



The Temple in Zion: A Reorganized Perspective on a Latter Day Saint Institution

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BEWILDERMENT ETCHED the man's face. "You mean, there will be *absolutely* no rites or special ordinances *at all* in your temple? Well, then, why build it?"

Such comments may be typical of LDS responses to the RLDS temple in Independence, Missouri—the place Joseph Smith, Jr., designated as the "Center Place of Zion." I am not surprised that Latter-day Saints have a tough time understanding what we "Reorganites" are doing with a temple. A good many RLDS—all along the spectrum from rigid traditionalists to ultra-progressives—are struggling with the idea, too. This is perhaps inevitable when divergent faith communities (both within the Reorganized Church and between the RLDS and LDS) take different paths. The task of understanding each other's religion then becomes ever more difficult.

Even though we frequently share a common vocabulary, scriptures, and a mutual historical starting point, the RLDS and LDS churches now offer radically different expressions of what Joseph Smith, Jr., began more than a century and a half ago. Yet I believe that both churches are *true* Latter Day Saint churches. Historically, we have equated "true" with "only," thereby failing to accept that different communities can exist in a relationship with God without forcing each to deny the validity of others. Therefore, without lapsing too deeply into a critical compare-and-contrast format (old habits are, after all, very hard to break), I shall attempt the difficult task of explaining to a predominately Mormon audience why I believe we RLDS are building

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a temple. Of course, as a faithful member of the Reorganized Church, I cannot speak for the LDS—I can offer only what I *understand* they believe. And I can offer also only *my* perspective on the Reorganized temple, not the official perspective, belief, or doctrine of the Reorganized Church, for there are perhaps no such things. A definition of our faith can be elusive; we have no equivalent to the Articles of Faith that Mormon children learn in Primary.

It is just as difficult to pin down exactly what the temple experience will be like and how it will change the Reorganized Church and its members' spiritual lives. We won't begin to know until after it is built and being used. Why, then, do we choose to build the temple in Independence, Missouri? It is not simply because we have been commanded through divine revelation to do so. It is true that our founding prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr., first issued the call in 1833 that "an house should be built unto me [God] in the land of Zion" (RLDS D&C 94:3a; LDS D&C 97:10),¹ and the prophetic vision was updated in recent years by two of his prophetic successors in the Reorganized Church. W. Wallace Smith recorded this revelation in April 1968:

The time has come for a start to be made toward building my temple in the Center Place. It shall stand on a portion of the plot of ground set apart for this purpose many years ago by my servant Joseph Smith, Jr. The shape and character of the building is to conform to ministries which will be carried out within its walls. . . . It is also to be noted that the full and complete use of the temple is yet to be revealed but that there is no provision for secret ordinances now or ever. (RLDS D&C 149:6a and 149A:6)²

Sixteen years later, in April 1984, Wallace B. Smith received revelation that further clarified the purpose of an RLDS temple:

The temple shall be dedicated to the pursuit of peace. It shall be for reconciliation and for healing of the spirit. It shall also be for a strengthening of faith and preparation for witness. By its ministries an attitude of wholeness of body, mind, and spirit as a desirable end toward which to strive will be fostered. It shall be the means for providing leadership education for priesthood and member. And it shall be a place in which the essential meaning of the Restoration as healing and redeeming agent is given new life and understanding, inspired by the life and witness of the Redeemer of the world. Therefore, let the work of planning go forward, and let the resources be gathered in, that the building of

¹ This revelation was given through Joseph Smith, Jr., on 2 August 1833, in Kirtland; word had not yet reached Ohio of the 23 July agreement forced upon the Saints in Independence to leave Jackson County.

² This was the first direction in recent times to the Reorganized Church to build a temple in Independence. It caught a good many church members by surprise, because the Conference that year had been embroiled in a controversy over the role of the bishopric, a debate that greatly overshadowed any thought of building a temple.

my temple may be an ensign to the world of the breadth and depth of the devotion of the Saints. (RLDS D&C 156:5-6)³

Obviously, building a temple at the literal and figurative center of our faith community requires more than simply “doing what we’re told,” even if the source of our instructions is divinity. After all, we are not automatons marching in lockstep to an intelligence separate from our own. God in Christ is “in us” as co-creators and fellow sojourners in the redemptive plan of the world’s salvation. The eternal purpose in RLDS temple building is related not to an other-worldly realm but to the redemptive, healing, peacemaking, reconciling ministry of Christ in *this* world. We hope to glorify the one God of the universe through participation in the divine plan of the cause of Zion.

