

The LDS Church and Community of Christ: Clearer Differences, Closer Friends

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AT THE BIENNIAL WORLD CONFERENCE of the RLDS church in April 2000, the delegates voted to change their name to "The Community of Christ." In this paper I will refer to the "RLDS church" rather than the new name because virtually everything I write about happened before April 6, 2001, the date on which the name change became official. Clearly one reason for the change was to end or limit the comparison and confusion with our Utah-based cousins. As President W. Grant McMurray said at the Mormon History Association meeting in Kirtland last May, over the years we have tended to identify ourselves as belonging to "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. We're Not the Mormons."¹ Historically we denied we were Mormons, but we couldn't shake the label. When the church name proposed by the First Presidency was debated at the conference, one delegate from Tennessee reported being kicked off of ball teams for supposedly being Mormon. In our sports-crazed culture, that is the ultimate rejection. The First Presidency's proposed name change passed with only 22 percent of the delegates voting against it.²

It used to be that we "prairie Mormons" outnumbered "mountain Mormons"³ in parts of the country, especially Missouri, Iowa, and Michigan. I grew up in Flint, Michigan, and attended the RLDS-sponsored Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa, for four years. I never in my life consciously met a Mormon until a year after my graduation in 1960. Granted, I probably had met a few Mormons

1. W. Grant McMurray, "A 'Goodly Heritage' in a Time of Transformation: History and Identity in the Community of Christ." Address given at the Mormon History Association, Kirtland, Ohio, May 22, 2003, p. 3. Copy in the possession of author.

2. *2002 World Conference Bulletin* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ, 2002), 424.

3. I am indebted to Jan Shipp for the labels "mountain Mormons" and "prairie Mormons."

along the way, but they were all "in the closet" as far as I was concerned. In Flint, we prairie Mormons had two branches with well over one thousand members while there was one small LDS branch at the edge of town.

Since I met my first Mormon at the Liberty Jail in 1961, the Utah church has grown dramatically and spread all over the country as well as to many parts of the world while RLDS U.S. membership has leveled off and declined slightly. Our growth has largely been in Third World countries. In recent decades, the Utah church has become more conservative while we have taken a giant step to the left in our theology. The greater theological divide may have made many prairie Mormons anxious to avoid being confused with the mountain Mormons. This has carried over into politics as well. Many of our members and leaders are Democrats who abhor the "Christian Right," with which so many Mormon politicians are aligned.

In this paper I will briefly discuss what I see as the six major differences between the two churches during the first century of their existence, and then I will look at eight new differences that have emerged over the past forty years or so. I make no claim that either is a complete list.

PART I—THE FIRST CENTURY

The two major issues that divided us in the beginning, in the 1850s and 1860s, are no longer issues between us. Polygamy was probably the major issue at the outset. One reason for RLDS success in rallying dissident Mormons in the Midwest from the 1850s onward was the fact that we were the only significant Mormon splinter group which did not embrace polygamy at one time or another, in one way or another. Many of the early RLDS members had been Strangites when James J. Strang was monogamous. But when he met 17-year-old Elvira Field and was inspired to revise his theology of family, many of his followers ended up RLDS, including our founder Jason W. Briggs. After their defection, Briggs and others followed William Smith until they discovered that, like Strang, William didn't live the monogamous ideal either.⁴

Polygamy is no longer an important issue dividing the churches because about a century ago most Utah Mormons quit practicing "the principle." However, Wilford Woodruff only suspended the practice. If Gordon B. Hinckley announced today—in a new manifesto—that the LDS church would be restoring the practice of polygamy because the Supreme Court would uphold it now, I believe the reaction of many Mormons would be to vomit. The public image of

4. Alma R. Blair wrote the best single article history of the origins of the RLDS church in his "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism," in F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards, *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History* (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1973), 207-230; James J. Strang is covered in the same book by William D. Russell, "King James Strang: Joseph Smith's Successor?" (231-56), recently reprinted with slight revision in John Sillitoe and Susan Staker, eds., *Mormon Mavericks: Essays on Dissenters* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002): 31-57.

Mormon family values would be down the tubes. It would destroy the fragile political alliance between the Religious Right and many Mormon politicians. The LDS church might have to enter into a political alliance with the gay rights people to defend against the attacks of religious conservatives!

