An RLDS Reformation? Construing the Task of RLDS Theology

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Introduction

During the last twenty-five years, Reorganized Latter Day Saints have struggled to discover what it means to be the body of Christ in the modern world. Clifford A. Cole in "The World Church: Our Mission in the 1980s" explains that the RLDS Church entered a new era in the early 1960s when the First Presidency sent Charles D. Neff and D. Blair Jensen as missionaries to the Orient (1979, 42). Their mission marked the beginning of a remarkable period of intense, often critical examination of the basic beliefs and purpose of the church. Such periods of reformation do not occur in churches without considerable controversy and disappointment; the RLDS Church proved no exception. Considerable progress was made, but not without some anguish and deep searching.

The Orient mission itself raised several issues. Cole reports that Neff, in the course of his work in Japan, noticed how little the church's tracts said about the basics of Christian faith. Consequently, Neff wrote to the Basic Beliefs Committee and asked if the church had anything to help him in missionary work. All he could find was material explaining how the RLDS Church differed from other Christian denominations, which was of little help in Japan, where only 3 percent of the population was Christian. Cole summarized the Joint Council's reaction: "That confrontation forced us immediately to recognize that we are called primarily to teach the basic faith rather than the ways we are different from some other Christian people" (Cole 1979, 42).

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Thus church leaders sought to uncover and clarify what that basic faith entailed. Helpful but nonetheless unsettling information poured in from two major areas: history and biblical criticism. Although many examples could be cited from these areas, we shall discuss only a few. For example, the results of historical research conflicted with the church's traditional view of its history. In a 1962 *Saints Herald* article, James E. Lancaster challenged traditional accounts of the Book of Mormon translation. Testimonies from Emma Smith, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and other eyewitnesses indicated that Joseph Smith "translated" by means of a small seer stone placed in his hat. Thus Lancaster concluded that the "translation" process should be understood as conceptual, not literal (1962, 798–802, 806, 817). Three years later, Robert Flanders's *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* presented startling revelations about the activities of the Nauvoo era, particularly with regard to Joseph Smith's involvement in politics and theological speculation (1965, 179–341).

The church learned of the fruits of biblical criticism as RLDS ministers attended theological schools and Protestant seminaries. Contrary to traditional RLDS teachings, most scholars hold that the New Testament contains no definite prescription for church organization. In fact, Jesus did not found a church. Rather, the loose-knit community of his followers gradually evolved into the church. Biblical criticism also questioned the RLDS notion of the kingdom of God, as well as the view that the gospel is a set of propositions or principles.

These and other internal developments, coupled with changes in American society throughout the 1960s and 1970s caused many RLDS to admit the failure of traditional teachings to respond creatively to the new situation. Church leaders thus recognized the pressing need to do theology. Several publications were the result. In 1967 and 1968 employees of the RLDS Department of Religious Education wrote a series of study papers for the Curriculum Consultation Committee. Whether "position papers" accurately describes their nature and intent, that is how they came to be known. In some ways, the papers represent the climax of the RLDS period of reformation. They admirably attempt a serious examination of the implications of new historical, biblical, and theological findings. The First Presidency presented a series of six papers to church officials and companions at meetings 9–10 January 1979, in Independence.

Other individuals and committees commissioned to write RLDS theology have each attempted to render RLDSism more coherent and consistent internally, and more relevant and palatable to those outside of the church. Yet while this flurry of theological thinking and writing has occurred, we are unaware of any theological discussion of how Reorganized Latter Day Saints ought to understand the task of doing theology. The church has recognized that it must do theology and has, at least in a tentative way, committed itself to the task of thinking theologically. But a discussion of how the task of approaching theology ought to be construed from an RLDS perspective has never appeared in print. It is just such a discussion that this essay hopes to initiate.

We are convinced that the questions and crises of the last two and a half decades remain with the church in the 1980s and that the roots of the problem are theological. Having briefly outlined the characteristics and causes of the period of RLDS reformation, we shall proceed to evaluate three current theological trends. Each attempts to address those developments which led to the shaking of the foundations of RLDSism. Space limitations prevent us from developing an exhaustive typology of the ways that theology is presently understood and approached in the church. The categories employed and the examples cited should be regarded only as representative of general trends. In our analysis of these trends, we will attempt to illuminate the price paid for and the benefits gained by the way in which each construes the task of theology. These are RLDS fundamentalism, theology as history, and the transliteration of Protestant thought. In conclusion, we issue a call for dialogue and elaborate our own model for approaching theology from an RLDS perspective.

