

JESUS CHRIST, MARRIAGE, AND
MORMON CHRISTIANITIES:
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“I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.”

According to his official history, that’s all Joseph Smith said to his mother after God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him while he prayed by himself in the woods. Whether or not Presbyterianism was true was a more pressing question for the young Joseph Smith than it is for most of you. Sometime in the mid-1820s, Lucy Mack Smith and several of Joseph’s siblings joined a Presbyterian church. Joseph must have wrestled with his mother’s choice. Like his father, though, he never joined any Protestant church. But it was surely a major point of controversy and discussion in the family.

“Presbyterianism is not true.”

I have to say that’s a rather small takeaway for a theophany. It’s rather like meeting a three-star Michelin chef and having him declare that the food at McDonald’s is not good.

And it’s a bit annoying. God and Jesus visit the prophet-to-be in a grove and tell him that my church is not true.

Still, having been a Presbyterian all my life, I’d have to concede that Joseph Smith or the Lord had a point. There have been some terribly false things about Presbyterianism and Presbyterians. It’s not just that

we have an unspellable and unpronounceable name, or that what we most excel at is forming committees and subcommittees.

John Calvin and the Protestant Reformation in Geneva were the theological inspiration for those in Scotland and England who embraced Presbyterianism, which means, most simply, the local and regional governance of churches by elected elders and ministers. It's ecclesiastical democracy with checks and balances. It allows us to do things "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

John Calvin was the theological bogeyman of early nineteenth-century America. Calvinism was under assault from Americans who could not abide the idea that God arbitrarily chose to save some individuals and damn others. The basic concept struck many early Americans as arbitrary and cruel. Methodists insisted that salvation was freely available to all individuals who chose to place their faith in Jesus Christ. Many Unitarians contended that predestination made God loathsome. Joseph Smith and his followers rejected Calvinism as well. A central teaching of the Book of Mormon is that individuals are free to choose "liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all" (2 Nephi 2:27). Christ died for all, not just for a select number of God's chosen.

Calvin did not exclude infants from God's sovereign and just decrees about salvation: "even infants bring their condemnation with them from their mother's womb [and] suffer not for another's, but for their own defect. For although infants have not yet produced the fruits of their own unrighteousness, they have the seed implanted in them . . . their whole nature is . . . a seed-bed of sin."¹

That just stinks. God damning certain infants because they would have sinned had they lived longer! Ugh. At least the LDS Church lets children off the hook until age eight. And now that my daughter is eight years old, I think eight is too young.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:217 (Book II, chapter 1, section 8).

A few weeks ago, our family had a run-in with the authorities down in Green River, Utah. Not a serious run-in. I was pulled over for going 51 in a 40-miles-per-hour zone. Flashing lights. Police officer at the door. Handing over license and rental car agreement. Agonizing wait for five minutes. I wondered whether “driving while Gentile” is risky in Utah. Apparently not, as I escaped with a warning.

Meanwhile, my daughter was watching *Inside Out* in the backseat on a little DVD player. She had no idea that we had been pulled over. This is *not* because I get pulled over every other day. It’s just because my daughter pays no attention to the rest of the world if she’s focused on something. So I tend to think that God would be unjust to hold her accountable for her sinfulness. I’m giving her until at least eighty years of age.

The Book of Mormon condemns the idea of infant baptism as abominable. It teaches that “all little children are alive in Christ” (Moroni 8:22). Behaviorally, I’m not so sure about that, but it’s a much more attractive idea than Calvin’s contention that God has predestined many infants to hell.

I can find all sorts of other ideas to back up Joseph Smith’s contention that Presbyterianism is not true. John Calvin’s supporting the burning of anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus at the stake in Geneva. American Presbyterians’ leading the way in the defense of slavery prior to the Civil War. Churches and presbyteries (presbyteries resemble LDS stakes) that have split over issues of women’s ordination and same-sex marriage. Congregational factions fighting over church property.

I might take some offense when the Book of Mormon labels other churches as “false,” or perhaps as belonging to the “great and abominable church,” but I can’t fully disagree with Joseph Smith’s statement to his mother that Presbyterianism is not true. It’s certainly not true in the sense of being Christ’s one true church, or of having avoided episodes that we might all label “abominable.”

