



Mormon Growth and Practices: Christian Theological Reflections

PATRICK R. KEIFERT

Recently, I observed two events in the same mainline denomination that merit some reflection on theological leadership in the church in North America. Both happened in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and both were occasioned by Mormon growth and practices.

EVENT ONE

As the keynote speaker at a synod assembly, the presiding bishop of the ELCA, the Rev. Mark Hanson, announced that the ELCA has been replaced as the fifth largest denomination in the United States by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons. He made this announcement within his opening remarks as a way of inviting the delegates to consider with him the strategic priorities of the ELCA.

Hanson wondered aloud whether too many people, both members and potential members of ELCA congregations, think of the ELCA in terms of the things “we fight about and divide us.” Most recently, he noted, those issues include bishops and our relationships with other Christians, and whether we will ordain practicing gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual persons. He wondered if it was wise for the ELCA to be primarily identified with what we fight about.

His announcement regarding the Mormons received no comments from the

Mormonism, despite its manifest departures from orthodox Christian faith, models practices of relating faith and everyday life that can be significantly instructive for Christian congregations.

audience, either when it was made or in follow-up conversations with him. Silence is very hard to interpret. Perhaps, because it was a synod in the western part of the United States, the reality of Mormon growth was not news to the delegates. Indeed, they may have already assumed that the Mormons were a larger denomination than the ELCA, given their experience in the West.

Despite Bishop Hanson's desire to focus on the strategic priorities of the ELCA, which among other things placed high priority on Lutheran identity and evangelism, the discussion went to the things that we fight about and that divide us. This is not to say anyone objected to the priorities suggested in the beautifully produced video that featured Hanson on a Colorado mountain hike. Positive comments were made in support of them, but they were treated like "motherhood and apple pie" and passed over for supposedly more critical matters, such as matters that divide us, matters focusing upon clergy and denominational order.

EVENT TWO

The second event took place, once again, in the western part of the United States. This time, it was in the Sunbelt in a congregation-wide planning and visioning session for one of the synod's largest metropolitan congregations and denominational standard-bearers.

The people gathered were leaders of major corporations, nonprofits and for-profit, and included presidents of universities. They represented the strongest characteristics of a thoughtful, well-educated, financially successful generation of a denomination in decline. Some had served on its denominational councils and in regional leadership.

This leadership group has been wrestling with a couple of the demographics of the congregation. First, the congregation's median age is 67, and these leaders reflect that reality. Second, the generation between these older members and their grandchildren is only skimpily active in the congregation. All were capable of seeing that their congregation, while wealthy and numerically large, has failed to pass on its faith. Some were willing to wonder aloud whether or not the congregation was dying.

Indeed, through a small-group process, the leaders at this meeting moved out of demographic abstractions to speak of their own lives, their own families, their own relationships. They spoke about their own sense of failure—remember, these are people who have experienced lots of success and learned to move beyond their failures—and the deep grief that they have not passed on their faith to their own children, much less to the abstract demographic of "baby-boomers." The small-group conversations were surprisingly candid. Tears and moments of silence marked some of the stories shared.

In the reporting and reflection plenary session that followed these small-group discussions, one group's reporter shared his and his wife's own story. He and his wife fit the success and wealth demographic of the congregation. They have five

children, but only their oldest son is a member of a church. The other four have left behind their faith and, apparently, any faith. They are still hopeful that they might return, since the oldest son had also dropped out for many years but had returned some ten years ago.

Of course, the father was not all that pleased with the church the oldest son and his wife chose: the Mormon Church. He explained that they had decided on the Mormon Church because both of them had experienced failed first marriages. Her parents, too, had been divorced. They both wanted to make their second marriage work and wanted to associate with people who worked on marriage and family. As a result, their friends tended to be Mormon and they found the support to their family by the Mormon Church just right. They joined and have been very active over the last decade or so. "Oh, and by the way," the father noted, "they have lived and found this Mormon community in Minneapolis."

A certain catharsis took place during that meeting and a number of the other small-group reporters reflected that catharsis. However, in the years since, the congregation has not been able to make the major changes in practice that other congregations have found successful in passing the faith from generation to generation in contemporary North America.

Indeed, their response has been quite similar to the response I get when I tell this story or similar ones to mainline Protestant audiences. First, they prefer to ignore them, after some catharsis regarding the present decline of their denomination. Second, if I persist in asking them to do more than process their grief, they become irritated, sometimes angry. Third, they begin to attack Mormons or the evangelical right and their destructive, politically incorrect, and morally unacceptable practices regarding marriage and the family, evangelism, and proselytism.

Equally disturbing is the general disinterest in the doctrinal and theological reflection that these Mormon practices raise. In what follows I want to sketch some Mormon doctrine and practices and open some theological questions. Rather than take a defensive posture over against these Mormon doctrines and practices, that is, attempt to find out what is wrong with them, I want to wonder about what God is doing through these practices and integrate that wondering about God into traditional Christian doctrine and theology.