Let me explore some reasons why we are building this temple.

ENCOUNTER CHRIST

When I was a boy, I learned about the second coming of Jesus Christ through the perspective of my grandmother and my very traditional Reorganized Church congregation in eastern Jackson County, Missouri. My understanding was completely literal: The resurrected Jesus would come floating down out of the clouds and land at the front door of the temple on the temple lot—a small acreage separating the RLDS Auditorium (a structure similar to the Salt Lake Tabernacle) from the Reorganized Church’s largest congregation, the Stone Church. (For those unfamiliar with the area, the Mormon Visitors’ Center is directly to the southeast; the RLDS Temple is being built directly north of the visitors’ center.)

I envisioned this millennial Independence Temple as a near clone of the Kirtland Temple with, of course, its main entrance facing east. After entering through that east door, the resurrected Jesus would take up physical residence for a thousand years while the world beat a path to his door. The heathen nations would recognize, finally, that the RLDS should rightfully be put in charge because we possessed the one true and now restored faith with the priesthood power and authority lacking in all other churches. I can clearly remember my grandmother gently persuading me to reconsider my dream of becoming a doctor—you see, there would be no need for medical practitioners during those thousand years, and there was no question that the temple would be built in my lifetime.

³ This revelation is best remembered for opening priesthood roles to women.

She was at least right about the latter, but my late-1950s world view has undergone some changes. I no longer look for the Second Coming in such a narrow, literal way. My beliefs have changed, partly because I have since rejected that apocalyptic and millennialist panorama. It conflicts with too many basic scientific realities. As well, firsthand experience with religious pluralism has tempered my belief in the One True Church. I have developed a respect for the beliefs and “temples” of others, and in doing so have reexamined the meaning of a temple for me and for my faith community. But if I no longer expect a resurrected, returned Jesus to walk into the Independence Temple, how then do I connect that holy place with the idea of a Second Coming?

The temple is becoming a symbol for the Reorganized Church of its relationship to the Creator and creation. But that relationship, that connection with our roots, is not based primarily on our past—or humankind’s past. (This may be an essential difference between the temple experience for our two churches. I am told that some LDS members faithfully attend the temple for that sense of connectedness, even though they have set aside the more official theological meanings of the vicarious ordinances.) I am beginning to sense that the temple for us RLDS will be a touchstone of the way we understand our *being*; in other words, it will be the central symbol of the cosmic Christ incarnating or coming in us. That’s the sort of thing that is tough to channel into ritual, and I hope we never try. But it is appropriate to have a place of special renewal and empowerment where our lives can change direction and begin to more fully reflect the ministry of Jesus, who provides us a pattern. Therefore, I cannot see the “millennial ministry of Jesus Christ” as coming from one individual in the temple. Rather, “one body in Christ” will honor the temple as its soul.

Also, I no longer expect Christ to “come again” to the temple because I realize that in one sense, the Second Coming has already happened: I have encountered Christ in many different people—Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Mormons, Jews, Canadians, Americans, Africans, women, children, men, and (dare I say it) a secular humanist or two. Why limit the spirit of Christ to a single body, human or divine? As a Reorganized Christian, I reject the notion that Divinity has a body just like mine, along with the idea that Christ has a specific gender, race, or nationality.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew who lived in ancient Palestine. But I do not believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the fullness of Christ. Neither is the resurrected Jesus encountered by Saul on his way to Damascus. And, of course, the central theological message of the Book of Mormon narrative is that Christ cannot be limited by time or space but can find

expression in all cultures, in all lands. God wears many faces. It is something like actors in a Greek drama who use different masks to change quickly from one persona or character to the next; yet the being behind the mask is the same, even though the audience perceives a separateness and uniqueness. This same idea was the original intention of early Christian theologians who spoke of the three "personas" of the Godhead. Over the centuries, the word "persons" was substituted, and that means quite a different thing. Perhaps the most important element here is the human perception involved rather than the essence of the being behind the mask.