At the same time, from John Calvin down to the present, Presbyterianism has also been a vehicle for beauty, for community, for thoughtful inspiration. “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” That’s the opening sentence of John Calvin’s *Institutes*.² Joseph Smith should have liked that. In fact, Joseph Smith centered his final sermons on those very questions. Who is God? Who are we? He answered them a bit differently than had Calvin, but those basic questions have generated so much theological reflection across the centuries.

Surely Joseph Smith would have liked the opening of the longer and shorter versions of the Westminster Catechism, which states that the chief end of our lives is to “glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” God is not merely to be understood, admired, or worshiped. Rather, humans are to enjoy God.

I would say, far more prosaically, that I have found beauty in local congregations that taught me that I needed a redeemer and showed me a community through which I found one. And so I have stuck with my church, despite its obvious flaws, despite its declining numbers, because it was within its confines that I found beauty, community, and life.

In the history and doctrines of Mormonism, I also have found much beauty, community, and life, and I have also found episodes and ideas that are abominable. Tonight, I will share two instances to illustrate that complexity. Both stories pertain to marriage, which seems very appropriate. Outsiders have at different points in the LDS Church’s history expressed horror over and admiration for Mormon patterns of marriage. Matters of marriage, moreover, have divided and still divide Mormons among themselves, partly because Latter-day Saints affix so much sacred and salvific importance to marriage.

2. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:37 (Book I, chapter 1, section 1).

My first story comes from the time of the Mormon “reformation,” that period in the mid-1850s when Brigham Young and his associates decided that the Saints needed to re-commit themselves to God, to their church, and to their leaders.³ It was nearly ten years after Brigham Young had led the first group of Mormon pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. While not exactly ten years of prosperity, it had been a decade of relative isolation and peace. The Saints had survived the first several tough winters in the valley, and now thousands streamed to the West each year, from Illinois, from the Northeast, from England, from Scandinavia.

And yet Brigham Young was unsatisfied. Deeply unsatisfied. He feared his people had lost their earlier ardor and zeal. And I think he could see the handwriting on the wall. US officials kept coming to Utah, as did US military officers and surveyors. They would keep coming. Political storms were on the horizon, and Brigham believed the Saints needed to be united and committed in order to weather them.

In response to his concerns, Young and associates such as Jedediah Grant preached sermons that castigated the Saints for their sins, warned them of the dangers of ongoing immorality and disobedience, and instructed them to be rebaptized for the remission of their sins. They needed to show their renewed commitment. Many did. They confessed sins. They were rebaptized. The ensuing months were a spiritual hot-house in many Mormon communities. Repentance. Visions. Speaking in tongues. For many, fear of judgment mingled with the exhilaration of forgiveness and assurance.

It was during this time period that Brigham Young and others openly preached that Jesus’ death could not atone for certain sins, for which sinners had to atone with their own blood. There was bloody talk, and there were bloody crimes during these years. The reformation of the mid-1850s is certainly among the darkest periods of Mormon history.

3. See the broader discussion in John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), chapter 9.

In particular, Young called on those who had wavered over polygamy to step up to the mark and live their religion. Those previously hesitant should embrace the plurality of wives. They should marry if possible. They should marry again if possible. Young pointedly reminded the congregations that “multitudes of pure and holy spirits [were] waiting to take tabernacles.” Righteous men, he argued, had an ongoing responsibility to create those bodies. “If my wife had borne me all the children that she would ever bare,” he explained, “the celestial law would teach me to take young women that would have children.”⁴ Some local leaders warned of violent reprisals against those who voiced opposition to polygamy. “Whang away at them,” one leader in Provo instructed.⁵

The response to such preaching was overwhelming. Letters from men and their bishops poured into Young’s office, requesting permission to take additional wives. Young’s clerk pronounced himself “astonished at the number of applications for permission to take wives.” Pleased with the response, Young told most supplicants to “go ahead.” He or a clerk would sometimes scribble that phrase on an incoming letter. With particular satisfaction, Young noted that the handcart “Sisters . . . are almost all married off; they are much in demand.”⁶ The Saints took the reformation preaching of their leaders to heart. They went ahead. They married. They married again.

