God's priesthood through the Prophet Joseph. Since then, Mormons believe the Savior has been actively leading the Church through whatever man is serving as the current prophet. One of the LDS Church's main purposes is to prepare people for Christ's eventual Second Coming.

As Mormons strive to develop a personal relationship with Heavenly Father, they recognize that Jesus Christ is the broker and the gatekeeper — in theological terms, the *mediator* — between God and humanity. The only way back to God is through him. Mormons feel deep gratitude and love for the Savior and pledge total allegiance to him. When they pray to the Father or do anything else of a religious nature, they do it in Christ's name. The Church is Christ's, the gospel is Christ's, and Christ administers God's priesthood among humans.



REMEMBER

Although everything centers on Christ, Mormons view him as a means to an end, not an end in himself. Mormons are sometimes accused of blasphemy for believing that humans can become like God. However, from a Mormon perspective, the idea that the Savior accomplished his Atonement just so people can strum harps and sing praises for eternity seems almost blasphemous.

## When he comes again

No one but God knows exactly when Jesus will return in glory to rule the earth for 1,000 years, but Mormons believe the time is fast approaching and people should prepare.

### Signs of the times

Although the Church's restoration is one of the key signs that the Second Coming is near, Mormons believe they must still preach the gospel to all nations before Christ will return.



WARNING

Unfortunately, many of the signs preceding the Second Coming don't sound like too much fun. The earth will go haywire with natural calamities, including earthquakes, disease, storms, and famine, and the wicked will run rampant. According to Mormon scripture, "All things shall be in commotion; and . . . fear shall come upon all people" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:91). Of course, the Lord has promised to comfort the righteous during these times of crisis, and many of them will survive to welcome him back.

### It's a bird! It's a plane!

At a crucial point during *Armageddon*, the world's final catastrophic war, Mormons believe the Savior will descend out of the sky to assume control of the earth and accomplish the following tasks:

- » **Levitate the good people:** As the Savior comes down from the heavens, he'll resurrect the righteous dead, who'll be airlifted up to meet him, along with those righteous people who are still living. Together with those who were already resurrected at the time of Jesus's own resurrection, these people will eventually inherit the *celestial kingdom*, where they'll live with God and potentially become like him.
- » **Say goodbye to bad guys:** With the good people safe, he'll destroy the wicked mortals who are still living, imprison Satan, cleanse the earth with fire, and restore the earth to its Garden of Eden status, with no weeds or carnivores. All the wicked spirits from throughout history will stay in timeout in spirit prison.

» **Start his own show:** He'll establish a perfectly fair, just, and peaceful world-wide government — run by both Church members and nonmembers — and launch the 1,000-year period of earthly paradise known as the *Millennium*. After the Millennium begins, he'll resurrect the medium-good people from throughout history, those who lived decent lives but didn't fully embrace the gospel. These people will eventually inherit the *terrestrial kingdom*.

As great as the Millennium sounds, it has a catch at the end. Satan will be unleashed for one last time, and he'll succeed in turning away more people from God. The armies of the righteous will defeat the armies of evil for the final time, and God will forever cast out Satan and his followers into outer darkness. Then will come the final judgment, when all people receive their eternal reward in one of the three kingdoms of heaven.

## God's Whisperer: The Holy Ghost

Mormons are unusual in their belief that God the Father has a physical body, like his Son Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost, in contrast, is a spiritual being. In fact, Mormons often say *Holy Spirit* rather than *Holy Ghost*, using the two terms interchangeably. (*Ghost* was a term used in the 17th-century King James Version of the Bible to signify “spirit,” and the name stuck.)

Mormons believe the Holy Ghost is a witness to truth, a comforter, and a sanctifier. The more pure and obedient that people are, the better they're able to feel the Holy Ghost's spiritual influence. Mormons strive to follow God's commandments so they can retain the companionship of the Holy Ghost as much as possible, and they draw upon his guidance when discerning right from wrong, evaluating spiritual teachings, and pressing on toward perfection. As the Spirit carries out the will of the Father, his influence can be felt everywhere in the world at the same time — in fact, Church leaders compare the Holy Ghost to the sun, which warms the entire earth and sheds light everywhere.

### The Spirit who never got a body

The Holy Ghost is unique among the three personages in the Godhead because this member is the only one without a physical body. Church leaders have taught that the Holy Ghost has a *spiritual* body, which is presumably a more advanced, deified version of the spirit body that Mormons believe everyone had in the premortal life.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Mormon theology hasn't offered a definitive statement about the origins and identity of the Holy Ghost, focusing instead on this spirit personage's role in the Godhead and in people's lives. Some Mormons believe the Holy Ghost is one of God's spirit children who was called for this particular mission and will be the last spirit to be blessed with a physical body. Even more controversially, some Mormons would like to think the Holy Ghost is female, perhaps even Heavenly Mother herself. However, this is far from orthodox belief. As one Mormon apostle explained, God hasn't yet given revelation on the Spirit's origin or destiny, and debating it is "speculative and fruitless." In deference to current LDS Church usage, in this book we refer to the Holy Ghost with male pronouns.

