

THE REORGANIZATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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On April 15, 1972 the Mormon History Association held a notable convention at Independence, Missouri. Some 130 members and friends of the Association visited historic Mormon sites and heard discourses from scholars representing both the "Utah Mormons" and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the most encouraging features of this meeting was the genuine communication between scholars of both churches who were concerned with a common historical heritage. In this spirit we invited Barbara Higdon of Graceland College to discuss the Reorganization in the twentieth century. Her essay provides valuable insights into the pressures that have shaped her church in the modern world.

The 1970 World Conference of the Reorganization may well prove in retrospect to have been the occasion upon which the official legislative body of the Church took cognizance as never before of the impact of the twentieth century upon it. From the floor of the conference troubled delegates called into question the influence of scholarship and professionalism and challenged the consideration of certain theological questions in an expression of the rising fear that changes wrought in "the old Jerusalem gospel" would destroy it. Expressed both literally and symbolically in the deliberations of the 1970 conference, this conflict over the mission and nature of the Church had been too long in coming. Until almost mid-century, critical organizational and financial problems had distracted the attention of the Church from the few voices calling for the alteration of some of the traditions inherited from nineteenth century origins. Gradually, however, with the solution of more apparent problems, the few found support, and the Church began the agonizing process of discovering how it could translate the principles of the Restoration into the language of the twentieth century.

The progress of this change can be charted in the Church's evolving understanding of its nature and mission: how ought the Church to be defined? What message ought to be preached? The answers to these questions are found in pronouncements by Church leaders, in the materials of religious education, in the hymnal, in missionary philosophy and techniques, and in the practical application of the gospel in the lives of believers.

A typical point of early reference against which current change can be measured is the view of the nature and mission of the Church presented in *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* by Daniel MacGregor, published in 1923.¹ This popular book contained one set of answers to the above questions, defen-

sive answers that had been present in the thinking of the Church since 1830. MacGregor asserted that the Church was defined by the institutional structure described in the New Testament. He related the structure of the Reorganization to scriptural passages mentioning priesthood office and function and validated the advent of the Restoration by reference to the apocalyptic literature of Daniel and Revelations and by complicated mathematical computations based on biblical prophecy. Interpreting contemporary historical events as "signs of the times" by which the latter days as the setting for the Restoration could be identified, MacGregor claimed apostasy from original Christianity and quoted leaders of the Reformation to the effect that they had only begun the task of restoration of original Christianity. These ideas and interpretations gathered together some of the major themes of the nineteenth century Restoration, and they supported much of the belief and practice of the early twentieth century church.² For people born into the Church these beliefs were the heart of the gospel, and for people converted by missionary materials based on them, they were an important persuasive force. Although continuous modifications in language took place, these ideas defined the Reorganization in the first half of the twentieth century. Making certain assumptions about history and the revelatory process and permitting little variation, these ideas were affirmed and reinforced in religious education materials, in countless missionary sermons, and in books and articles.³

As the Church passed mid-century, many forces could be found pulling the movement away from these interpretations of its nature and mission. Among them was the recognition by the missionary force that baptisms had been declining for a decade.⁴ Other forces included an expectation of more professionalism in the presentation of the Church to member and nonmember alike by people exposed to an increasingly sophisticated culture (no longer would lack of professionalism be accepted as a proof of divine favor);⁵ the skepticism of a generation of college-trained members who refused to be persuaded by claims based on a single, literal reading of the scriptures; the presence in the college-trained group of a few who had been directly influenced by the formal study of theology and had responded to the liberalism of twentieth century Protestant theologians; the expansion of the Church into non-Christian areas, stimulated by the movement of private Church members in the Armed Forces or in business as well as by administrative design;⁶ and the gradual acknowledgement that somehow theology and practice must take into account those outside the Church who were engaged in the work of God. The changes that have occurred as a result of these forces and others constitute an adaptation to the milieu of the twentieth century just as the interpretations offered by MacGregor summarize an adaptation to the interests and concerns of the nineteenth.