For years we RLDS insisted that Joseph Smith did not practice polygamy, nor did he write Section 132.⁵ We said Brigham wrote it and published it under Joseph's name in 1852, eight years after Joseph died and could no longer defend himself. But by the 1980s, RLDS opinion shifted dramatically, partly stimulated by Church Historian Richard P. Howard's article on polygamy in the 1983 *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, which cautiously admitted Joseph's involvement.⁶ Current Church Historian Mark A. Scherer suggests another shift in thinking has occurred since the 1980s: "In the past, polygamy has been viewed [by the RLDS] in the historical context as a controversial belief associated with the newly emerging Nauvoo Temple theology. But today let us view polygamy as an issue of human worth, peace and justice, and ministerial abuse."⁷ Our Director of Peace and Justice Ministries in the church, Andrew Bolton, has said publicly that today we would refer to at least some of Joseph Smith's marriages as "clergy abuse."

It should be noted that for the past thirty-five years our policy has allowed the baptism of polygamous men in the Third World—if they promise to accept our policy of monogamy and not take additional wives—while the LDS policy does not allow for the baptism of polygamous people in non-western cultures.⁸ Or in Utah, of course.

Lineal succession in the presidency was the other major issue for the RLDS in the beginning. On November 18, 1851, Jason Briggs had a spiritual experience in which he concluded it was God's will that a son of Joseph the Martyr should lead the church, succeeding his father.⁹ Clearly, for Briggs—and probably most early RLDS—these were the two major issues: polygamy and lineal

5. See the following three classic twentieth-century RLDS books on the basic differences in the two churches' treatment of polygamy: Elbert A. Smith, *Differences That Persist between the RLDS and LDS Churches* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1959), ch. 3; Russell F. Ralston, *Fundamental Differences between the LDS and RLDS Churches* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1960), chs. 5 and 6; Aleah G. Koury, *The Truth and the Evidence: A Comparison between Doctrines of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1965), ch. 4.

6. Richard P. Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, 3 (1983):14-29.

7. Mark A. Scherer, "Re-visioning Our Church Heritage," *Saints' Herald*, September 2001, 16.

8. Maurice L. Draper of the First Presidency wrote a defense of the new policy in "Polygamy among Converts in East India," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1, no. 2 (December 1970): 85-88. Verne Deskin wrote a strong critique of the new policy in the same issue, pp. 89-92. The Editorial Committee of *Courage* wrote an editorial more liberal than the church leaders' policy, pp. 107-08.

9. Blair, "The Reorganized Church," 214.

succession in the presidency of the church. However, lineal succession in the presidency is also no longer a difference separating us. When President Wallace B. Smith called W. Grant McMurray to be president of the church after 136 years of Joseph Smith's descendants leading the Reorganized Church, he discarded the position enunciated by Briggs and many other church leaders. One principle of succession remains unchanged: Each prophet names his successor, indicating divine guidance in the choice. There were five Smith presidents in all: Joseph Smith III and his three sons, Frederick, Israel, and W. Wallace, and then finally W. Wallace's son, Wallace B. Smith, who retired in 1996.

Lineal succession in the presidency was very important in the early years, with an authority-conscious church in the Midwest contending with their authority-conscious cousins in the West.¹⁰ But we can't brag about that anymore. I suspect there were a reasonable number of saints like my late father—a loyal church appointee—who complained that he had never liked the idea of "the divine right of kings" and implied that was a factor in his move from Canada to the United States in 1923 when he was 25.¹¹

In addition to the two issues of polygamy and succession in the presidency, at least two other differences became important although they were not issues when 27-year-old Joseph Smith III assumed the presidency of the prairie Mormons on April 6, 1860. One of these matters was the plurality of gods. Most notably enunciated in the Book of Abraham and in the King Follett sermon, this doctrine was clearly assumed by some RLDS members, in our early years at least, to be part of church doctrine.¹² But over the years we abandoned and then denounced the idea.¹³ Sometimes we simply noted that the Book of Abraham is not in the RLDS canon of scripture. It is possible that the 1878 General Conference resolution establishing the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants as the "standard of authority on all matters of church government and doctrine"¹⁴ was, in part, a decision to exclude the Book of Abraham from our RLDS canon of scriptures.

