

# Reflections on the Restoration

*Lowell L. Bennion*



The world's living religions began with the lives and teachings of charismatic leaders such as Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad. Each won a following by the force of his character, the witness of his faith, and the humane content of his teaching. In the beginning these religions were relatively simple in their teaching, with limited ritual and organization and, of course, without tradition.

As they acquired a following and the founders died, their disciples, wishing to carry on the words and mission of their leaders, canonized their words, elaborated rituals and organization, and built material monuments to the faith — cathedrals, statues, temples, and historical markers. This process is called institutionalization and it characterizes practically every ongoing movement — be it economic, educational, political, or religious in character.

Thomas O'Dea, insightful sociologist of religion, made a simple but profound statement when he said, "Religion *needs* most and *suffers* most from institutionalization." If religion were not institutionalized, it would likely die with the founder or with his immediate disciples. It would not be integrated into the social fabric of society. Religion is a social phenomenon. To be shared and preserved it must have a body of beliefs and other ways of expressing feelings and aspirations by the group. Scriptures, rituals, and traditions fill this need.

On the other hand, religion may suffer from institutionalization because institutional practices and interests may increase dramatically and divert people from the original purposes and values of the founder. In my missionary days in Europe, I became aware of the dangers to religion found in the elaboration of Church dogma, ritual, and organization which took place when the Church of Christ became the Church of the Roman Empire. Indeed this was one explanation and evidence of the apostasy in early Christian history. It was not, however, until I began to study the process of institutionalization that I gained a fuller understanding of its meaning for religion.

---

*LOWELL BENNION, former director of the University of Utah Institute of Religion, is executive director of the Community Services Council, Salt Lake City.*

In many well-established religions, ethically and spiritually sensitive members have felt burdened by the weight of their religious institutions. They sensed that the purpose and spirit of the pristine faith had been weakened and impaired by the excessive or irrelevant accumulation of doctrine, ritual, and authority. Nearly every reform movement in Christianity has been a search for the simplicity and authenticity of the Christian faith of the New Testament times. John Huss and Martin Luther attacked practices of the Catholic Church. John Wesley and George Fox, founders of Methodism and the Society of Friends, sought to recover the true spirit of Christianity within the Church of England. When their reform efforts failed, they established new religious movements. These new religions developed into institutionalized religions of their own. The Quakers are an exception. They have retained the simplicity of their original faith better than any group I know. In spite of (or because of) their success, they have remained a very small group.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints represents another effort to restore the pristine gospel and Church of Christ as it existed in apostolic times. It is by no means the only Christian movement of the nineteenth century which sought to do this. But in several ways, the concept of restoration in the LDS faith is distinctive.

First of all, the idea that this new religion was the restored Church and gospel was made clear from the beginning. Joseph Smith was not trying to pour new wine into old bottles. For him, the divine Church of Christ did not exist on earth. A fresh revelation and a new dispensation were needed to bring back the gospel and a church acceptable to Deity. Joseph was not learned in Christian history or dogma. Young, untutored, and unaffiliated, he sought not to reform existing churches but began anew to reestablish the true Christian faith. This was a bold undertaking which he did not claim to initiate himself, except through prayer. After his First Vision, he felt, like Amos of old, called to speak for God.

The beginnings of Mormonism have inspired me from my youth. I was deeply moved by my belief in the reality of a personal God, the resurrected Christ, and the principle of revelation revealed through the experience of Joseph Smith. I resonated with the fact that Mormonism began in the inquiring mind of a youth who sought out God on a spring morning in the spring-time of his life. I have cherished the feeling all my life that this, my religion, was more like a free-flowing mountain spring than a lake filled with moss or covered with ice.

A second distinctive aspect of the restoration in the LDS faith is the concept of divine authority. Religious leaders have felt called of God and doubtless have been moved often by his inspiration in their search for the true Christian faith. Joseph Smith not only felt inspired but said that he received authority in a very real manner. He claimed that leaders of the original Christian movement — John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John — appeared to him and Oliver Cowdery, laid hands upon their heads, bestowed on them the priesthood of God, and commissioned them to organize the Church of Christ, to perform the ordinances of the Church, and to act for Deity in sacred

matters. I am not aware of any other movement which, in its attempt to reestablish the true Christian faith, makes such a claim to divine authority. The priesthood exercised by most Christian leaders is an inner subjective calling felt by the individual and confirmed in the same way by his congregation. Lutherans call it the priesthood of all believers. The Catholic Church is an exception, claiming divine authority through apostolic succession from Peter.

