

232.1: True and Living Church (D&C Gospel Doctrine Lesson 9, Updated)

[“The Only True and Living Church”](#)

Manual Goal: To teach class members about the restoration of the Church of [Jesus Christ](#) through the Prophet [Joseph Smith](#), to help them appreciate the blessings of Church membership, and to encourage them to show the Lord their [gratitude](#) for membership in His Church.

EGD Goal: To help class members appreciate how God reveals truth and goodness to all, and how specific denominations such as the LDS Church fit within God’s work of salvation.

Outline

- I. Framing
- II. Discussion of new resources
- III. “Only true and living Church”
 - a. Exploring the LDS narrative (Dispensational exclusivity)
 - b. Exclusivity and salvation
 - c. A theological proposal: efficient, loving Providence
 - i. “God is at work among all religions”
 - ii. “God is at work among all religions, especially mine”
 - iii. “God is at work among all religions, and we should find the best fit for us”
 - d. In what ways could the LDS Church be “true and living” or “most true”?
- IV. Staying alive
 - a. What does it mean to be a “living” religion?
 - b. How can our personal religion stay “alive”?
- V. The scope of world religion (and LDS claims in that context)
 - a. Current demographics
 - b. A brief history of world religion
- VI. Recommendations for Sunday School discussion
- VII. Conclusion

New Resources

[Lesson 9: “The Only True and Living Church”](#)

- [“Build Up My Church”](#): This article discusses preparations that led up to the formal organization of the Church. [Interesting emphasis on the lack of expectation/forewarning that Joseph planned to found a Church. Most preparation seems to have taken place from June 1829 to April 1830. Interesting background reading.](#)
- [“The Articles and Covenants of the Church”](#): This article gives further context on earlier documents that influenced Doctrine and Covenants 20. [Worth consulting, providing insight about how revelation was received before the founding of the Church.](#)
“Like many of Joseph Smith’s revelations, the Articles and Covenants were received gradually.. This process of learning what Christ’s Church should look like began as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery translated the Book of Mormon. While working, they learned about the priesthood, baptism, the Holy Ghost, the Atonement of Jesus Christ,

and other vital principles and doctrines.” Helpful reminder about how Joseph received and revised revelations. This is what a “living Church” looks like, one that adapts and updates and grows as our needs change. Interesting to note that Oliver and Joseph were both working on similar documents.

[“Peter Whitmer Home in Fayette, NY”](#): This article on the Whitmer home has a section about the meeting on April 6, 1830, at which the Church was formally organized.

A helpful article that gives a feel for the context of the Book of Mormon and founding of the Church. I appreciate the inclusion of woman witnesses and converts: “In a little more than one month, Joseph Smith was able to complete the translation of the Book of Mormon in Fayette. The Whitmers provided space to work, food, and materials. The handwriting from two of the original Book of Mormon scribes has not been completely verified, but it is likely that they were members of the Whitmer household.

The Book of Mormon translation project also meant more work for Mary Whitmer, who had a large family to care for even without several guests. While doing the hard work that hospitality required in an era before washing machines and other technologies, Mary Whitmer was visited by an angel who showed her the plates and strengthened her faith.¹⁰ Sarah Conrad, a neighbor hired to help Mary Whitmer in her kitchen, also gained a testimony during the translation process. Sarah had noticed light shining from the faces of Joseph and Oliver as they came downstairs. When she learned from her employer that the change in the men’s countenances was “connected with a holy sacred work,” she believed and later joined the new church.”

- [“Gathering for Church Organization”](#): This infographic shows the distances people traveled to attend the Church’s organizational meeting. Nice graphic. Bonus to imagine a 16 year old Porter Rockwell! Might be helpful for a FHE setting and enriches preparation.
- [“Articles and Covenants, circa April 1830 \[D&C 20\]”](#): This page from the Joseph Smith Papers website gives in-depth information about the Articles and Covenants of the Church and features an early newspaper reprint of them. I think this is great, in part because I am a document nerd. Note the articles on “Diseases of the Mind” and “A Faithful Dog” and a cough syrup advertisement alongside this important precursor to D&C 20.

Framing:

It feels really good to be right. It also feels good to be special (or more accurately, to think ourselves right and think ourselves special). Problem is, most if not all of us think we are right and special. This is the problem of Pluralism, exposure to worldviews other than our own. We find out that other people feel about themselves and their traditions the same way we feel about ourselves and our traditions. So what do we do about all this? Is there a way we can still feel right and special, while also respecting others, the way God works, and reality as best as we can understand it?

I’m going to push back more than usual because I believe that the standard narrative not only fails to hold up against any historical or critical scrutiny, but also proves theologically unsatisfying.

I propose a healthy take on this topic is “God works among all religions. I am grateful to be a member of the Church because...”

Ideas and terms:

Only True

Most True

What does “True” mean anyway?

Living Church: One that develops and adapts and changes, working with how we are as humans and what we need. (Bring up value of conservatism and stability, but a balance is ideal, and Mormonism contains that in its nature and history)

Exclusivity: Only way to be right with God

Dispensational Exclusivity: The standard narrative

A step back: What is salvation in Mormonism?