The other key source for this doctrine, the King Follett sermon, was not published until after Joseph Smith was martyred, and not from Joseph's own notes, but from notes taken by listeners who were present.¹⁵ We have argued that the

10. See Smith, *Differences*, ch. 5; Ralston, *Fundamental Differences*, ch. 1; Koury, *Truth and Evidence*, ch. 5.

11. R. Melvin Russell (1898-1982). Possibly reflecting my father's negative views with regard to succession, I wrote an editorial in which I argued that the question is not which method of presidential succession is best—the RLDS or the LDS—but rather, which method is worst—succession or seniority? (*Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* entitled "Needed: A New Method of Succession," 2, no. 1 [September 1971]: 326-27).

12. Blair, "The Reorganized Church," 222-23.

13. Smith, *Differences*, ch. 2; Ralston, *Fundamental Differences*, ch. 3; Koury, *Truth and Evidence*, chs. 2-3.

14. RLDS General Conference Resolution 215 (September 13, 1878).

15. Ralston, *Fundamental Differences*, 53-55.

text of the sermon cannot be trusted, suggesting—sometimes not too subtly—that the Mormon editors who published the King Follett sermon shortly after Joseph's death no doubt changed the text, like the monks of the Middle Ages who removed "plain and precious truths" from the Bible (except the Mormons were adding falsehoods, rather than removing truths). On both polygamy and the plurality of gods, we took the position that you can't trust "Utah sources." Once those Nauvoo diaries were hauled across the plains and the mountains to the Great Basin Kingdom, they had somehow been corrupted.

While the mountain Mormons held to the plurality of gods and eternal progression to godhead, the prairie Mormons maintained fairly orthodox Protestant concepts of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. When I went to the Methodist seminary in Kansas City¹⁶ to study Systematic Theology, I did not find any real disconnect between what the Methodist theologians were teaching about the Trinity and the teachings of my RLDS upbringing or my studies as a religion major at RLDS-sponsored Graceland College. We prairie Mormons believed in an unchangeable God, and we have spilled a lot of ink condemning the notion of progression to Godhood.

Another issue—the fourth on my list—was baptism for the dead and the even larger matter of secret temple rituals. Many early RLDS members and leaders assumed we would baptize for the dead once we had an appropriate temple. As late as 1960, one of our Presidents of Seventy, Russell F. Ralston (later an apostle), suggested we didn't baptize for the dead because we didn't yet have a temple built for that purpose.¹⁷ He anticipated that eventually an Independence Temple would be built and include this ritual. I remember being a bit shocked when I read this in Ralston's book not long after it came out. I couldn't imagine our church conducting proxy baptisms.

When President W. Wallace Smith announced in his 1968 revelation (Section 149 of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants) that we would proceed to build the long-awaited temple in Independence, Graceland professor Paul M. Edwards was concerned that we might include baptism for the dead and other secret temple rituals in our temple. Paul scheduled a meeting with Duane Couey of the First Presidency, traveling two hours from Lamoni, Iowa, to Independence for the discussion. President Couey assured Paul that the temple would not have secret rituals and certainly not perform proxy baptisms—in secret or in public. Paul returned to Graceland only somewhat reassured. Unbeknownst to him, the general authorities¹⁸ were already well into the process of revising their

16. Saint Paul School of Theology Methodist.

17. Ralston, *Fundamental Differences*, ch. 7.

18. I have used the LDS term "general authorities" even though the RLDS Church used the term "The Joint Council of the First Presidency, Council of Twelve Apostles, and the Presiding Bishopric," which could be shortened by referring to "The Joint Council."

interpretation of some of the major doctrines of the church.¹⁹

Russell F. Ralston, the author of the 1960 book, *Fundamental Differences between the LDS and RLDS Churches*, had been our missionary seventy in Salt Lake City, one of our full-time paid appointee ministers hired by the general authorities in Independence. Another missionary seventy, who followed Ralston to the Salt Lake City assignment, was Aleah G. Koury. He also wrote a book on the basic differences between our two churches and also was later ordained an apostle. Koury's book, *The Truth and the Evidence*, was published by the church in 1965.²⁰