AT THE EDGE OF OUR FRONTIER

The frontiers of the 1990s and beyond are far different from those of the early to mid-1800s. A century and a half ago, the frontier meant the edge of unexplored or unsettled land masses, the end of civilization and the beginning of wilderness. Our frontiers today, however, are not so much matters of space and time as of being, of discovering the unknown within us, both as individuals and communities.

Joseph Smith, Jr., challenged the Saints to begin building the kingdom of God on earth by building a New Jerusalem first in Kirtland, Ohio, then in both Independence and Far West, Missouri, before the Saints finally settled along the Illinois banks of the Mississippi River in Nauvoo. Unquestionably, the rough yet bustling trading town of Independence represented the American frontier in 1831 when Joseph first visited it. But like Kirtland, that latter-day New Jerusalem was set amid gentile neighbors. Joseph dreamed of a new order, yet the vision paid scant attention to gentile wishes and realities. The Saints eventually left both Kirtland and Independence after more than a little prodding by neighbors. Caldwell and Davies counties in northern Missouri allowed a little more isolation. However, gentiles were there, too, and strife was not long in coming.

But the more isolated Nauvoo setting was different, coming as it did after years of persecution and religious experimentation. It provided an opportunity for further evolution of Church practices and kingdom building. The Kirtland Temple had been primarily a place of public worship, a school for priesthood and members, and the headquarters for Church administration. Joseph's plans for the Independence Temple were similar, but they expanded the single, Kirtland-like structure to twenty-four buildings that included space for the First Presidency and other leading quorums, for what was to become the Relief Society, and for a storehouse. Of course, those buildings were never built, even though the Saints purchased and dedicated about

sixty-three acres of land before they were driven out of the county in late 1833. Even though Joseph's vision of a frontier Zion—the New Jerusalem—changed, a temple always remained central in his plans.

The variety of historical models for the temple may lead us to wonder which will be the “right kind” of temple for the Reorganization in the 1990s. Should we copy the pattern for Kirtland, Independence, Far West, or Nauvoo? But the question is fundamentally wrong; all were right for their time and place. Therefore, the Independence Temple built by the Reorganized Church in the 1990s should not seek historical precedent, even though it will incorporate historical elements. Above all, it must be a temple for its time and place and institution—to actualize the dreams of the Saints. As a sacred space where all cultures can be at home, the temple must be at the figurative center of its faith community and must offer a vision of the cause of Zion appropriate for its day.

A New Jerusalem today must take into account more than a single city. It certainly cannot be limited to just one religious group, nor can it attempt the kind of economic, political, social, and theological separateness of Nauvoo, Joseph's “City Beautiful,” which served as the forerunner for the nation/state of Deseret. Even the LDS Church was forced, eventually, to scale back the political scope of what was left of Deseret by accepting the 1890 Manifesto.

Our perspective today is much like that of the astronauts who first walked on the moon more than twenty years ago. Until that time, our horizons had been limited by how far up the side of the mountain we climbed or how far into the atmosphere our planes soared. But when we stood on the moon with those astronauts and looked out on a new horizon, we saw for the first time our beautiful blue-and-white planet hanging in the darkness of space. In a spiritual sense, we saw Zion for the first time, too, encompassing the entire globe. And we finally realized (notwithstanding the work of scientific pioneers like Galileo, Copernicus, and Newton) that it is the Creator and not creation that provides the axis of the universe. This expanded and glorious vision of Zion shall have a temple at its center, serving as the crossroads of divine grace and human experience.

