

# 1. Are Latter-day Saints Christian?

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has always accepted Jesus of Nazareth as testified of in the Bible: the divine Redeemer and Son of God who atoned for the sins of all mankind and ensured our universal resurrection. The church has never ceased to affirm that there is no other name given whereby man can be saved (see Acts 4:12). Another book that the church reveres as scripture, the Book of Mormon, declares on its title page that it was written “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

In LDS belief, Joseph Smith is the prophet through whom God restored the Church of Christ and named it the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He stated that “the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”<sup>1</sup> Members of the restored Church of Jesus Christ gratefully rejoice in Christ’s atonement, confidently anticipate his glorious return, expect to be brought before him when he judges the entire human race, and hope to dwell with him for all eternity. Surely all who profess such beliefs can lay claim to being called Christians.

Obviously there are doctrinal differences between Mormons and people of a variety of other Christian denominations. But Latter-day Saints believe that it must be possible for people to have different points of view and still be Christians. Given the large number of Christian denominations, all of whom disagree on points large and small, this conclusion is inescapable. Latter-day Saints embrace as fellow Christians those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. In the same vein, they believe that no doctrinal difference or variation in practice can loom so large as to cancel out their own sincere belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Redeemer.

## Definitions

Latter-day Saint beliefs are in harmony with what the Bible calls Christian. The terms *Christian* or *Christians* occur only three times in the New Testament (at Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Peter 4:16). In each case these terms simply refer to those who follow Christ, which applies fully to Latter-day Saints.

Members of the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fail to find other definitions of Christianity persuasive—definitions based on interpretations of the Bible by particular denominations or on the interpretations of the classical creeds from the early Christian centuries. Latter-day Saints doubt that anyone has the authority to exclude others from Christianity based on these definitions. As C. S. Lewis observed:

It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men’s hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense. . . .

. . . When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, any such definitions that would exclude Mormons would expel other groups too—groups that most people would find it very odd to classify as non-Christians. For example, demanding that believers in Christ accept the trinitarian teaching of the Nicene Creed in order to be considered Christians implies that the bishops who voted against that creed at the Council of Nicea were not really Christians. It also questions the Christianity of the many followers of Christ who lived before Nicea, and thus before the full development of classical trinitarian doctrine.

Likewise, Latter-day Saints are puzzled by the declaration that only those people who base their faith and practice exclusively on the sixty-six books of the traditional Protestant biblical canon are Christian—that canonical list was clearly not settled, according to the records of Christian history, until several centuries after the death of Christ, and still is not universally accepted. This definition would banish not only the Latter-day Saints, but also many of the followers of Jesus from the first centuries, about two hundred million Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as the Roman Catholics who anchor their belief in the authority of apostolic tradition.

Consider further the claim that, because Mormons believe salvation to be connected with the authority of a church, they cannot be considered Christians. This claim also defines out of Christendom many of the greatest of the early Christian fathers, to say nothing of the Church of Rome and virtually all of Eastern Christianity.

In other words, definitions of Christianity based on the specific beliefs of one denomination or group of denominations are not very helpful. They often don't take into full account Christian history, and they don't help determine who is or isn't Christian.

## Historical Usage

The historical fact is that the word *Christian* has been used over the centuries to describe a wide range of practices and theological positions, including some that Latter-day Saints find just as seriously mistaken as do their Protestant critics. For instance, the Marcionites rejected the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. The Docetists denied that Christ possessed a real physical body. Yet these groups and many others are routinely referred to as Christians by the scholars who have studied them most.

Christian teachings and practices can be more or less inadequate, even seriously mistaken, while remaining Christian, just as competing theories of the solar system can vary and still lay claim to being scientific theories. The only definition of the word *Christian* that accounts for its use through the centuries and that includes all the individuals and groups who are universally regarded as falling under its description seems to be roughly this: A Christian is a person who accepts Jesus Christ as, uniquely, his or her Lord and Redeemer. By this definition, faithful Latter-day Saints, along with hundreds of millions of other believers in Jesus of Nazareth distributed across many denominations over thousands of years and on every continent, abundantly qualify as Christians.

## Notes

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 121.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 11.