

Is Joseph Smith Relevant to the Community of Christ?

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In the spring of 2005 Newell Bringhurst asked me to participate in a session of the Mormon History Association's annual meeting. Because it was the bicentennial of Joseph Smith's birth and we were meeting in Vermont, his birth state, our session was titled "In Pursuit of the Elusive Joseph Smith." He asked each panelist to consider the process of investigation and interpretation that has been made over the past forty years in terms of the most significant works produced, what significant areas of Joseph Smith's life remained to be explored, and whether a reasonably "definitive portrait" of Joseph Smith is more possible today than it was forty years ago. I agreed to participate in this session, along with four senior scholars in Mormon studies, D. Michael Quinn, Glen M. Leonard, Dan Vogel, and Grant Underwood. The session proved both stimulating and provocative, and hopefully useful to the audience in attendance. The following essay is a slightly revised draft of my remarks.

I spoke as a member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints/Community of Christ. As a result, I had a decidedly different perspective on Joseph Smith than my co-panelists. In addition, with the peculiarities of the history of my faith community, Joseph Smith Jr. has enjoyed a place in this religious tradition strikingly different from that he has attained among the Utah-based Latter-day Saints. Without question, he is much less revered and less legendary than among the Latter-day Saints, for whom Joseph Smith is significant, not just for his life but for his religious innovations. I have heard this assertion many times and in many places. As Ronald K. Esplin commented in an important essay about Nauvoo, "Nauvoo was, and is, and will be important to Latter-day Saints because it was *the* City of Joseph. It was the city he built, where he lived and acted, where he died. Above all, it was the city where

he fulfilled his religious mission. . . . In a very real sense, his other labors were prologue.”¹ Clearly Smith’s religious innovations are central to the LDS reverence for the founding prophet.

I would compare this perspective to one debated among various other Christian groups. Which is more important: the life of Jesus or the death and resurrection of Christ? Allowing that both are significant, the relative importance that one would place on these events tells us much about the group’s perspective. To emphasize the life of Jesus is to embrace an entity fully human who had to come to grips with the duality of his humanity and divinity and did so only with great difficulty and strength but ultimately with acceptance. To emphasize the death and resurrection of Christ is to accentuate divinity while too often giving short shrift to the struggle that Jesus engaged in throughout his life. Utah-based Latter-day Saints tend to emphasize the triumphant Joseph Smith (at least as they conceive of him) who “completed” his work of restoring the gospel before his assassination at age thirty-nine.

For the Community of Christ, Joseph Smith’s place is much less assured and certainly far less triumphant. Indeed, I know of no one in the organization who would conclude that Joseph Smith “completed” his work of restoration, and I could poll many who would question the totality of what he accomplished. I would contend that Joseph Smith’s activities represented a conflicting set of ideals for those identified with the Community of Christ. Such was the case from the time of Joseph Smith III, first president of the Reorganization, in the nineteenth century, and it has remained so to the present, becoming even more problematic in the last twenty-five years or so. Over the course of many years, the Church has cast aside any belief in plurality of gods, baptism for the dead, and temple ceremonies as understood by Latter-day Saints. From the beginning of the Reorganization movement, it rejected celestial marriage and the tendency toward militarism and official involvement in most political activities that were prevalent in Nauvoo. While some in the Reorganized Church refused to believe that these had any place in the organization of Joseph Smith’s day—and this has been a source of tension for those inside the Church—the reality is that, in a demythologization of history, many have come to accept that not everything Smith did was appropriate. At a fundamental level, the lifetime of contradictions that Joseph Smith lived represented both a triumph and a tragedy, the backlash of which the Commu-

nity of Christ's adherents have been seeking to understand and in some cases to live down ever since.²

At the same time, there is a dichotomy between what some of the Church's historians might understand about the past and what the average member believes, so while there is some consensus there is certainly not unanimity in the construction of a faith story about Joseph Smith. This came home to me quite pointedly in the context of a request recently from the junior high Sunday School teacher. She asked, "What should I tell my students about Joseph Smith?" I asked her what was in the curriculum, and she told me that it was completely silent on the subject. Accordingly, her class was asking questions for which she had no resources. This situation raised a critical question. What might we say about the founder? Having deconstructed his life and mission, how might we work to reconstruct a meaningful story that celebrates his legitimate accomplishments while remaining honest to the historical record? I had no answer for this instructor, and I still do not.