RLDS FUNDAMENTALISM

Perhaps the most systematic exposition of the fundamentalist position is Richard Price's *The Saints at the Crossroads* (Independence: Cumorah Books, 1975; see also Bird 1980 and Price 1975d). Fundamentalists correctly charge that the church has changed. They do not, however, like the changes. Price identifies nine "fundamental Restoration distinctives" which, he asserts, set the church apart from other Christian churches (1975s, 232–33). These nine may be summarized in three basic claims. First, Jesus Christ founded a specific church organization which later departed from the truths of the gospel and thereby lost the authority to represent God and administer the sacraments. After centuries of dark apostasy, light again burst forth as God intervened to restore the true church through Joseph Smith, Jr. This restoration is preserved in the Reorganization. Second, the church enjoys and possesses a sacred deposit of modern, infallible revelations given through the founder and his successors in the prophetic office. The Inspired Version of the Holy Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants contain the words of God as dictated to the prophets. Third, the church's chief mission is to participate in God's redeeming activity by building Zion, the literal city of God, at Independence, Missouri.

What kind of task confronts theologians if one begins with these fundamentals? Strictly speaking, theology in the classic sense has no role at all. Fundamentalists regard openness to the various theological trends of the larger Christian community as evidence of "apostasy" (Price 1975s, 20–32). Especially fearful of ecumenical influences and tendencies, they decry the results of the RLDS period of reevaluation and propose a return to the previous teachings of the church. They understand what we would term the theological task almost exclusively in terms of telling the "story of the Restoration," supported by vigorous proof-texting from the three standard books. The greatness of the RLDS tradition lies in its scriptures as seen through the lens of the Restoration. The present crises can be ended by obeying the command to teach all nations

the distinctive RLDS gospel and abandoning the present ill-fated flirtation with the vain "theologies of men."

We find three key insights in the fundamentalist position. First, although the fundamentalist alternative represents an antiquated way of understanding scripture and the divine activity in the world, such a world view dominated the thinking of most church members for many decades and, to a certain extent, still does. Second, the insistence of fundamentalists upon the importance of the identity of the church as a particular historical community represents an important facet of responsible RLDS theology. We are convinced — and we will develop this point more fully below — that a theology can be truly *RLDS* only when it takes our particular and peculiar history seriously. Third, fundamentalist writings reflect a strong fervor for what they regard as the truth. The best theologians approach their task with a determined passion to search out and express the truths of the Christian message, yet with humble recognition that their feeble attempts ever fail to capture those truths.

In many ways, however, fundamentalism does not represent a viable option. This is because fundamentalism is inflexible and insistent on its own infallible apprehension of gospel truths. It has difficulty listening and often becomes arrogant and idolatrous. Paul Tillich observed that a theological system should satisfy two basic needs: "The statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received." Few systems achieve an acceptable balance between these two poles, Tillich continues, and either sacrifice elements of the Christian truth or fail to address the contemporary situation. Others, like American fundamentalism, fail on both counts: "Afraid of missing the eternal truth, they [American fundamentalists] identify it with some previous theological work, with traditional concepts and solutions, and try to impose these on a new, different situation. They confuse eternal truth with a temporal expression of this truth" (1951–63, 1:3). RLDS fundamentalists are equally at fault.

Rather than face conclusions required by developments in twentieth-century biblical scholarship, science, psychology, and history, RLDS fundamentalists resort to old arguments and clichés which are no longer convincing. Price, for example, in his chapter on "The Church Misinterpreted," assails the Position Papers for claiming that "there was no divinely established structure" for the first-century church (Price 1975s, 115). Clearly, if the author of this paper is correct, then the RLDS claim to be the restoration of that church would be erroneous. The Papers also argued, to Price's further dismay, that no single organization may rightfully claim to be the only true church (Position Papers, 50). In our view, the author(s) of this Position Paper is on solid ground based on New Testament and historical scholarship. Price's rebuttal, however, merely restates the age-old RLDS position with sixteen proof-text references to the three standard books in one and a half pages (Price 1975s, 117–18). Nowhere does Price even consider the complexities of the New Testament data.

In the final analysis, RLDS fundamentalists have chosen to represent remnants of a nineteenth-century world view. They attempt to respond to twentieth-century questions with nineteenth-century answers, often even refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the questions. They unstintingly reject all attempts at revision and modernization of the church's message (Price 1975s, 1–6). Unfortunately, the fundamentalists, in their desire to remain faithful to the RLDS tradition, have foreclosed all possibilities for the creative transformation of that tradition.

