

Mormonism and the “Great Apostasy” Theory

by Pat Madrid

ISSUE: What is the best way to respond to Mormon missionaries when they come to my door? How can I best share the Catholic Faith with them while refuting the errors contained in Mormonism?

RESPONSE: When Mormon missionaries come to the door, it is important to remember that any discussion with them must be guided by charity. With that in mind, the best way to approach a discussion is to have your Mormon visitors focus on defending their claim of a “Great Apostasy” in the early Church. The truth is that there is no historical evidence to substantiate the claim of this alleged apostasy. The existence of the Mormon Church is entirely dependent on this theory and, if Mormons are unable to provide proof for this particular theory, all other issues become irrelevant.

DISCUSSION: One Saturday afternoon, my 12-year-old son Timothy stuck his head in the door of my study and grinned, “Dad, there are Mormon missionaries on our front porch.”

I grinned back. “Tell them to wait. I’ll be right there.”

Stopping to grab my Bible on the way out, I whispered a quick prayer to Christ, asking Him to guide me in my discussion with the missionaries and help me help them come closer to the truth. These young men had come to my home to convert me to their religion, but I saw them as potential converts to the Catholic Faith, and I had to rely on Christ to be an effective witness to the truth.

We sat in the living room sipping ice water and chatted for nearly an hour. The discussion was friendly and low-key, revolving around several points of disagreement between Mormonism and the Catholic Church. When they stood to leave, we shook hands and they agreed to come back for another visit. They asked if they could leave some literature with me, and I said, “Sure, as long as you’d be willing to read a little booklet I’d like to give you.” I gave each of them a Catholic apologetics tract and invited them to come back.

No doubt you’ve had Mormons visit your home. Maybe you’re not in the habit of inviting them inside for a chat, but you know they come with a specific goal in mind: to convert you and your family to Mormonism. These missionaries are trained to challenge Catholics on a series of issues, so it’s important that you have solid answers to their questions, as well as some tough questions to pose to them.

Mormonism’s main argument against the Catholic Church is its claim that there was a total apostasy of the early Church and that Catholicism is the apostate, counterfeit of the original. Mormons disagree with Catholics on many key doctrines (e.g., the Trinity, heaven and hell, salvation, etc.), but they recognize the antiquity of the Catholic Church. They understand that the only other Church which can make a plausible claim to being the original Church—the Church Christ established—is the Catholic Church. The Protestant churches, Mormons are quick to point out, can only trace themselves as far back as the beginning of the Reformation (circa 1517), so none of them can be the true Church. But the Catholic Church can easily demonstrate its existence and continuity of doctrine back to the time of the first Christians.

So for Mormons, proving there was an apostasy is of absolute importance if they’re to be successful in discrediting the Catholic Church. They approach Catholics with this in mind, so Catholics should be prepared to engage them on this subject before all others. To lay the groundwork, here’s a brief look at the Mormon Church and how it started.

Background on Mormonism

The Mormon Church has 12 million members and is expanding rapidly. At the current rate of growth, demographers predict that there will be over 150 million members by the end of the 21st century. The Mormon Church gets new members primarily through its aggressive missionary program that operates in most countries throughout the world. At any given time, there are at least 40,000 young Mormon men, between the ages of 19 and 22, who are knocking on doors in neighborhoods throughout the world seeking converts. Most of these converts are Catholics, and most of these Catholics are being scooped up in Latin America. Mexico, for example, now has over 1 million Mormons, and this number is rising steadily.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the official name for the Mormon Church, was founded and organized in 1831 by Joseph Smith, a rural farmhand who claimed to be receiving visions and revelation from God the Father, Jesus Christ, and various angels. Although he had received a minimal formal education, Smith was by all accounts brilliant and had an immense native intelligence that was supplemented by his voracious reading and a gift for telling stories and preaching. Tall and handsome, his charisma and keen intelligence were magnetic to many around him. Part of Smith's allure was his sheer earnestness, as he proclaimed to anyone who would listen that he had been chosen by God as the "prophet of the Restoration."

Smith claimed that in 1820, when he was 15 years old, God the Father and Jesus Christ had appeared to him in the woods near his home in Palmyra, New York, and gave him the revelation that there had been a total apostasy of the Church and that he would restore the gospel to its original purity. (Mormons refer to this episode as the First Vision.)

