

The Most Holy Trinity Sunday

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One way to understand your own faith better is to learn about what others believe, and so I've been reading a bit about the Mormons. I chose the Latter Day Saints for Trinity Sunday because of a decision a few years back by the Catholic Church that Mormon baptism was not valid Christian baptism because, although they do baptize with water and in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, their concept of God and Trinity are so different from the standard Christian doctrine that it is a different God.

This did not go down well with Mormons, who in many respects are excellent people, and natural allies in the culture wars of our day. They regard themselves as Christians; believe in God and in Jesus as savior. So who gets to decide who's a Christian and who isn't? That is a good question, deserving a respectful answer. Important to note, right away, that the Church wasn't out looking for someone to offend. The question of Mormon baptism came up because in certain circumstances it makes a difference whether or not someone is baptized. For example, if a Mormon and Catholic are preparing for marriage. But of interest today is what Mormons believe, how it differs from our belief, and the sources of our respective faiths.

Well, what is it that Mormons believe about God? I didn't have time to read the Book of Mormon for myself, or any of the other books that they regard as divinely inspired, having authority equal to the Bible. But here's what I learned from a review of several web sources, being careful to include Mormon sources.

According to Mormon belief:

++ the universe is eternal, has no beginning or end, so God did not create all things out of nothing but simply ordered already existing elements

++ the Father created the Son in his image, and they both have physical bodies of flesh and bone. This is why the Bible says that we are in God's image. We are, literally and physically.

++ the Father once existed as a human being, and he became God by perfect obedience to eternal laws. We too can become gods in the same way, with the help of a savior, Jesus Christ.

++ one branch of the Latter Day Saints believes in a heavenly Mother, who is the wife of the heavenly Father, making God not a Trinity but a Quaternity, but most Mormons don't seem to accept this.

These beliefs are quite different from what has been Christian orthodox belief. So where do they come from? From Joseph Smith originally, as elaborated and adjusted by later

leaders.

Joseph Smith was born in 1805 in Vermont, but grew up near Palmyra, New York, just east of Rochester. There had been so many religious revivals through the area that it was known as the “burned-over district”. As a young man, Smith was puzzling over which church to join. They competed with one another, yet each claimed Scripture alone as their authority, and each emphasized a direct, personal, emotional encounter with Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Before long Smith began to have visionary revelations of his own, which told him that all the Christian churches had turned aside from the gospel, but that through him the original true form of Christianity would be restored. People who were attracted to Smith simply accepted his claims to be a prophet, receiving new revelations from God.

Beside the inspired visions, Smith also claimed that an angel led him to discover golden plates engraved with an unknown language, which he was able to read by means of special “seer stones” that he looked through, like spectacles. Several followers are said to have signed affidavits that Smith had shown them the plates, but they could only take Smith's word that the plates were what he said they were, and how he had found them. Smith later said that the angel took the plates back.

According to a non-Mormon source, the plates disappeared around the time when some former partners of Smith in treasure hunting heard about the plates and wanted their share of the found gold.

So, it all comes down to what Joseph Smith said, claiming to be a latter-day prophet receiving new revelations from God. These revelations also recovered passages which had allegedly been dropped out of the Bible by Church leaders. What they claim are the complete texts of Genesis and Exodus, for example, are twice the length of the books that Jews and Christians accept. So, Mormon beliefs are not just alternative interpretations of Scripture held in common with other Christians, but new beliefs based on new Scriptures.

Their beliefs are somewhat new, but the phenomena are not. Throughout history the Church has dealt with individuals who claimed to have recovered the original truth that had been corrupted by the institutional Church. But the actual Christian faith of history is a consistent tradition going back to Christ himself. The first Christians did not rewrite the Jewish Scriptures to make them fit what Jesus did and taught. Rather, Jesus, in what he did and taught, claimed to be fulfilling the Scriptures that actually existed. Jews and Christians share those Scriptures even today, and can debate whether Jesus fulfilled them, whether he was in fact in continuity with the faith of people Israel, and whether he can be trusted when he spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Jesus also promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with the Church through the ages, guiding it to accurately understand and teach what Jesus taught. This promised guidance of the Spirit, along with the succession of apostolic authority to new generations of leadership, is why we believe that a meeting of all the Church's bishops, called an Ecumenical Council, cannot err in its formal definitions of faith or morals.

One such Council met at Nicaea in 325 AD to address the teaching of a priest in Egypt named Arius. Arius taught that the Father created the Son, so the Son was a creature, not God, and therefore God was not a Trinity of persons, and Jesus was not God incarnate. Arius' own bishop had already rejected this as contrary to the faith of the Church, but Arius continued to spread it, so they called a Council. The bishops, successors of the apostles, after much open discussion with Arius and one another, including much documentation of what the faith of the Church had always been, also rejected Arius, and expressed the shared faith of the Christian community in more explicit terms. But they were not claiming to be prophets receiving new revelation. They were stewards of the truth already revealed by means of a whole community that had known Jesus, heard him teach, seen his miracles, and received his Holy Spirit. The historical community of faith never operated on the basis of individuals on their own authority correcting the faith with new revelations, but it does listen to individuals who suggest deeper understandings of the faith already held by the community, and evaluates their suggestions.

It is this process that produced the Nicene Creed, a solemn definition of an Ecumenical Council that became the touchstone of Christian faith. So let's renew our faith once again by professing the creed of the Council of Nicaea.