MORMON GROWTH AND PRACTICES

Any fair sociological assessment of the religious ecology of North America, and to some extent, the emerging religious ecology of the world, makes special note of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), often abbreviated as LDS or LDS Church. Some sociologists of religion have declared Mormonism—as it is popularly called—the most likely candidate for the next worldwide major religion.¹

¹Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26 (Sept 1984) 18–27. See also www.lds.org. For a quick look at membership trends, see the appendix to this article.

Mormon numerical growth is remarkable. Though covering roughly the same time period that the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (1830s) has carried on active ministry on the continent, even modest reports indicate that there are twice as many Latter-day Saints as Missouri Synod Lutherans.² In a time of denominational decline in most mainline denominations,³ this numerical growth creates in many circles, as illustrated by the two events above, denial, confusion, anger, and attack on the religious right, including Mormonism. Even among denominations that are enjoying numerical growth,⁴ conversation regarding Mormonism evokes similar denial, confusion, anger, and attack, though seldom attacks on the religious right.⁵

“in ways thoroughly American and modern, the LDS Church developed from a vision and a plan into a church”

In ways thoroughly American and modern, the LDS Church developed from a vision and a plan into a church—the “three major elements of Mormonism.”⁶ This movement from a vision—a prophetic vision of a religious entrepreneur, Joseph Smith—through a plan for development and into the creation of a social organization to sustain this sweeping vision and numerical growth sounds very much like the autobiographies of many entrepreneurs who founded contemporary American corporations.

Mormonism is modern in a very deep sense in that the movement developed clearly within the boundaries and culturally acceptable rules of religious experience in Western modernity. Among these characteristics of modernity are: (1) a strong emphasis on historical development and progress based upon historical “facts”; (2) clear, distinct, testable truth claims, available to each individual; (3) the centrality of absolute human free will and with it the necessity of obedience and accountability as the grounds of salvation; (4) a mastery of nature, both time and space; and (5) the clear divide between public and private space in religious practices and doctrines.

Mormonism, though reportedly half of its adherents no longer reside in the

²Of course, church membership represents a much-disputed topic, with many different ways to count and report in each religious tradition and significant variations within a religious tradition. Nonetheless, a fair assessment suggests that the five million plus figure claimed by the LDS Church’s website is not inappropriate by certain methods of counting commonly used by other churches.

³Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Robert Wuthnow, *Restructuring American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴See *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* (1999) 22–39 on denominational growth; cf. also glenmary.org.

⁵In a number of personal conversations and interviews with leadership in Seventh-day Adventist, neo-evangelical, and neo-Pentecostal churches, the topic of Mormon growth creates significant discomfort. The reasons vary greatly but in most of the conversations there is a sense that any comparisons are considered odious and inappropriate.

⁶Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 1.

United States, was made in America. Along with the Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist, it is one of the two homegrown and sizeable American religions, developed since the advent of Europeans on the continent. Like the Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist, it shares the liberal American tradition on human nature: humans are good, unfettered by original sin, and capable of faith and obedience that conquers all exigencies. Unlike the Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist, Mormonism incorporates, for all practical purposes, the commonsense understanding of American cultural Protestantism into its most public and familiar religious practices, the home and the local church, and supersedes that same cultural Protestantism with its most secretive and creative religious practices, the temple rituals.⁷

This contrast between the public and the private character of Mormon religious practice and space is itself peculiarly modern. Of course, there have always been religious systems that practiced both a public cultus and a private one. In the case of Mormonism, however, the rules for which sets of rites and practices are private and which public follow those of American modernity.⁸ For popular consumption by most Americans and, even in some cases, most Mormons, the local church, the ward and stake religious communities, represent their experience of Mormonism.

WARDS AND STAKES

The wards usually represent a weekly gathering of fewer than 200 persons from a group of between 300 and 700 individual members.⁹ Several wards form a stake. The stake is the primary unit of the local church; it is the location of governance and “reflects the Church in microcosm, with a president and counselors, a high council and other offices.”¹⁰ It is the stake that most nearly approximates the Methodist Conference or Presbyterian Presbytery, though not necessarily in geographical or numerical size. The ward gatherings are in most cases fully public and, in my experience, seek to welcome strangers in a manner both respectful and engaging. The practices and rituals here, though highly governed by central church leadership, have a familiar, comfortable, porous feeling to them for the first-time participant. Most guests, of course, come with a host family with whom they already have an established relationship.¹¹

⁷This supersessionist character is noted by most scholars. See Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), and Davies, *Introduction*, 195.

⁸For a further discussion of this public/private space and religious experience in American modernity, see Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

⁹Interestingly enough, this “around-200-in-worship” pattern follows patterns observed in other local churches in other denominations.