I have often used the title of Koury's book, *The Truth and the Evidence*, as a model for the research methods we used in dealing with the Utah Mormons. We began with the truth, then marshaled the evidence to support what we already knew was the case. Koury deals with various topics—polygamy, succession in the presidency, the plurality of gods, etc. Miraculously, when one reaches the end of each topic, the prairie Mormons "win." Our position was the right one on every count! Ironically, Koury told me the reason he wrote his book, just a few years after Ralston, was that he wanted to be more objective about "the Mormons" than Ralston had been. It was to be a friendlier book, so I expected Koury to concede that the Utahns were right about something. By then I realized that as long as the focus was on Kirtland, the prairie Mormons held the advantage, but whenever the debate turned to Nauvoo, the mountain Mormons would win.

Part of the RLDS criticism was directed to the fact that baptism for the dead and other LDS temple rituals were conducted in secret. Against this "abomination," we could cite the denunciation of secret societies in the Book of Mormon, then build upon the general antipathy in American society toward other secret societies such as the Masons.

These four issues were the central ones debated between our two churches for at least a century: polygamy, succession in the presidency, the plurality of gods, and baptism for the dead and other secret temple rituals. We also debated other matters such as differences on tithing and Brigham Young's views on Adam-god. In addition, there were two other early differences that may not have been so apparent to many RLDS members during the course of that first century. One resides in the fact that the RLDS church rejected the close church-state relationship that developed in Nauvoo and continued in Utah. Living among the

19. In 1968 the Council of Twelve, after consultation with the First Presidency, approved the idea of baptizing polygamous men in third-world cultures who understood that monogamy is our ideal. By that year, the general authorities were being taught by Methodist seminary professors Paul Jones, Carl Bangs, and Dale Dunlap in what were called the "Joint Council Seminars." Staff members at the church's Religious Education Department during the late 1960s were drafting quite liberal position papers for the new church school curriculum, and the church's Basic Beliefs Committee began publishing in the *Saints Herald* that year a new faith statement, published in book form in 1970 as *Exploring the Faith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House).

20. Both books cited previously.

more numerous Methodists and Baptists and other Gentiles in the Midwest, and remembering the hostility of the larger society in Nauvoo and elsewhere, we did relatively little gathering to central locations, and we did not often meddle in politics. (Unless, of course, an issue like liquor reared its head.)

The other issue often overlooked in our first century was race. Very early in RLDS history, the ordination of African Americans was affirmed by way of a revelation from Joseph Smith III in 1865 at the end of the Civil War.²¹ As is well known, it was not until 113 years later that the LDS church changed its policy to acceptance of the ordination of black men. The fact that we made little polemical use of this difference until the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s changed public attitudes toward blacks is a sign of the racism in both American culture and the RLDS church. One would think we would have beaten our Utah cousins over the head with this issue. We had Joseph Smith on our side, the "good prophet" who ordained Elijah Abel. You had the "bad prophet," Brigham Young with his strict prohibition on ordination. But for ninety years we were largely silent until the inclusion of blacks as equals in America became somewhat popular, at least in the North.²² Even then we were cautious, fearing to offend racist church members. We were not prophetic on race.

Interestingly enough, one Seventy assigned to Salt Lake City did make a major issue of race. John W. Bradley served in Salt Lake City in the 1960s—after Ralston and Koury—and wrote a series of three articles in the 1963 *Saints' Herald*, making the case for racial equality and defending our scriptures as preaching racial equality.²³ Likewise, in his 1960 book, Ralston made a five-page statement on race at the end,²⁴ reflecting the rising American consciousness on race. Writing five years later, toward the end of the civil rights movement in 1965, Koury ignored the difference on race as an issue between the two churches. Perhaps this difference in the Ralston and Koury books merely reflected differing personal views held by the two men toward the civil rights movement. When the ministers of the Kansas City Council on Religion and Race asked people in the Kansas City area to sign a pledge that they would not discriminate on the basis of race in selling their homes, Ralston signed the pledge while Koury, when I personally solicited his support, explicitly declined.