A third remarkable element in the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the incorporation of much of the religion of the Old Testament. Inspired in part perhaps by the Apostle Paul's emphasis on the distinction between Judaism and the Christian faith, many Christian movements have made little room for the religion of Israel in their efforts to return to the pristine Christian faith. The faith of Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles, however, had much in common with the religion of Israel. All of them quoted the Old Testament repeatedly to justify and validate their new religion. For early Christians, Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. His ethical teaching was in complete harmony with that of the prophets and some later teachers in Judaism. For them, pristine Christianity was Judaism plus the mission and life of Jesus Christ.

Like the founders of Christianity, Latter-day Saints have incorporated much of the religion of Israel into their own faith. They call themselves modern Israel and claim kinship with Joseph who was sold into Egypt. The Book of Mormon overlaps both the Old and New Testament periods. The Book of Mormon quotes extensively from the Old Testament and also highlights the coming of Christ. In part, the Book of Mormon is a fusion of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Its authors call it a record of Joseph and declare that one of its purposes is to serve as a New World witness of the Bible. (The LDS Church itself now subtitles the Book "Another Testament for Christ.") The forced exodus of the Mormons from Nauvoo to a promised land to build a new Zion, had much the same meaning to Mormons as the exodus from Egypt must have had for ancient Israel.

When Orson Pratt celebrated the arrival of the pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley, he identified their new home in the "tops of the mountains" with the Zion spoken of by the prophets. Indeed, the Saints saw themselves fulfilling Old Testament prophecy in this, their heroic adventure.

But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it.

And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it.

For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever. (Mic. 4:1-5)

Like ancient Israel, Latter-day Saints considered themselves a chosen people, called to establish Zion, a New Jerusalem. Their flight west was reminiscent of Israel's flight from Egypt. They named their river, which flowed from the fresh waters of Utah Lake to the Great Salt Lake, the Jordan. They constructed a defense of polygamy that included the lives of Old Testament patriarchs. Someday they would return to Missouri as the Jews would to Jerusalem.

A fourth important characteristic of the restoration was an attempt to establish a cohesive society based on Christian love. This intent is beautifully portrayed in Mosiah 18 in the Book of Mormon where Alma teaches the meaning of baptism.

And now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those who mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times, and in all things, and in all places . . . what have you against being baptized? (Mosiah 18:8-29)

The rest of the chapter tells how their baptismal pledge became reality in their daily lives.

Early in Mormon history, valiant but unsuccessful attempts were made to establish a law of consecration which would have gone far to eliminate poverty and to enable the more capable to contribute richly to the common good. The Saints were told to "remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and afflicted, for *he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple* (D&C 52:40; italics added).

Brigham Young made repeated attempts to achieve the same goal, as evidenced in *Building the City of God* by Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976). All of these socio-economic experiments in Missouri and the West failed for political, economic, and human reasons, but they illustrate how the restoration was more than theological and ecclesiastical. Sincere and sacrificial efforts were made to establish a Christian society.

The pristine gospel taught by Jesus had both institutional elements and profound religious and ethical principles. Jesus himself submitted to baptism, called the Twelve, and sent them to preach and baptize. To Peter, he gave authority to bind on earth and in heaven. His chief concerns, judging by his sayings and actions, however, were the will of his Father and the well-being of the human family. He said little about institutional matters and much about humility, faith in God, and love of neighbor: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

Because of the fragmentary nature of the New Testament record and the possibility of more than one interpretation being placed on passages of scripture, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove rationally and definitively that the LDS faith is a restoration of the primitive Christian church and gospel.

Many fundamental aspects, however, support the claim: the lay character of the Church, the assertion of divine authority, the simplicity and form of its ordinances (the blessing of children, the administration of the sick, baptism by immersion and of the spirit, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper), baptism for

the dead, and the presence of prophets, apostles, and other officers named in the New Testament; its emphasis on faith and repentance, the first principles and ordinances, its concept of Deity and man, and its many programs which promote the welfare and fellowship of its members.