Inevitably, the marital stampede led to a decrease in the marriage age. “Nearly all are trying to get wives,” Wilford Woodruff wrote the

4. Brigham Young, Sep. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 4:55–56.

5. Dominicus Carter, in minutes of Oct. 26, 1856, Provo Central Utah Stake Record, LR 9629 11, Church History Library (hereafter CHL), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

6. “astonished” in Brigham Young Office Journal, Jan. 14, 1857, Box 72, Folder 3, Brigham Young Papers (hereafter BYP), CR 1234 1, CHL; “go ahead,” see for example Brigham Young to William Barton, Mar. 5, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 3, page 459, BYP; “Sisters” in Brigham Young to Ezra T. Benson, Jan. 26, 1857, Letterpress Book 3, page 320, BYP.

following spring, “until there is hardly a girl 14 years old in Utah but what is married or just going to be.” Woodruff himself offered his fourteen-year-old daughter Phebe in marriage to Brigham Young, who informed the apostle that he was no longer marrying “young wives.”⁷

While marriages of fourteen-year-old girls were not unheard of in the rest of the United States (the legal age of consent was often twelve for women), such unions were very rare. Mormon leaders, by contrast, blessed an unusual number of early marriages, especially during the reformation.

The issue arose repeatedly during early 1857. Sometimes Young himself found a request distasteful. “Old Father James Alread brought three young girls 12 & 13 years old,” he once complained. “I would not seal them to him. They would not be equally yoked.”⁸ James Allred was seventy-three years old. Other times, though, Young gave permission for the marriage to proceed but counseled the husband to wait to consummate it. Writing to one supplicant, Young granted him permission to wed a thirteen-year-old girl but instructed him to “preserve her intact until she is fully developed into Womanhood.”⁹ Similarly, he counseled another applicant to “‘Go ahead’ but leave children to grow.”¹⁰

When I was researching the life of Brigham Young, these letters made my stomach turn. There are many things I admire about Brigham Young. He could be extremely winsome. He was incredibly funny. He

7. Woodruff to George A. Smith, Apr. 1, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 1, 439, Church Historian’s Office, Outgoing Correspondence, CR 100 38, CHL; “young wives” in Wilford Woodruff Journal (hereafter WWJ), Feb. 15, 1857 (Scott G. Kenney, ed., WWJ, 1833–1898: Typescript [Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84], 5:22).

8. WWJ, Jun. 14, 1857, 5:58.

9. Brigham Young to Uriah Butt, Feb. 17, 1857, Copybook 3, p. 408, BYP. See Butt and Joseph Parramore to Brigham Young, Feb. 17, 1857, box 64, folder 5, BYP.

10. Heber C. Kimball to John S. Fulmer, Mar. 20, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 3, p. 474, BYP. Kimball explicitly described his advice as Young’s counsel.

displayed remarkable persistence and resilience in striving to accomplish his goals. He suffered, I think, from something akin to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of the Nauvoo persecutions and Joseph Smith's martyrdom.

Like all people, though, Brigham Young had feet of clay. "Preserve her intact until she is fully developed into Womanhood." "Go ahead but leave children to grow." In these instances of very early marriage, he acted recklessly, putting girls into situations that denied their true agency and placing them at great risk of abuse.

Certainly, many Mormon women voluntarily entered into and even publicly defended plural marriage in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Church hierarchs, parents, and suitors pressured young women—barely pubescent girls—into marriages. I say that with the recognition that Brigham Young was hardly alone in creating such precarious circumstances for young women. European aristocracies arranged marriages for girls at very young ages in the middle ages and early modern periods. The prophet Muhammad by tradition married his plural wife A'isha when she was six or seven and delayed consummation of the marriage until she reached puberty. Such practices remain common in some parts of the world today. And no doubt many non-Mormon parents pressured their daughters into unwanted marriages in the nineteenth century. Regardless, the Mormon reformation pushed the age of marriage down, creating what I consider abominable circumstances for young women in early Utah.¹¹ In fact, Utah Mormonism very nearly went off the rails in the mid-1850s, with pressure to take plural wives, dangerous saber-rattling against Washington, and shocking instances of extra-legal violence.