21. RLDS D&C 116.

22. William D. Russell lists forty-eight articles and editorials on the issue of race published in the official church publication, the *Saints' Herald*, the church's youth magazine *Stride*, and the church's magazine for college and university students, *The University Bulletin* ("A Priestly Role for a Prophetic Church: The RLDS Church and Black Americans," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 [1979]: 37-49, esp. 48n36). See also Arlyn R. Love, "The First Presidency's Response to the Civil Rights Movement," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 4 (1984): 41-50, and Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1988).

23. John W. Bradley, "Race in Restoration Scriptures," *Saints' Herald* 110 (November 15, December 1, December 15, 1963): 772-75; 812-13, 816; 850-51, 862.

24. Ralston, *Fundamental Differences*, 230-34.

Five days later, at our World Conference, he was called to be an apostle. Only six of the eighteen "General Authorities" in the First Presidency, the Presiding Bishop, and the Council of Twelve signed the good neighbor pledge.²⁵ All were asked to sign it, but our leadership was very cautious.

The differences between the churches that I have enumerated here lead me to agree with Alma Blair and others who have long contended that we RLDS rejected the Nauvoo innovations and developed a theology that was fairly consistent with Mormon theology in the Kirtland period, 1831-1838. I refer to our traditional doctrines as the "Kirtland Theology." I believe the theology that we finally settled on by about 1880 was essentially the theology of the church at the end of the Kirtland period in 1838. This is also pretty much the theology of the LDS "Articles of Faith," since Joseph Smith didn't enlighten John Wentworth about the more exotic Nauvoo doctrines that had already developed by the time he wrote to Wentworth in 1842. As such, the LDS Articles of Faith comprise a far-from-complete statement of the LDS faith. They make no mention of the Doctrine and Covenants or the Book of Abraham or Pearl of Great Price. Nor do the articles mention baptism for the dead or other temple rituals, plurality of wives or of gods, or progression to godhead. There is also no mention of temples. It sounds like a rather orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, with no mention of Jesus as our Elder Brother. Joseph avoided giving undue offense to the readers of the *Chicago Democrat*.

Presumably we could say that in 1842, when Joseph wrote to John Wentworth, the Nauvoo innovations were not fully developed. Joseph had married plural wives, but "the principle" was still a secret. Writing to the outside world, Joseph deleted the more exotic parts of Mormon theology. Interestingly, much of what he left out was what the RLDS church, organized a decade later, rejected. We attempted to be more normal or legitimate to our Midwest neighbors, just as I presume Joseph was putting on the best face of Mormon theology when writing to newspaper editor John Wentworth, leaving out what our kids today might call "the weird stuff." Weird at least to Gentiles. Four of the six issues of differentiation are closely associated with Nauvoo—polygamy, the plurality of gods, secret temple rituals (most notably baptism for the dead), and the close church-state tie.

Using the analysis of "sect" employed by Jan Shipps, who describes a sect as a religious group trying to recover a lost tradition,²⁶ we can make certain observations. In its early years the RLDS church was a sect. We agreed with the Palmyra and Kirtland doctrines but rejected the later Nauvoo doctrines. We accepted the early part of the Mormon tradition but rejected the later, more extreme Mormon

25. Four of the apostles signed it, as did Maurice L. Draper of the First Presidency and Walter N. Johnson of the Presiding Bishopric. President W. Wallace Smith specifically declined my invitation to sign the Good Neighbor Pledge.

26. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 48.

doctrines. Clare Vlahos has said that we RLDS tried to balance our desire to be both "reasonable to gentiles and legitimate to Mormons."²⁷ We tried to be seen as legitimately Mormon and legitimately Christian. Hence, Alma Blair has characterized the RLDS version of the restoration as "moderate Mormonism."²⁸

Between about 1880 and the 1960s, the theological differences between our two churches changed very little, except for the mainline LDS abandonment of polygamy in the 1890s. However, in the 1960s the prairie Mormons began to shift from being a sect, trying to recover or preserve the "Kirtland version" of Mormonism, to becoming a denomination more in the mainstream of American Protestantism. By "mainstream denomination" I mean the more liberal and generally longer-established denominations, not the evangelical fundamentalist denominations. As Philip Barlow has suggested, the accident of a liberal Methodist seminary—the Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City—locating itself only a fifteen-minute drive from RLDS headquarters in Independence may have affected the church's move toward mainstream Protestantism. Many RLDS attended Saint Paul, including Grant McMurray and Peter Judd of the First Presidency, and several apostles. If either of the Kansas City seminaries operated by the Southern Baptists or the Church of the Nazarene had been closer to RLDS headquarters, the church today might be closer to evangelical Protestantism.²⁹