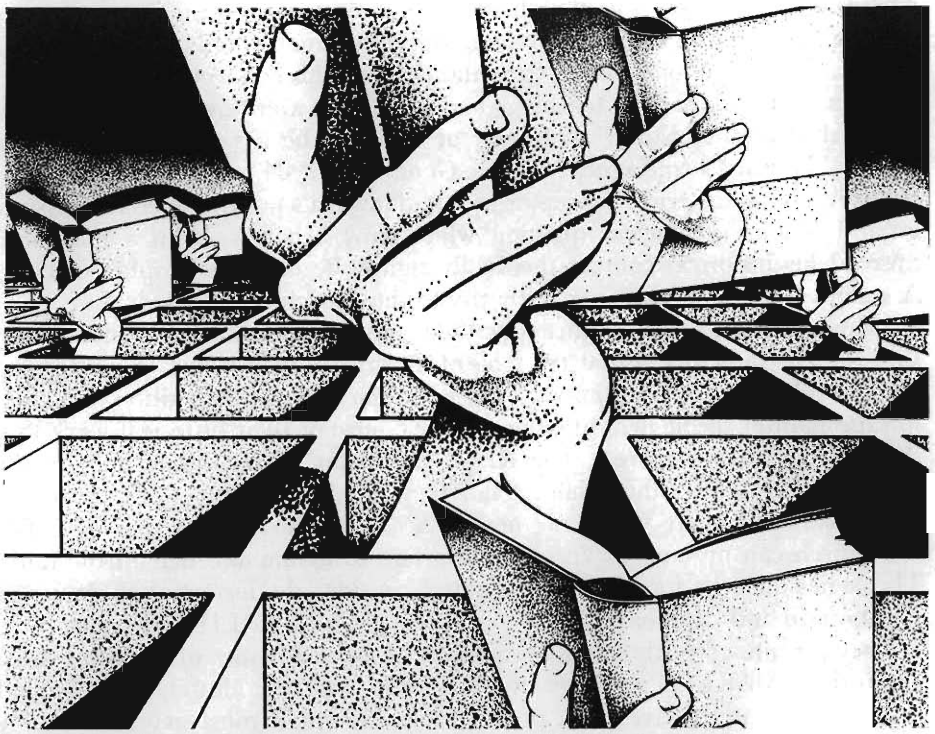
THEOLOGY AS HISTORY

RLDSism is first and foremost a historical faith. It is the story of a people who believe themselves to be called to a unique mission, who were persecuted and driven into the wilderness. The heart of that faith centers on key events: Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, vision in the grove, the appearance of the Book of Mormon, the several attempted gatherings, the martyrdom of its founder, and the Reorganization. RLDS doctrine evolved alongside of these events and the one is not separable from the other. Both are locked together and depend upon each other.

Given this fact, it is not surprising that, in the past, the church has presented its theology by retelling its version of how and why these events occurred. When a later generation of church members comes to believe that doctrines taught and practiced by an earlier one are no longer true, it is likely to dissent, not from the doctrine itself in a straightforward theological manner (thereby admitting the fallibility of past formulations), but rather by arguing that the true church never believed or practiced that doctrine. Thus, for example, the church assigns the system of temple rituals to a post-Nauvoo Brigham Young, moves the command to baptize for the dead to an "appendix" in its canon, and in a recent paper by the Church Historian, admits that while Joseph Smith, Jr., was close to the appearance of polygamy, it was taught only as an "accident of history," as a thing essentially beyond Smith's control (Howard 1983).

It is not our intent to relegate the work of Richard P. Howard to the same category as the first two examples of this trend as though there is no qualitative difference between them. Historical research has come a long way from the parade of "story of the church" volumes.[1] Indeed, it is only when historical scholarship has reached its present level of competency that the inadequacy of this method of doing theology becomes apparent. We do not claim that Howard set out to write a theological treatise or that he regards his work as RLDS

[1] Works in this tradition include Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and of its legal successor, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 7th ed. (Independence: Herald House, 1964); W. J. Haworth, *The Fall of Babylon and the Triumph of the Kingdom of God* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House, 1911; reprint ed., Independence: Herald House, 1974); William H. Kelley, *Presidency and Priesthood: The Apostasy, Reformation, and Restoration*, 2nd ed. (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House and Bookbindery, 1908); Joseph Luff, *The Old Jerusalem Gospel: Twenty-Nine Sermons Representative of the Faith of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence: Herald House, 1903).



theology. We suggest simply that his essay indicates his awareness of and concern about the theological issues raised by his research. Thus, when we say that RLDS theology cannot be undertaken this way, we do not mean to impugn the work of the present generation of historians. Rather, we argue only that the tools of the historian are not those of the theologian: that church members ought to stop expecting church historians to do theology and berating them when their work cannot solve the church's *theological* difficulties. A closer look at Howard's paper better reveals the point.

