

Mormonism Today



Steve Singleton

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by Steve Singleton



Joseph Smith, Jr.

Any attempt to summarize recent developments in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) must be selective, for the organization is immense, its teachings complex, and its

activities extensive. I will confine my observations to four areas:

- Its splintered brotherhood
- The increase of its wealth, power, and influence
- Two examples of major shifts in its practices
- The crumbling credibility of its “scriptures”

1. A Splintered Brotherhood

Contrary to prevailing notions about LDS from non-Mormons, the movement begun by Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844) has divided and splintered as much or more than other religious groups. Most of these divisions originated in rival claims to the succession of the leadership of the church after the [murder of Joseph Smith, Jr.](#) in 1844.

Sidney Rigdon, James J. Strang, Brigham Young, and others each claimed to be the “prophet’s” true successor. Most of the “saints” chose to follow Young, who



Sidney Rigdon

eventually led his group to Utah. The [Utah-based group](#) is the only one which uses the term “Mormon.” It claims to have 12.8 million members, though [some say that number may be inflated](#) because it counts adherents rather than members.

Sidney Rigdon (1793-1876) claimed that on the day of Joseph Smith, Jr.’s death the Lord had given him a vision that he should be the guardian of the church until a successor be found. As the only remaining



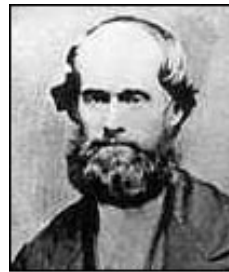
Brigham Young

member of the church presidency, Joseph Smith, Jr. being dead and the other member, William Law, having left the church, Rigdon maintained that he ought to be Joseph Smith, Jr.'s successor. Brigham Young (1801-1877) succeeded in winning the support of the apostles, however. When Rigdon refused to submit to Young's leadership, Young denounced him, and the Twelve cut him off from the church. Rigdon returned to Pittsburgh, where he denounced Brigham Young and the Twelve as apostates and polygamists (Hill, 422-424, James & Soby, 618-619).

Those who followed Rigdon eventually came to be known as [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day](#)

[Saints, Bickertonite](#), after William Bickerton (1815-1905), one of Rigdon's followers who claimed to have been told by God to center his people in St. John, Kansas. It claims to have a membership of about 15,000 members in some 50 churches. Doctrinally, they condemn polygamy, plurality of gods, and baptism for the dead (Anderson, 32).

James J. Strang (1813-1856) claimed that the very day Joseph Smith, Jr. died,



James J. Strang

an angel appeared to him and anointed him as successor. Strang, like Joseph Smith, Jr., claimed to have found metal plates inscribed with

strange characters, the second set of which, when Strang translated them by a Urim and Thumim, advocated polygamy. Eventually his church crowned Strang “king,” but Strang, like Joseph Smith, Jr., was murdered. His followers are now known as the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Strangite](#). They once had as many as 3,000 members, but their numbers have



Emma Smith

dwindled in recent years. They deny the virgin birth and the atonement (Anderson).

Others, including Joseph Smith, Jr.’s mother, his widow Emma, and his brother

William, believed that Joseph Smith, Jr.’s son, Joseph Smith, III, had been the successor Joseph Smith, Jr. himself had designated. Joseph Smith, III (1832-1914) was only 11 years old when his father was killed, however, and did not agree to lead the church until 15 years later. In the meantime, William Smith led this group in opposition to Brigham Young. By November 1845 Brigham Young’s group had cut off William Smith and William Smith’s followers soon reciprocated (Hill, 425).

When Brigham Young’s group left Nauvoo, Illinois, for Utah, Joseph Smith, III’s followers stayed behind, eventually settling in Independence, Missouri. For many years they were