
Biased Belief

Why the Mormon Missionaries Haven't Converted Me Yet

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Table of Contents

1. Mormon Recap	1
1.1. The one essential claim of Mormonism	2
2. The Prophet Complex Theory of Joseph Smith	3
3. Mormon Epistemology: Burning Bosoms and Confirmation Bias	4
3.1. The Experiment - Alma 32	5
4. Conclusion	9

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When a friend of mine left for Brazil to serve his two-year mission with the LDS church after graduating high school, I began meeting with pairs of missionaries at home. After almost nine years of these occasional discussions, I think I have a pretty good idea of what they believe, and why I don't.

1. Mormon Recap

First a quick recapitulation for those who aren't familiar with Mormonism: the Latter Day Saint Movement, or "Mormonism," got its start during the [Second Great](#)

[Awakening](#) (1820's) in western New York when a farm boy named [Joseph Smith](#) got fed up with the infighting of the various Christian sects and decided to ask God which church was the True church. God answered by [appearing in person](#) and telling Joseph that none of the current churches had the full truth. Eventually God used Joseph as a latter-day prophet to [restore](#) the full gospel to Earth:

- He was shown the location of an ancient American record, and given the ability to translate it to English as the [Book of Mormon](#). (Mormon being the name of the ancient historian who compiled the book, written on metal plates, from the records available to him. It was Mormon's son, Moroni, who hid the plates and later appeared to Joseph as an angel and told him where to find them buried in a hillside in New York.)
- He was [visited by John the Baptist](#), and later by other New Testament personages, which conferred to him the authority of previously lost [priesthoods](#).
- He organized the church, founded cities, and introduced some of the unique theological concepts associated with Mormonism: that God has [a physical body](#), that [families are eternal](#), and that, for 50 years during the late 19th century, some families were better off with one husband and [several wives](#), etc.

Today the largest organization in the Latter Day Saint tradition is the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) based in Salt Lake City, Utah. That church has an impressive missionary program, sending out pairs of young missionaries to cities all over the world to teach the doctrines of the church and seek converts. It is with these missionaries that I've been meeting.

1.1. The one essential claim of Mormonism

There is plenty to talk about, from church history to theology. Most missionaries are happy to discuss their claims

both rationally and empirically (from archeology to textual criticism). But, ultimately, Mormonism can be distilled to one truth-claim: that the priesthood authority was restored by God through Joseph Smith. This is what the church *is*; the line of prophets established by God is once again on Earth, and this authority alone holds the keys necessary for humans to reach their intended destiny. And there is but one way to know the truth of that claim: subjectively, by the help of the holy spirit, you must recognize the truth in your own mind and heart.

As such, the *modus operandi* of missionaries is not to convince investigators that the church is true in order to lead them to accept its doctrines; rather it is to present the doctrines (their teaching on families or the existence of the *Book of Mormon*, for example) as reasons why the church could be true.

2. The Prophet Complex Theory of Joseph Smith

My theory is that Joseph Smith was motivated by what I call the Prophet Complex. Like most of us, he would sometimes get excited about his ideas: when he had a moment of insight or a personal breakthrough in harmonizing contradictory ideas he had been struggling with or when he discovered an explanation or object he found elegant or beautiful. Unlike most of us, he interpreted his feelings, the stirrings in his chest, not as mere excitement but as divine validation of his ideas. Few things induce as much excitement within a person as romantic attraction or in discovering what appears to be a metaphysical or scientific truth about the universe.

This theory easily leads to a “pious fraud” theory of why Joseph Smith would pass his own ideas off as divine revelations, and, as I see it, successfully accounts for several historical facts about Smith:

- As a teen he made a living as a [scryer](#): he convinced himself, or at least his employers, that by gazing into seer stones he could divine the location of hidden treasures.
- He was devoted to his wife, Emma, until his death. Emma's father refused to sanction the marriage, so she and Joseph eloped. According to at least [one account](#), not until Joseph married Emma, and brought her with him, was he allowed to finally retrieve the golden plates from which he translated the *Book of Mormon*.
- Despite his devotion to Emma, he took several other wives and introduced polygamy as an acceptable family structure among the saints.
- He believed he was a prophet of God.

We see a similar epistemological method being taught by the missionaries today.

3. Mormon Epistemology: Burning Bosoms and Confirmation Bias

Early in my first discussions with the missionaries, they presented [Moroni's promise](#), found in the last chapter of the *Book of Mormon*, to me:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

— Moroni 10

So if you do manage to overcome the bootstrap problem of “having faith in Christ” in order to find out if His church is true, how does the power of the holy ghost manifest that truth? One oft-quoted Mormon scripture is a revelation given to Oliver Cowdery after his attempt at translating the *Book of Mormon* plates:

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

— [Doctrine & Covenants 9:8](#)

When I would ask the missionaries what the feeling was like when they finally had the truth manifested within them, most of them explained that it wasn’t a single experience but a conspiracy of feelings, thoughts, and events which lead them to their divine knowledge. The overarching theme was that the more I would pray for specific answers, the more I would experiment and invest myself in the teachings, then the more likely I would be to “feel that it is right”.