Few of the major incidents that have been a part of the Community of Christ faith story remain salient. These include the translation of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood and the gospel in its fullness, the development of a uniquely useful theology, the concept of Zion, belief in the Second Coming of Christ and the millennium, and several others. What remains is a deeply flawed character at the center of the Church's origins.

How might a re-enchantment of Church history be accomplished? Might we do so by asking the question: "Could any other person have been the founder of the restoration movement?" No doubt, historical developments are important to the identity of the Community of Christ, but how might members accept the historical record "warts and all" but still see Joseph Smith as unique in some respects? It remains a puzzlement.

There are many difficult examples of what the Community of Christ has been seeking to deal with. The quest for Zion was an attractive idea for the Church for more than a century, and the success of Smith in such places as Nauvoo has often been viewed as the closest approximation the Church has to the ideals of Zion carried in scripture and doctrine. At the same time, the Reorganized Church/Community of Christ has been repelled by the darker side of political power—corruption, influence-peddling, and the difficulty of political choices. Much the same was true when considering Smith's truly weird theological experimentation.³ Many in

the Community of Christ today are certainly uncomfortable with Smith's authoritarianism, with his militarism, and with his sense of being God's chosen. I know of no one in the leadership of the Community of Christ who accepts the Book of Mormon as a work of history, even if they view it as scripture. Of course, some rank and file members still accept it as such. As to the many doctrinal idiosyncrasies that emerged from the mind of Joseph Smith, those are sometimes viewed as the ramblings of a misguided fanatic.⁴ That he became increasingly egocentric and power hungry is a given for virtually all Community of Christ members.

But I suspect that many members still view his early structuring of the Church and its basic doctrines as prophetic. Even so, their view of his prophetic role in the Church is severely limited when compared to the view of the LDS Church and perhaps to early RLDS views. By distancing itself from many of his actions and selectively emphasizing his prophetic role, the Community of Christ views him as more human than he is in the LDS tradition. His Nauvoo innovations are an "embarrassment," but many still view him as a figure of significance in the formation of the Church.

Accordingly, the Community of Christ has walked a fine line in interpreting the legacy of Joseph Smith. From a theological perspective, the Reorganized Church essentially rejected Smith's radical ideas. Between 1830 and 1844, and especially in the latter years, Smith promulgated a series of unique ideas on eternity, the multiplicity of gods, the possibility of progression to godhood, celestial and plural marriage, baptism for the dead, and other ideas associated with Mormon temple endowments—none of which found a place in the Reorganized Church.⁵ A few of these innovations were simply considered quaint by non-Mormons; others, such as plural marriage, aroused volatile emotions and became rallying points for opposition to the movement.⁶

For many reasons, the Reorganization for over a hundred years desired to remain faithful to the stories, symbols, and events of early Mormonism, on the one hand, even as it sought respectability among Christians of other denominations.⁷ To a remarkable extent, it was successful in doing so. These tensions were held in creative balance until a theological reformation in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Its success was largely due to the unique heritage of the Reorganized Latter Day Saints as the people in the middle, seeking to steer between the Scylla of excessively authoritarian, speculative, Nauvoo Mormonism and the Charybdis of creedal, congregational, Protestant sectarianism.⁸

The recent broad-based reformation has resulted in the virtual abandonment of most of the vestiges of Mormonism that informed the movement for a century and in their replacement by more mainline Christian conceptions.⁹ In the process of that reformation, the character of Joseph Smith has become an embarrassment. He is often viewed as a skeleton in the closet of the Community of Christ. After all, he was a cult leader who preached doctrines anathema to many Christians, engaged in sexual hijinks of the worst order, sought to take over the United States and make it into a theocracy with him in charge, and, failing that, allowed himself to be martyred as a rallying point for his followers.

In this context, attempts to understand and explain the life and activities of Joseph Smith Jr. for the Community of Christ membership are not particularly necessary or valued. At this point, I can no more envision the preparation of a new biography of Joseph Smith usable by the Community of Christ than I can foresee the centrality of a new biography of Charles Darwin to the current debate over evolution/intelligent design. Joseph Smith is not truly germane to the current Community of Christ direction.

Having offered this lengthy preamble, let me address the questions that Newell Bringhurst suggested that we consider in relation to Joseph Smith.