The Church plays a very important, necessary role in the religious life and salvation of its members — teaching the gospel, performing essential, grace-bestowing ordinances, offering opportunities for corporate worship, fellowship, and service, and motivating people to live the gospel. However, the Church is not an end in itself. It is a means of developing true disciples of Christ — persons who have faith in him, who are learning to live the kind of life he would have them live, and who believe in and trust his grace.

Like pristine Christianity, Mormonism also has within it both institutional elements and gospel principles and ideals. Both derive their value from helping to bring “to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Both are a means to an end, the end being the developing of Christian faith and living in the lives of God’s children. As the LDS Church ages and expands in size, territory, and functions, I am concerned that it continue to serve this, its primary purpose, rather than being diverted to institutional ends.

1. My first concern is that we do not equate the religious life with Church activity. The Church is an essential part of the religious life. There we are taught the gospel, make sacred covenants, and have opportunities to serve one another. But the Church is not the end of the religious life. We are not here to serve the Church but rather to serve people through the Church. Men and women are not made for the Church, but the Church, like the Sabbath, is made for them. We do not teach lessons but people. Ultimately nothing matters in a class, a meeting, an interview, or a Church activity except what people take away — ideally, increased hope, faith, knowledge, desire to serve, or resolution to live the teachings of Jesus.

2. My second, similar concern is that institutional goals do not become ends in themselves. When they do, they may violate gospel principles and inhibit spiritual growth in members. About twenty-five years ago, some ambitious, well-meaning mission presidents made baptisms their goal. They established baptismal quotas and pressured their missionaries to meet these goals. Selling techniques were introduced. Some children were baptized without fully understanding the meaning of the ordinance and without informed consent from their parents.

Some home teaching is done just to get it done, not to build caring and serving relationships with those visited. Just last week I heard two contrasting reports from people visited. In one instance, the brethren come faithfully and never fail to say, “If there is anything we can do, call us.” The sister lives alone, is in frail health, cannot drive, and would very much like to be taken to Church but is too proud to ask. Her teachers never offer her a ride. She stays home. The other elderly widow has a home teacher who keeps snow removed from her walks and makes minor, needed repairs on her house. He takes the initiative, sees what needs to be done, and does it.

3. My third concern is that we do not think that the ordinances of the Church have value in and of themselves apart from the quality of our lives. We must not be content because we were baptized, married in the temple, ordained to the priesthood, given the gift of the Holy Ghost, made recipients of the sacrament, and of temple ordinances. Church rituals and ordinances are not ends in themselves. They are linked with gospel living. If our baptism doesn't motivate us to bear one another's burdens, it is putting trust in dead works; if the priesthood doesn't make us better servants of Christ, amen to its value in our life; if temple marriage does not contribute to the Christian quality of our marriage, of what value is it?

4. I am concerned also lest the scriptures become an end in themselves. This happened in ancient Israel. The Mosaic law introduced a humane and ethical emphasis in religion, particularly in the teaching of Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. But there developed in Israel the tendency to elaborate and worship the law irrespective of human values or consequences. A classic example was Jesus' conflict with Pharisees over keeping the Sabbath. Did man exist for the Sabbath or the Sabbath for man? Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, to save life or to lose it (Luke 6:1-10)?

Latter-day Saints are taught to study and revere scriptures as the word of God, but they must not be interpreted apart from God's purpose in human life or the fundamentals of the gospel. Jesus made the scripture of his day — the Law and the Prophets — “hang” on the love of God and love of man. This principle still holds for scriptural interpretation today. The scriptures are not of one quality; they are not a legal document, equally binding in every book and on every line. As with the Law of Moses, some of it was conditioned by the state of the times and is no longer valid today.

The principle of continuous revelation enables the prophetic leadership of the Church to relate the will of God to ongoing human needs and understanding which may, at times, change an earlier teaching or practice. Jesus, for example, did away with animal sacrifice among the Nephites and instead called for “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Ne. 9:19, 20). The 1978 revelation, giving worthy males of every race opportunity to hold the priesthood, is a classic example of a change in policy that is consistent with gospel fundamentals and human welfare and salvation. The divine will is not fully known. The work of the Church is not finished. We have yet to learn the full meaning of Christian discipleship. The salvation of men is still in the making and every succeeding generation of Latter-day Saints must learn anew what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Goethe wisely said, “What from your father's heritage is lent, earn it anew to really possess it.”