¹⁰Davies, *Introduction*, 172.

¹¹This relational dynamic is neither coincidental nor recent in LDS ward practice; quite to the contrary, even though Mormonism has been the object of considerable persecution, suspicion, and attack, the relational character of LDS practice is firmly grounded in history and doctrine. Indeed, as this essay will underline, the interaction between relationships and principles is part of the DNA of LDS religion.

Most conversions to any religion in America take place in these relational groups, whether family, household, or other sustained relationships of coworkers, neighbors, and friends.¹² Mormons have most successfully placed into common practice such relational systems, and even before this success they understood and expressed the relational character of the religious life. This historical understanding of religious life as essentially relational and communal rather than individualistic reflects both the vision of Joseph Smith, the standard texts of the LDS Church, and the tortured early history of the movement.

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This Mormon focus upon relationships stands against the notion that only individualistic churches are growing. Indeed, sociological analysis points to a deep hunger among Americans for meaningful relationships. Studies by Robert Wuthnow and others¹³ show how the well-documented power of individualism¹⁴ has driven people to significant relational groups, small groups, in lieu of lonely lives. Many, perhaps most, of these are not attached to religious communities. However, those local religious communities that know how to offer significant relationships appear to be growing. The LDS Church simply is a leader in this relational approach and has been from its inception. This can be seen in its ordinary practice at the level of the ward.

The religious practice of the ward most closely reflects the earliest moorings of LDS Church life in nineteenth-century Protestantism. As the eldest son of our grieving Lutheran father learned, the day-to-day practice of the LDS Church is based in the primal relationships of the family. Family life revolves around the activities within the family and within the ward, whose leader is the bishop.

BISHOPS¹⁵

The bishop’s responsibilities are roughly equivalent to those of the Protestant minister or pastor in the local congregation. The bishops are, of course, all men.

¹²See Rodney Stark, “The Basis of Mormon Success: A Theoretical Application,” in *Latter-day Saints Social Life*, ed. James T. Duke (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), on relationships and conversion.

¹³On this phenomenon—highly documented, but still highly suspect in many traditional church circles—see Robert Wuthnow, “*I came away stronger*”: *How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). For a practical guide for introducing significant relational group ministry in the contemporary traditional American Christian congregation, see Patrick R. Keifert and David Stark, *People Together: The Next Generation of Small Group Ministry* (Christian Reformed Church, 2003). For insights into developing small group ministry in small churches, see Patrick R. Keifert, David Stark, and Judith Stack-Nelson, *The Small Church Small Group Book* (St. Paul: Church Innovations, 1998).

¹⁴Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 1996).

¹⁵This and the following factual material is drawn roughly from the summary of ward life by Davies, *Introduction*, 177–194; I find Davies’s summary of the desired and common behavior of LDS wards and stakes accurate; however, the observations are my own, except where I cite other sources.

Each bishop carries on his responsibilities on an unpaid basis, while sustaining himself and his family through secular employment. Each bishop is supported in this work by two counselors, who also work for approximately twenty hours a week without salary. In effect, each ward has at minimum two full-time ministers for the 300 to 700 members. The bishop reports to the stake president.

Interestingly enough, the weekly gathering does not have the bishop up front most of the time, in clear contrast to the typical Protestant worship service. Instead, a range of other leaders, or priests, lead the various activities, including worship. The bishop's responsibilities are more teaching and organizational than leading worship or preaching.

Today, since the reworked format of 1980, the gathering usually has three elements: (1) Sacrament Meeting; (2) Sunday School classes; (3) meetings of various organizations. The Sacrament Meeting is led by the Aaronic priesthood that includes young adult males, beginning in their teens. Sunday School classes are usually divided into age-appropriate formats, but other intergenerational formats do exist; the Monday home evening, which is a regular discipline in practicing Latter-day Saints' lives, uses an intergenerational approach.¹⁶ The ward is divided into various organizations, some long-standing, such as the Young Women's Group and the Relief Society for older women. Others are appropriate to the local circumstances. For example, the ward attended by our neighbors in graduate school was organized around the departments and schools of the University of Chicago.¹⁷

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One of the first differences I noticed about the organization of wards was the importance of priesthood. Priesthood was divided between the Aaronic and the Melchizedek. The Aaronic priesthood is made up of age-related offices: deacon (12–13), teacher (14–15), and priest (16–18). If boys (yes, not to make the point too often, it all applies to boys only) show appropriate responsibility in this priesthood, they are likely to be ordained into the order of Melchizedek, at around age 19, before they serve their two-year mission.¹⁸ This mission represents one of the

¹⁶The family home evening, usually on Mondays, was officially instituted in 1965 but practiced before that time, with some documentation going back to the 1930s. Although some critics find this “recent” development disingenuous, where it is practiced it seems to pass the sincerity and practicality test quite well.