Besides claiming to receive direct revelation from God and His angels, Smith claimed to have been entrusted with a new body of scripture—the Book of Mormon—and that he was empowered by God to translate the "Reformed Egyptian" in which this long-hidden scripture had been originally inscribed on metal plates by ancient prophets. The Book of Mormon is a compilation of 15 books allegedly written by Jewish prophets who lived in the New World between the years of 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. Once copies of the book of Mormon were printed and circulated, he began preaching a set of unusual doctrines that he claimed had been part of the original Christian Church but had been lost in the great apostasy, which had engulfed the early Church and quickly extinguished it.

Rather than attempt to forge an historical link with the original Church, Smith styled himself the "prophet of the restoration" and argued that his restored church contained the "fullness of the gospel," one that includes such doctrines as:

- Blacks and Indians were given dark skin as evidence of a "curse" sent by God;
- God the Father was once a mortal man who lived on a planet near the star "Kolob," he served and worshipped the god who ruled that planet and, after his death, he was judged worthy by his god to become a god himself;
- Salvation is based on works, especially by performing temple rituals on behalf of the dead (e.g., baptism for the dead, proxy marriages, endowments, etc.);
- Jesus Christ was the "spirit brother" of Lucifer and, during his ministry on earth, was a polygamous husband who fathered several children;
- God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct gods.

There are other unusual doctrines that Smith claimed were "restored" to the earth by him, but the primary one was the "Great Apostasy" of the true Church.

The late Bruce R. McConkie, one of Mormonism's most belligerent apologists and general authorities, said, "This universal apostasy began in the days of the ancient apostles themselves; and it was known to and foretold by them. . . . With the loss of the Gospel, the nations of the earth went into a moral eclipse called the Dark Ages. Apostasy was universal. . . . And this darkness still prevails except among those who have come to a knowledge of the restored Gospel" (*Mormon Doctrine*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966 edition, pp. 43-44).

McConkie spoke plainly about Mormonism's attitude toward the Catholic Church: "It is also to the Book of Mormon to which we turn for the plainest description of the Catholic Church as the great and abominable church. Nephi saw this 'church was most abominable above all other churches' in [his] vision. He 'saw the devil that he was the foundation of it,' and also the murders, wealth, harlotry, persecutions, and evil desires that historically have been part of this satanic organization. He saw that this most abominable of all churches was founded after the day of Christ and His apostles; that it took away from the gospel of the Lamb many covenants and many plain and precious parts; that it had perverted the right ways of the Lord; that it had deleted many teachings from the Bible; that this Church was the mother of harlots; and that finally, the Lord would again restore the gospel of salvation" (*Ibid.*, 1958 edition, pp. 314-315).

The apostasy that never happened

Mormons don't claim to know exactly when the apostasy took place, but they warn that the Catholic Church is a satanic counterfeit of the original Church, a corrupt phoenix that emerged from its ashes (cf. 2 Nephi 28; Mormon 8:28-38; Doctrine and Covenants 10:56).

Mormons will try to make their case by citing biblical passages such as Mt. 24:4-12; Mk. 13:21-23; Lk. 21:7-8; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; 2 Tim. 3:1-7; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; and Jude 17-19. Notice that several of these verses say "many will fall away," but none says or implies that there would ever be a *complete* apostasy of the Church. There's no evidence to support the total apostasy theory.

The verses listed above describe an apostasy in the "end times" or the "*latter days*," as the King James Version renders it. This is another disproof of the theory of a total apostasy. The Mormons claim the apostasy took place early on, definitely by the early third century. But the second and third centuries were not the "latter days." Joseph Smith name his religion the "Church of Jesus Christ of the *Latter-Day* Saints," warning his converts that they were living in the latter days. So, ironically, these verses fail even just for the simple fact that they refer to an era that is at least 1800 years *after* the time the New Testament was written.

Christ guaranteed that the Church would never be overcome. Both He and the Apostles speak of this frequently. You can present the Catholic case to a Mormon by following this step-by-step presentation of biblical evidence.

First, read the passages that speak of the Church being Christ's own Body (e.g., Rom. 12:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 3:4-6; 5:21-32; Col. 1:18). Christ is the head of His Church (cf. Eph. 4:15-16) and He indwells each member of His body, the members enjoying an organic spiritual union with Him (cf. Jn. 15:1-8). So it's inconceivable that Christ would allow His Body to succumb as a whole to Satan's attacks.