Mormons believe that as a spirit, the Holy Ghost can communicate intimately with every person's spirit, though the person needs to strive to live righteously so as not to repel the Holy Spirit. No unclean thing can sustain the presence of God, and the Holy Ghost literally imparts God's presence to humans in a tangible way. With this idea in mind, Mormons who've been baptized and have received the gift of the Holy Ghost (see the next section) are careful to remain worthy of that gift.

## The Holy Ghost's many roles

So what does the Holy Ghost do, exactly? While the Father organizes and sustains all things and the Son redeems mortality, the Holy Ghost kind of keeps the home fires burning. In fact, fire is one symbol of the Holy Ghost that frequently appears in scripture (see, for example, the apostles' experience with "tongues of fire" when they were baptized in the Spirit in the New Testament, recounted in Acts 2). The Holy Ghost performs several vital functions in the Godhead and in bringing people to Christ.

### The witness of Christ

Have you ever noticed that in scripture, the Holy Spirit seems to show up just when Christ makes an appearance? When Jesus is baptized in the Bible's New Testament, for example, the Spirit descends — perhaps figuratively — in the form of a dove just as Heavenly Father announces the coming of Christ: "This is my beloved Son" (Matthew 3:16–17). In John 15:26, Jesus promises that the Holy Ghost will testify of him. In other words, the Holy Ghost is a witness of Christ, pointing people to Christ's glory and truth.

In Mormonism, the *law of witnesses* dictates that more than one righteous person will confirm a true spiritual principle. This idea seems to be true of the Godhead as well: The Spirit is an additional witness of Christ. In the Savior's baptism story, for example, God announces Christ's identity while the Spirit rests on Jesus. The other members of the Godhead testify to Christ's divine nature.

## The comforter

Shortly before Christ was crucified, he promised his disciples that he wouldn't leave them comfortless but would send a comforter to help them in their path (John 16). This promised helper was the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Ghost exists as a comforter for each person and also as an enabler of sorts: Mormons believe one of the primary ways God answers prayers is through other people, and the Spirit is the still, small voice of God that keeps members in tune with the needs of others. Sometimes Mormons feel a little tug to pray for someone or do something to help someone they know. This urge may be as simple as a phone call to a particular friend, only to find out the friend had a rotten day and needed a boost at just that moment.

## The revealer of truth

In John 16, Jesus says that he has many other things to teach his disciples, but they aren't ready for those additional truths. Jesus assures them the Holy Ghost will be their new teacher after his departure, guiding them into all truth as directed by the Father. Mormons believe that human beings learn spiritual truths “precept upon precept, line upon line” — in other words, slowly but surely (Isaiah 28:10 in the Bible's Old Testament and 2 Nephi 28:30 in the Book of Mormon). People don't learn truth in a vacuum, because the Spirit is with them every step of the way, teaching them and helping them discern truth from error.

Mormons are a prayerful people, and they often bring things to God in prayer that other folks may consider trivial. They follow James 1:5, which says that if they lack wisdom, they should ask God, who gives to everyone liberally. With this idea in mind, Mormons pray for the answers to tough questions and for guidance in making all kinds of decisions, both major and minor. They believe the Holy Ghost often confirms the truth of something they've prayed about. Sometimes, they receive a tingling or warm sensation running through their bodies, or simply a peaceful sense of calm about a particular course of action. On the other hand, they believe they'll receive a “stupor of thought” if something isn't right.

The end of the Book of Mormon contains an oft-quoted passage about praying to know the truth and receiving spiritual confirmation. Widely shared by Mormon missionaries, the passage is called *Moroni's Promise*, because the Book of Mormon prophet Moroni pledged that people who ask God sincerely in the name of Jesus Christ can receive confirmation of the truth by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 10:3–5). The scripture further guarantees that by the power of the Holy Ghost, people can know the truth of all things.

## The sanctifier

The Holy Ghost plays an important role in helping members stay on the straight and narrow path. He *sanctifies*, or helps them become more holy. As we explain earlier in this section, the Holy Ghost is sometimes associated with fire, and fire is the ultimate refiner's tool. The Spirit's goal is to purify an individual.



REMEMBER

As we discuss in Book 7, Chapter 2, one of the most important principles of Mormon life is what they call *enduring to the end*. Having faith in Christ, repenting, and being baptized are all wonderful, but those actions don't help people much in the long run if they backslide or fall away from the faith. Enter the Holy Ghost — the Spirit helps members stay in tune with the will of Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. He keeps members honest — who can say the Holy Ghost isn't responsible for those occasional prickings of conscience that help keep them on the right path?



TIP

Before you finish this chapter thinking everything about the Holy Ghost is warm and fuzzy, you should know one more thing: The Bible says that blaspheming the Holy Ghost is the one unpardonable sin (Matthew 12:31–32). This kind of blasphemy is one of the few things that absolutely guarantee someone a room reservation in Hotel Outer Darkness.