PART II - RECENT DIFFERENCES

It seems incongruous that during the past four decades, as we RLDS moved toward mainstream Protestantism and farther from traditional Mormon doctrine, closer friendship ties have developed between the two churches. Possibly the largest influence in this direction has been the meetings of the Mormon History Association, the John Whitmer Historical Association, and Sunstone Symposia, where RLDS and LDS scholars have interacted in a friendly, respectful manner. There have also been more frequent contacts between the leaders of the two churches during that time. And meetings of the Smith family have brought people together across denominational lines.

Let us now look at the new differences that have developed in recent years, considering first the founding document of Mormonism, the book which Joseph Smith modestly called "the most perfect book ever written," a book which he said—by way of revelation—contains the fullness of the gospel.³⁰ For more than a century, mountain Mormons and prairie Mormons agreed that the Book

27. Clare D. Vlahos, "Images of Orthodoxy: Self-Identity in Early Reorganization Apologetics," in Maurice L. Draper and Clare D. Vlahos, eds., *Restoration Studies I* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 176.

28. Blair, "The Reorganized Church," 210.

29. Philip Barlow, "Transformation in Context: Mormonism, the Community of Christ, and Religion in America," address given at the John Whitmer Historical Association World Conference Banquet, Independence, Mo., April 6, 2002.

30. See RLDS Book of Mormon I Nephi 3:19; 4:16; III Nephi 7:34-37; 9:66, 69 (LDS Book of Mormon I Nephi 10:14, 15:13; III Nephi 16:10-13; 20:28, 30).

of Mormon was true in every sense of the word. It was a true history, its doctrines were true, and it was a fundamental sign of the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's prophetic role.³¹ Most of us hadn't read it, but we knew it was true.

In recent years, however, most of the RLDS leaders, and many of the rank-and-file members, have come to doubt the Book of Mormon's historicity as well as some of its doctrinal affirmations. For example, Leland W. Negaard wrote his thesis at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1961 on the problem of Second Isaiah. He noted that most scholars conclude that many of the later chapters of Isaiah were written in the mid-sixth century BCE rather than in the eighth century. Thus, the Book of Mormon contains passages from the book of Isaiah which had not yet been written when Lehi and family departed from Jerusalem, in 600 BCE. Negaard taught religion at Graceland College, and the RLDS church's publication for college and university students, the *University Bulletin*, published an article by Negaard on Second Isaiah in 1966.³²

In the late 1960s, Wayne Ham wrote a paper for the church's Department of Religious Education on "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History."³³ He outlined nine problems with the orthodox view which holds that the book is history. Today it seems that although the Book of Mormon is still part of our canon of scriptures, it is not revered as highly as it used to be. It is used less in worship services and is cited far less in church publications than previously. Most leaders and many members doubt its historicity. Those who doubt can be grouped into two camps. One group finds little value in the book and would just as soon it were not in our canon of scriptures. The other camp, which I believe is much more numerous, regards it as scripture because of its message and its place as the founding document of the movement.

Two months after W. Grant McMurray was ordained president of the church in April 1996, he was interviewed on Martin Tanner's religion talk show for a Salt Lake City radio station. In response to a caller, Grant said that historical research simply doesn't give us the tools to determine whether the Book of Mormon is historical or not. When pushed by another caller, who asked, "Do *you* believe it is historical?" Grant gave the same response: Historical research simply doesn't give us the tools to determine whether the Book of Mormon is historical or not. So historicity of the Book of Mormon is a recently developing difference between us.

31. A. Bruce Lindgren, "Sign or Scripture: Approaches to the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 69-75. Reprinted in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 55-62.

32. Leland W. Negaard, "The Problem of Second Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," unpublished thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1961. An abbreviated version was published later as "Literary Issues and the Book of Mormon," *University Bulletin* 18 (Spring 1966): 21-24.