¹⁷In addition to growing up in the West and serving congregations in Washington state and Wyoming, where we had regular contact with Latter-day Saints, our family developed a working and friendly relationship with a Mormon family during graduate school. We exchanged childcare, shopping, house sitting, and many other familial responsibilities typical of married graduate school life. In all of these instances, I have found Mormons to be very good neighbors and to be persons dedicated to many virtues that I, too, seek to practice. I also found them regularly, and sometimes past my comfort zone, to press my children to join theirs in religious activities.

¹⁸Before 1978 the order of Melchizedek was generally withheld from persons of dark skin, until a revelation to the then-Prophet and President of the LDS Church, Spencer W. Kimball: Davies, *Introduction*, 125 ff. The original pressure for this change has been attributed to growth of the church among the descendants of African slaves in Bra-

most effective ways of passing on the faith from one generation to another.¹⁹ If possible, the family carries the primary responsibility to support this mission.

In terms of traditional Christian practices and doctrine, this notion of priesthood is an aberration from which we can learn, one that adumbrates certain aspects of practice and doctrine in the ancient and Protestant Reformation church. Clearly, for example, the early church did not establish a priestly order along the lines of the temple cult of ancient Israel, but formed house-based congregations led by local leaders who certainly did not have the kind of education that would be the equivalent of a university degree.

Even after the establishment of Christianity as one of the legal religions of the ancient Roman Empire, the leadership of the congregation and its primary pastoral care was in the hands of the elders,²⁰ the *presbyteroi*. The congregation in Hippo, for example, might have had sixty people in worship with twelve of them designated as elders who were receiving local leadership development classes from their overseer, Bishop Aurelius Augustinus, who spent most of his time preparing sermons and biblical commentaries, or engaged in other activities that would support his primary role as a teacher and overseer of the elders. The bishop might have served this role for other local face-to-face communities, not unlike the role of the stake president in contemporary Mormon organization.

In more recent Christian tradition, the Protestant Reformation made much of the priesthood of all believers. And, contrary to its most popular interpretation in American religious circles, this did not mean that each person was his or her own priest but that we were priests for one another. Or so Luther meant by the priesthood of all believers. This need for one another underlined the relational and communal character of Christian practice and doctrine.

For missional and theological reasons, contemporary Christians would do well to reexamine the priesthood, its organization and its place within the doctrine of the church. This reexamination need not take the usual form of anticlericalism, so typical in Protestant circles, but might take the form of finding new ways to understand Christian vocation in and outside the practices of the Sunday services. Clearly, among the least developed and critically vital doctrines of the Lutheran Reformation are the notions of the priesthood of all believers and the doctrine of vocation, its partner for the place of the Christian in the world.

Without accepting the doctrinal system implied by LDS teaching, I am moved by the leadership practices of many Mormon wards to reconsider a number

zil and secondarily in sub-Saharan Africa and the USA. See Dale E. LeBaron, "Mormonism in Black Africa," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996).

¹⁹Whether an official policy or not, most LDS Church officials with whom I have had conversation clearly understand that the primary value of the two-year mission is in this turning of the children to the fathers, as they would put it, citing Mal 4:5–6. I wonder why it is that mainline Protestants so seldom practice this tradition of having young people serve some sort of mission. One need only look to this practice in Mennonite churches in North America and compare that to the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, for example, to see that this practice and its benefits need not be limited to Mormons.

²⁰In the LDS Church, once a man is ordained into the order of Melchizedek, he is called an elder.

of assumptions about my work as a teacher of the church—whether in the seminary classroom, online, or as a consultant in congregations and the systems that support them. However, it is not simply Mormon practice that intrigues me but its doctrinal development of the relation between divine and human agency in everyday life. Perhaps because Mormonism developed in Zion on the Great Salt Lake in such isolation from other nineteenth-century Adventist movements, perhaps because many of the assumptions about deity in modernity either seemed unacceptable or simply were not known by many of the early LDS leaders, they were able to explore much more active engagement of God in the everyday world than the dominant forms of pietism that remain the lifeblood of most Christian denominations in North America.²¹

TESTIMONY

For Mormons, the first Sunday of the month usually includes a testimony and fast meeting. The money that would have been spent on food is given to the church, usually above the tithe. Individuals also give oral testimony in the gathered community. Of course, this is hardly a unique LDS practice; in my experience and according to credible witnesses, this testimony practice is much like that found in traditional Christianity. One can usually predict who will give testimony and what the content is likely to be. Much of the testimony takes on a rhetorical shape and purpose that functions in a ritual manner. Nonetheless, the young get to hear their parents and grandparents speak of their faith; the old hear the old story told in new and young voices; they all turn their hearts to one another and are active participants in the shaping of their witness and its interpretation.