## Figuring Out What Makes Mormonism Different



REMEMBER

Although Mormons share a lot in common with other Christian and non-Christian faiths, they hold several uncommon beliefs, especially when compared to Protestant Christianity. Here's a brief overview of some key points where Mormons differ from the norm:

- » **Premortality:** No other mainstream Christian denomination agrees with Mormons that the essence of each human has always existed and that humans were born spiritually to Heavenly Parents before being born physically on earth. Although people who believe in reincarnation can easily relate with the concept of a life before this life, Mormons believe that everyone gets only one shot at mortality.
- » **The Trinity:** Most Christians think of God as a universal spirit that manifests as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. By contrast, Mormons see these deities as three separate, individual beings who are united in purpose.
- » **God's nature:** Mormons believe that God the Father underwent a test much like this earthly one, which they argue doesn't deny his eternal nature because

all individuals have always existed, in one form or another. Today, God has a glorified body of flesh and bones, and he possesses all possible knowledge and power throughout the universe.

- » **The Savior:** Mormons believe that Jesus Christ was God's firstborn spirit child, which means he's the oldest spiritual sibling of all humans. However, Jesus is God's only earthly child, which means that he's the only perfect mortal who ever lived.
- » **The devil and hell:** Mormons believe that God didn't create evil but that each individual being has the ability to choose good or evil. The devil was God's first, most powerful spirit child to choose evil, and he tries to persuade others to do the same, but evil can still exist without him. As far as hell is concerned, Mormons believe that wicked people will suffer consequences for their sins, but only those who personally know God and still rebel against him will go to an eternal hell, which Mormons call *outer darkness*.
- » **Adam and Eve:** In the Mormon view, Adam and Eve were heroes who consciously took the steps necessary to begin mortality. Mormons view mortality as an essential test for eternal progression. Without this physical experience in a fallen world, humans can't learn and grow enough to eventually become like God.
- » **The Atonement:** Mormons believe that Jesus Christ paid for humankind's sins not just on the cross but also in the Garden of Gethsemane, where his pain was so great that he sweat blood. Christ pays the price of the sins of anyone who repents and obeys his gospel, but those who refuse will suffer for their sins. Mormons don't use the sign of the cross, as some Christians do, but they believe that Christ broke the bonds of death through his resurrection.
- » **Salvation:** Mormons believe all humans will be resurrected and receive an eternal reward depending on individual worthiness. Although pretty much everyone will receive a measure of salvation in one of three eternal kingdoms, only those who at some point accept the Savior's complete gospel — the same one currently preached and practiced by the Mormons — will receive *full salvation*, which means returning to live with God.
- » **Priesthood:** In the Mormon view, the *priesthood* is the authority to act in God's name for the salvation of his children, within the bounds of the LDS Church organization. Instead of ordaining professionals who've completed special training, the Church ordains all worthy and willing Mormon males from age 12 on up, via the laying on of hands by someone already holding the priesthood. Any adult priesthood holder can perform ordinances such as baptism and healing or be called to lead a congregation.
- » **Ordinances:** Mormons believe each individual must receive certain physical ordinances in order to return to God's presence, and authorized priesthood holders must perform them. Mormons also hold the unusual belief that if a

person dies without receiving an essential ordinance, a living Mormon can perform it in a temple on the deceased person's behalf, and their spirit will decide whether or not to accept it.

- » **Apostles and prophets:** Mormons believe that the Savior issues revelations to whatever prophet is currently leading the LDS Church. These revelations instruct how the leaders should administer the Church under current earthly conditions. In addition, Mormons believe that the Savior calls modern apostles to serve as his special witnesses, similar to the New Testament apostles.
- » **Scriptures:** Most Christians believe the Bible is God's only authorized scripture. Although Mormons uphold the Bible and prayerfully study its teachings, they believe it contains some translation errors and omissions. In addition, they believe that other civilizations recorded scriptures equally as valid as the Bible, most notably the New World civilization that gave rise to the Book of Mormon. In fact, they believe that God is still revealing scriptures in this day and age.
- » **God's only true church:** Mormons believe their own church is God's only "true and living" church currently on the face of the earth. Mormons respectfully acknowledge that many religions contain elements of God's eternal truths, but they believe that only the LDS Church possesses the full package of God's authorized priesthood, ordinances, and revelations.

## Looking at Joseph Smith and Mormonism's Beginnings

To Mormons, the term *gospel* means the "good news" that Christ died to save humanity and also refers to a very practical package of tools and instructions that the Savior provides for getting humans back home to God. That package includes doctrines, commandments, ordinances, continually updated revelations, and the priesthood authority to act in God's name. Remember, Mormons believe that the Savior was God's first spirit child way back before the earth was formed, so he's been on deck to reveal his gospel to prophets from Adam onward.

In the Mormon view, the timeline goes like this: First the Savior gave his gospel to Adam, but Adam's descendants eventually lost it through disobedience and corruption. Then the Savior gave it to other prophets, such as Noah and Abraham, but their people gradually lost it, too. Finally, when the Savior was born on the earth to accomplish his mission of overcoming sin and death for all humankind, he reestablished his gospel. However, within a few decades after his resurrection, humans fumbled it away yet again.

During the 1,700-year religious dry spell that Mormons say started after the Savior's New Testament apostles died, he worked behind the scenes and prepared the earth to eventually receive his gospel again. In 1820 he began the process of restoring it for the final time. When a teenager named Joseph Smith knelt in prayer to ask God which church he should join, God the Father and his son Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph and told him that none of the existing churches were true. Within ten years, Joseph Smith launched the Savior's restored gospel in the form of what people now know as the Latter-day Saint religion.