EMPOWERED FOR SERVICE

Old Testament imagery of the Israelites' wilderness tabernacle and the New Testament concept of human beings as temples of the Holy Spirit are equally important in the RLDS temple. In Moses' time, the Hebrew tribes reserved a special place, the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting, for their prophet's deliberate encounters with Yahweh, the God of

their forebears. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of smoke and fire, which hovered over the Israelite encampment day and night as a symbol of divine presence, descended. Hidden within the smoke, Yahweh spoke to Moses, then ascended into the heavens. With his face covered to protect his people from its brightness, Moses left the tent to let the Israelites know just what Yahweh wanted them to do. His experience with Yahweh was not so much a weighing in the balance of the good and evil deeds of his people but rather a realization that through all the Israelites' experiences, they were still God's chosen ones with a particular mission.

God is no longer hidden within smoke and fire as in Old Testament times but is revealed in the light of a new day—in the persona of Jesus Christ—without the need for a structure in which God could temporarily “tabernacle.” As the writer of John's Gospel wrote (drawing upon the same Greek words used in the Septuagint version of the Exodus story), “The Word was made flesh [and] lived among us” (literally, “pitched his tent among us”) (John 1:14).⁴ The New Testament writers extended the idea that the presence of God in Christ would “encamp” *within* believers as they assumed the function of temples. Most orthodox Christians therefore no longer see a need for any kind of structural temple.

Yet perhaps because we Latter Day Saints have always drawn upon Old Testament symbols, we have been temple builders. Like Moses, we sense the need to approach Divinity to discern what we are to do. But we in the Reorganized Church should not depend on our prophet to represent us for those deliberate encounters, although in some cases that may happen. As a prophetic community, we must go to the temple in unity for insight and empowerment. Perhaps our temple experience will challenge us to grow beyond our reliance on the prophet. This new perspective can offer expanded spiritual horizons, stretching us to see the world's need for God's community, which offers compassionate, humble service in the name of Jesus Christ.

I don't expect to “see Jesus” in the literal sense in the temple. However, I am confident that we will “experience Christ” in ways and forms heretofore unimaginable. That experience cannot come through mere ritual or reenactment of someone else's story, nor can it originate in our own efforts. It must come through grace as God's involvement in the world is met by our selfless service to other human beings and to all of creation. We can “feel good” (awed, inspired, thrilled, challenged, humbled, lifted up) in the holy setting of the temple, but unless we return to our homes empowered with an expanded testimony of

⁴ See especially the Jerusalem Bible.

God's love and purpose for creation, the experience serves no lasting purpose. We are like Apostle Paul's Corinthian cymbals and gongs.

KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

The term "keys of the kingdom" is used frequently in our movement, often in regard to priesthood ministry and responsibility. The Kirtland Saints were the first to think of their "House of the Lord" as the place of endowment of such keys. The Nauvoo Saints also used similar terminology in regard to their temple, although the theological underpinning had evolved dramatically by that time to become the ritual observances virtually guaranteeing celestial glory through a step-by-step process, perhaps borrowed in some way from Masonic rites. Perhaps we in the Restoration movement have been impoverished, though, by thinking of these "keys of the kingdom" almost solely as mechanical devices to open doors. While the symbolism is appropriate, it has limitations. Used *only* in this way, keys lose their metaphorical power, becoming things to acquire by doing all the right acts in front of the proper authorities.

Several other metaphors can inform RLDS temple practice in a much broader sense. The keystone of an arch is the one stone that not only completes the arch's shape but gives strength to the entire structure. Seen in this way, the temple in Zion is what has been missing in the Reorganized Church; it will give shape, character, and strength to everything we do in proclaiming the gospel of Christ to a world that groans for redemption. To extend the metaphor, the key in a musical score is vital to keep all the various instruments and voices in harmony. The church is neither a choir singing in unison nor a jumble of miscellaneous noises, each straining to be heard above the din. Members of the body of Christ do not all do the same things or make the same sounds, yet the mysterious blend of our combined efforts achieves the desired end. The temple could provide the key to unify the church the same way that music written in the same key for different instruments can transform mere sound into Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Scientists refer to this as synergism; I call it temple ministry.

