

The Restoration and History: New Testament Christianity

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THE RESTORATION MOVEMENTS have tended to elevate historical claims to the level of theological dogma. But in our defense of historical beliefs we have often denied the reality of historical process by asserting that ideas, institutions, social relationships, and even written texts drop out of a timeless heaven rather than emerging from the historical process of human struggle. The very term, *restoration*, points to one major expression of this ahistorical tendency: the claim that the "true church" consists of an eternal (nonhistorical) priesthood structure and authority. We claim that the historical Jesus established this structure in New Testament Christianity, and that it was restored to earth by Joseph Smith, Jr., just as it was in the beginning, free of the taint of human, historical process.

We cannot examine extrahistorical realities, if there be such. But we can ask whether the New Testament justifies the historical claim that Jesus established a priesthood structure and authority similar to one which now exists in one or more of the Restoration churches. The answer, in my opinion, is no, on the grounds that Jesus apparently established no priesthood structure at all.

When we turn to the New Testament to examine such a claim, it must be understood that we have no documents at all written by Jesus and none by any of his original disciples. All of the texts attributed to the Twelve are probably pseudonymous and of late date. Further, there is compelling evidence that several letters attributed to Paul — definitely 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus and probably Colossians and Ephesians — are pseudonymous and come from at least the third generation of Christianity. The Gospel of Mark is commonly dated about A.D. 70 and the other Gospels between A.D. 80–95. Thus we must begin with the letters of Paul if we are looking for the earliest reliable informa-

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tion. What information we do have, however, is overwhelmingly against the traditional Mormon view of early Christianity.

Because only a small portion of the evidence can be examined here, I will propose four basic claims about New Testament Christianity for which I believe the supporting evidence is compelling. Then I will suggest a rough summary of how the early Christian communities may have moved from a loosely knit ecclesia to the early stages of becoming an institution, and discuss some implications of this for the LDS churches. The main argument of this paper presents a standard view held among many New Testament scholars, but what is well known in one community may be news to another. Thus I share it for its relevance to the LDS communities and suggest further readings for those interested in pursuing the topic further.

Claim One: Twenty years after the crucifixion, the Jerusalem church was still predominantly, perhaps entirely, Jewish.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, written about A.D. 53–54, is the earliest document we have which gives concrete information about the nature of the community of disciples in Jerusalem under its original leaders. Perhaps the most passionate text of the New Testament, it contains Paul's own wrathful account of his conflicts with "James, Cephas [Peter] and John, who were reputed to be pillars" (2:9; all New Testament quotations are from the Revised Standard Version).

Of central importance for us is the clear fact that James, Peter, and John were insisting that gentiles had to be circumcised and obey the Mosaic law — had to become Jews — to be accepted as disciples of Jesus. Paul was by this time preaching a different gospel. His own conversion experience had led him to conclude that gentiles could become Christians without becoming circumcised Jews. The conflict had immediate impact. Paul had already made converts among the gentiles. What would happen to these new members if the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem rejected them?

Hoping to solve this problem, Paul traveled to Jerusalem and "laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preached among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (2:2). He thought his diplomacy successful, for James, Peter, and John "gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (2:9). What happened in Jerusalem to squash this brief vision of ecumenism is lost to us, but

when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, for he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity (2:11–13).

We can imagine Paul feeling abandoned and even betrayed, yet fighting fiercely in his letters to preserve his mission. We need not belabor the details of the letter further to identify a virtually certain bit of historical data: twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the leading disciples in Jerusalem were still Jews, and their perspective dominated the community of disciples there.