## Translating additional scriptures

After Joseph Smith's answer to prayer in 1820, which Mormons refer to as his *First Vision*, an angel began regularly appearing to prepare him for his prophetic calling. Finally, the time arrived for him to perform one of the most important steps in restoring the gospel: bringing forth additional scripture that helped restore correct principles and can serve as a witness and testament of the new faith.

As Mormons understand it, something very special happened in the New World between 600 BCE and 400 CE. At the beginning of this 1,000-year time period, God instructed a prophet named Lehi to leave Jerusalem with some other families and move to the Western Hemisphere. Over the centuries, this little tribe grew into a major civilization that underwent continual cycles of faith and wickedness, prosperity and destruction. In his usual way, the Lord sent prophets to teach these people and call them to repentance.

Soon after the Savior's resurrection, he dropped by to spend a few days with about 2,500 of his followers in the Western Hemisphere, ministering to his "other sheep" (John 10:16). Before the Savior ascended to heaven, he called 12 additional apostles to carry out his work in this part of the world. Under apostolic leadership, the people managed to hold onto the gospel for another 400 years after the Savior's momentous visit. Eventually, however, their lack of faith led to their corruption and extermination, and that was the end of the Book of Mormon civilization.

The New World prophets and apostles kept records on metal plates. A prophet named Mormon made a shortened version of the people's spiritual history and his son Moroni buried it in a hillside. About 1,400 years later, Joseph Smith's family settled near this same hillside in upstate New York. With the help of God, who helpfully provided interpreting devices to go along with the metal plates, Joseph translated and published the ancient record, and today the LDS Church distributes millions of copies each year in over 100 languages. If the proof of Mormonism is in the pudding, then the Book of Mormon is the pudding. (For more about the Book of Mormon, see Book 7, Chapter 5.)



## Establishing the Church

While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and his helpers came across passages that prompted questions, such as how to properly baptize someone. The questions that Joseph asked Heavenly Father triggered the following key events:

- » In 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Joseph and his chief scribe to restore the *Aaronic Priesthood*, the preparatory priesthood authority necessary to perform basic ordinances, including baptism.
- » Soon after John the Baptist's visitation, the New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John appeared on earth to give Joseph the *Melchizedek Priesthood*, the full authority to act in God's name within the Church organization.
- » In 1830, Joseph Smith officially organized the Church, which Mormons believe the Savior recognizes as his only "true and living" church.
- » Until Joseph's assassination in 1844, he received numerous additional revelations, scriptures, and ordinances that helped fully establish the new religion.

## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE M-WORD

As a prophet who lived somewhere in North or South America around 400 CE, Mormon was just one of dozens of important figures in LDS history. Nevertheless, he's the man whose name became the nickname for this whole religious movement. Unfortunately, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a tad frustrated with the nickname.

The prophet Mormon's claim to fame was compiling and abridging the ancient records that became the Book of Mormon, titled that way because of Mormon's central editorial role. After Joseph Smith translated and published the book, it didn't take long for detractors to start calling his followers *Mormonites*, because of their belief in the book. The Mormons got rid of the "ite" part of the nickname, and eventually the term stuck and lost most of its negative connotations. Still, *Mormon* is just a nickname. What would Mormons rather be called? Although the Church hasn't completely ruled out the terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* at the cultural level, it asks the media to use the Church's full name on first reference in a story — in other words, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — and then say "The Church of Jesus Christ" on each subsequent reference. However, that lingo hasn't exactly caught on, even at the daily Salt Lake newspaper owned by the Church.

# Understanding the Priesthood

In the Mormon view, the *priesthood* is nothing less than God’s power and authority. He can use the priesthood to create worlds, to keep the universe running smoothly, and to perform other godly tasks. In order to give his children — who someday will become godlike — an opportunity to learn the ropes of the family business, God grants priesthood power and authority to all worthy male members of Christ’s church. This way, they can help carry out God’s purposes on the earth and perform ordinances that hold eternal weight. Of course, a mortal’s priesthood power compared to God’s is like a candle compared to the sun, but the type of power is basically the same, and it can keep increasing eternally.

The Mormon priesthood is divided into two levels. The Aaronic Priesthood, also known as the preparatory priesthood, helps Mormon teens get ready to receive the higher Melchizedek Priesthood, which all worthy adult males can hold.



TIP

In Mormonism, the word *priesthood* usually refers to God’s power and authority that he delegates to men, but sometimes people use the term to indicate male Mormons in general.

## For boys: The Aaronic Priesthood

Named after Moses’ brother Aaron (for more on Moses, see Book 4, Chapter 2), the Aaronic Priesthood mainly performs the Church’s outward ordinances of repentance, such as baptizing people and administering the sacramental bread and water to congregations. In biblical times, adult descendants of Aaron administered this priesthood. In the modern Church, all worthy teenage boys do.

There are three ranks of the Aaronic Priesthood through which Mormon boys advance every two years. Each time a boy advances, he can continue performing the duties of the lower ranks. Before advancing in the priesthood, a boy discusses his worthiness in a private interview with his local congregational leader, who also holds an Aaronic Priesthood office.

