

# Mormonism moving closer to Christianity, Truett prof observes

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WACO—While political alliances between Southern Baptists and Mormons on issues like same-sex marriage are nothing new, a Baptist scholar asserts the two camps have more in common theologically than many assume.

Roger OlsonRoger Olson, a theology professor at Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#), said in a recent blog he categorizes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints neither as scary cult nor orthodox Christianity. Rather, based on extensive study of Mormon literature and dialogue with LDS scholars, Olson described Mormonism as a fluid belief system he can envision someday "evolving into a Christian denomination."

Mormonism "is a bit amorphous" and always evolving, Olson said. In his experience, most of the harshest critics of the LDS haven't kept up with changes in the church nor read the current literature, he noted.

Much anti-Mormon criticism draws on enigmatic statements of past presidents, whom Mormons consider as prophets but aren't considered infallible or authoritative, Olson said.

Mormons engage in practices like men wearing special underwear that many evangelicals deem "curious or even odd," Olson said, but those are part of their tradition and don't bother him.

## **The 'Fourth Branch'**

When it comes to theology, he said, the LDS leaders "very much want their

religion and church to be considered authentically Christian—the fourth ‘branch,’ as it were, of Christianity—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Mormon.”

The scholars he knows aren’t monolithic. Asking in private their views of the relationship between Mormonism and historical Christianity, one friend told him “Mormonism is to Christianity as Christianity is to Judaism.”

“I thought that was a somewhat fair description—in the sense that I perceived Mormonism to be qualitatively different from, even if rooted in, Christianity,” Olson said.

When he told others, they reacted negatively, insisting Mormonism, as espoused by the LDS Church, is most definitely Christian, but “with a difference.”

“In other words, they explained, it is not ‘orthodox Christianity’ but true Christianity,” he said. As an orthodox Christian, Olson respectfully disagrees.

### **Scholars and rank-and-file disagree**

Mormonism at the local level is not necessarily the same as Mormonism among scholars at Brigham Young University, he noted.

For example, he has shocked Mormon missionaries with what their own scholars believe and don’t believe, he said, adding the gap between scholars and laity “is very wide and deep.”

“There is a gradual but discernable shift taking place in the LDS Church” away from the extremely harsh view of all non-Mormon churches of bygone days and toward “a greater generosity toward non-Mormons of good will who have a real chance at eternal salvation,” Olson observed.

“There is no doubt in my mind but that something is going on in the LDS

Church and Mormonism in general that constitutes a gradual but discernable shift away from those doctrines most anti-Mormon Christian critics like to highlight toward a somewhat more biblical and even evangelical account of Christ and salvation," he said.

Based on that shift, Olson said: "I can envision someday the LDS Church evolving into a Christian denomination. For now, though, I consider it an alternative religion rooted in Christianity but also rooted, unfortunately, in Joseph Smith's and Brigham Young's fantasies."