In 1970 the Church publishing house announced the publication of a new book entitled *Exploring the Faith*, which included essays previously published in installments in the official Church publication, the *Saint's Herald*, representing a ten-year labor by many Church officials in hammering out a statement of belief which it was hoped would unify the theology of the members. In the Foreword the committee explained that "Historical and traditional points of view needed to be expanded in view of contemporary religious experience and scholarship." From this perspective the definition of the nature of the

Church formulated by the committee showed a considerable shift in emphasis from the earlier position. The committee viewed the Church not primarily as an institution identical to the early Christian church but as a fellowship of those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. They suggested that the biblical description of the early church was too meagre to justify a claim of identical characteristics, though great similarities exist because the needs of people are the same from age to age and similar structures would thus be needed to meet these needs.⁷ Further, scripture was seen not as the words of God but as words about God, "especially words about the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, who is himself the fulfillment of God's self-revealing."⁸ The gospel was thus defined not as a set of propositions but as the activity of God through Christ.⁹ Supporting this view, other writers suggested that the distinctive nature of the Church is not to be found in the presence of certain offices which may be similar to New Testament offices, but in the willingness of its members to bear one another's burdens and assist each other in the process of sanctification which is defined as a personal piety that expresses itself in concern for the life of the world.¹⁰ The recent development of a new curriculum for Christian education assumes this definition of the Church. It no longer uses the study of scripture and church history as an end in itself, but rather as a means for discovering what God intends the Church to be today.¹¹ The basis of the claims for institutional distinctiveness has also been shifted. Addressing a gathering of the High Priests of the Church in 1971, Apostle Clifford Cole, President of the Quorum of Twelve said:

... we are shifting from an emphasis on distinctives — that is, on the ways we are different from other churches — to a concern for teaching the whole gospel of Jesus Christ and winning persons to committing themselves to him. Prior to the last two decades our missionary emphasis was highlighted by ... [materials] on such subjects as the apostasy, stories of Joseph Smith and the founding experiences of the Restoration movement, and life after death. Since that time many new ... [materials] have been written indicating a concern for ministry to people and a desire to bring them not only to the church but to Jesus Christ.¹²

Another facet of the definition of the Church which has undergone change is the attitude toward centralization of administrative authority. In 1966 decentralization was enunciated as an important goal for the Church.¹³ As this goal has been implemented it has seemed to carry an emphasis on fellowship as the defining essence of the Church. Individuals and small groups far removed from Church headquarters and leading Church councils have been permitted to create programs for themselves. This policy has been implemented in missionary activity, in the appointment of national ministers in foreign missions, in stake programs, and in campus ministry. The new Christian education curriculum reflects this trend by providing resources but not detailed programs and suggesting that attention in the class shift from teacher to students.¹⁵

Growing out of the changing concept of the nature of the Church is a changing understanding of its mission. Repeatedly in current literature the assertion is made that revealed truth is incarnational living, that personal piety suggests a life of service. Thus personal piety is not an end in itself but an attribute which enables the Christian to conduct the mission of the Church. This mission is not limited to baptizing new members, although that goal is



Tabernacle and Church Headquarters, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, Missouri

still important. The mission of the Church is also accomplished when members enter into the life of the secular community to witness by deed to the efficacy of Christian fellowship. The mission does not become mere social service because the Church testifies to the world of a power that is holy and transcendent.¹⁶

In practice an incarnational attitude is observable in many facts of Church life: the establishment of medical missions and English language schools abroad;¹⁷ the utilization of Church buildings for community service; the development by the Quorum of Seventies of a method of evangelism directed primarily to a program called Witnessing Weekend in which teams of witnesses "share a positive current testimony of God at work in their lives."¹⁸ Formerly evangelism might well have meant the reiteration of the superiority of the R.L.D.S. Church over other denominations by use of scripture and a recounting of the events of 1830. In the missionary approach to nonmembers the same kind of change can be seen. Emphasis is being placed on the evidences of God's spirit reaching out to people's lives today with the Church serving as the framework which enables this contact to occur with greatest effect.¹⁹