1. How much progress has been made over the past forty years in terms of the most significant works produced?

This is an interesting question and one that I wish I had a better answer to, but the reality is that, while we now know much more about the details of Smith's life than in the past, I'm not sure that we have more understanding. Fawn Brodie laid out the major parameters of the questions most people pursued concerning Smith in her 1945 biography, and it is still by far the best work on the subject.¹⁰ Few have moved far from the research agenda she laid out.

In *No Man Knows My History* Brodie systematically dealt with five basic issues that have challenged Mormon historians ever since.

1. Joseph Smith's First Vision.
2. Treasure seeking and its relationship both to Smith and Mormon origins.
3. The origins and content of the Book of Mormon.
4. The origins of plural marriage and other theological innovations.
5. Joseph Smith, theocracy, and authoritarianism.

Because of our pursuit of these major issues, we have learned an enormous amount about Smith's work. We are all indebted to the historians who have explored these issues in depth and broadened our knowledge. Donna Hill's 1977 biography tried to deal with these issues comprehensively and was largely successful but failed to replace Brodie's book as the standard account of Smith's life, at least among the larger community of historians and observers.¹¹ Perhaps Richard Bushman's new biography of Smith will accomplish that task, but such a determination comes only with time.¹²

The reason a definitive biography of Joseph Smith is such an elusive goal is because Mormon historiography has become such a battleground in the last twenty years. I'm uncertain if believing LDS scholars can write anything but "faithful history" any longer, emphasizing exclusively the sacredness of the story of Mormonism. From John Whitmer to the present, most writing on the Mormon past has been oriented toward producing a narrative of use to the membership. The result was a thrust of historical interpretation that overwhelmingly emphasized God's word as defined by the Mormon prophets, spreading throughout the world in a never-ending advancement of the Church. Most LDS historians have accepted this interpretation because, as Klaus J. Hansen has suggested, most of them are members of the Latter-day Saint faith community, and they must overcome years of religious training that predisposes them to view the Church, its leaders, and its institutions as righteous and just.¹³ LDS Apostle Boyd K. Packer has even invoked an espousal of the progress of Mormonism as a religion as *the* primary purpose of historical investigation, telling Church educators in 1981: "Your objective should be that they [those who study Mormon history] will see the hand of the Lord in every hour and every moment of the Church from its beginning till now."¹⁴ With such a perspective, Church-mandated interpretations of the Mormon past are not easily overcome. And while Bushman is certainly an able and elegant historian with special skills in presenting the faith story, his book will be acceptable mostly to believing Mormons.

2. *What significant areas of Joseph Smith's life remain to be explored?*

There is one huge area in Joseph Smith's life that I would like to see explored. It relates to his place in the myth and memory of the Latter-day Saints. No area in historical study has been more significant in the recent past than the study of memory. The reality of what happened in the past—which in any event is unrecoverable—is decidedly less important

than what the population who values the story believes about it. So what do the Mormons believe about Joseph Smith? How did they come to believe this, and why? How have these beliefs morphed over time and in response to what triggering events? Of course, Joseph Smith is a legend. He is a legend in the same way that Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, Daniel Boone, Alvin York, Henry Ford, and a host of others in American history are legends. Unpacking the legend and exploring his myth and memory offer a new understanding on his place in the development of this important American-originated religion.

3. *Is a reasonably "definitive" portrait of Joseph Smith more possible today than it was forty years ago? Why or why not?*

I would suggest that there is no such thing as a definitive work of history. At some level, this question depends on the concept of "truth"—whether it exists and, if so, whether it is "knowable." I question both assumptions, although I would never argue definitively about them since I don't really know.

What we think of as truth has changed fundamentally with time. I am reminded of a scene from the classic comedy, *Men in Black*, that is really a commentary on the nature of modern society. The Tommy Lee Jones character, K, tells the Will Smith character about the reality of aliens in America. He adds, "Fifteen hundred years ago, everyone knew that the sun revolved around the Earth. Five hundred years ago, everyone knew the world was flat. Yesterday you knew that we were alone on this planet. Imagine what you'll learn tomorrow."¹⁵ Imagine how truth has changed over time! Truth is inexact and difficult to pin down, always changing in relation to other events, perceptions, and countervailing ideas, especially over time.

