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## Mormonism, Democracy, and the Urgent Need for Evangelical Thinking

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Predictably, Mormonism is in the news again. The presence of two members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints among contenders for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination ensured that it was only a matter of time before Evangelicals, along with other Americans, began to talk openly about what this means for the nation, the church, and the stewardship of political responsibility in the voting booth.



There are numerous ways to frame these questions wrongly. Our responsibility as evangelical Christians is to think seriously and biblically about these issues. The first temptation is to reduce all of these issues to one question. We must address the question of Mormonism as a worldview and judge it by the Bible and historic Christian doctrine. But this does not automatically determine the second question — asking how Mormon identity should inform our political decisions. Nevertheless, for evangelical Christians, our concern must start with theology. Is Mormonism just a distinctive denomination of Christianity?

The answer to that question is definitive. Mormonism does not claim to be just another

denomination of Christianity. To the contrary, the central claim of Mormonism is that Christianity was corrupt and incomplete until the restoration of the faith with the advent of the Latter-Day Saints and their scripture, *The Book of Mormon*. Thus, it is just a matter of intellectual honesty to take Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, at his word when he claimed that true Christianity did not exist from the time of the Apostles until the reestablishment of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods on May 15, 1829.

From a Christian perspective, Mormonism is a new religion, complete with its own scripture, its own priesthood, its own rituals, and its own teachings. Most importantly, those teachings are a repudiation of historic Christian orthodoxy — and were claimed to be so from the moment of Mormonism's founding forward. Mormonism rejects orthodox Christianity as the very argument for its own existence, and it clearly identifies historic Christianity as a false faith.

Mormonism starts with an understanding of God that rejects both monotheism and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Mormon concept of God includes many gods, not one. Furthermore, Mormonism teaches that we are now what God once was and are becoming what He now is. This is in direct conflict with historic Christianity.

Mormonism rejects the Bible as the sole and sufficient authority for the faith, and insists that *The Book of Mormon* and other authoritative Latter-Day Saints writings constitute God's final revelation. Furthermore, the authority in Mormonism is mediated through a human priesthood, through whom God is claimed to speak directly and authoritatively to the church. Nothing makes the distinction between Mormonism and historic Christianity more clear than the experience of reading *The Book of Mormon*. The very subtitle of *The Book of Mormon — Another Testament of Jesus Christ* — makes one of Mormonism's central claims directly and candidly: That we need another authority to provide what is lacking in the New Testament.

The Mormon doctrine of sin is not that of biblical Christianity, nor is its teaching concerning salvation. Rather than teaching that the death of Christ is alone sufficient for the forgiveness of sins, Mormonism presents a scheme of salvation that amounts to the progressive deification of the believer. According to Mormonism, sinners are not justified by faith alone, but also by works of righteousness and obedience. Mormonism's teachings concerning Jesus Christ start with a radically different understanding of the Virgin Birth and proceed to a fundamentally different understanding of Christ's work of salvation.

By its very nature, Mormonism borrows Christian themes, personalities, and narratives. Nevertheless, it rejects what orthodox Christianity affirms and it affirms what orthodox Christianity rejects. It is not orthodox Christianity in a new form or another branch of the Christian tradition. By its own teachings and claims, it rejects any claim of continuity with orthodox Christianity. Insofar as an individual Mormon holds to the teachings of the Latter-

Day Saints, he or she repudiates biblical Christianity. There are, no doubt, many Mormons who are not fully aware of the teachings of their church. Nevertheless, the doctrines and teachings of the LDS church are there for all to see.

It is neither slander nor condescension to state clearly that Mormonism is not Christianity. Taking Mormonism on its own terms, one finds a comprehensive set of teachings and doctrines that are self-consciously set against historic Christianity. The larger world may be confused about this, but biblical Christians cannot make this error, for we are certain that the consequences are eternal.

So, how do we move from this knowledge to the question of our social and political responsibility? Can a faithful Christian vote for a Mormon candidate?

It is on this question that Evangelicals must think forcefully, faithfully . . . and fast. We need to recognize that we are asking this question from a privileged historical and political context. For most of our nation's history, voters have chosen among presidential candidates who were identified, to one degree or another, with some form of Protestant Christianity. To date, for example, America has had only one Roman Catholic president and one Jewish candidate for vice president as a major party nominee.

It can be argued that our contemporary political context puts greater emphasis on the religious identity of candidates at all levels than has ever been experienced in American history. Both major political parties have sought various elements of the religious electorate and have developed strategies accordingly.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with Evangelicals stating a desire to vote for candidates for public office who most closely identify with our own beliefs and worldview. Given the importance of the issues at stake and the central role of worldview in the framing of political positions and policies, this intuition is both understandable and right. Likewise, we would naturally expect that adherents of other worldviews would also gravitate in political support to candidates who most fully share their own worldviews.

At the same time, competence for public office is also an important Christian concern, as is made clear in Romans 13. Christians, along with the general public, are not well served by political leaders who, though identifying as Christians, are incompetent. The Reformer Martin Luther is often quoted as saying that he would rather be ruled by a competent Turk (Muslim) than an incompetent Christian. We cannot prove that Luther actually made the statement, but it well summarizes an important Christian wisdom.

Furthermore, Christians in other lands and in other political contexts have had to think through these questions, sometimes under urgent and difficult circumstances. Christian citizens of Turkey, for example, must choose among Muslim candidates and parties when

voting. Voters in many western states in the United States often have to choose among Mormon candidates. They vote for a Mormon or they do not vote at all.

Furthermore, we must be honest and acknowledge that there are non-Christians or non-evangelicals who share far more of our worldview and policy concerns than some others who identify as Christians. The stewardship of our vote demands that we support those candidates who most clearly and consistently share our worldview and combine these commitments with the competence to serve both faithfully and well.

In a fallen world, political questions are always contextual questions. With fear and trembling, matched with faithful biblical commitments, Christians must support and vote for candidates who will most faithfully and effectively meet these expectations. We must choose between real flesh-and-blood candidates, and not theoretical constructs.

Given all this, we would expect that, under normal circumstances, Mormon voters will support candidates who most fully represent their worldview and concerns. Given the distribution of Mormons in the United States, this means that many Mormons (who would probably prefer to vote for a Mormon candidate), often vote for an evangelical or a Roman Catholic candidate. The reverse is also true. Evangelicals in many parts of the United States vote eagerly for Roman Catholic candidates with whom we share so many policy concerns, and this is true also in reverse. In an increasingly diverse America, we will be faced with very different choices than we have faced in the past.

None of this settles the question of whom Evangelicals should support in the 2012 presidential race. Beyond this, those who support any one candidate for the Republican nomination must, if truly committed to electing a president who most shares their worldview and policy concerns, end up supporting the candidate in the general election who fits that description.

We are facing what are, for America's Evangelicals, new questions. These questions will call for our most careful, biblical, and faithful thinking. We need to start thinking urgently — long before we enter the voting booth.

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