When an adult male joins the Church, he’s initially ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, but he usually takes only a few months — rather than six years — to advance to the higher priesthood.

### Step 1: Deacon

Turning 12 is a major milestone for a Mormon boy. He leaves the *Primary*, the Church’s organization for children, and joins the *Young Men*, the program for boys ages 12 through 17. Even more significantly, if Church leaders deem him worthy, they make him part of the Aaronic Priesthood, starting with the office of deacon.

The main duty of a deacon is to pass the sacramental bread and water to the congregation during *sacrament meeting*, Mormonism's main weekly congregational worship service. In addition, deacons serve as messengers for priesthood leaders, help take care of the meetinghouse, and in heavily Mormon areas may go house to house collecting *fast offerings* from members. (Once a month, Mormons skip two meals and donate what they would've spent on the food — plus more, if they're able — to the poor and needy.)

## Step 2: Teacher

At age 14, a Mormon boy can become a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood. A teacher's main job is filling the sacramental trays with bread and water and setting them out to be blessed and passed. In addition, teachers can accompany adult priesthood holders on *home teaching* visits, which is the only teaching they typically do. (In Mormonism, the men visit each household in the congregation once a month — ideally — to see how the members are doing and to deliver a short gospel message.)

## Step 3: Priest

At age 16, LDS boys can become priests. The main job of Mormon priests is to bless the sacramental bread and water, saying the prayer exactly right or repeating it until they do. (Don't worry; they can use a cheat sheet.) In addition, priests can perform baptisms, ordain other males to Aaronic Priesthood offices, and conduct meetings when an adult priesthood holder is absent.

## The bishop



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Okay, this section is a little confusing, so bear with us. The leader of a full-sized Mormon congregation, or *ward*, is called the *bishop* (his counterpart in a smaller congregation, or *branch*, is called a *branch president*). Why do we list that role here, under the Aaronic Priesthood? Because, technically, the office of bishop is part of the Aaronic Priesthood. The bishop directly oversees the boys who hold the Aaronic Priesthood, and he uses that priesthood to perform some of his duties, such as handling finances and helping the poor.

However, the bishop of a ward is also a high priest in the Melchizedek Priesthood (see the next section), which gives him authority to act as CEO of the ward and conduct its spiritual affairs. In addition to overseeing the efforts of all the volunteers who typically staff a ward, the bishop spends a lot of time interviewing individual members for a variety of reasons. Bishops act as judges in God's earthly kingdom, and Mormons believe they can receive revelation about how to run the ward, including discerning what individuals are really feeling.

# For men: The Melchizedek Priesthood

Given to all worthy adult Mormon males, the *Melchizedek Priesthood* provides men with the power and authority to lead the Church and preside over their own families, including receiving revelations directly from God to help them carry out those stewardships. From the prophet on down, all men hold the same priesthood, but they have different offices and callings within that priesthood; the prophet is the only single man who can exercise or delegate all the keys of authority. Mormons believe God recognizes the actions of priesthood holders only when they're in complete harmony with the chain of command, so a priesthood holder can't go off and start his own church. (However, plenty of people have launched offshoots of Mormonism, all of which the LDS Church regards as illegitimate.)

## Elders

During their 20s and 30s, nearly all Mormon men hold the Melchizedek Priesthood office of elder. This rank allows them to teach and administer in the Church, bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost, do missionary work, attend the temple, and perform a variety of blessings and other ordinances. Elders preside over meetings when no high priest is available.

## High Priests

In order to hold a high-ranking leadership position, such as bishop or *stake president* (leader of a grouping of wards), a man is first ordained a high priest. A younger man can become a high priest if God has called him to a senior leadership position, but most high priests are middle-aged or retired. When a man approaches his 40s or 50s, he may become a high priest even if he's not called to a senior leadership position, probably just so he can stay with his peer group.

## Patriarchs

Usually retirement-aged priesthood holders, patriarchs are fairly rare in the LDS Church, with many *stakes* (groups of wards) having only one. Typically during the teen years, a Mormon goes to a patriarch to receive a *patriarchal blessing*. This blessing tells the receiver which tribe of Israel they belong to and includes personal advice and revelations that Mormons consider important enough to transcribe and keep handy for lifelong reference. Adult converts to the Church can receive a patriarchal blessing, too.

## Seventies and Apostles

The relatively few men who hold either of the two Melchizedek Priesthood offices of *seventy* and *apostle* typically serve the Church full time, and together they're also known as *General Authorities*. Usually based at Church headquarters in Salt

Lake City, Utah, they're assigned to oversee Church functions and departments and to rotate among positions governing the Church in large areas of the world.

## Living Your Day-to-Day Life as a Mormon

Viewing this mortal life as a time of testing, Mormons see their faith as the textbook for an A+, and they strive to live the religion 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In fact, one of the primary virtues in Mormonism is obedience to the commandments and counsel of the prophets, as well as to the spiritual promptings of the Holy Ghost. The religion provides standards that Mormons believe will help them become pure and righteous enough to reenter God's presence, with the Savior's crucial help to overcome sin and death.