Second, point out that St. John reassures us that Christ is more powerful than Satan (cf. 1 Jn. 4:4). Then read 1 Tim. 3:15, which describes the Church as the "household of God." Or, to put it another way, the Church is the "house that Christ built." That house cannot be pillaged by Satan because "no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then, he can plunder his house" (Mk. 3:27; cf. Mt. 12:29). Jesus Christ is the "strong man" who guards His household, the Catholic Church. While it's true that the devil can conquer individual Christians, who commit mortal sin and cut themselves off from union with Christ (cf. Rom. 11:22; Gal. 5:4; 1 Jn. 5:16-17), the Church as a whole is preserved by Christ, who promised, "Behold, I will be with you until the end of the world" (Mt. 28:20). We are told that the "wheat and chaff" (good and bad) will be side by side in the Church until the end (Mt. 13:24-43, 47-50).

Third, remind the Mormon that Christ promised St. Peter, "You are Rock, and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18-19). Clearly, Christ would not command His followers to do something He Himself could not do. Remember what He promised His followers: "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rains fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But *it did not collapse*; it had been set solidly on a rock (Mt. 7:24-25). It was no coincidence that Christ promised He would build His Church "on this rock" (see also Heb. 11:10 and 1 Pet. 2:6-8).

Jesus fails the first time

Mormonism stands or falls on the premise that Christ was a failure, that His attempts at building a Church flopped. And if they flopped, He would be made to look foolish for saying, “Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him and say, ‘This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish’” (Lk. 15:28-30).

Fourth, besides investing the Church with His own authority to teach, make disciples, and administer the sacraments (cf. Mt. 28:20; Mt. 18:18; Lk. 10:16), Christ promised the protection and guidance of the Holy Spirit: “I will ask the Father and He will send you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. *I will not leave you orphans* (John 14:16-18; emphasis added).

If the Mormons are right about the total apostasy, Christ *did* leave us as orphans for over 1600 years. This means He was either a liar or a fool, making promises he couldn’t keep. But Christ is God, He is all powerful and He keeps His promises. His Church cannot sink into a total apostasy.

Jesus fails the second time

Smith also claimed that after His Resurrection, Christ appeared in South America to the Nephites—a group of Jews who, Smith claimed, had migrated to the New World between 600 and 592 B.C. (cf. 1 Nephi, chapters 1-18). He organized a parallel church there (somewhere in South America, Mormons claim), which was a mirror image of the church in Palestine. But Christ’s second attempt at church building failed as miserably as His first, and soon His South American church collapsed under the weight of evil members and pagan influences, drifting into complete apostasy (cf. 3 Nephi, chapters 11-28).

Practical advice when dealing with Mormons

Besides highlighting the above passages in your Bible, cross reference them with the Catechism for ease of use. Read the Catechism’s sections on the nature of the Church, including its indefectibility, that is, its inability to teach contrary to Christ’s teaching (cf. Catechism nos., 669, 672, 737-768, 779-822).

Pray for the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Be charitable and patient; don’t be sarcastic or mean-spirited. Present the Catholic case in a friendly but firm way and be ready to give out good apologetics literature that will explain things in greater detail.

When Mormons come to the door, make their apostasy theory the focal point of the discussion. Tell them you’ll discuss other issues provided they can prove there was a total apostasy. If they can’t, you’re not interested in whatever else the Mormon Church has to say. After all, if the Great Apostasy didn’t happen, Mormonism has no reason for existence, since there’d be no need for a restoration.

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By What Authority?; Mark P. Shea; \$7.95 • CUF Member . . . \$6.95.

Theology for Beginners; Frank J. Sheed; \$9.99 • CUF Member . . . \$8.99.

ARTICLES:

“Cults, Movements, and World Religions,” Mary Woodard, *Lay Witness*, May 1997; \$0.75.

“Cults: The Threat is Real,” Mary Woodard, *Lay Witness*, June 1997; \$0.75.

“The ‘Jesus’ of the Cults,” Mary Woodard, *Lay Witness*, July/August 1997; \$0.75.

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, S.J., *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

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