What could have led even Barnabas, Paul's closest companion, to abandon Paul and his gospel of grace? The reasons should be obvious. Jesus was a Jew, and so were all of the original "pillars." There is no reason to doubt that they all lived according to Mosaic law, including circumcision, obedience to dietary laws, celebration of Jewish holidays like Passover, and observance of the Sabbath. They worshipped in synagogues and in the temple. Jesus is portrayed not as rejecting the Mosaic law but as engaging with others in interpreting it. We are told that he sought to cleanse the temple, not to reject it. In general, there is every indication that Jesus criticized Judaism, its priesthood, and its law, not as an apostate standing outside them, but as a reformer standing within. We have no record of Jesus telling anyone not to be Jewish.

As Hans Conzelmann wrote in the *History of Primitive Christianity*, "The first Christians are Jews, without exception. For them this is not simply a fact, but a part of their conscious conviction. For them their faith is not a new religion which leads them away from the Jewish religion, but the confirmation of the promise to Israel" (1973, 37).

Claim Two. Early Christianity was dominated by the expectation that Jesus would return in the immediate future.

"The heart of the preaching of Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God," wrote Rudolph Bultmann, one of the major New Testament scholars of this century (1958, 11). The literature of the New Testament consistently presents Jesus as calling persons, not primarily to belief in doctrines, rituals, or ecclesiastical authority, but rather to decision — for or against the kingdom (or reign) of God.

Bultmann expressed what is a very widely held consensus of New Testament scholars in the following description of Jesus' teaching: "God will suddenly put an end to the world and to history . . . Jesus expected that this would take place soon, in the immediate future" (1958, 12–13). We cannot be certain what Jesus said, but there is no doubt that a number of New Testament texts support Bultmann's view.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14–15).

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1).

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place (Mark 13:24–30).

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' . . . I say unto you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of man comes (Matthew 10:5–7, 23b).

Of course, this is a picture of Jesus presented by the authors of Mark and Matthew and written long after Jesus' death. For an earlier look at the thought of the church we must go to Paul's letters. Here we also find abundant evidence that Paul expected the world to end and Jesus to return in the near future — certainly during his own lifetime.

In his earliest extant letter, 1 Thessalonians, written about A.D. 50, Paul confronted the problem that some Christians in Thessalonica had died, an event apparently unexpected by the disciples there. Like Paul, they had expected the return of Jesus so soon that death would not be a problem. Notice Paul's use of "we" as he sought to reassure them:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. . . . For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:13-17).

The same theme is sounded in the familiar words of 1 Corinthians:

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

The appointed time has grown very short; from now on let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29-31; see also 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 2:19; 3:11-13; 1 Cor. 1:7; 10:11; 16:22; Phil. 3:20-21; 4:5; Rom. 13:11-13; 1 Peter 4:7; and James 5:7-8).

Virtually every New Testament author struggled with this expectation in some way or another. Apart from the hints of imminent expectation in 6:2 of Luke, its author tried to put the kingdom far off in the future and to emphasize the need to apply Christian values in this world. Notice, for example, that Luke drops Mark's opening proclamation that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15) and replaces it with Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor." Also, Luke has moved Mark 1:15 to the apocalyptic discourse and has put it into the mouth of the false prophets! "And he said, 'Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them'" (Luke 21:8). The Gospel of John, though heavily edited, also includes an effort to set aside concern for a return of Jesus (3:16-19; 4:23; 5:21-24; 12:31-2; 17:1-3). But the expectation persisted. It is evident throughout the book of Revelation, which opens with the words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servant what must soon take place; . . . for the hour is near." The closing chapter is equally

clear: God “has sent his angel to show his servant what must soon take place.” “And behold, I am coming soon . . . for the time is near. Behold, I am coming soon. . . . I, Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches” (Rev. 22:6, 7, 10, 11, 16). Such passages abound in the New Testament literature. It is obvious why Bultmann concluded: “The eschatological expectation and hope is the core of the New Testament preaching throughout” (1958, 11–12).