Following is an overview of what daily life is like for Mormons all over the world. Not everyone lives up to all these standards, of course, but this is pretty much what practicing Mormons believe they ought to be trying to do:

- » **They follow a disciplined routine.** Each day, most Mormons pray individually, pray as families, and spend time reading the scriptures. They may also devote time on one or more weekdays to fulfilling volunteer Church assignments, such as preparing a Sunday school lesson or helping clean the local meetinghouse (see Book 7, Chapter 3).
- » **They embrace a G-rated lifestyle.** To avoid addictions and maintain spiritual purity, Mormons abstain from coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol, and harmful drugs. In addition, they keep sex strictly within the bonds of heterosexual marriage and shun anything "unholy or impure," including immodest clothes, pornography, profanity, and gambling. Some Mormons even refrain from cola drinks and R-rated movies.
- » **They seek a change of pace on Sunday.** On Sundays, Mormons spend the day resting and worshipping with their families, and they attend a three-hour block of classes and meetings at their local meetinghouse, which is open to the public. On the Sabbath, most Mormons avoid work, shopping, sports, and other worldly distractions.
- » **They kiss Monday-night football goodbye.** Mormons devote Monday evenings to spending time and studying the gospel with their families.
- » **They take part in rituals.** Mormons regularly attend the *temple*, a special building set aside for the faith's most sacred ordinances, such as celestial marriage. (See Book 7, Chapter 4 for more on Mormon temples.) Temples aren't open on Sunday or to the public, and most of the ordinances performed there are on behalf of the dead. Mormons who've gone through

the temple wear special undergarments each day to remind them of their covenants with God and to provide spiritual protection.

» **They occasionally sacrifice food and money.** Each month, Mormons fast for two meals (about 24 hours) to increase their spirituality, spending that time praying, reading the scriptures, attending church, and otherwise trying to get closer to God. They donate money saved from those meals — and more, if possible — to the Church’s fund for helping the needy. In addition, Mormons tithe a full 10 percent of their income to the Church.

## Considering Missionaries of All Shapes and Sizes

Upon hearing the word *Mormon*, many people instantly envision two clean-cut young men walking or bicycling through the neighborhood in dark suits, white shirts, ties, and the telltale black missionary badges. These junior gospel executives are the main means by which the LDS Church fulfills its sacred mandate to spread the doctrine of Christ throughout the earth. Largely because of this dynamic force of gospel representatives, the LDS Church has grown remarkably fast since World War II.

### Getting the basics

At the age of 3, Mormon boys and girls begin singing a song at church titled, “I Hope They Call Me on a Mission.” However, the song is really aimed mostly at the boys, who make up the majority of the total missionary force. Missionary service is practically encoded into the DNA of Mormon-born males, and it’s considered a priesthood duty. Young women can serve missions, but Church leaders say they should feel no obligation to do so. On the other hand, Church leaders increasingly encourage retired Mormon couples to serve missions, if they don’t have any dependent children and their health and finances allow it, because retirees provide maturity and wisdom that the youngsters can’t match.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Citing the rigors and demands of missionary life, the Church has recently raised the bar on qualifications for missionary service, particularly for the boys. Increasingly, leaders are weeding out young people who sow their wild oats and then try to repent or who aren’t prepared to succeed on a mission. The Church now expects missionaries to demonstrate real faith and a genuine desire to serve, instead of going to meet social expectations, to try to convert themselves to Mormonism, to please girlfriends who will marry only a returned missionary, or to get the new

car their parents promised if they serve a mission. Those who are worthy to serve a mission but who suffer from physical or emotional problems often volunteer in local positions rather than in full-time, faraway missions. Not surprisingly, the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide has dropped in recent years, although many people feel that today's missionaries are better qualified and more enthusiastic than ever before.

## Boy wonders

For nearly a century, a mission has been Mormonism's rite of passage into adulthood for young men, almost like a two-year tithing on the first 20 years of life. Nearly all begin serving at age 18 or 19, after working or attending college for about a year following high school. A male can sign up for a mission as late as his mid-20s — but any later than that and he's expected to stay home and evangelize the single gals until he finds one who's willing to become his wife.

Notwithstanding the Church's raising of the bar, every qualified, able young man is still expected to serve, and the social pressure is enormous. Not going — or going but getting sent home early — can make a young man feel like a second-class Mormon for years afterward. Whether or not a missionary wins many converts, the experience is considered essential preparation for future Church service and leadership.

As the teen years progress, parents and youth advisors help Mormon boys prepare for their missions. This preparation includes both spiritual and practical elements. On the spiritual level, young men are expected to

- » Gain an abiding faith in the Savior, Joseph Smith's prophetic mission, and the Church
- » Read the entire Book of Mormon and study the Bible and other Mormon scriptures and manuals
- » Develop a personal relationship with Heavenly Father through prayer
- » Learn to recognize and follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost
- » Keep themselves morally and ethically pure
- » Share the gospel with their friends

In addition, the Church encourages teen boys to develop practical skills that will come in handy during their missions, such as how to

- » Save and budget money
- » Speak in public and teach individuals of all ages

- » Work hard and get along with others
- » Launder, mend, and iron their clothes
- » Prepare nutritious meals and do basic housework

## Girl power

In recent years, increasing numbers of young women have chosen to serve missions before getting married. These “sister missionaries” must wait until they’re 19 to leave, but they don’t have an upper age limit like the men do — even a 50-year-old woman can go on a mission if she’s still single.