11. See the discussion in Todd M. Compton, "Early Marriage in the New England and Northeastern States, and in Mormon Polygamy: What Was the Norm?," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 184–232.



“My self and wife Vilate was annointed [anointed] Preast and Preastest unto our God under the Hands of B[righam] Young and by the voys [voice] of the Holy Order,” wrote apostle Heber C. Kimball in his diary in February 1844. At that ceremony, Young poured oil upon Kimball’s head, anointing him as a priest and king “unto the most High God in & over the Church.” Young promised his friend long life and that he would have the power to redeem his “progenitors . . . & bring them into thy Kingdom.” He also anointed Vilate Kimball “a Queen & Priestess unto her husband . . . & pronounced blessings upon her head in common with her husband.”¹²

Two months later, in a privately completed second stage of the ordinance, Vilate Kimball performed a ceremony to prepare her husband for his future burial. She washed his feet, then anointed his feet, head, and stomach. The ritual ensured their readiness to rise together when Christ returned, presuming they died before that event. Vilate Kimball wrote that she had anointed her husband so that she might “have a claim upon” her “dear companion” in the resurrection. Death would not separate them from each other or from the promises and blessings conferred upon them by the priesthood.¹³

Joseph Smith continually introduced new rituals to assure his followers of their future salvation and exaltation, new ordinances designed to make sure the promises of which he spoke. The “second anointing” or “Last Anointing,” described by Heber and Vilate Kimball, was the highest of those rituals. According to Brigham Young, this ordinance

12. This and the several paragraphs that follow are adapted from John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 8.

13. Heber C. Kimball Journal, 1 Feb. 1, 1844 and Apr. 1, 1844 (one entry in Vilate Kimball’s handwriting), in Stanley B. Kimball, ed., *On the Potter’s Wheel: The Diaries of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 56–57.

conferred “the fulness of the Priesthood, all that can be given on earth,” a promise that the recipients’ exaltation was certain rather than contingent.¹⁴ Among the blessings they should expect following the ritual was a visitation from the Savior. Anointed and ordained as kings and priests in anticipation of their future kingdoms, men now possessed the authority—the “keys”—to perform “all the ordinances belonging to the kingdom of God.”¹⁵ A wife, in turn, was priestess and queen “unto her Husband,” participating at his side in the governance of an eternal familial kingdom. Over the next century, tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints (in their lifetimes or posthumously) received their second anointings.¹⁶

The Kimbells connected the second stage of the ordinance, in which Vilate Kimball washed her husband’s feet and anointed his body, with the anointing of Jesus shortly before his crucifixion. “Even as Mary did Jesus,” Heber Kimball wrote, “that she mite have a claim on Him in the Resurrection.” Likewise, Vilate Kimball wanted to have a “claim upon him [Heber] in the morning of the first Resurrection.” Heber and Vilate Kimball were now husband and wife for eternity. So, apparently, were Jesus and Mary.

All four New Testament Gospels contain a story of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive, perfumed oil or ointment.¹⁷ In the Gospels of

14. Heber C. Kimball Journal, Diary, Dec. 26, 1845, kept by William Clayton, typescript at HBLL, 126.

15. Joseph Smith quoted in WWJ, Mar. 10, 1844, 2:361–62. See Glen Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 260–61.

16. See Devery S. Anderson, *The Development of LDS Temple Worship, 1846–2000: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), xli–xlv; and David John Buerger, “‘The Fulness of the Priesthood’: The Second Anointing in LDS Theology and Practice,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 10–44.

17. Mark 14:3–9; Matthew 26:6–13; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8.

Mark and Matthew, as Jesus travels to Jerusalem prior to his arrest and crucifixion, a woman in the town of Bethany pours an expensive spikenard oil over his head. Some of the men present complain that the jar could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus, however, responds that the woman quite properly has “come beforehand to anoint my body to the burying” (Mark 14:8). Luke’s Gospel diverges from the accounts in Mark and Matthew, as the anointing takes place long before Jesus’ crucifixion at an unnamed location. A woman identified as a “sinner” or, according to some translations, a “prostitute” bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and then rubs them with oil. Jesus’ host, a Pharisee, objects that his guest, if a prophet, should have known about the woman’s sinful life, whereupon Jesus lambasts his host for his self-righteousness and lack of hospitality. Jesus forgives the woman’s sins. Only the Gospel of John identifies the woman as Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus in the town of Bethany. Some Christians have equated Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene, present at Jesus’ crucifixion and according to two of the gospels the first to see him following his resurrection.