Exaltation is becoming like our Heavenly Parents through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Salvation is therefore not an event or magic trick, but a process of becoming, a transformation into beings worthy to be in the Celestial Kingdom, worthy to live with and like our Heavenly Parents, to become beings who WANT to live as our Heavenly Parents live. It’s hard work if you haven’t noticed.

So, bracketing temple ordinances for the moment (since we know that Mormon doctrine teaches that everyone can and will get those sooner or later), what remains?

Salvation in this life becomes a question of HOW MUCH we become like our Heavenly Parents. I personally think that this-life Exaltation involves maximizing: Love. Joy. Peace. Freedom. Growth.

So whatever brings us closest to God, most like God, that is saving.

It is therefore possible, likely even, that there are many people outside the Church who are closer to God, and thus “more saved” than members of the Church.

Thus, when it comes to salvation, our personal growth and development proves more important and urgent than the status of Church membership.

I’m not saying Church membership isn’t important—it is—but a theological argument can be made that it is not the greatest priority.

(What humans are liable to say vs what God is liable to do, share experience from teaching World Religions)

Challenge of pluralism (Finding out that other people feel about themselves and their traditions the same way we feel about ourselves and our traditions)

Theological Proposal:

Efficient, loving Providence

“God is at work among all religions”

“God is at work among all religions, especially mine”

“God is at work among all religions, and we should find the best fit for us”

Most of you know that I have taught World Religions for the past seven years. Teaching World Religions has impacted my faith more than anything else—more than learning about Church history, more than graduate level Biblical Studies. I believe that in order to hold our religious beliefs responsibly, we need to get a sense of the context of those beliefs.

Helpful Quotes:

God loves us all and works among all nations

2 Nephi 29:7 Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?

Alma 29:8 For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.

First Presidency Message, 1978.

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals...[W]e believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come... Our message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.”

Joseph Smith

“Mormonism is truth. . . . The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds, and we have the highest degree of evidence of the same. Have the Presbyterians any truth? Embrace that. Have the Baptists, Methodists, and so forth? Embrace that. Get all the good in the world, and you will come out a pure Mormon... One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.” *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 199

The Living Church

Context: Current Demographics and Historical Context

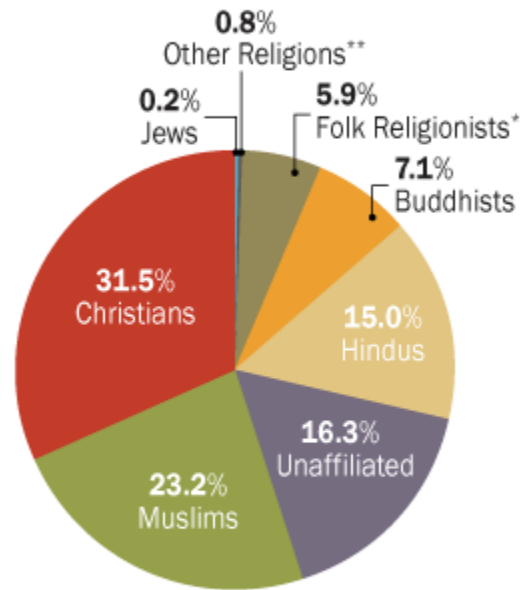
Religious Adherents:

Worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group. A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.

The demographic study – based on analysis of more than 2,500 censuses, surveys and population registers – finds 2.2 billion Christians (32% of the world's population), 1.6 billion Muslims (23%), 1 billion Hindus (15%), nearly 500 million Buddhists (7%) and 14 million Jews (0.2%) around the world as of 2010. In addition, more than 400 million people (6%) practice various folk or traditional religions, including African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions. An estimated 58 million people – slightly less than 1% of the global population – belong to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Tenrikyo, Wicca and Zoroastrianism, to mention just a few.¹

Size of Major Religious Groups, 2010

Percentage of the global population



*Includes followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions.

**Includes Bahai's, Jains, Sikhs, Shintoists, Taoists, followers of Tenrikyo, Wiccans, Zoroastrians and many other faiths.

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • Global Religious Landscape, December 2012

LDS members, counting maximally (active, inactive, everyone) 15,634,199 (as of 2015 reported in April 2016 General Conference)

Global population: 7.485 billion

So members are 0.2% of the global population (roughly comparable to Jews).

<http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

Academic Understanding of the History of Religion

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_religion

A note on dates: Young earth positions cannot be responsibly held. Science can explain LDS views far better than traditional LDS views can explain the findings of science; I believe the two can be integrated responsibly

I find it both more responsible and exciting to take the best understanding of history and the world we have from science, and *then* work out the theological implications, rather than remaining loyal to familiar frameworks that have their own history (influenced by the Bible for example), and then try to make science fit into that outdated framework, or worse, ignore science altogether.