Although young men serve for two years and generally stick to finding prospective converts and teaching them, young women serve for 18 months and may receive special assignments, such as staffing a Church visitors’ center or helping disadvantaged people improve their health and hygiene. However, female missionaries can also be extremely effective in their evangelizing, and the demand for sister missionaries exceeds supply in many parts of the world. Male missionaries typically baptize their own converts, but female missionaries can’t, because Mormon women don’t hold the priesthood. Instead, the male missionaries or a local priesthood holder does it for them.

## Silver is golden

With today’s prosperity and longevity, many Mormon couples find themselves with plenty of money and energy after they retire. After their children are grown, they can focus their efforts on helping the Church and its members. In particular, the Church has discovered that missionary couples provide a valuable leadership role in less-developed parts of the Church. Requests for couple missionaries have become more frequent and urgent in recent years, and it’s becoming common for willing, able couples to serve multiple missions during their retirement.

# Enlisting in God’s Army

A few months before the desired departure time, a young Mormon man or woman begins filling out the missionary application, which requires medical and dental exams and worthiness interviews with local Church leaders. In applying to serve a mission, young missionaries don’t get to choose where they’ll go and what language they’ll speak. What’s more, they have to pay all their own expenses, except airfare to and from the mission field, which the Church covers.

## Receiving the call

After the missionary's stake president sends the application to Church headquarters, it takes just a few weeks to process it. Because a missionary may be assigned anywhere in the world, anticipation runs high for receiving that all-important envelope from Salt Lake City. Before the missionary opens it, family and friends typically gather round, and many missionaries' hands tremble as they tear open the envelope.

Receiving a call to Wyoming when you were hoping to go to Hong Kong — or vice versa — can be a little challenging. However, Mormons believe that each mission call is divinely inspired, a hope encouraged by the fact that each letter is, by all appearances, signed by the prophet of the Church. Nevertheless, the number of calls issued each year undoubtedly results in some bureaucratic randomness. Reports say that top-level apostles review all the calls and correct any that don't feel right.

Some Mormons believe that a person's mission call was determined in the pre-mortal life. Faith-promoting stories persist about the missionary who, while diligently knocking on doors, meets someone who seems instantly, uncannily familiar. The common explanation for such *déjà vu* is that in the premortal life, the missionary promised this person that during mortality, the missionary would find and teach him or her the truth. This widespread folk belief not only helps missionaries accept their callings, but also motivates them to work hard so they don't break their promise to find that special someone.

## Following the rules

Succeeding as a missionary requires many strong qualities. A missionary must be patient, loving, persistent, and articulate. However, the Mormon missionary program seems to emphasize one virtue above all others: obedience. Over and over again, Church leaders tell missionaries that in order to effectively teach and convert people, they must follow the Holy Ghost's promptings, but they won't be able to feel the Holy Ghost unless they obey all the mission rules and regulations.

So what are the mission rules? Most of them are spelled out in a small, white booklet that missionaries are supposed to carry at all times. In addition, individual mission presidents make their own rules, which can sometimes seem arbitrary. Because the mission president can't be everywhere at once, missionaries supervise each other by means of an organized system of zones and districts.

Following is an overview of the most significant rules that missionaries must follow:

- » **A missionary *always* stays with their companion.** For many people, this rule turns out to be the most difficult aspect of serving a mission. The only time a missionary can be alone is in the bathroom — and not for too long. This policy is mainly to protect missionaries from falling into sin or danger. In most missions, missionaries can occasionally swap companions for an afternoon or evening, but they're supposed to spend most of their time working with their assigned companion, even if they can barely stand each other. On the other hand, many become lifelong friends.
- » **Missionaries follow a rigid daily schedule.** They arise at 6:30 a.m., spend an hour in personal gospel study, pass another hour studying with their companion, and then work all day and evening, with one-hour breaks for lunch and dinner. If they're assigned to speak a foreign language, they take additional study time for that. Lights must be out by 10:30 p.m. Frankly, many missionaries face a big challenge in not wasting time by idling in the apartment, going shopping or sightseeing, hanging out too long at members' homes, and so on.
- » **To stay spiritually pure, missionaries don't watch TV or movies, read magazines or newspapers, or listen to secular music.** Some missions allow classical music and others permit inspirational Mormon pop music, while some limit missionaries strictly to Mormon Tabernacle Choir recordings. The only reading material allowed is the scriptures, the Church magazines, and a handful of approved Church-published books.
- » **One day each week, missionaries take a preparation day, or P-day.** This time isn't really a day off, because missionaries still wake up at 6:30 a.m., do their studying, and get back to work after dinner. During P-day, missionaries shop for groceries, wash their clothes, clean their apartments, fix their bicycles, write letters home, and run personal errands. If they have any time left over, they can play mission-approved sports or visit nearby tourist attractions, but they can't leave their assigned areas without permission, and they always stay with their companion.
- » **With few exceptions, missionaries always wear their formal proselytizing clothes outside the apartment.** Exceptions include playing sports on P-day and performing service projects that require grubby clothes; running personal errands, however, isn't an exception. In addition, they always wear their missionary badges as a reminder of their missionary calling — some even wear them on their T-shirts while playing basketball. They must address one another by the title of Elder or Sister and not use first names or nicknames. (Yes, it's ironic that teenaged boys go by "Elder," which is a priesthood title from the Bible.)