3.1. The Experiment - Alma 32

The one chapter of the *Book of Mormon* I was asked by my missionaries to read the most often was [Alma 32](#). Part of this chapter is a sermon by Alma, using a metaphor of a seed, on how one can cultivate faith and belief. It is an excellent example of Mormon epistemology and can even be read as Joseph Smith’s own apology for his revelations. I’ll quote the bulk of it beginning at verse 27 adding emphasis to important bits I’ll discuss below:

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, **even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even**

until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, **if it be a true seed, or a good seed**, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, **it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions**, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me.

[...]

But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then you must needs say that the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow. And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith: for ye will say I know that this is a good seed; for behold it sprouteth and beginneth to grow.

And now, behold, are ye sure that this is a good seed? I say unto you, Yea; for every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness.

Therefore, if a seed groweth it is good, but if it groweth not, behold it is not good, therefore it is cast away.

And now, behold, because ye have tried the experiment, and planted the seed, and it swelleth and sprouteth, and beginneth to

grow, ye must needs know that the seed is good.

— Alma

3.1.1. Confirmation Bias

Alma suggests an experiment: believe, or at least *desire* to believe, something is true. If it turns out to be good, then you know it is true and worth believing; otherwise forget it. This is an approach to knowledge that is exceedingly prone to [confirmation bias](#): the tendency to favor information that confirms preexisting beliefs or hypotheses.

3.1.2. Observer-Expectancy Effect

The missionaries would often use this scripture to ask me to conduct various “experiments” to help me recognize the manifestations of the holy spirit. Worse, they would often use methods which introduced further bias. For example they would ask me to pray by asking God if the *Book of Mormon* was true. They would then bear testimony that they *know* the *Book of Mormon* is true and they are sure if I’m sincere then I will come to know as well. At our next meeting they would ask me what I felt when I was reading and praying, especially did I feel good or peaceful (as if the only way I would feel peaceful while reading is if the holy spirit were speaking to me). That technique, suggesting what an investigator will feel when they pray, is prone to the [observer-expectancy effect](#) in which the missionaries’ cognitive bias affects the investigator’s. It is an attempt to avoid this bias that many courts do not allow leading questions during direct examination.

3.1.3. Sunk Costs

Other experiments included changes to my lifestyle (praying everyday and attending church service and events). Whenever I didn’t receive a testimony of the truth of the church, the solution was to suggest more ways I could become

invested in the church. One sister missionary, in all sincerity, suggested I be baptized into the church because she thought that would help me gain a testimony. I was reminded of the part of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when Tom is trying to convince Jim to tame a rattlesnake: “Blame it, can’t you TRY? I only WANT you to try — you needn’t keep it up if it don’t work.”

The technique of asking investigators to spend more of their time “experimenting” is prone to [escalation of commitment](#): the investigator has so much invested in the truth of the church that they will tend to believe it is true without sufficient reason.

3.1.4. Falsifiability and the Prophet Complex

In any case neither Moroni’s promise nor the experiment of the seed are useful in determining the truth of the church. Moroni’s promise presupposes the truth: either the investigator has it confirmed by the holy spirit, or they didn’t pray sincerely (or they just haven’t waited or invested enough yet). Alma’s experiment doesn’t test for truth, it tests whether an idea is good or not.

Note that early in the passage I quoted above Alma equates “true seed” with “good seed”. From then on he only discusses what is “good”. He even uses the metaphor of a growing plant to explain the physical feeling of swelling emotions which occur when an idea is good. This is the prophet complex! Alma 32 contains insight into the internal justifications of a pious fraud. It seems likely to me that in Joseph Smith’s mind if an idea *felt* good enough after consideration, then it also passed the test of truthfulness. Indeed many members of the LDS church, the so-called [Cultural Mormons](#), are members precisely because they believe the church is good though not necessarily true. While interesting, it is not a path to knowledge I would take for myself and I do not consider Mormonism to be on firm epistemological ground.

4. Conclusion

Of course none of my observations preclude the possibility of personal revelation, and it is certainly possible that the missionaries I've talked to believe because they have direct and irrefutable knowledge from God that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the *Book of Mormon* is an ancient record, and that the church's priesthood is based on divine authority. If that's the case, outside of me having my own mystical experience, there is no good way for me to confirm their claims. I remain unconvinced.