One of the obvious characteristics of ministry in the early decades of the Restoration movement—in general and specifically related to temples—was male dominance. The authority, power, and control of an all-male priesthood played a major role in theology and church administration. Perhaps we should accept that dominance merely as part of nineteenth-century American culture. But it is not at all appropriate at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Therefore, the Reorganized Church's temple ministry, I contend, must not be based on such

blatantly male images but should reflect the empowerment that flows from mutuality and equality. The church needs to follow the inspired counsel of a prophetic community more than the accepted authority and control of a male-dominated hierarchical structure which, in turn, supports its leading role with scripture that arises from an even more patriarchal era.

In 1984 our RLDS prophet, Wallace B. Smith, made a crucial step to bring the will of God to the Reorganized Church by extending the call of priesthood ministry: "I say to you now, as I have said in the past, that all are called according to the gifts which have been given them. This applies to priesthood as well as to any other aspects of the work. Therefore, do not wonder that some women of the church are being called to priesthood responsibilities. This is in harmony with my will" (RLDS D&C 156:9b-c).

Some RLDS members contend that God would not or could not do such a "new thing" and have separated themselves from the main body of the Reorganized Church. At the same time, the more than two thousand women who have been ordained have added a new and vital aspect to the church's ministry as Christ's servants and burden-bearers. For those who "have eyes to see," that should be ample evidence that God *does* do new things. Sadly, some choose not to see; and there is division, brokenness, and enmity in our midst.

CENTER OF HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

When you are sick, you go to a doctor, who prescribes treatment (medicine, bed rest, exercise, change of habits), and you are "cured." Remember, though, that Jesus didn't cure everybody who came to him. He frequently told even those he did heal not to tell anybody else. They rarely obeyed, however, and so he often was inundated with curiosity seekers who hampered his other ministry.

If the temple became a "healing shrine," there is a risk that hordes of the curious as well as the sick might prevent it from offering other kinds of vitally important service. Perhaps those with chronic, rather than acute, illnesses might be served better in the temple. But should they expect to be "cured" according to the acute-disease model, especially considering that the nature of their illnesses is completely different?

I have a friend who has multiple sclerosis. He is in his thirties, faced with a chronic condition that is also progressive. We don't get to see one another much because we now live more than two thousand miles apart. Some time ago I visited his home for the first time in nine years. Although I could stay only one night, he gently reminded me after greeting me warmly that it was time for his afternoon rest. If he

did not lie down for about forty-five minutes, our planned evening get-together at a mutual friend's home would undoubtedly place a strain on his health and well-being. In short, his MS might flare up if he did not take the time to recharge his energy.

I marveled at his self-discipline. It was a poignant reminder of the different meaning health and wholeness has for him. I wish I had the same level of self-discipline in dealing with my own chronic medical condition. In the twenty years I have lived with Crohn's Disease, an inflammatory bowel syndrome, I have experienced numerous valleys and peaks. Slowly I have come to realize the relativity of healing and wholeness. I don't expect to walk into the temple in Zion someday to have my Crohn's Disease healed any more than I'd expect to have the lengthy, surgically removed portions of my small intestine suddenly grow back. Yet the discipline of the temple may open new vistas of the meaning of healing and reconciliation as inner qualities and outward activities.

One aspect of reconciliation is peace. The RLDS temple is dedicated to the pursuit of peace. This neither supplants the gospel of Jesus Christ, nor is it an end result. A pursuit implies an ongoing process. My grandmother was not alone in believing the peaceable era envisioned by Isaiah and others to be an absence of sickness and discord. But Christ's kingdom on earth will have continual need of healers, reconcilers, and advocates. Can we not see that kingdom as an "end" without placing everything on a time line? The temple could transcend such time/space limitations. Peace, in Christ's kingdom, will become more akin to the Hebrew *shalom* and less an existence to look forward to in "the sweet by and by."

INCLUSIVE MINISTRY

Certainly we RLDS may be tempted to take pride in our efforts, especially once the magnificent spiral-shaped sanctuary begins to rise three times the height of the auditorium across the street. RLDS members and friends will come to Independence by the thousands to view this unique structure, built by a relatively small group that frequently is racked by internal dissention and disagreement. The temple is sure to become many things to many people. We have just begun to explore its role as a planetary symbol, facilitator, sacred space, and advocate for peace in the twenty-first-century church and world. We have a long way to go before all of God's children will feel welcome in the temple.