Bultmann’s stance is representative of a standard position of responsible biblical scholars. The diversity and complexity of the ways in which various New Testament authors struggle with the failure of Jesus to return only reinforce the evidence that this expectation of his imminent return permeated early Christianity. As Ernst Käsemann insists:

We can and must determine the various phases of earliest Christian history by means of the original imminent expectation of the parousia [second coming], its modifications and its final extinction (1969, 236–7). I can acknowledge as earliest Christianity only that which still has its focus in an eschatology determined by the original imminent expectation in its changing forms (1969, n. 1, 236–37).

Claim Three: Early Christian ministry was charismatic rather than institutional.

It should be clear by now that the earliest disciples were Jews who were responding to the call of one whom they believed to be the Messiah and whom they expected to return soon to usher in the Kingdom of God. As Jews they continued to worship within Judaism, including the observance of sacrifices conducted by the temple priesthood. But as followers of Jesus they had no separate organization and certainly no separate priesthood. While the early Jerusalem community eventually faded into obscurity (perhaps dispersed or killed in the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in A.D. 70), Christianity survived because Paul and others transplanted it into the larger gentile world. These gentile Christians had no direct allegiance to Judaism or its priesthood, and thus seem to have formed their local groups without using the framework of a hierarchical priesthood structure.

One of the New Testament words for these groups, which we translate, perhaps misleadingly, as “church,” is *ecclesia*. Its Greek origin is significant. When an official entered a city to make a decree, those who gathered to hear the proclamation were called the *ecclesia* — the “called-out” or the “assembled.” The New Testament writers adopted and transformed this word to refer to those who were called out by the Lord Christ and who had responded to his word. As a self-designation, “*ecclesia*” reveals much about their self-understanding. Like its secular counterpart, the *ecclesia* of Saints was essentially structureless apart from the natural leadership of those who had been closest to Jesus. It had no priesthood, no formal offices. The Saints were united by their common awareness of having been called out by Christ, whose proclamation they continued in their own work of ministering to each other and preaching, both to themselves and others. Through the letters of Paul we are able to discern something of the theology and practice by which ministry and leadership were maintained in the structureless *ecclesia*.

Ernst Käsemann writes of the Apostle Paul, "The Apostle's theory of order is not a static one, resting on offices, institutions, ranks and dignities; in his view authority resides only within the concrete act of ministry as it occurs" (1964, 83). The letters of Paul provide clear evidence of this charismatic view of ministry. Paul saw every Christian as having received gifts from God to be used for the community. He obviously made no distinctions between what we might call natural versus spiritual gifts. In Paul's mind every good ability a person has is spiritual because it comes from God:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Paul then lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, and tongues as some of the gifts of the spirit. After presenting his famous analogy of the body, he continues in 12:28 by saying:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, then helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.

Paul then reminds us that while not all may have these particular gifts, we should all seek the higher gifts. And what is the highest gift of all? Paul tells us in his magnificent chapter 13: "The greatest of these is love."

It has been common for apologists in the LDS and RLDS movements to cite the first half of 1 Corinthians 12:28 to show that the early church contained the offices of apostle, prophets, and teacher as in modern LDS churches. But the context shows this to be the worst kind of proof-texting. Paul was not talking about offices at all, but about various gifts of interpersonal service which were manifested in the community.¹ Note that the list includes helpers, administrators, and speakers in tongues. And compare this with the similar list in Romans 12:4-8 where Paul includes acts of generosity and mercy among the spiritual gifts which rank with prophecy and teaching:

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

There is no justification here for assuming that these are formal offices which were believed to constitute the nature of the church. It was *ministry*, the will-

¹ I have not included Ephesians 4:11-14 here because I am personally convinced that it was not written by Paul, but by "Deutero-Paul" and should be dated somewhere between Paul and the Pastoral Epistles. However, I do not see that this text is really very helpful for our purposes. It certainly says nothing which would significantly challenge my claims, and it could very well be seen as simply another example of the already-given lists. Notice also, that Ephesians 2:20 supplies no real support for the standard LDS position. This passage is entirely consistent with what I have said elsewhere about the state of the churches around the early second century A.D.