This shift is also marked in current literature, such as a 1968 publication which reported the proceedings of a symposium held by the Church on contemporary issues. The emphasis was sounded in the Introduction:

... the membership of the church will come to recognize the need for the increasing expenditure of zeal and energy in behalf of specific needs existing in their immediate locality. May it also lead us into a program of study that is concerned with the problems of mankind, in order that we may more proficiently perform our duties in behalf of the Master of men.²⁰

This change has also had the effect of breaking the traditional reluctance of the Reorganization to mix with the community, a reluctance which may have had a practical as well as a theoretical origin. Certainly the affirmation of the pervasiveness of God's — and hence the Saints' — concern with every aspect of life was present from the beginning of the Restoration. It may be that members of the Reorganization interpreted the tragedy of Nauvoo as a warning against mixing in the affairs of the community. Or the disfavor with which

nineteenth century American society viewed all branches of Mormonism may account for the Church's isolationism. Whatever the reason, the theoretical grounds of isolation in the past have been an overemphasis on the second half of the admonition that the Church should be "in the world but not of the world," with the world being defined as all non-R.L.D.S. people and activities. The extent to which this belief could be carried can be seen in the assertion in the *Saints' Herald* in early 1933 that the Saints would have been almost untouched by the depression if they had just followed the commandments of God.²¹ This attitude too has changed. Not only is the Church as an institution entering into the life of the community by providing housing for various community activities in the suburbs, but it is ministering in the inner-city as well.²² The Church seems to understand its mission now to involve a suffering for and with the world. Church leaders have long admonished members to acknowledge the efforts of other churches. For example, in 1941 the Presiding Bishop of the Church called for this kind of ecumenism:

One of the common fallacies in the thinking of many Latter Day Saints is that of regarding the hope of Zion as an exclusive possession of our church. There has been a growing understanding during recent years, however, that the objectives of the church, in the economic and Zionic sense, are not out of harmony with those of other movements which are being promulgated in the world today. One of our serious problems is that of relating our movement to these other movements.²³

The use of materials from outside sources (the new curriculum of Christian education draws on materials from non-R.L.D.S. authors)²⁴ and the adapting of the ideas found successful by other churches (the original idea for Witnessing Weekends came from the Institute of Christian Renewal)²⁵ are two expressions of the acknowledgment that God's work is being done by many people. The resolutions with social content appearing on the agenda at recent world conferences also testify to the effort of the Church to meet the world. Earlier conferences focused attention almost exclusively on the Church as an institution. In recent years there has been considerable looking outward, in an attempt to discover ways in which the Reorganization could deal prophetically with world problems such as pollution, race, war, and poverty.²⁶

As never before the Reorganization is admitting the possibility of a pluralism of belief. It is not paradoxical that the statement of basic beliefs which was intended to unify the theology of the Church asserts towards its close, "The problem has been in our tendency to insist on unity of opinion when it is really in our essential trust in God that we are to be united."²⁷ Controversial material in the *University Bulletin*, in *Courage: A Journal of Thought and Action* (recently completing its first year of publication) and occasionally in the pages of the *Saints' Herald* gives evidence of a growing latitude of thought. The toleration of discussion of such formerly sacrosanct subjects as the Virgin Birth, the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and rapprochement with the Utah church indicates increasing intellectual freedom. The adaptation of the gospel to a variety of cultures also encourages intellectual pluralism and "gives latitude in forms of worship and patterns of living."²⁸

Finally the presence of greater professionalism in the Church and the willingness to go outside to obtain supplementation in the structuring of the

program and materials of the Church reflect a growing economic affluence as well as an expectation that the wisdom of the world has a contribution to make to the work of the Church. Not only is the membership becoming more expectant of professionalism, but the increasing educational status of many members is available to fulfill the expectation. This growing sophistication is apparent in the hymnal of the Church published in 1956 on which a more consistent professional scrutiny of both the music and the words was rendered than on any earlier hymnal. The historiography of the Church has been greatly enhanced by the creation of a historical library that makes research possible. Trained theologians and professional educators have been employed in campus ministry and Christian education. Nonmember specialists in many fields are being consulted freely. For example, the Joint Council and campus ministry have utilized outside specialists such as theologians and church historians.