The temple may encourage many to respond to the call to follow Christ. After all, this temple belongs to Christ and shall stand as a

beacon of Christ's way, which, as scripture tells us, is the way to know God. But it is not a roadmap owned exclusively by Latter Day Saints. It is not marked by specific rituals guaranteeing celestial glory. Jesus, always open to divine grace as healer, reconciler, peacemaker, witness, and humble servant, offers us a glimpse of God's way. He shows us that God is willing to lift us from our human brokenness because of the unmeasurable mystery of divine love. And we are to be like Jesus. At the temple in Independence, we will learn to do that.

FOCAL POINT FOR OUR FUTURE

More than 150 years ago, Joseph Smith prophetically called his people to build the temple in Zion. We have begun the task of raising the temple as an "ensign of peace" on the very spot from which he spoke. Is it mere coincidence that this spot now also represents something quite the opposite from what he envisioned? A few miles from Jackson County, Missouri, some 150 underground missile silos sit amid the fertile farmland of western Missouri. At ground level, they appear to be nothing more than fenced enclosures about 150 feet square containing a large concrete slab and a protruding doorway. Beneath each enclosure, however, sits a gigantic intercontinental missile armed with multiple nuclear warheads, each many times more potent than those dropped on Japan in 1945.

The missiles are aimed at targets in the Soviet Union, ready to be fired, our political and military leaders tell us, in response to nuclear attack. The command center for these missile silos is at Whiteman Air Force Base about fifty miles southeast of Independence. Additional preparations are underway these days to house the newest, most controversial, and most expensive (\$525 million apiece) weapon in U.S. military history: the B-2 (Stealth) Bomber. Unfortunately, the Persian Gulf crisis may keep the B-2 from being cancelled or cut back.

What all this means is that Jackson County, Missouri, sits essentially at "ground zero" for the start of World War III and the possible end of humankind as we know it. But the site for the temple can also become the starting point for Christ's kingdom and the peaceable era that prophets have envisioned for centuries. By building the temple, we can respond positively to the choice offered first to Joshua: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deut. 30:19).

AT THE CROSSROADS

Israel, the promised land for Yahweh's chosen people, was at the center of several ancient trading routes. A cosmopolitan mix of mer-

chants and warriors interacted with a people that otherwise may have remained a tiny and obscure footnote to history. But instead Israel has profoundly influenced at least the Western world's religious, moral, ethical, and philosophical thought. It rose to its greatest political and economic glory during a brief interval between the dominant eras of ancient superpowers. Who would have thought that a quarrelsome band of ex-slaves who took forty years to complete a three-week trek from Egypt to Canaan would end up influencing the world as it did? But, of course, their influence came not from business or political acumen, but because they remained, by and large, faithful to their divinely appointed task.

Our calling today is not to be an updated version of ancient Israel. There is no need for such an elitist notion of divine chosenness. As well, there is no need to turn the world's peoples into clones of rich, success-oriented Westerners. The easy answers and rituals that can turn attention away from human need and misery provide the wrong path. And of course it is time to abolish subservient roles for women along with autocratic hierarchies (usually patriarchal) which spawn oppression.

The world today does need Christ. And that, in brief, is why I believe God has challenged us to do a new thing by building this temple. It is the response of the Reorganized Church to God's grace as well as a symbol of God's divine love. It is a way to connect the peoples of the Third World with those in the First and Second without oppressing or corrupting anyone. It is a place to encounter God in Christ and then to go forth to build and transform communities which express that incarnation. It is a place to carry our past with us as we look to the future. It is God's sacred place and our sacred place and, most important of all, the world's sacred place. Joseph Smith, Jr., first issued the call to build the temple. But we can transcend his vision as we are touched by Divinity and challenged by our world's needs. Our task will be to do what Apostle Paul counseled long ago: "By the mercies of God, . . . present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God is" (Rom. 12:1-2).

And so, I look forward to the day which is coming soon when I can stand in the temple in Zion with my sisters and brothers to encounter Christ, who will then send us away a changed people. We then shall be, finally, a temple people—the people of God.