33. Wayne Ham, "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," published with slight revisions by the author in *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1, no. 1 (September 1970): 15-22.

We have also recently developed significant differences with our LDS cousins over the nature of revelation and prophecy. Both the mountain Mormons and the prairie Mormons have historically tended to view revelation as "propositional," as retired RLDS Church Historian Richard P. Howard has suggested.³⁴ We have viewed God as issuing commands to prophets or to disciples, with specific directives such as, "Martin, pay the printer's debt," or, "Spencer, kill the ERA!" However, we prairie Mormons are now more inclined to see revelation as the disclosure of the person of Jesus Christ and what it means to be a disciple in our particular time and culture. Maybe the problem in the Mormon movement lies in the language used, when from the beginning we affirmed that human beings are touched by the divine in all ages. To express this in the phrase "God speaks today" was understandable in the biblical culture in which our movement was born, but it implies that God's disclosure to humans normally takes the form of words uttered. The RLDS are now asking themselves whether that model really describes the nature of the most profound religious experiences.

A third emerging difference is that we have recently come to view Joseph Smith and succeeding prophets quite differently. During that first century of RLDS history, we felt the need to defend the prophet, assuming his doctrines were true and his character consistently virtuous. Where we differed doctrinally with the LDS, we often defended our position on the basis of Joseph's canonical writings. We considered polygamy immoral, so rather than accepting the idea that the prophet yielded to temptations of the flesh, we denied that he had polygamous wives. Incredibly, we blamed it on Brigham. Today we view Joseph Smith as a very flawed human being, but most of us still see him as a legitimate prophet.

The fourth issue is women in the priesthood. In the first century, priesthood eligibility for African Americans was a difference, but since 1984, priesthood eligibility for women has become a more significant difference between the churches. In 1973 *Dialogue* published my letter-to-the-editor on the subject:

Members of the Reorganized Church like to point out that there are black men in its priesthood. However, we Reorganites tend to overlook that we deny a much larger segment of the human race the opportunity to hold the priesthood. I see no difference between denying the priesthood to women and denying it to blacks. Both practices seem absurd today.³⁵

Eleven years later the priesthood ban on women was lifted at the World Conference of 1984. The issue had been festering in the church for about fifteen years. The debate was heated, and roughly one-fourth of our active members left the church as a result of Section 156 of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, which makes women eligible for priesthood ordination.

34. Richard P. Howard, "Latter Day Saint Scriptures and the Doctrine of Propositional Revelation," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1, no. 4 (June 1971): 209-25.

35. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 8, no. 2 (1973): 10.

The fifth recent issue is homosexuality. In the 1950s and 1960s, racial discrimination was a big issue for the RLDS church, but in the 1970s and 1980s the issue was gender. In the 1990s, the church began to address the issue of homosexuality. In that debate, the church leadership began to recognize an organization of church members called GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance), allowing the organization to have a booth and to sponsor special worship services at conference. In 1997, Graceland College added "sexual orientation" to the list of categories in which it promises "non-discrimination," and more recently the college applied that policy to domestic partner benefits for employees. Church President Grant McMurray made affirming statements at the 1998 and 2002 World Conferences.³⁶ However, as of this writing, the official policy remains that a homosexual can only be in the priesthood if she or he is celibate. In practice this policy is sometimes ignored, and President McMurray admitted in his 2002 conference address that he has sometimes ignored it.³⁷ There has been strong conservative resistance to President McMurray's 2002 conference address.

A sixth difference in recent years has to do with our views about apostasy and restoration. In the last generation, many RLDS leaders and rank-and-file members have drastically revised their understanding on this matter. During the first century, RLDS views on apostasy and restoration were pretty much the same as LDS. We held that Christ established his church and it later fell into apostasy, only to be restored again after more than 1000 years in darkness. (We also saw a modern wave of apostasy brought about by Brigham Young.) The person who did the most to debunk this concept among the RLDS was Roy A. Cheville, the first RLDS to receive a Ph.D. in religion (University of Chicago, 1942). Cheville taught at Graceland College for nearly four decades, then served for nearly two decades as the presiding patriarch of the church. In his book, *Did the Light Go Out?*, Cheville argued that there was much good in medieval Christianity and thus "the light" was never extinguished.³⁸ Cheville and others in the church also concluded that "restoration" is a relative term with a variety of meanings.³⁹

Most significantly, RLDS scholars came to the conclusion that it is not historically accurate to say that Jesus established a church during his earthly min-

36. W. Grant McMurray, "The Vision Transforms Us" (1998 World Conference Sermon), *Saints' Herald*, June 1998, 232.

37. W. Grant McMurray, "Called to Discipleship: Coming Home in Search of the Path" (2002 World Conference Sermon), in *2002 World Conference Bulletin*, 182.

