



## Washington University School of Medicine

---

From the Selected Works of Kevin J. Black, MD

---

July 28, 2021

# Medical and ethical issues and Latter-day Saints

Kevin J Black



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/kjb/26/>

# Medical and ethical issues and Latter-day Saints

Kevin J. Black, M.D. © 1998-2021



*Notes for an annual lecture in the Washington University School of Medicine elective course “Major religious traditions and health care.” This document represents my personal views and does not necessarily represent the opinions of the University or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

---

## 1) Introduction

- a) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- b) In modern colloquial English, this means “Jesus Christ’s church for modern Christians,” or “... for Christians in the end times” (The word “saints” in the name of the Church follows New Testament usage [[Acts 9:13,32,41](#); [Rom. 1:7](#); [1 Cor. 1:2](#); [Philip. 1:1](#)] rather than the common, Roman Catholic meaning)
- c) The [preferred shortened form](#) is: The Church of Jesus Christ
- d) Members often shorten this to just “the Church”
- e) Individuals are preferably “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” or “Latter-day Saints” (noun) or sometimes “Mormon(s)” (a nickname originally applied derisively)
- f) I’m presenting my understanding; I’m not speaking for the Church

## 2) Brief overview of doctrine (compare this 1830 statement of belief) [[Doctrine & Covenants 20:17-29](#)])

- a) There exist eternal absolutes, *e.g.* good and evil
- b) There is a God, who is perfect, loving, and all-knowing
- c) We existed before this life as spirit children of God; all humans are spiritually brothers and sisters; the spirit is eternal and cannot be destroyed
- d) God designed and presented a plan which would allow us to progress
  - i) We would be born on earth with a physical body to house our spirit (the body is an essential part of our eternal life rather than an evil)
  - ii) God would grant us free choice between good and evil
  - iii) We would forget our pre-mortal existence so as to be able to learn faith
  - iv) We would all make mistakes (sin) that would separate us spiritually from God
  - v) We would have sickness and death
  - vi) After death, we would remain as spirits to await a final judgment
  - vii) An infinite sacrifice would be provided that would counteract sin and death
  - viii) Eventually our body would be resurrected (*i.e.* restored to us in perfect condition) and in this condition we would be judged
  - ix) If we were faithful we would return to God’s presence forever
- e) Jesus Christ is the central figure in our religious belief
  - i) The Son of God
  - ii) Perfect, sinless, divine
  - iii) He died and was resurrected, and because of this all men and women will also be resurrected
  - iv) He somehow felt the pain of all our sins, and offers to purify us if we believe in Him enough to repent (leave our sin behind and make restitution to the degree possible) and follow His commandments
  - v) He lives today as a perfect being and directs His Church
- f) We all have access to revelation from God
  - i) God commands us to pray to thank Him for our blessings and ask for what we need
  - ii) The Holy Spirit gives us comfort, identifies good and evil, and reveals God’s will to our minds by way of feelings and thoughts
- g) God chooses and authorizes certain men to represent him (priesthood)
  - i) Purposes
    - (1) To reveal God’s commandments as they pertain to the current period in the world’s history (*i.e.*

teach us what we need to do to be happy and to be able to live with God again after this life)

(2) To have authority to perform ordinances (*i.e.* sacred rites); these ordinances are null and void if not performed by this authority

(a) ordinances essential to salvation, *e.g.* baptism and giving the Holy Ghost

(b) other ordinances to help us be happy, *e.g.* blessing the sick

(c) through priesthood power, a husband and wife can be sealed to each other and their children so that their family ties are recognized by God even after death; this ordinance is performed in sacred buildings called temples

(d) priesthood authority is received only by authorized laying on of hands from someone else who already has priesthood authority

(3) Priesthood responsibility teaches us to serve others

ii) Lay priesthood (*i.e.* service is not paid and is in addition to our career)

iii) A prophet presides over God's work on the earth at a given point in time

(1) *e.g.* Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah

(2) From shortly after Jesus' death until modern times, there was no prophet

(3) In 1820 God revealed Himself to a young man in New York state named Joseph Smith, Jr., and told him that through him, God would restore His priesthood authority and many truths which had been lost to the world