- » **Missionaries write weekly letters to their mission president and to their parents, and they're allowed to phone home only twice a year, on Mother's Day and Christmas.** Missionaries can correspond with anybody who lives outside the mission, including loved ones waiting at home.
- » **Missionaries don't date, flirt with, or even hug a member of the opposite sex.** Even in pairs, missionaries can't teach a member of the opposite sex without an additional chaperone present. If a missionary gets romantically involved with someone, the missionary is usually transferred far away, possibly even to another mission. If a missionary has sex, they are usually excommunicated and sent home, hopefully to repent and eventually get rebaptized.

## Introducing the Eternal Family Unit

In the Mormon view, all human beings are the spirit children of Heavenly Parents and can grow up to become like them. So that humans can learn how to become parents, God commands them to form family units on this earth, which serve as miniature models of God's own eternal family organization. Mormons have faith that, through the gospel, their earthly families can eventually become like God's eternal family.

Upon hearing that Mormons believe families can be together forever, some people think the idea sounds more like hell than heaven, depending on the state of their own family relationships. Nevertheless, Mormons preach that people reach the highest level of heaven as families, not as individuals. Known for marrying younger, divorcing less often, and having more children than today's average couple, devout Mormons who are sealed to one another in the temple believe they can accomplish nothing greater than building a strong, successful family that will continue throughout eternity.

In addition, Mormons think that discovering their ancestors and taking certain steps to eternally bind together their extended families, all the way back to Adam and Eve, is extremely important. Also, Mormons believe that all humans can become part of God's eternal family by entering into covenants and getting adopted into the *house of Israel*, which is what God calls his covenant people.

### Why families are so important

Mormons believe that the traditional nuclear family is part of God's plan and must remain the basic unit of society. In addition, they believe that the LDS Church's main role is to help families gain eternal blessings together, through Jesus Christ.



REMEMBER

In the Mormon view, all men and women are commanded to “multiply and replenish the earth” — in other words, have children. God wants all his spirit children to come to this earth, gain a physical body, and go through a test, and this can happen only if people make babies. However, Mormons insist that all children deserve to be born to a married husband and wife. Although the Church expresses compassion for those people who can’t find a partner or bear children, it discourages self-imposed celibacy and has zero tolerance for sexual activity outside marriage.



WARNING

Because families are so central and important to their faith, Mormons believe the family is one of the devil’s main targets. That’s why Mormons get so alarmed about divorce, abortion, and gay marriage, which they view as sinful trends that move society away from traditional families. (Some observers find the Church’s opposition to gay marriage ironic because its objections resemble those raised about polygamy in the 19th century, when the Church was on the other side of the table.) However, the Church seemingly softened its views toward gay marriage, going so far as to back safeguards in 2022 for same sex marriages in the United States so long as they don’t infringe upon religious groups and their rights to believe how they choose. Yet, Church apostles put the focus on the fact that those safeguards also protected tax-exemption status and other freedoms for religious groups.

## “Till never do you part”: Eternal sealing

Mormons believe that love isn’t enough to preserve relationships past death. Rather, an eternal *sealing* ordinance is necessary to join husbands, wives, and their children together forever.

Eternal sealings occur in a sacred building called a *temple*. After a Mormon couple is sealed, any children they have after that point are automatically sealed to them at birth. If a couple doesn’t get sealed until after children are born, those children participate in a temple sealing ordinance with their parents. However, getting sealed doesn’t guarantee that every family member will make it to the eternal reunion — the sin in an unrepentant person’s life overrides the sealing ordinance for them.

For more on this, see Book 7 Chapter 4.

## Raising up seed

Mormons aren’t prohibited from using birth control, but they’re still known for having large families.

Why do Mormons have so many kids? Beyond simply valuing family life and parenthood, several possible reasons exist.

- » **To make sure they're not leaving anyone out:** Mormons believe that everybody's spirits lived together and formed relationships before coming to earth. Mormon parents sometimes have more children because they sense that another spirit who belongs in their family is still waiting to be born, although this widespread belief isn't official doctrine.
- » **To give premortal spirits the opportunity of a lifetime:** Mormons want to give as many people as possible the opportunity to come to earth and be raised in a Mormon home, where they can learn the gospel and receive the necessary ordinances for salvation, such as baptism.
- » **To extend their boundaries:** Mormons believe they'll progress together through eternity as families, and having lots of children is good preparation for that. In heaven, after an exalted couple — see Book 7, Chapter 2 for more about exaltation — produces a sufficient number of spirit children, these heavenly parents will eventually organize their own world over which they'll preside, like God the Father presides over this world. This belief has led evangelical Protestants and other Christians who oppose Mormonism to charge that Mormons believe in many gods, but Mormons point out that they never stop honoring and obeying their own Heavenly Father, even after becoming like him. He remains the only God to them throughout eternity.