In the first half of his essay, Howard draws out clearly the connection between the church's insistence that Joseph Smith, Jr., did not teach polygamy and Joseph Smith III's own refusal to believe that his father could be connected with a practice that he found so repulsive. Such an insight goes a long way toward explaining the sensibilities of the Reorganization as a church molded in the image of Joseph Smith III.

In the second half, although he draws only on RLDS sources, Howard concludes that Smith was in fact closely related to and responsible for the initiation of a chain of events which led to the practice of polygamy. Although Howard stops short of putting the teaching in Smith's hands, he does not deny that polygamy was the logical extension of doctrines that Smith promulgated. No non-RLDS historian stops here; the authoritative biographer of Smith, Fawn M. Brodie, is certain that he taught the doctrine. Yet even Howard's modest conclusion places RLDS readers in an awkward position. Traditionally, the RLDS Church has taught that polygamy is immoral. The question then

emerges: What ought the church do with a prophet who made the error of starting this chain of events? Howard, *as a historian*, can only give a historical answer. He focuses on Smith's "repentance" from his connection with the doctrine as evidence that his teachings and his doubts were overpowered by impersonal forces of history. This may or may not be a satisfactory *historical* answer. Howard's colleague, Imogene Goodyear (1984), has her doubts. But regardless of its historical success or failure, Howard's position merely shifts the ground of our *theological* question which now becomes: Can a man who misread his historical context this badly rightly be called a prophet of God? A second follows: What gives authority to the church he founded?

Howard cannot answer these questions, regardless of how good his scholarship is. The difficulty is that the tools of history are inappropriate to the task. He and other RLDS historians are placed in the unenviable position of having to raise painful theological questions in the course of their historical work that they cannot answer there.[2] The RLDS theologian owes a great debt to the present generation of historians. Had they not begun their work twenty to thirty years ago, there would not now be a call for the study of theology. But the church can no longer expect its historians to define and defend the faith. Theologies must be found that adequately consider the historical character of RLDS faith and can use the work that is being done by RLDS historians without being confined to the methods of history for the advance of the theological enterprise. An RLDS theology depends upon both the church's history and the creative, interpretive work of its historians; but it must never be simply determined by that history.

THE TRANSLITERATION OF PROTESTANT THOUGHT

While both RLDS fundamentalism and theology as history contain certain insights into how the RLDS Church has understood and continues to understand and identify itself, neither can be followed exclusively. Indeed, neither can be considered *theology* as the term is generally understood in the broader Christian community. The third trend, however, seeks to be theology in just this sense. This type of theology is promoted by people who comprise what might be accurately called the first generation of RLDS theologians. As there are no RLDS seminaries and almost no published RLDS theological writings of interest to non-RLDS readers, these students have learned their craft in Protestant seminaries that are largely unaware of RLDSism. Hence, what they have learned is mostly Protestant theology, which seldom fits neatly alongside the traditional RLDS language used almost universally throughout the church.

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[2] The fine historical work of William D. Russell exhibits this same quandary. For example, his essay, "A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone*, Sept.–Oct. 1982, pp. 20–27, casts doubt on the traditional church belief about the historicity of the book, yet he concludes the essay with the claim that the book can still be regarded and used as scripture. We find his conclusion interesting and perhaps somewhat surprising, but it cannot fully address the theological issues at stake. For example, if Russell's account is correct, and we think that it is, then what ought the church to do about its claim to have a prophet who claimed to possess gold plates which he translated with the Urim and Thummim?

One should not be surprised, therefore, that these first RLDS theologians are struggling to discover RLDS names for the exciting, even intoxicating, ideas of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, or Whitehead, for example.

