

UNIT 1

WHO ARE THE MORMONS?

INTRODUCTION

Mormonism is one of the world's fastest growing religious movements. There are, nevertheless, many sincere people among them who will accept the beautiful principles of the gospel. Often, however, their prejudices against other churches, and the doctrines they hold, make them react against biblical teachings. It is important, therefore, to establish an intelligent strategy that will bring them to a knowledge of Jesus.

CONTENTS OF THE UNIT

In this unit we will study:

- ▶ The origins of Mormonism, especially regarding its founder.
 - ▶ The administrative structure of Mormonism.
 - ▶ The methods they use to promulgate their message.
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OBJECTIVES OF THE UNIT

When you finish this unit, you should be able to:

- ☐ Outline the history of Mormonism.
- ☐ Relate the principle events of the life of Joseph Smith.
- ☐ Outline Joseph Smith's ideas on polygamy.
- ☐ Outline the administrative and outreach methods of Mormonism.



SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

As an introductory step, we will organize ourselves into small working groups. Each group will have three members.

1. Discuss the reasons you wish to evangelize Mormons.
2. Interchange ideas regarding the evangelization of Mormons in the light of the following biblical passages:

Mark 16:15,16.

Acts 10:3-5: 1:8.

3. Pray, asking for the Lord's help in reaching the objectives the group sets for itself.

Group reports. Each group will elect a presenter who will give a brief report to the plenary sessions.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

For more information on the history of Mormonism see the following bibliography: B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books Company, 1978); Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History. The History of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd edition, revised and amplified (New York: Alfred A. Knop, 1985); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977); Linda King Newell y Valeen Tippets Avery *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith. Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady", Polygamy's, 1804-1879* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984); Chad J. Flake, *A Mormon Bibliography: 1830-1930* (Salt Lake City: University Press, 1978); Davis Bitton and Maureem Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *New Views of Mormon History. A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987); Steven L. Shields, *The Latter Day Saints Churches: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1987).

The Origins of Mormonism

The Mormons were first organized in Fayette, New York, USA on April 6, 1830. At first they called themselves the *Church of Christ*, but as splinter groups formed each called itself by a different name. The best known is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, headquartered in Salt Lake City. Other segments of the original Mormon movement also exist. The most significant is the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, headquartered in Independence, Missouri.

WORLD EXPANSION

Prior to World War II, Mormonism expanded mainly in the United States, Great Britain and Scandinavia. In recent years they have grown rapidly in other countries.

THE FOUNDER OF MORMONISM



Joseph Smith, Jr.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith (1805-1844), son of Presbyterian parents who moved to the region of Palmyra, New York during the Second Great Religious Awakening that shook the district. Joseph was a 14 year-old preadolescent confused by the differences between denominations. He claims that he prayed to know which church he should join and that the Father and Jesus Christ revealed to him in a vision that all were mistaken (Joseph Smith, *History* 1:1-20). On September 21, 1823 he is said to have received another vision in which the angel Moroni showed him the place where a book written on golden plates was hidden, along with the Urim and the Tumim with which he could translate the plates. The tablets narrated the history of the first inhabitants of America and their religion (Joseph Smith, *History* 1:29-54). Joseph Smith is said to have translated them and published them for the first time in 1830, under the title *The Book of Mormon* (Joseph Smith, *History* 1:66, 67, 75).

A TREASURE HUNTER

Joseph Smith, Jr. worked as a treasure hunter.¹ According to the record of a trial conducted in Chenango County, New York, Smith had a stone called a “seer stone”

which he consulted to find buried treasure.² This happened after the second vision, during the time he is said to have translated the golden plates.

HOW THE MORMON CHURCH ORIGINATED



Founding of the Mormon Church

In 1829 Joseph Smith claimed that he received from John the Baptist, Peter, James and John the “authority of the priesthood” (See *Doctrine and Covenants* 13; 27:12; 128:20 and Joseph Smith, *History* 1:68-70). According to Smith, God called him to be president, translator, developer and seer (*Doctrine and Covenants* 124:125). With these antecedents, he and six followers organized the church on April 6, 1830 (*Doctrine and Covenants* 20:1-4).

MOVING AROUND

At first they resided in Ohio and later Missouri, but their system of uniting church and state, along with some other unique features, awakened the animosity of the surrounding residents.³ After the Mormon war of 1838, they were forced to migrate to Commerce, Illinois.⁴ A year later they arrived in Nauvoo, Illinois.⁵ Things went well at first and they transformed the Nauvoo into the number one city in the state.

Six years later they were convulsed by a new outbreak of hostilities, and Smith was accused of polygamy, false testimony, slander and ordering the burning of the newspaper the *Nauvoo Expositor*, resulting in his assassination by a mob.⁶

WHAT IS A “SEER STONE?”

In the area where Joseph Smith grew up, many people believed that it was possible to find buried treasure by “seeing” it with the “mind’s eye.” To do this, you needed a certain kind of stone that would “transmit” the pictures. It was also called “glass-looking.” It was something like a fortune-

teller’s crystal ball. When the stone was placed under a person’s hat, it supposedly became transparent and the face of the person using it would “light up.” Joseph Smith had a seer’s stone he had found that was brown and about the size of an egg. (See Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994), pp. 105-107).

THE KIRTLAND SAFETY SOCIETY BANK

In 1837 the Kirtland Safety Society Bank was organized. The cashier of the society, who was also Joseph Smith's secretary, misappropriated \$25,000 of the society's money, leaving it in a precarious financial situation.⁷ The \$25,000 taken was apparently in paper notes issued by the bank itself, and therefore worthless in the outside world.

On January 12, 1839 the society went bankrupt. That day, at about 10:00 A.M., Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon escaped from Kirtland on horseback.⁸ At that moment fewer than twenty people actually dared to declare that Joseph Smith, Jr. was a true prophet.⁹ His credibility was further damaged when he excommunicated Martin Harris (1838), Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer (1839)¹⁰ the three men who claimed to have seen the actual golden plates of the book of Mormon.¹¹ Smith then had to seek out eight additional witnesses.¹²

THE POLIGAMY ISSUE

On May 8, 1838, responding to a series of questions, Smith came out against polygamy. He even censured the men who remarried as soon as three or four months after becoming widowers, explaining that more time should be expected out of respect for the wife's memory and the feelings of the children.¹³ The inexplicable paradox is that the Mormon prophet himself had numerous wives without having been widowed at all, and without keeping in mind or respecting his wife's feelings or those of his children. Joseph Fielding Smith, the First President of the church from 1901-1918, attempted to very adroitly explain away the situation, but there remains more than one cloud hanging over this phase of Joseph Smith's life.

EXAMPLES

CONTRADICTORY REVELATIONS

① Since he himself stated in *Doctrines and Covenants* that polygamy is abominable (Jacob 2:24), how could he then record on July 12, 1843 a revelation which allowed polygamy? (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:60, 61).

In fact, Joseph Smith practiced polygamy before receiving his pretended revelation.¹⁴ Therefore, he was guilty of adultery. This complicates the situation even more,