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This contrasts with most typical Protestant services where only the paid professionals speak and interpret the narrative of their life together. If we truly want our children to have faith and our faith to have children, we might want to provide for regular opportunities to learn how to speak about faith. While testimonial services have many drawbacks, they appear to continue to work for Mormons, supporting outcomes many other Christians desire.

This practice among Mormons, or its absence among many Christians in

²¹This topic alone could open up many fruitful lines of thought in the doctrine of God and the doctrine of vocation. For some Mormons who have tried to explore this area of thought, see Stirling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), and his *The Theological Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965). In the early 1980s Professor McMurrin, who taught both history and philosophy at the University of Utah, befriended me and pointed me into this most lively direction of reflection.

North America, leads me to wonder aloud how we believe that God makes God's self known across the generations. Further, I realize that many congregations exhibit strong resistance to introducing this practice, because they do not want to listen to the same old, tired, worn-out testimonies or listen to ignorant and inarticulate expressions of the faith²² or be expected to make their own testimony against their will.²³ Some of the emotional energy in this resistance reveals class consciousness, because such behavior often is identified with the peasant- and working-class religious traditions. The strongest emotions of those driving this resistance come from outright fear that they will be shamed. The power of shame in our congregations reveals a working theology, a sense that who we are and our limited or modest witness to faith is somehow shameful.

WORD OF WISDOM

One of the more controversial practices of the LDS Church is the Word of Wisdom, from which grows a Mormon dietary code. Over the decades, this Word of Wisdom, found in Doctrine and Covenants Section 89, became the basis for a number of dietary practices. Tobacco and alcohol were forbidden. Certain drinks beyond alcohol, including tea and coffee, were eventually put on the list, with later clarification that their caffeine content was the critical factor; this led to banning cola drinks.

Interestingly enough, as more citizens of the United States carry on lifestyles that are harmful to their health, and many others seek support groups and patterns of healthy living, churches like the LDS Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church enjoy significant growth. The health plans of most major denominations scramble to get their clients healthier as the crisis of unhealthy behavior among clergy and their families escalates.

Dietary laws, of course, have been rejected by Christians regarding salvation. Nonetheless, as a penultimate matter, parts of the Christian tradition have encouraged certain diets, including no meat on Fridays or abstinence from alcohol. The latter tradition crossed many denominational boundaries in the United States during the Prohibitionist movement. The LDS Church also rejects the notion that such dietary obedience saves the believer. However, for the Mormon who seeks exaltation into the celestial kingdom, such dietary practices have both temporal and spiritual benefits.

Clearly, the local practice of the Mormon ward that focuses on healthy living with practical resources aimed at home life might well serve as stimulus for similar practices in Christian congregations. Theologically, it has been long clear that one

²²Of course, these testimonies are likely to reveal substantial ignorance, confusion, and even outright false teaching. Can one imagine a better way for the local pastor, teacher, or bishop to gain insight into the faith life of the congregation on a regular basis than such candid testimony?

²³Often, I find this fear of the will being coerced into action out of the same lips that regularly condemn the practice of testimony as individualistic. They seem oblivious to their own individualism.

of the wounds of modernity²⁴ has been the rather large division between the practice of health care focused upon a “scientific” model of life and the “faith-based” models that eschew engagement with the modern medical community. Healthier models that seek to heal this wound of modernity in our practice and doctrine of health care belong in the congregation. Though such innovation is already taking place in many congregations, most congregations continue to further the wound of modernity regarding health.

TITHING AND MISSION DEVELOPMENT

The tithing tradition in the ward comes from Doctrine and Covenants 119. While the tradition is variously interpreted throughout the history and geography of the LDS Church, it generally refers to ten percent of the actual family income. The actual number is determined in a conversation between the head of household and the bishop of the ward.²⁵ In most cases this money is sent to the First Presidency of the LDS Church for further development of the church; expenses for the ward are gathered above this tithe. New stake houses are paid for by the First Presidency, and the local ward pays them back over time. Mission development, while locally led by the presidency of the stake, is funded from this central source. New wards can easily arise without significant financial burden and with the resources of a larger congregation, the stake, available to them at no immediate cost.

One practice that first struck me as different in Mormon wards from most congregations I knew was how they talked about money. The discussion of money took place in a matter-of-fact manner during the business meeting time each Sunday. Since more than half of those present were leading some part of the ward organization, they were immediately aware of the financial needs and the place that need had within the vision and mission of the ward.