The transformation of the Reorganization from a nineteenth to a twentieth century church was not finished by the recognition of these four foci of change at the 1970 Conference. The events that triggered the immediate controversy will have effect far beyond present expectation. However, this process gives evidence again to the truth implied by the very existence of the Restoration, that the gospel of Christ speaks to men in the transitory symbols of a specific age. Three times — in the 1830's with the restatement of these principles for the nineteenth century, in the 1860's and 70's with a reassessment of the founding stance, and finally during the last twenty years — the Reorganization has been forced by external events to identify and translate its Christian evangel. That the process has occurred and will occur again is the basic vital sign of the institution.

= death knell

ADDENDUM

Since the writing of this article the Church has held its 1972 World Conference. Many of the same issues were debated again but with less heat and fewer dissenting voices. The outward thrust of the Church received validation in the word of God presented by W. Wallace Smith, the Prophet and President. In part the revelation said, "... there are also those who are not of this fold to whom the saving grace of the gospel must go. When this is done the church must be willing to bear the burden of their sin. . . ." Following a full day of discussion the Conference accepted the document as the mind and will of God. It now remains for the Church to discover and accept the full meaning of bearing the sin of the twentieth century world.

Wow!

¹Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1923.

²Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning*. First published in Nauvoo in 1839, this book went through seven editions in the Reorganization.

³Typical of the body of literature are the following: *The Restoration Story* and *The Good News*, both missionary booklets of the 1950's; *Telling the Gospel Story*, a junior quarterly of 1945; E.A. Smith, *Restoration: A Study in Prophecy*, a 1946 book; "High Points of Our Message," an article in the October, 1935, *Priesthood Journal*.

⁴*World Conference Reports*, 1968, p. 67.

⁵Doctrine and Covenants (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House). Sec. 1:4 has been interpreted to suggest that worldly wisdom would be overcome by unlearned servants of God.

⁶Lillie Jennings, "Korea: New Chapter in Church History," *Saint's Herald*, Independence, Missouri: 15 May 1965, p. 8.

⁷*Exploring the Faith* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1970), pp. 130-131.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁰Donald D. Landon and Robert L. Smith, *For What Purpose Assembled* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1969).

¹¹*A Design for Adult Education in the Church and Design for Discipleship* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1971).

¹²Clifford A. Cole, "Theological Perspectives of World Mission," *Saint's Herald* (July, 1971), 11.

¹³*World Conference Reports*, 1966, p. 240.

¹⁴Cole, p. 12.

¹⁵*Design for Discipleship*, p. 6.

¹⁶Cassette conversation recorded to accompany new curriculum for Christian education, Donald Landon, Geoffrey Spencer, Robert Smith, 1971.

¹⁷A permanent medical installation exists in Seoul, Korea; several church medical teams have visited Haiti; English language schools exist in Lima, Peru, and Tokyo, Japan.

¹⁸Ed Barlow, "Witnessing Weekends," *Saint's Herald* (June, 1971), 28ff.

¹⁹For example, in the 1967 Campaign for Christ in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the sermons of Seventy A. M. Pelletier, Jr. emphasized the fruits of Christianity: Christian Discipleship, Commitment, Involvement, and Community.

²⁰Paul A. Wellington, ed., *Challenges to Kingdom Building* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1968).

²¹Ward A. Hougas, "Our Church and the Depression," *Saint's Herald* (January 27, 1932), 78.

²²Cole, p. 11.

²³G. L. DeLapp, *A Study of Zion's Procedures*, Vol. I (1941), p. 5.

²⁴*A Design for Adult Education in the Church*.

²⁵Barlow, p. 30.

²⁶See Minutes of the 1968 and 1970 World Conferences.

²⁷*Exploring the Faith*, pp. 245-46.

²⁸Cole, p. 62.