Indeed, truths have differed from time to time and place to place with reckless abandon and enormous variety. Choice between them is present everywhere both in the past and the present; my truth dissolves into your myth and your truth into my myth almost as soon as it is articulated. This pattern is reinforced everywhere, and the versions of truth espoused by various groups about themselves and about those excluded from their fellowship are often misunderstood. Perhaps Pontius Pilate framed the dilemma best two millennia ago when he asked Jesus, "What is truth?"¹⁶ But he never got an answer from Jesus. That silence says much about the nature of truth.

So, having followed this divergent trail about the nature of truth, let

me suggest that there is no chance whatsoever of any historian producing the definitive biography of Joseph Smith. But that is because I reject the premise of definitiveness, not because excellent works will not emerge. Indeed, I hope they do—and soon.

Notes

1. Ronald K. Esplin, "The Significance of Nauvoo for Latter-day Saints," *Journal of Mormon History* 16 (1990): 72.

2. This was one of the themes of my dissertation, published as *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). On the RLDS reformation, see Larry W. Conrad and Paul Shupe, "An RLDS Reformation? Construing the Task of RLDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 92–103; Roger D. Launius, "The RLDS Church and the Decade of Decision," *Sunstone* 19 (September 1996): 45–55; Roger D. Launius, "Coming of Age? The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1960s," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 31–57; Roger D. Launius, "Neither Mormon nor Protestant? The Reorganized Church and the Challenge of Identity," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, edited by Douglas Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 52–60; W. B. "Pat" Spillman, "Dissent and the Future of the Church," in *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, edited by Roger D. Launius and W. B. "Pat" Spillman (Independence, Mo.: Graceland/Park Press, 1991), 259–92.

3. I deal with this topic in relation to Nauvoo in "The Awesome Responsibility: Joseph Smith III and the Nauvoo Experience," *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 11 (Fall 1988): 55–68.

4. See my explorations of these topics in "The RLDS Church and the Decade of Decision," *Sunstone* 19 (September 1996): 45–55; and "An Ambivalent Rejection: Baptism for the Dead and the Reorganized Church Experience," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 61–84.

5. The literature on many Nauvoo theological developments is extensive. For general introductions, see T. Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church during the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1839–1846," *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 435–46; Marvin S. Hill, "Mormon Religion in Nauvoo: Some Reflections," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1976): 170–80.

6. See Richard P. Howard, "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*

3 (1983): 14–29; Alma R. Blair, "RLDS Views of Polygamy: Some Historiographical Notes," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 5 (1985): 16–28; Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 190–272; Roger D. Launius, "Methods and Motives: Joseph Smith III's Opposition to Polygamy, 1860–90," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 105–20; Roger D. Launius, "Politicking against Polygamy: Joseph Smith III, the Reorganized Church, and the Politics of the Anti-Polygamy Crusade, 1860–1890," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 7 (1987): 35–44.

7. Alma R. Blair, "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado Press, 1973), 207–30; Clare D. Vlahos, "Moderation as a Theological Principle in the Thought of Joseph Smith III," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 1 (1981): 3–11.

8. Clare D. Vlahos, "Images of Orthodoxy," in *Restoration Studies I*, edited by Maurice L. Draper and Clare D. Vlahos (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 184. See also Conrad and Shupe, "An RLDS Reformation?" 92–103; W. Paul Jones, "Demythologizing and Symbolizing the RLDS Tradition," *Restoration Studies V*, edited by Darlene Caswell (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1993), 109–15; Larry W. Conrad, "Dissent among Dissenters: Theological Dimensions of Dissent in the Reorganization," in *Let Contention Cease*, 199–239.

9. One may debate whether this is a good thing. W. Grant McMurray criticized several scholars for pointing up the problems of this reformation in his address, "History and Mission in Tension: A View from Both Sides," in *Religion and the Challenge of Modernity: The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the United States Today*, edited by Danny L. Jorgensen and Joni Wilson (Binghamton, N.Y.: Global Publications, Academic Studies in the History of Religion, 2001), 229–49. It is a paper filled with his characteristic wit. But more important, it should also be deeply troubling for those who pursue historical knowledge, for it demonstrates serious anti-historical and, in some instances, anti-intellectual attitudes.

10. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). A revised and expanded second edition appeared in 1971.

11. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).

12. Richard Lyman Bushman with the assistance of Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

13. Klaus J. Hansen, "The World and the Prophet," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 106.

14. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 262.

15. *Men in Black*, feature film, starring Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones (Universal Studios, 1997).

16. *The Holy Scriptures* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1944 ed.), John 18:38.