This immediate and dispersed sharing of information regarding financial need is joined to the language of mission of the ward, stake, and greater church. The tie between the First Presidency and the local presidency is regular and plain. The power of this matter-of-fact, immediate, and widely shared responsibility of money and financial matters does not bog down the ward; rather, it lessens the chance that high levels of distrust develop regarding how money is spent.²⁶

The contrast between this set of practices regarding money and that of most Christian parishes boggles the mind. In the latter there is typically almost no or only euphemistic talk about money. Too many congregations live with the inheritance of a Christendom notion that money belongs in the hands of the leadership and is best attended to in private. It takes care of itself somehow. The most painful

²⁴I borrow this term from the Anglo-American philosopher of science, Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁵Howard D. Swainston, “Tithing,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 1481.

²⁶The level of trust is relatively high, despite the fact that the financial records and investment policies of the LDS Church are as highly protected from public knowledge as those of the Vatican, or perhaps more so.

contrast is seen in how few members of most congregations share the financial responsibility.²⁷ More strategically significant, however, is the failure to connect money and mission on a regular basis. Given the emerging wisdom that money follows mission—and I see very little evidence to doubt this wisdom—this failure probably costs congregations more cash than any other financial practice.

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The beginning of a theological analysis begins with the relationship between money and Christian values, since money is at its root simply a way of transferring value. This basic economic reality seems far removed from Christian teaching and practice in most congregations. Somehow, the economic world, the world of money, is either too public, secular, and dirty to discuss on a regular basis in the local Christian community or it is too private and personal to be the business of that community. Perhaps there is no greater example of the wound of modernity, the divide between the secular and sacred, the distance between the private and the public, than these practices regarding money in congregations. The theological work to be done here is critical, deep, and vital to the life of the church and the world.

BLESSING

At the head of the family organization in LDS tradition is the place of the blessing. In the paternalistic world of Mormonism, this practice of blessing belongs to those fathers who hold the priesthood of Melchizedek. Growing out of Doctrine and Covenants, the tradition of familial blessing is common and thorough in every aspect of family and ward life. It functions in ordinary moments, such as meals and bedtime, before and after travel, and in times of illness, and in extraordinary and high ritual moments, such as baptism, marriage, and ordination. As an outsider, I did not at first see the importance of blessing in the day-to-day life of my Mormon neighbors. Only after witnessing some extraordinary events, like being with parents at the bedside of their terminally ill child, did I begin to trace the practices there to the day-to-day importance of blessing. As a friend of mine who heads a hospice care unit notes, “People tend to deal with death the way they deal with life.”

At the heart of this practice is the common sense among practicing Mormons of God’s presence in their lives and the power of the priesthood—usually their father, an uncle, or a brother—to make that blessing of God active in their own life. This blessing powerfully ties the high focus on human agency and moral responsi-

²⁷We often find that very high proportions of congregational budgets come from a very small number of households. It is not unusual to have 7–15% of the congregation provide 75–90% of the gift income in congregations with whom Church Innovations consultants have worked.

bility to the ever present power of God and the highly developed sense of community of Latter-day Saints, in which each member participates in exaltation in the celestial kingdom.

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, we see the moorings of Mormonism in Adventist, perfectionist, and restorationist nineteenth-century, “freedom’s ferment,” religious movements. The immediacy of God’s advent through blessing, the desire for exaltation and perfection, the restoration of the one true church, and the affirmation of the perfected free will capable of creating Zion on earth are all present in this sense of blessing in ordinary and extraordinary times.

Strangely, this characteristic of blessing often shows itself also in Christian congregations that enjoy missional renewal. They experience an immediacy of God’s presence in their lives, personally and communally. Although many of these congregations follow a paternalistic pattern, not all do. I have known and studied congregations who reject a paternalistic and patriarchal notion of blessing and household and who, nonetheless, enjoy a vibrant practice of blessing in ordinary and extraordinary times.

Theologically, the doctrine of blessing has known significant revival from many different sources in recent generations. That doctrinal development, associated with the theologians who have explored the doctrine of blessing, seems to be well in advance of the practice in many congregations.²⁸ Liturgical renewal, especially the use of the occasional services, has enhanced the practice of blessing in liturgical churches. Congregations influenced by charismatic renewal are very familiar with the practice of blessing. Nonetheless, this practice and the understanding of God’s desire for our good and weal remains well hidden and neglected in most congregations.

PRAYER AND TRUTH

From the beginning, the LDS Church instructed the seeker to take what they had been taught and test its truth in prayer. This appeal to personal testing of the truth remains a critical part of ward and stake practice. Practicing members of the ward are regularly asked personally and in family and Sunday School classes to test in prayer the truth of what has been taught and studied.

This tying of prayer and testing for truth initially struck me as hokey and untrustworthy, likely to be subject to individualistic enthusiasm. And, of course, it can be and is. However, setting aside a defensive posture for learning and hospitality’s sake, I began to appreciate the power of this practice for overcoming one of the most debilitating realities in congregations with which I work.

Most members of Christian congregations do not test for themselves what they have learned. They do not even believe that what is taught and practiced at church fits rightly in the category of truth to be tested. Most are practical relativists.

