

Ordaining Women and the Transformation from Sect to Denomination

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OVER THE PAST FORTY YEARS the top leadership of the Community of Christ church (until recently the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) has gone through significant changes in religious thought. I have contended elsewhere that the decisive changes occurred in the 1960s.¹ In the 1970s the rank-and-file members became increasingly aware of the fact that the church leadership was moving away from traditional sectarian positions. W. Wallace Smith's son Wallace B. Smith became President of the church in 1978² and soon it was clear that the new president and his top leaders were committed to this new worldview. In January, 1979, the First Presidency invited all of the church's fulltime appointee ministers and their wives to Independence where the new president and his counselors read theological papers which clearly showed the presidency to be in a liberal camp.³ This change involved the transformation of the RLDS church from a fundamentalist sect—that is a religious body predominantly focused on “restoring” a lost “authentic” form of worship—to a contemporary Protestant denomination. As long as the church was a fundamentalist sect, the focus was on “correct” doctrines and organization that characterized the “true” church. As the

1. “The Decade of the Sixties: The Early Struggle in the RLDS Shift from Sect to Denomination,” Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 4, 2000.

2. W. Wallace Smith was president of the church from 1958 until he retired in 1978, at which time his son Wallace B. Smith became president, serving until his retirement in 1996.

3. The First Presidency, Presidential Papers (January 1979). Photo-reproduction available through the Restoration Bookstore operated by Richard Price in Independence, Missouri.

church moved from sect to becoming a denomination, we naturally have focused more on themes which we have in common with other Christians whether we consciously intended this or not. As a sect we had focused on Joseph Smith; as a denomination the focus is much more on Jesus than on Joseph.

The first widely circulated publication against the new liberalism in the church was a newspaper begun in 1970 by an RLDS fundamentalist named Barney Fuller. It was appropriately entitled, *Zion's Warning*—warning the saints in Zion of trouble at the gates. At this point it should be noted that “fundamentalist” in the RLDS context has nothing to do with polygamy. RLDS fundamentalists are those who believe that their faith should be based entirely or almost entirely on the scriptures, which they view as fully trustworthy sources for formulating religious beliefs. They believe the RLDS church was the one true church until it turned its back on many of these scriptures. RLDS liberals, by contrast, are those who see the scriptures as important sources for the faith but nevertheless as conditioned by culture. Therefore the scriptures must be tempered by reason and human experience.

During Wallace B. Smith's presidency several major changes were instituted in the RLDS church that were manifestations of the transformation from sect to denomination. The first and most dramatic of these was one that caused a major split in the church. The debate over women's ordination had been simmering in the church since the early 1970's. The feminist movement in the United States and other parts of the world had made some RLDS people aware of how the strongly patriarchal culture that exists in most of the world has limited women's opportunities to use their talents in ways that would benefit themselves and the larger society. The issue first came to the attention of the church's biennial World Conference in April, 1970, when a resolution was offered which called for including women in more significant roles in the church. A substitute motion was offered by A. H. (Bud) Edwards, which clearly suggested that women be ordained. It was shocking to many delegates—a loud collective gasp was heard throughout the conference chamber as Edwards read his substitute motion—and the motion was quickly tabled.⁴

Over the next fourteen years people in the church debated the issue, often with great feeling, pro and con. In the 1970s, the initial strategy of those favoring ordination, which included many church leaders, was to use women more extensively in leadership roles that did not require ordination. It was decided that church committees at all levels should in-

4. 1970 World Conference Bulletin, 329 and “A Transcript of Business Sessions: The 1970 World Conference, 404-408,” in Community of Christ Library-Archives; A. H. (Bud) Edwards email to Bill Russell, March 15, 2002.

clude more women. In local worship services, some congregations moved toward letting women perform ministries previously restricted to priesthood men, including preaching the sermon on Sunday morning. This writer recalls being one of the dozen priesthood men who served the bread and wine at the monthly communion service in the Lamoni, Iowa congregation in 1972, with the communion sermon delivered by Dr. Barbara Higdon, a professor of literature and speech at Graceland College. The un-ordained Higdon could not have served the communion, but she delivered the Word on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

In April, 1970, the same month that the World Conference tabled the substitute motion calling for women's ordination, a group of professors at Graceland College, along with some friends elsewhere, began publication of a quarterly journal entitled *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action*. Editorials in the journal were sometimes signed by one editor, and some were printed under the signature of the nine-member Editorial Committee. The Editorial Committee published an editorial in their December, 1970, issue that called for the ordination of women, nearly fourteen years before the church's policy would change.⁵ The feminist theme was frequently articulated in the pages of *Courage* during its brief three year existence, 1970-1973.⁶

The issue of women's role in the church continued to surface at the remaining World Conferences during the 1970s⁷ and was finally resolved at the April 1984 World Conference when President/Prophet Wallace B. Smith presented a revelation which called for the ordination of women. That revelation was accepted by the delegates at the conference as a revelation from God and became Section 156 of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, but with 20% of the delegates dissenting. It soon became clear that the largest schism in the history of the Reorganization was in the making. In the six years following the approval of Section 156, about one-fourth of the active RLDS members ceased their involvement in the church. Many of these people formed separate splinter groups in their local areas.⁸ Others simply tired of the bickering and quit attending

5. Editorial Committee, "Sex Roles in a Changing World," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action*, 1, no. 2 (December 1970): 81-84.

6. William D. Russell, "The Rise and Fall of *Courage*, an Independent RLDS Journal," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 11, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 115-119.

7. See Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, Volume 2, *The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860-1992* (Independence, Mo: Herald Publishing House, 1993), chapter 35, "Expanding the Arenas of Service for Women," 381-408.

8. William D. Russell, "Defenders of the Faith: Varieties of RLDS Dissent," *Sunstone* 14, no. 3 (June 1990): 14-19; and "The Fundamentalist Schism, 1958-Present," in Roger D. Launius and W.B. "Pat" Spillman, eds., *Let Contention Cease* (Independence, Mo: Graceland/Park Press, 1991), 125-151. See also the essays in *Let Contention Cease* by Larry Conrad, "Dissent Among Dissenters: Theological Dimensions of Dissent and Reorganization,"

church in any branch of the restoration. While old school saints were shocked and angered over the adoption of Section 156, many held out hope that a subsequent World Conference would rescind the decision and correct a serious error. But when in 1986 a motion to rescind Section 156 came to the floor of the Conference, President Smith ruled it out of order, and 88% of the delegates upheld his ruling. Meanwhile, this and other important changes have turned the church's attention to developing a more Christ-centered theology and toward matters of more significance than those issues which focused on our uniqueness or differences with the Utah Mormons.

199-239; Pat Spillman, "Dissent and the Future of the Church," 259-292; and Roger Launius, "Guarding Prerogative: Autonomy of the Nineteenth Century Reorganized Church," 17-58. See also Paul M. Edwards *Our Legacy Faith* (Independence, Mo: Herald Publishing House, 1991), 282; Richard P. Howard, *The Reorganization Comes of Age*, 409-432, and Launius, "The Reorganized Church, the Decade of Decision, and the Abilene Paradox," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 1 (Spring, 1998), 47-65.