This is exactly what we find in Geoffrey F. Spencer's essay, "Revelation and the Restoration Principle." Other RLDS thinkers have read and profited from Protestant theology. For example, see Peter A. Judd and Clifford A. Cole, *Distinctives: Yesterday and Today* (Independence: Herald House, 1983), and Peter A. Judd and A. Bruce Lindgren, *An Introduction to the Saints' Church* (Independence: Herald House, 1976). Spencer alone, however, seeks to deal with this theology on its own terms and makes his debts to particular theologians explicit. Spencer rightly thinks that the church could benefit from Paul Tillich's concept of the Protestant Principle, Tillich's discussion of "ultimate concern" and idolatry. (He understands idolatry as the elevation of proximate, preliminary matters to the level of ultimate concern; Tillich 1957d, 28–29; 1951–63, 1:227, 3:244–45; 1957p, v–xxv). Idolatry often occurs in churches, for instance, when members come to identify the particular, finite forms through which the ultimate finds expression as being the ultimate itself (1957d 96–98). The Protestant Principle is the ongoing, critical protest against such idolatries. Protestantism, which began as an attempt to embody the principle, often fails to remain faithful to it. But the principle continues to beckon and stand in judgment upon the church.

For theologians, the principle is a simultaneous "yes and no" to all theological assertions. Tillich reminds us that all theological formulations are finite, fallible, historically conditioned attempts to express the inexpressible. This profound insight serves to prevent our absolutizing past statements and thus inevitably propels us toward the future and ever-new interpretations. The Protestant Principle is therefore implicitly eschatological, always pressing forward to more accurate and relevant formulations of the truth.

Impressed by this insight, Spencer sees clearly that RLDS theology must either embrace this Principle or drift on toward complete irrelevance. But because the *Protestant Principle* seems less than ideal for a church that has never regarded itself as Protestant (or Catholic), Spencer is wont to describe the truth of the Principle in explicit RLDS language. Thus, after explaining Tillich's concept, Spencer formulates a *Restoration* Principle and considers its possible implications for the RLDS movement. Spencer's Restoration Principle is little more than a transliteration of the Protestant Principle, a Protestant idea with an RLDS name. He explains, "Customarily, to some extent, the Restoration has been seen essentially as the reintroduction of certain realities which existed in a form of purity or completeness in a former era but were lost" (1983, 188). Realizing that historical research puts such a notion in grave danger, he wants the Restoration Principle to aid the church by modifying the way it understands the concept of restoration, so that restoration becomes anticipatory rather than reactionary.

Spencer's attempt to relate the best of Protestant theology to RLDS theology is laudable. But his transliteration of Protestant thought into RLDS categories fails to fully consider or appreciate the RLDS heritage as a particu-

lar people with a particular history. Most importantly, his use of *restoration* is problematic. All denotative and connotative meanings of the term point backward, toward the recovery of something lost. *Restoration* refers to a return to a former or original state. Spencer, however, wishes to interpret *restoration* to mean the opposite: "Restoration exemplifies the readiness to live in the spirit and expectancy of the future in respectful and honest appreciation of our past rather than in bondage to it" (1983, 189). Or again: "The readiness to hold our contingent forms, structures, and doctrines up for further interpretation may be one important way in which we manifest what 'restoration' is" (1983, 189). Yet the entire essence of the church's understanding of restoration has been to look back and recover just those past forms, structures, and doctrines. The very word *restoration* designates such attempts.

Moreover, to say that "to some extent" (Spencer 1983, 188) "Restoration" has meant bringing back the old-time religion is to seriously underestimate the enduring influence of this view and ignore its particular history in the RLDS movement. If Spencer wants to use Tillich's insight, he ought to simply call it the Protestant Principle or find some other way to express the idea to RLDS audiences. He might simply challenge the church to respond to and embody the Protestant Principle. Relabeling it may be an unnecessary concession to the RLDS fear of Protestant and Catholic theology. The church must become willing to openly acknowledge and accept insights from Protestant and Catholic circles. RLDS symbols and images have specific meanings and histories which must be admitted and dealt with, even if it means abandoning the symbol as irretrievable. We regard *restoration* as incapable of undergoing such a radical and unprecedented reversal of meaning. A Restoration Principle can never mean what Tillich meant by Protestant Principle.

Spencer's method of thinking theologically does offer some important advantages. The most striking aspect of this essay is its openness. It encourages the RLDS theologian to utilize the work of past and present Protestant and Catholic theologians. Second, the method recognizes the need for interaction between RLDS symbols and history and the broader Christian community. Third, it recognizes the need to modify and reinterpret church tradition. The church can no longer claim to infallibly possess the truth. "The vulnerable church," Spencer correctly writes, "is the one which has closed down the canon, set the limits of belief, claimed infallibility and finality for its pronouncements and believes it can weather the storm" (1983, 191). Finally, it exemplifies the courage required to make what may be unpopular stands in a church still suspicious of the theologian.