The example of the woman’s anointing Jesus was integral to the way that nineteenth-century Mormons thought about the second anointing. When Vilate Kimball washed her husband’s feet, she imitated the woman at Bethany. LDS Church leaders passed down the connection between the second anointing and that of Jesus at Bethany. In 1889, apostle and future Church president Joseph F. Smith wrote the following to Susa Young Gates:

under certain conditions women have been ordained Priestesses unto their husbands, and set apart to rule and reign with them &c. Then comes the holy ordinance of “*washing of feet*” and anointing with holy ointment, as Mary administered to Jesus. The wife to the husband. This is a law of the Priesthood which Mary understood, having learned it of the Lord. And she received his blessing and approval for it. It was

not confined to *her* nor to the Lord, but so much was given out for a key to the truth.¹⁸

Mary, in this formulation, administered to Jesus in the manner of a “wife to the husband.” Through the second anointing, Mormon ritual quietly introduced the idea of a married savior. And this gave Mormon men and women the opportunity to imitate Jesus and his wife. Some did so very explicitly.

In 1853, Ruth Page married Samuel H. Rogers. Her groom had once been her missionary. Ten years earlier in New Jersey, Samuel Rogers had confirmed Ruth after her baptism. A few years earlier, Samuel had married his brother’s widow. Now Ruth became his plural wife. Shortly after Ruth’s marriage, Church leaders asked Samuel to move to the southern Utah settlement of Parowan. He initially brought his first wife and left Ruth behind with her parents; Ruth joined the family a year later. Ruth and Samuel Rogers never had children. Several years later, Samuel married Ruth’s sister Lorana. For the Rogers family, polygamy was a strain, but they persevered.

The next year, Samuel was preparing to move to a Mormon settlement in Arizona. He asked Ruth if she would consent to remain behind in Parowan. She answered that she “was willing if he would return the next fall and we could go to the Temple.” Before the move, Ruth and Samuel also completed the Church’s most sacred ordinance. Samuel noted in his diary that this took place on the fifty-second anniversary of Joseph Smith’s receiving the plates of the Book of Mormon from the Angel Moroni. “I dedicated the house and room,” Samuel wrote, “also blest the Oil after which my Ruth Anointed my feet and wiped them with the hair of her head, then kissed them after the patern as written in the Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ.” At times, Ruth may have felt

18. Joseph F. Smith to Susa Young Gates, Jan. 8, 1889, Susa Young Gates Papers, MS 7692, box 54, folder 1, CHL. Emphasis in original.

that her earthly claim on Samuel was tenuous, but he would bring her forth as his wife in the resurrection.¹⁹

Many Protestants and Catholics are repulsed at the idea of a married Jesus. Correspondingly, many anti-Mormon books quote nineteenth-century LDS leaders who contended that Jesus had married several women and that he had fathered children on earth. The biblical evidence and early Christian testimony point to Jesus *not* having married on earth,²⁰ but I do not see why Christians should find the idea of Jesus having a wife and children repulsive.

When Vilate Kimball and Ruth Page Rogers anointed and then dried their husbands' feet with their hair, the tenderness in such rituals is hard to deny: A couple trying to make their companionship eternal by imitating their savior and the woman who anointed him. Certainly, there are strong elements of patriarchy in the ritual, but Ruth Page Rogers also used the ordinance to assert herself. Yes, I'm willing to stay behind when you go with the rest of the family to Arizona, *if you complete this sacred ritual with me before you go. I have a claim on you in this world and the next.*

In the twentieth century, the second anointing became an ordinance bestowed on only a few. And even though some American Mormons retain a belief in a married Savior, the idea faded from public view. Nevertheless, these two examples bring together a number of themes central to the doctrines and history of Mormonism: marriage, polygamy, ritual, community, and the Christian Savior.

Marriage is an ordinance or contract that is supposed to both unite individuals and build community. At the same time, the idea of marriage

19. Ruth Page Rogers Journal, Aug. 6, 1879, typescript in author's possession; Samuel H. Rogers Journal, Sept. 22, 1879, MS 1134, HBLL. On the Rogers family, see Paula Kelly Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 2.

