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What's in a Name?
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In February, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints sent a letter to its churches indicating that members and churches should use the church's full, official name whenever possible. In particular, the term "Mormon" should no longer be used to identify the church. When using a shortened name, the church should no longer be referred to as the "Mormon Church" (or even the "LDS Church"), but as "The Church of Jesus Christ." The letter indicated that it was preferable to refer to individuals as "Latter Day Saints" rather than "Mormons."

What does this change mean? In a recent essay at Beliefnet.com, the renowned scholar of Mormonism, Jan Shippo, wrote, "To be sure, in laying claim to the name 'The Church of Jesus Christ,' the First Presidency is affirming Mormonism's essential Christian-ness." The church, Shippo observes, "may well be moving toward being a part of the nation's common religious culture. Indeed, it would be almost impossible for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to be the sixth largest church in the United States--which it now is--without moving in that direction."

The interesting aspect of this shift is that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints "is not moving toward Protestantism and/or Catholicism. Instead, with this move, the First Presidency is pointing to its church's most fundamental doctrinal assertion, declaring anew that the institution they lead is the restored "Church of Christ." This is made clearest, Shippo argues, when we take into account the secondary contraction of the name. "That alternative (note the initial upper case letters) is 'The Church.'" The use of the term by which the earliest Christians were known essentially constitutes a claim that the Latter Day Saints represent the true inheritors of the church established by Jesus' apostles.

This identification of The Church of Jesus Christ with the church founded by earliest Christianity leads to a further observation. I think "The Church" is in the penultimate stage prior to understanding itself as a separate, independent religion. This becomes clear

from a comparison with the church at the time of the Apostle Paul. The earliest Christians saw themselves as part of Judaism; they met in the Temple and even Paul made voluntary sacrifices there. In his letter to the Romans, Paul goes so far as to claim that Christianity is the true chosen religion; the Christians are the true Israel because God, Paul says, has cut the branch of "Israel of the flesh" from the tree and grafted on the branch of "Israel of the spirit" (i.e., Christianity). A decade or so later, Christianity became a religion separate from Judaism, leaving the old religion behind and retaining the supersessionist claim over it.

This process provides a parallel to the one in which the Church of Jesus Christ has been undergoing. Initially, Mormonism arose within the context of 19th-century Christianity, and then, after violent opposition from the Christians around it, made the claim to be the "restored Church of Christ." The reemphasis of this claim at this time indicates, in my reading, that there is a renewed awareness of The Church's self-understanding as a development beyond, yet based upon, Christianity. Following the model of the early church under Paul, the next stage will be to acknowledge themselves as a separate religion.

There would be nothing wrong with this development, if it happens. It constitutes a typical phenomenon in the development of religions. After all, not only did Christianity grow from Judaism, but Bahai grew out of Islam and Buddhism began within Hinduism. The developments in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints thus indicate the importance and vitality of religious expression in our country. It is the freedom of religious expression which stands after all at the heart of our country's foundation.