38. Roy A. Cheville, *Did the Light Go Out?* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1962).

39. See also Geoffrey F. Spencer, "The Spirit and the Forms: Church Life and Order in the First One Hundred Years," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action*, 2, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 353-67, and C. Robert Mesle, "The Restoration and History: New Testament Christianity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 19, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 55-68, and "The Development of the New Testament Church," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1972): 23-35.

istry, with various priesthood offices and sacraments. If Jesus did establish something like a church, it was a far cry from the church which Joseph Smith established eighteen centuries later. These days you will not hear the concepts of apostasy and restoration mentioned as often in church meetings as they were in the past. Many of the local splinter groups organized after we began to ordain women chose the name "Restoration Branch," because they strongly affirm the traditional doctrines about apostasy and restoration.

A seventh recent difference is that we prairie Mormons used to be very much focused on the next world, on life after death: Repent, be baptized, do your church duties, and upon your death you will be ushered through the pearly gates, possibly with a ticket to celestial glory. Today there seems to be very little concern about life after death in the Community of Christ. Many don't have the foggiest idea what happens after death—or before birth, for that matter. We just try to muddle through this life without messing up any more than we have to. If my observation is accurate, the mountain Mormons still retain a strong emphasis on life after death. For example, when I delivered a paper at the Mormon History Association meeting in Ogden in 1982, my good friend Bob Matthews commented that I ought to consider my eternal status when choosing topics for research and publication. While it had occurred to me that my choice of controversial topics could get me in trouble with church officials on this side of the grave, I had never thought of having to answer to St. Peter about my publications. Maybe that will be the ultimate disciplinary hearing!

Finally, the Community of Christ interest in this world more than in the next is reflected in our current attempt to be a "peace church." In the 1984 revelation calling for the ordination of women, Section 156 also stated that the temple "shall be dedicated to the pursuit of peace. It shall be for reconciliation and for healing of the spirit."⁴⁰ In 1994, RLDS church leaders developed the following mission statement: "We proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace."

Community of Christ Theologian-in-Residence Tony Chvala-Smith sums up the recent shifts by saying that "the Community of Christ no longer treats the Joseph Smith story as the normative lens through which it interprets the Christian message."⁴¹ Or, as our Coordinator for Peace and Justice, Andrew Bolton, has put it: "We used to see Jesus through the eyes of Joseph; now we see Joseph through the eyes of Jesus." Church leaders now see their task as developing a Christ-centered theology of peace. Some critics of these theological shifts say, "Why don't you all just go join the Methodist Church?" But what could be more challenging and worthwhile than to develop a Christ-centered theology of peace, making use of elements of our Mormon tradition? While we were once focused on an inward, self-absorbed attempt to prove our own worth as "the one

40. RLDS D&C 156 (1984).

41. Tony Chvala-Smith, email to Bill Russell, July 10, 2002.

true church," we are now trying to be a "community of Christ." The new name focuses our attention on the Zionic ideal of community and the desire to be authentically Christian. It is a reminder that our best glimpse into the kind of people God would have us be comes from the life of the humble carpenter from Nazareth whom we see portrayed in the four gospels rather than in the revelations of modern church prophets or the legislative enactments of ecclesiastical conferences. It remains to be seen whether a church born into a culture of violence in the American frontier⁴² can transform itself into a community of Christ seeking peaceful solutions to the conflicts of today's world.

42. See D. Michael Quinn, "National Culture, Personality and Theocracy in the Early Mormon Culture of Violence," *The John Whitmer Historical Association 2002 Nauvoo Conference Special Edition* (The John Whitmer Historical Association, 2002): 159-186.