(4) Joseph Smith was also directed to give the priesthood to others so that when he died, God's authority would remain on the earth

(5) God's prophet today is [Russell M. Nelson](#) (*trivia: a retired [academic heart surgeon](#)*)

h) Our beliefs are founded on present and past revelation from God

i) Scripture, including the Holy Bible and The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ

ii) Revelations to the current prophet

iii) Personal revelation through the Holy Ghost

i) God commands all people who are capable of understanding right and wrong to believe in Jesus Christ, to repent, to be baptized, to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to receive the Holy Ghost and to follow God's commandments the rest of our lives

j) Marriage and the family are eternal and crucial elements of God's plan for our happiness

**3) Latter-day Saints today** (see [Church statistics](#)) (see also 2008-2019 article "[who are the Mormons?](#)")

a) The church is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah

b) Over 16 million members worldwide, only ~41% in the U.S.

c) Many members are relatively recent converts (total membership in 1996 was under 10 million)

d) There are congregations in >150 countries and territories

i) Spanish or Portuguese is the first language of >1/3 of all Latter-day Saints; fewer than half of us speak English as our first language ([old Church News article](#))

ii) A dozen countries are "more LDS" than the U.S., including Tonga (~64% of the population), Chile (3%), and New Zealand (2.4%).

e) Latter-day Saints represent 2% of the U.S. population ([fourth](#) or possibly [third](#) largest U.S. church)

i) Roughly half of U.S. members have been members 10 years or more (caveat: [1992 data](#))

ii) Compared with Americans in general, practicing U.S. Latter-day Saints have a substantially greater life expectancy; they are more likely to remain religiously observant if highly educated; they are much more likely to marry and to have children; employment and socioeconomic indices roughly parallel those of the general population ([from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 1992](#))

f) Local stats: the greater St. Louis area is home to about 11,000 Latter-day Saints in 39 congregations; the temple on U.S. 40 west of I-270 serves ~20,000 members, mostly in Missouri and Illinois ([STL temple district](#)); many WUSM faculty, staff and students are members

g) Latter-day Saints see themselves as trying to live their religion daily: daily prayer and scripture study, teaching or leadership duties, weekly Sunday meetings, visit other members monthly, tithing plus donations to the poor, weekly family night (a spiritual lesson plus recreational activities), emphasis on

time with family, missionary work, weekday youth scripture study classes, and other lifestyle changes (dress modestly, avoid pornography, avoid work or purchases on Sunday, avoid debt)

- h) The Church contributes to humanitarian needs [independently](#) and in partnership with other charities

#### 4) Specific medical and ethical issues

a) Making decisions

- i) When answers to specific questions have been revealed to the prophet, they are generally regarded as the end of the theological discussion on those matters
- ii) When making difficult decisions, members often study scripture, pray for individual revelation, and/or discuss the matter with their family or their bishop (pastor); advice from experts (e.g. their physician) is also appreciated
- iii) The Church advises against legally or ethically questionable medical practices, and advises members to consult competent medical professionals
- iv) Note that for doctrinal reasons mentioned above, it may not occur to many Latter-day Saints to ask for a non-LDS chaplain; they'll appreciate help connecting to local LDS congregations

b) Preventive medicine: God has given several commandments pertinent to health, including:

- i) Sexual abstinence before marriage and complete fidelity afterwards
- ii) The "[word of wisdom](#)," i.e. no alcohol, tobacco, coffee, or tea, and no drug abuse; also taught to focus diet on grains and vegetables and to eat meat sparingly

c) Beginning of life

- i) "Children are one of the greatest blessings in life, and their birth into loving and nurturing families is central to God's purposes for humanity. When husband and wife are physically able, they have the privilege and responsibility to bring children into the world and to nurture them." However, "the decision of how many children to have and when to have them is a private matter for the husband and wife. ... Decisions about birth control and the consequences of those decisions rest solely with each married couple" ([Church statement](#)). However, the Church discourages elective surgical sterilization.
- ii) Participating in an elective [abortion](#) is considered a serious sin except in cases of incest, rape, threat to the life or health of the mother, or when the fetus will not survive beyond birth; and even in these situations women are advised to consult with their bishop (pastor) and submit the issue to prayer
- iii) Artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization with semen from a man who is not the woman's husband is discouraged
- iv) Dying infants: [little children cannot sin and so infant baptism is not required](#); but a priesthood holder can [bless the child and name him/her](#) if possible

d) Views on illness, suffering, and loss

- i) Suffering and death, although never wished for, are an important part of this life, and can give us important experience, meaningful choices, and increased faith
- ii) All problems of mortality are temporary and eventually will be cured because of the atonement of Christ: "There is a resurrection, therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ" ([Mosiah 16:8](#))
- iii) Mourning: "Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die, and more especially for those that have not hope of a glorious resurrection. And it shall come to pass that those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them" (From an 1831 revelation to Joseph Smith [[Doct. & Cov. 42:45-46](#)]).
- iv) Temple covenants can preserve family ties even after death

e) End of life

- i) Autopsy and organ donations are up to the individual and family
- ii) [Suicide](#): it is recognized that someone who commits suicide may not be responsible for his acts; this judgment should be left up to God
- iii) [Euthanasia](#) (i.e. deliberately putting someone to death even if suffering from an incurable condition) is contrary to God's commandments. However, death is considered a natural and important part of our existence, and when death is inevitable, "members should not feel obligated to extend mortal life


by means that are unreasonable.” Family members are advised to seek competent medical advice and spiritual guidance through prayer in making such decisions.

- f) Healing
  - i) God does work miracles
  - ii) However, God can also work through natural means including competent medical practice, and most members take a commonsense approach to treating illness.
  - iii) Members who are sick or undergoing major surgery often request a blessing from a priesthood holder who anoints them with oil and can bless them with advice, comfort, or healing as dictated by the Holy Spirit. "And whosoever among you are sick . . . shall be nourished with all tenderness, . . . And the elders of the church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me. . . . And again, it shall come to pass that he that hath faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed" (Doct. & Cov. 42:43,44,48).
    - (1) This can only be done by a Latter-day Saint who holds the proper priesthood authority (often a family member will perform the blessing, or try the BJH Chaplain's office or an LDS classmate)
    - (2) This ordinance is not essential for salvation and need not be done before death
    - (3) It's OK to ask if you can be present for the blessing
- g) Other
  - i) Many Latter-day Saints wear undergarments that symbolize a promise to God to live a righteous life. Further information is available on the Church's media information site, here and here.

## 5) Further information

- a) Me (kevin@WUSTL.edu, My Faith) or other LDS faculty or students at WUSM
- b) Church web site: www.ChurchOfJesusChrist.org
- c) Missouri St. Louis Mission, 314-205-8510 or Facebook
- d) Ludlow DH, ed.: **The Encyclopedia of Mormonism** (5 vols.). New York: Macmillan, 1992; online at http://lib.byu.edu/collections/encyclopedia-of-mormonism/.
- e) Arrington LJ, Bitton D: **The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints**, 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. ISBN: 9780252062360. This is a very readable short history of the church.
- f) Judd DK: Religiosity, mental health, and Latter-day Saints: A preliminary review of literature. Pp. 473-498 in **Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members**. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1998. online
- g) The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (http://religions.pewforum.org, data collected 2007)
- h) Putnam RD, Campbell DE: **American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us**. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. online
- i) The Pew Research Center's Mormons in America survey (data collected Oct.-Nov. 2011)

---

 “*Medical and ethical issues and Latter-day Saints*” by Kevin J. Black, M.D. is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at kbmd@byu.net.