One scholar I have read provocatively argues that Neanderthals are the ones who first exhibited religious behavior—a more individualistic form of religion that Sapiens then adapted.

SAPIENS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND

Timeline of History

*Years
Before
the
Present*

13.5 billion	Matter and energy appear. Beginning of physics. Atoms and molecules appear. Beginning of chemistry.
4.5 billion	Formation of planet Earth.
3.8 billion	Emergence of organisms. Beginning of biology.
6 million	Last common grandmother of humans and chimpanzees.
2.5 million	Evolution of the genus <i>Homo</i> in Africa. First stone tools.
2 million	Humans spread from Africa to Eurasia. Evolution of different human species.
500,000	Neanderthals evolve in Europe and the Middle East.
300,000	Daily usage of fire.
200,000	<i>Homo sapiens</i> evolves in East Africa.
70,000	The Cognitive Revolution. Emergence of fictive language. Beginning of history. Sapiens spread out of Africa.
45,000	Sapiens settle Australia. Extinction of Australian megafauna.
30,000	Extinction of Neanderthals.
16,000	Sapiens settle America. Extinction of American megafauna.
13,000	Extinction of <i>Homo floresiensis</i> . <i>Homo sapiens</i> the only surviving human species.
12,000	The Agricultural Revolution. Domestication of plants and animals. Permanent settlements.

19 mins left in book 1%

5,000	First kingdoms, script and money. Polytheistic religions.
4,250	First empire – the Akkadian Empire of Sargon.
2,500	Invention of coinage – a universal money. The Persian Empire – a universal political order ‘for the benefit of all humans’. Buddhism in India – a universal truth ‘to liberate all beings from suffering’.
2,000	Han Empire in China. Roman Empire in the Mediterranean. Christianity.
1,400	Islam.
500	The Scientific Revolution. Humankind admits its ignorance and begins to acquire unprecedented power. Europeans begin to conquer America and the oceans. The entire planet becomes a single historical arena. The rise of capitalism.
200	The Industrial Revolution. Family and community are replaced by state and market. Massive extinction of plants and animals.
The Present	Humans transcend the boundaries of planet Earth. Nuclear weapons threaten the survival of humankind. Organisms are increasingly shaped by intelligent design rather than natural selection.
The Future	Intelligent design becomes the basic principle of life? <i>Homo sapiens</i> is replaced by superhumans?

Context for the History of Religion

92,000: mother and child ritually buried, red ochre on their bodies

70,000-40,000 BC Cognitive revolution (allowed for flexible, abstract thinking, rapid adaptation; this is where I think Adam and Eve best fit)

Traditionally, earliest evidence for religion considered to be burial of the dead. Dates back to before **50,000 BC**

38,000 BC: Symbolic representation emerges: cave paintings, statues of animals and humans (possible mother goddess, other deities), skulls and bones were buried with red ochre, possibly the earliest relics. All likely religious

12,000 BC Agricultural Revolution

9000s BC: Organized religion emerges

9000s-7000s: Earliest known megaliths (large stones like Stonehenge) in Anatolia/modern Turkey

5000s: Proto-IndoEuropeans emerged

Indigenous Religions: Go all the way back to the beginning

Indian

Hinduism

3000s: Indus Valley civilization, precursors to Hinduism

Aryan invasion of the Indus Valley Civilization 1500 (Harappan Civilization was amazing... look it up)

Vedas written: 1500-1000ish BC

Bhagavad Gita written: 300s BC

Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama: 400s BC

Mahayana Buddhism: 100s AD

Jainism

Mahavira: 500s BC

Sikhism Nanak founded in AD 1500

Asian

Confucius 551-479 BC

Taoism 500s BC

Shinto 300s-600s AD important developments, but elements go back into Japanese indigenous

Middle Eastern

Zoroastrianism: Zarathustra lived: 1000, perhaps earlier?

Judaism

Abraham: 1600s??

Moses: 1300s

David: 1000

Babylonian Captivity: 587-539

Torah: 400s BC

Jewish canon: 1st century AD

Christianity

Jesus' death: 27

Jewish Christianity 30s-300s

Constantine converted 312

Nicene Creed 325

Crusades 1095-1291

Great Schism 1054 (Roman and Orthodox Christianity divided officially)

Martin Luther 1517 (95 theses)

Henry VIII and Anglicanism: 1534

Quakers: 1600s

Baptists: 1600s

Shakers: 1700s

Methodists: 1700s, John Wesley

Seventh Day Adventists: 1863

Jehovah's Witnesses: 1870s

Pentacostals: 1900s

Baha'I founded: 1800s

Suggestions for Teaching Sunday School

Discuss what it means to be the "true Church" and the "living Church"

how we can be "true and living members"

how we can "keep our faith and community alive" by adapting to the needs of the members in the present

Ask how the idea of the "only true Church" fits in the context of a loving, efficient God

<http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/timeline>

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191737206.timeline.0001>

<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/07172009/profile.html>

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/when-did-the-human-mind-evolve-to-what-it-is-today-140507905/>