²⁸I think of work on creation and blessing by such theological scholars as Gustaf Wingren and Claus Westermann and their students.

At best, theology and religious claims are practical and useful, hopefully supportive of life; they are a dimension of private experience but not a claim on all of reality. So why bother with testing their truthfulness?

“most members of Christian congregations do not believe that what is taught and practiced at church fits rightly in the category of truth to be tested”

As a price of the wound of modernity, too many congregations have forsaken their identity as communities of truth seekers. Having rejected fundamentalist models of truth, they have not found appropriate models and practices for truth seeking. So much more can and should be said here but neither space nor time in this essay permit.²⁹

Whatever faults might be found in the doctrine and practice of prayer and truth testing among LDS members, they have not forsaken the deep commitment to seeking truth. The entire Mormon cosmology is joined together through such familial prayer and testing of truth. Beginning with the prayer of the Heavenly Father and Mother who procreate spirit children initially, through fathers and mothers who procreate and thus incarnate these spirit children, on to future generations who will join the present and past generations in exaltation, the familial prayer holds everything together.

Despite all these differences, the typical unchurched or even under-churched American sees the local ward as a form of American Protestantism.³⁰ And many Mormons experience it this way. Depending upon the location, anywhere from 15 to 85 percent of ward membership may not experience the higher and more characteristically Mormon distinctives that are associated more directly with the private rituals and practices of the temple. Within temple practices and doctrines the profoundly different and characteristically LDS Church takes shape.

FAMILY IN STAKE AND TEMPLE

The whole of LDS Church life might be understood as a kind of a “church within a church.”³¹ To understand this, it helps to imagine the most public form of LDS religious practice, the ward and stake—that most like the cultural Protestantism of its historical sources—as the chapel form of the LDS Church. This form of

²⁹For more on this, see Patrick R. Keifert, “The Bible and Theological Education: A Report on a Journey,” in *Unsettling Scriptures, Surprising Faith: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, ed. Patrick Miller and Beverly Gaventa (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming 2004).

³⁰Many Mormons think of themselves in this way. In interviews with mainline Protestants in Mormon territory (Utah, southern Idaho, and Wyoming), many who have attended ward meetings find them a conservative variety of Protestantism. Even mainline Protestant clergy have described them in this manner. Indeed, I interviewed two Lutheran pastors who had joined the LDS Church who admitted that it was quite a while before they began to understand the rather profound differences—differences, obviously, which they then found preferable to Lutheranism.

³¹Davies, *Introduction*, 171.

church is face-to-face, experienced weekly, and carries on the daily interaction with the family that remains the center of church life. The more private, indeed, secret form of LDS religious practice takes place in the temple.³²

At one time, there was only one temple, and it moved eventually to Zion on the Great Salt Lake.³³ However, despite the fact that Joseph Smith's vision was the restoration of the true church on earth at Zion, the developing Latter-day Saints created temples in many locations. Indeed, in many metropolitan areas, even outside the West, one can easily see these prominently located sacred buildings. After these buildings are built, a period of open house is common. Local clergy, especially, are strongly encouraged to tour the new temple. After it is dedicated, however, only those with the endorsements of their bishop and stake president can enter and participate in the rites appropriate to this church within the church.³⁴

Practices and rites associated with the temple are critical for understanding the core distinctives of LDS religion, especially what is referred to as exaltation and understood to supersede traditional Christian salvation while at the same time fully encompassing it. Precisely at this juncture of doctrine and temple practices we see the creativity of the LDS Church and its least understood elements. One way to understand this doctrinal creativity is to focus on the difference between salvation and exaltation in Mormon doctrine and practice.

In Mormon theology salvation, how God saves us, follows common Christian doctrine, at least in its language. LDS teaching holds that all are saved by Jesus Christ.³⁵ Through his once-and-for-all atonement, Jesus frees all individuals from the power of evil and death and grants to them resurrection into eternal life. This atonement belongs to all those who are baptized into the church, including those who are baptized after death by vicarious baptism in the temple. In this sense, LDS teaching and practice is that of a universalistic religion, allowing for the opportunity for all persons, even those who are dead, to be saved.

Salvation, however, though allowing for the universal resurrection of the dead, remains conditional upon repentance and faith, "both expressed through baptism and confirmation."³⁶ Further, baptism allows those baptized to be free to seek exaltation. Exaltation is the process of achieving the celestial kingdom follow-

³²I borrow this analogy of chapel and temple from a number of sources, but it is used also in Davies, *Introduction*.

³³Other temples were built in Kirkland, Ohio, and Navoo, Illinois, on the journey that eventually brought the Brigham Young movement to Salt Lake City.

³⁴For a fuller description of the temple cult within LDS history and contemporary practice, see Davies, *Introduction*, 195–224.