20. See Anthony Le Donne, *The Wife of Jesus: Ancient Texts and Modern Scandals* (London: Oneworld, 2013).

has caused so much division. Early Christians wondered whether or not they should follow the examples of Jesus and Paul and *not* marry. Celibacy and virginity became idealized, although both Western and Eastern Christians reified the holiness of marriage as one of the sacraments or mysteries of the church. Protestants rejected both celibacy and the sacramental nature of marriage, thus upholding marriage as ordained by God while removing some of its theological significance. Until recent decades, moreover, nearly all Christian churches have emphasized the hierarchical status of husbands over wives.

Moving ahead many centuries, while many things led to animosity between other Americans and Mormons in the nineteenth century, polygamy stoked the persistence and fierceness of anti-Mormonism. For most Americans, polygamy was un-Christian, un-American, uncivilized. It was barbaric. Not only did it make Mormonism something other than Christian, it made it a species of barbarism rather than a species of religion.²¹

At the same time, Heber and Vilate Kimball, Ruth and Samuel Rogers were polygamists who reenacted the anointing of Jesus. They did not cease being Christians when they embraced Mormonism, or when they embraced polygamy. Instead, they and other Latter-day Saints found new ways to imitate their savior.



Marriage has not only divided Mormon and Protestant Americans, it has also contributed to divisions within churches, Mormon and otherwise. Because marriage occupies such a central place within Mormon history and doctrine, changes in marital practices and debates about marriage have proved unusually fraught for Latter-day Saints. Indeed,

21. See J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

from scholarly debate about Joseph Smith's marriages to the angst-filled discussions of same-sex relationships today, conflicts about marriage have torn families and institutions asunder. That continues, for instance, in the reaction to the recently announced LDS policy toward the children of same-gender couples. For some, the policy is a necessary defense of traditional marriage. For others, it is an affront to the New Testament and Book of Mormon's teaching that Jesus and therefore his church welcome all children with open arms.

For some individuals, insiders and outsiders, the worst moments of Mormon history, or the idea of a polygamous Jesus, or the Church's current policy toward gays and lesbians would lead one to conclude, "Mormonism is not true." And from my vantage point, that's as true as Joseph Smith's conclusion about Presbyterianism. Certainly, as a Protestant, as a Presbyterian, I reject the idea that the LDS Church or any other branch of the Restoration is Jesus Christ's one true church.

When Joseph Smith and a few followers established what they at first called the Church of Christ in 1830, they understood their actions as a clean break with apostasy, a restoration of Christ's true church. Things were never that simple. Mormonism never fully erased the debts to the Protestant culture it claimed to reject. In so many ways, early Mormons borrowed from that religious culture, in their regular conferences, in their talk of "ordinances" and "infinite atonement," in their hymns, in, more than anything else, their intense focus on the figure of Jesus Christ and on his imminent Second Coming. Spending nearly a decade studying Mormon history and doctrine has led me to emphasize what Mormonism has in common with the larger streams of Christianity from which it emerged.

For a long time after its founding, Mormonism charted its own course, with its own doctrines, ordinances, and traditions. And in keeping with the theme of the 2016 Sunstone Symposium, there are many Mormonisms, churches that themselves charted their own paths, some

moving closer toward ecumenical Protestantism and others adhering to nineteenth-century doctrines the LDS Church itself later set aside.

Given the diversity of this history, it's hard to remember that if we belong to any of these branches of Christianity or any of these many Mormonisms, and to some extent even if we've disassociated ourselves from them, we're connected, by history, by scripture, by rituals. We're within the same genealogy of religion, whether we like it or not. That doesn't mean we don't have things to disagree about. That doesn't mean we won't find certain things troubling about some of our distant cousins. That doesn't mean we shouldn't condemn practices that cause individuals to suffer. But it does mean we should hesitate before reaching conclusions such as, "Presbyterianism is not true," "Mormonism is not Christian," or "fundamentalists are not Mormon."