5. My fifth concern is that we may identify our being Latter-day Saints *primarily* with things peculiar and distinctive in our religion such as the Word of Wisdom, welfare projects, temple work, missionary service, family home evening, and genealogy. These are valuable programs but again only means to an end. We are here and in the Church to learn to become disciples of Christ—to learn the meaning of love, humility, faith in Deity, and to worship God and



to remember his Son — to take his name upon us and have his spirit to be with us. I am deeply grateful for the Word of Wisdom. It is one of the reasons why I am grateful to have been reared a Latter-day Saint, but it must not be my chief interest in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same goes for genealogy or keeping a journal.

6. My sixth concern is that we make our commitment to God and Christ and fellow human beings whole souled. We should make friends for the sake of friendship, not to gain converts to the Church. Friendship is not to be a means to an end, a technique of selling the gospel. I hear people say that they are living the gospel to receive blessings, to gain the celestial kingdom, or to earn exaltation. If that is their primary motive, I wonder if their goal doesn't detract from the quality of gospel living — if they are not serving two masters — the gospel and their own interests. I prefer the Savior's statement: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with *all* thy heart, and with *all* thy soul, and with *all* thy mind" (Matt. 22:37; italics added). I believe we should love our neighbors because they need our love and because we need to learn to love. Love it its own reward.

7. We must teach people not lessons. We must reach hearts, not statistical goals. Giving lessons is an institutional emphasis. Teaching individuals is a gospel emphasis. The purpose of Sunday School is not to teach the gospel, but *to teach individuals* the gospel. Nothing matters in a Church class or activity in the last analysis except what happens to the people involved. This is true of a sacrament meeting, a class, a social, a basketball game, or home teaching.

I remember asking an M-Men basketball coach what his purpose was in coaching his young men. His answer, "To win the stake — and if possible the Church — championship." I repeated the question with emphasis. He repeated the answer with emphasis. His objective was institutional. He did not see it in either gospel principles or the well-being of individual team members.

Similarly, in a leadership meeting, I asked Scoutmasters what their purpose was in Scouting. One answered, "To get every boy registered and in uniform." Another said, "To have at least 75 percent attain the rank of Eagle." These answers reminded me of an experience one of my students related years ago. He said that every boy in the troop in his ward but one had qualified for an award at a given Court of Honor night. Desiring 100 percent, the Scoutmaster said to this boy, "If you will promise to complete your second-class work in the next thirty days, we will present you with a second-class award Friday evening at our Court of Honor." To the Scoutmaster's shame and the boy's credit, the lad refused to accept "the honor." Institutional goals sometimes do violence to religious and ethical principles.

8. A final illustration of institutionalization that may divert effort from more genuine, religious goals is taking pride in materiality. Jesus had no place to lay his head. Churches, and worthy motives, build cathedrals, temples, meeting houses, monuments, and historical sites to inspire members and to honor the founder of the faith. These are legitimate unless they become a source of pride or divert attention from true gospel living. Catholics have been criticized for building and decorating great cathedrals in the midst of poverty.

Looking to our day, Moroni warned us, "Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?" (Morm. 8:39)

I like to think of the restoration of the pristine gospel of Christ not as a single event in the past, but as an ongoing effort on our part to make the things important to the Savior important to us. We have the authority and the teaching to accomplish the restoration, but each generation of Latter-day Saints must learn the meaning of Christian discipleship anew and realize it in their lives. Thus, we must not view the Church as an end in itself, but as an appropriate, wonderful means of helping people to become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Only in this way can we gain the values and avoid the limitations of institutionalization.

I feel the need to worship God more leisurely and more purely, to visit the sick and afflicted and lonely more often, to be more neighborly, to cultivate a broken heart and a contrite spirit, to be less busy in and out of Church and to be more committed to Christ and his way of life. Never has the need to be true disciples of Christ been more urgent and perhaps more difficult. The world needs to witness a Christian society. This is our opportunity — not only to preach the Restoration but to realize it by choosing, in our personal and community life, to live by the weightier matters of the law — faith, justice, and mercy.