³⁵Note, however, that for those who have moved beyond salvation and been ordained and received higher office and endowments, it becomes necessary for them to offer their own blood as sacrifice, should they commit some heinous sin, like murder. Out of this LDS tradition, the option of death by firing squad remains in legal effect in Utah. See Davies, *Introduction*, 106ff., for a short but fuller explanation of this very interesting and distinctive Mormon doctrine and practice regarding blood atonement. For a bizarre but powerful working out of this doctrine in real-life America, read Norman Mailer's account of Gary Mark Gilmore's insistence upon execution by firing squad for the death of two convenience store clerks in armed robberies netting a little over \$100 (*The Executioner's Song* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1979]).

³⁶Davies, *Introduction*, 104.

ing one's resurrection. Such achievement, above the terrestrial plain of afterlife, requires receiving ordination, marriage, and endowment rites, the latter two of which are only achieved in temple rites and through the *family*.³⁷

As this discussion makes clear—though this remains somewhat odd to the traditional Christian imagination—the LDS Church is really two different churches, a church within a church, a public one and a private one. The public one looks altogether familiar to the typical American; the other, despite the fact that it is patently present in its public architecture, is quite private. What holds these two churches together is the family. The family puts together the local expression of the church with the more regional, and finally international, expression of the church. Through the family, the individual moves through salvation to exaltation. The family, through ancestral studies and baptism of the dead, becomes the tie across time as well. The family ties the heavenly and the earthly, the whole of humanity, indeed, all of Mormon cosmology, together.

LAST THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

As an orthodox Christian, I find the distinction between salvation and exaltation and the creation of a church within a church to stray from the central and abiding good news of the presence of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, for the sake of the world. This essay has not been interested in either defending orthodox Christianity or criticizing the

“consistently, LDS doctrine and practices successfully reach modern persons who seek to heal the tremendous damage done to person, family, and community by late-modern capitalism”

LDS Church on that basis. Instead, it has sought to understand, indeed, to be hospitable to Mormon doctrine and practices, especially at the local face-to-face church level. I have sought to be theologically interested in and hospitable to their lived congregational life, to imagine that God is up to something amongst them; I have assumed that, as a Christian theologian, I might test the truth of their practices and doctrines better through such hospitable theological interest. Further, I have tried to set aside my natural distrust of—and often disgust with—many of their doctrines and practices, especially their patriarchal notion of family and church, and wonder with you, the reader, what we might learn from them.

If I were to summarize such learning in a very broad brushstroke, I would point to the continued and emerging value of the Christian doctrines of creation and law—both the blessing and curse of creation and law. In each attempt to open a theological topic, I found the topics of creation and law present as a resource for

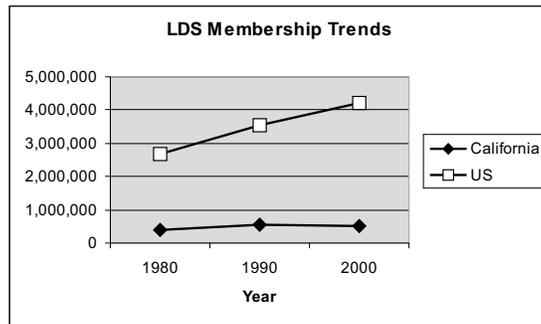
³⁷Ibid., 104–105 and 195ff.

healing the wound of modernity and as a way of faithfully moving forward into our rapidly changing postmodern or late-modern world.

Consistently, LDS doctrine and practices successfully reach modern persons who seek to heal the tremendous damage done to person, family, and community by late-modern capitalism. The eldest son of our grieving Lutheran father and mother, and his new bride, are typical examples of adult converts to Mormonism. Their traditional middle-class Lutheran congregations—many more of those in Minneapolis than Mormon wards—did not offer them a sufficient tie between creation and law, a sufficient insight into God’s seeking to bless them in economic and familial life, or into the common practices of familial and congregational life, that they felt they needed to sustain a healthy family.

Without making the patriarchal family the center and source of salvation and exaltation, Christians could provide such common practices of familial and congregational life. We have in our common Christian heritage an abundance of doctrine and practice with which to do so. We have in the LDS community some delightful hints and habits upon which we might build. ⊕

APPENDIX



LDS MEMBERSHIP TRENDS			
	1980 ³⁸	1990 ³⁹	2000 ⁴⁰
California	405,441	533,741	529,575
US	2,684,744	3,540,820	4,224,026

PATRICK R. KEIFERT is professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary and president and director of research at the Church Innovations Institute, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

³⁸Bernard Quinn, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1980: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported by 111 Church Bodies* (Atlanta, GA: Glenmary Research Center, 1982).

³⁹Online at <http://www.thearda.com/RCMS/2000/USReport2000.html> (cited 1/17/04).

⁴⁰Ibid.