We human beings are frail individuals, spiritually and morally, and church membership and the holding of ecclesiastical offices offer no immunity against those frailties of human nature. Why did Brigham Young sanction those very early marriages? Why did John Calvin support the burning of a heretic at the stake? Why do local and national church leaders sometimes act in ways that seem so contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ? I would add for those who are not or are no longer connected with the LDS Church or any church or religious group, non-religious institutions and their leaders are certainly subject to the very same frailties.

Perhaps some of John Calvin's twentieth-century theological descendants might help us answer such questions. Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr were giants of mid-twentieth-century Protestant theology. They were among those theologians who rejected the modernist idea that human beings were essentially good and that perfect justice and peace could be achieved on earth. By contrast, Tillich stated that human

beings and their religious institutions always remain embedded in the “ambiguities of life . . . with all the disintegrating, destructive, and tragic-demonic elements.” From a strictly sociological point of view, we set ourselves up for grave disappointment when we expect our religious institutions to even approximate the holiness of their ideals. Tillich asserted that a church’s “holiness cannot be derived from the holiness of [its] institutions, doctrines, ritual and devotional activities, or ethical principles; all these are among the ambiguities of religion.” Instead, a church’s holiness rests upon its foundation in Jesus Christ, who redeems it despite its lack of perfect holiness.²²

Or, as Reinhold Niebuhr once explained, the good news of the gospel is not that God enables human beings or institutions to live out Christ’s law of love. Instead, the good news is that even though we and our institutions remain “inevitably involved” in human sinfulness and injustice, “there is a resource of divine mercy which is able to overcome” this fundamental contradiction.²³

Of course, Protestant ecclesiology is rather different than Mormon ecclesiology. Tillich, for instance, regarded the existence of ecclesiastical divisions as “unavoidable.” Noting differences in ecclesiology, he observed that the Catholic Church was intensely averse to criticism. “Since the Roman Church identifies its historical existence with the [true] Spiritual Community,” Tillich wrote, “every attack on it (often even on non-essentials) is felt as an attack on the Spiritual Community and consequently on the Spirit itself.”²⁴

22. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 162–72.

23. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* edited by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 102–03. Niebuhr originally published his essay in 1940 in the emerging context of the Second World War.

24. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:167.

So it has largely been with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which resembles Catholic rather than Protestant ecclesiology. Those Mormons who question the Church, even on what seem to be non-essentials, find themselves in stormy waters. And most Latter-day Saints revere their leaders, past and present, and those leaders have asserted that God guides their actions. “The Lord will never,” asserted Wilford Woodruff in 1890, “permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray.”²⁵

Tillich observed that to ask Rome to abandon its claims to exclusivity and holiness would be tantamount to asking the Catholic Church to abandon “its own peculiar character.”²⁶ Nevertheless, the Vatican has substantially relaxed its attitude toward exclusivity in the last half-century and tolerates a much larger measure of dissent and theological diversity than does the LDS Church. In any event, I would suggest that differences in ecclesiology do not preclude an acceptance of Tillich’s basic point about the “ambiguities of religion” as they pertain to the LDS Church. Indeed, Latter-day Saints have expected rather too much holiness from their ancestors, past leaders, and current leaders, and those expectations have impeded a straightforward and sober accounting with the frailties of the Church’s members and institutional history. And they’ve made it difficult for Latter-day Saints who bump up against those obvious frailties.

Moreover, even if many Latter-day Saints revere their leaders, it is not LDS *doctrine* that those leaders are infallible. The LDS Church, for instance, has recognized in recent years that the decision of Joseph Smith’s successors to withhold the priesthood and temple blessings from black members rested on the sinful foundation of nineteenth-century American racism.

25. Official Declaration 1, “Excerpts from Three Addresses by President Wilford Woodruff.”

26. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:169.

Leaders will never lead the church astray. Leaders make grave mistakes that contribute to human suffering. Humans are created in the image of God, but they exhibit obvious frailties. Marriage unites and tears asunder. Whether we are Mormon or Presbyterian or nothing at all, we live with these paradoxes. And if we belong to any sort of Christian church, such paradoxes remind us to place our faith in God and in Jesus Christ rather than in institutions and individuals. We should look to God and our Savior for mercy, and in response, extend as much of that mercy as we can toward the individuals and institutions we encounter.