CONCLUSION

We began this essay by making three basic claims. First, we suggested that the RLDS Church is presently involved in a genuine struggle to discover what it means to be the body of Christ in the modern world. This struggle has created a near-crisis of identity and authority. Second, the roots of this struggle are theological. Third, this struggle has prompted the church to do theology.

To these we now add a fourth claim: theology never emerges in a vacuum. Each way of approaching the task of theology grows out of and reflects some particular facet of the theologian's situation and church, in this case, the struggle of the RLDS Church to embody Christ in the world. Thus, from the way each particular theology is done, one may obtain clues to the nature and character of the present situation of RLDSism.

What then can be learned from the three trends discussed above? From fundamentalism, theologians ought to learn that the RLDS community has been and continues to be a people with a particular history and a particular matrix of symbols, stories, and events. From history RLDS theologians should learn that the church tends to claim infallibility for many of its teachings and practices, a tendency destructive as well as false and erroneous. Finally, from the first RLDS theologians, we ought to learn that the church has a certain, though not yet fully defined, kinship with the wider Christian community and is seeking to discern the parameters and depth of that relationship.

Each of these trends fails as a way of approaching the task of RLDS theology precisely because each grows out of only one facet of the church's present situation and focuses its attention on that one problem. Consequently, they seem to ignore other dimensions of the present situation. Fundamentalism, determined to protect the particularity of RLDSism, asserts the infallibility and unsurpassability of the RLDS gospel and ignores the wider Christian community. Historians correctly criticize the church's unwarranted claims of infallibility but lack the methodological tools to answer questions about the enduring value of a movement which possesses no exclusive claim to truth. Historians are not equipped to answer theological questions about what divine authority may inhere in a church which is as fallible and historically conditioned as any other. RLDS theologians transliterating Protestant thought into RLDS categories see the proper relationship between their own church and Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity but fail to appreciate the enduring influence and value of RLDS symbols and stories. Viewing the RLDS as one Christian church among many prevents claims of infallibility but often gives little hint as to what truth, if any, RLDSism might uniquely contain.

The several successes and failures of these ways of approaching the task of RLDS theology again point out the urgent need to do RLDS theology. Clearly, new models are needed, models that build upon the insights of preceding models and respond more fully to the present situation of the RLDS Church. We offer a few suggestions which may serve as catalysts for further inquiry and discussion.

In our judgment, a truly RLDS theology will be governed or characterized by integration. First, an RLDS theology must come to terms with what RLDSism presently is, its history, and what it moves toward. The work of the RLDS theologian requires historical research, participation in the church as a worshipping community, and internal dialogue. Second, RLDS theology must understand the complexity and diversity of the broader Christian community. Helpful activities include the study of Protestant and Catholic theology, membership in ecumenical organizations, and the active cultivation of friendships

with Christians of all traditions. Finally, such a theology must be attuned to the demands and challenges of the modern world. Awareness of the modern situation emerges from the study of the natural and social sciences, the exercise of Christian discipleship, and attempts to dwell in the same global village with various cultures and religions.

Authentic RLDS theologies hold each of these elements of the present situation in tension with one another, learning from each, using the insights of one to critique the limited understandings of the others. Such theologies are undergirded by the conviction that God is at work in and through all three. Continual application of Tillich's Protestant Principle ensures that theologians appreciate the value of tradition but never rest content with mere repetition of the past for its own sake. Critical but never aimlessly destructive, authentic RLDS theologies require constant dialogue, dialogue which will prohibit claims of infallible apprehension of Christian truth.

To understand the task of RLDS theology in this way offers one additional advantage: it opens the theological enterprise to all church members, and in fact depends upon the participation of each. Theology so conceived is not primarily a task of the institutional church nor is it the domain of a few academicians. Rather, it is done primarily by and for the community of individual RLDS Christians. Those who lack the time and means to read Whitehead or Tillich, or to attend ecumenical conferences, or to labor in a Latin American barrio may still be involved in the theological enterprise by reflecting on and seeking the presence of God in their own communities and aligning their vocational, educational, devotional, and economic choices with the loving, abiding, and chastizing Presence.

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