

The Long Journey  
From Plurality of Gods to Trinitarianism

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## Introduction

### God

We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit. We affirm the Trinity – God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation above is from the basic beliefs statement of Community of Christ. The statement is written using classic theological language and represents a Trinitarian understanding of God that is officially endorsed by Community of Christ and shared by much of the Christian world, both Catholic and Protestant.

The Community of Christ has its roots deep in the Restoration movement begun by Joseph Smith Jr. in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to RLDS tradition, this movement had its genesis in a revelatory experience that occurred in the spring of 1820. At the age of 15, young Joseph had visited a nearby grove of trees to pray for divine light concerning which church he should join. According to his 1842 testimony, he was visited by two divine beings and told not to join any of the churches because all creeds were an abomination in God's sight.<sup>2</sup>

Now, nearly 200 years later, the Community of Christ affirms an understanding of God that parallels the same creeds which were so vigorously contested during the young prophet's lifetime. Clearly there has been a tremendous migration in theological understanding from Joseph's day to this. How did Community of Christ, through the Reorganization era and beyond,

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<sup>1</sup> Community of Christ, "Basic Beliefs of Community of Christ," in *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2012), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844*, (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 54.

increasingly come to state a more classic Christian doctrine of God? This paper is undertaken in an effort to determine an answer to exactly that question.

### Understandings of God in the Restoration Era

In order to follow the trail of the church's theological understanding of God, it is important to begin with the theology of Joseph Smith Jr. himself. This is especially true since Joseph, as prophet, seer and revelator, played such a dominant role within the young but growing early church community. Identifying Joseph's view of God is not as easy as it might seem, however, since like the rest of us, Joseph's theological understanding changed over time. Even within the same time period, his positions on the nature of God were not always consistent.

The signature document of the early church is the Book of Mormon. It was published in 1830, the same year the church was first organized. The book was widely used by missionaries to promote the church and its understanding of salvation. All of this makes the Book of Mormon a logical place to look for early understandings by the author on the nature of God.

Dr. Dale Luffman notes that people are often surprised by the amount of Trinitarian language in the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> Luffman points to the closing sentence of the Testimony of the Three Witnesses, "And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen."<sup>4</sup> The Book of Mormon also refers to the instruction of Jesus, "And after this manner shall ye baptize in my name, for, behold, verily I say to you that the Father, and

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<sup>3</sup> Dale E. Luffman, *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers* (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Smith Jr. quoting Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris. "Testimony of the Three Witnesses," *Book of Mormon*, Community of Christ Authorized Edition (Independence, Missouri: Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1953.) iv.

the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.”<sup>5</sup>

While the Book of Mormon does have passages suggesting a Trinitarian theology, it is not consistent in expressing those ideas. Dr. Luffman notes several passages that suggest a theology of modalism or Sabellianism; the idea that there can be only one God who is perceived in three different forms or *modes*.<sup>6</sup> An example of this is found in the preaching of Abinadi who prophesies as follows.

God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people; And because he dwelleth in flesh, he shall be called the Son of God: And having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son; the Father because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son: And they are one God, yea, the very eternal Father of heaven and of earth.”<sup>7</sup>

Mark Scherer points out that, like Joseph Smith’s other writings and public statements on the subject, the Book of Mormon is inconsistent in its language concerning the nature of the Godhead. While some passages are Trinitarian in nature, others suggest a distinctly binitarian separation; the idea of two personages in one Divine being rather than three.<sup>8</sup> Language contained in the teaching of Jesus in III Nephi reflects this idea. Jesus speaks of the Father having sent him as the Son to be lifted up on the cross and draw all men to himself, thereby lifting them up to God.<sup>9</sup> There is no mention of the role of the Holy Spirit in this passage.

Scherer believes the inconsistency in the book’s theology “becomes quite understandable if placed in the context of Joseph’s theological maturing process” and offers that “This

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 3 Nephi 5:27, 633.

<sup>6</sup> Luffman, *Book of Mormon’s Witness*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Book of Mormon*, Mosiah 8:28-31, 251.

<sup>8</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Restoration*, 384.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Book of Mormon*, III Nephi 12:25-27, 673-674.

inconsistency signals some uncertainty about Smith's own views on this complex theological issue."<sup>10</sup>

As the young prophet gave theological pronouncements or revelations, they were recorded and eventually inserted in the church's book of *Doctrine and Covenants*. An example of an early revelation that is germane to this study was given in June, 1830. It was initially called, "The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ,"<sup>11</sup> but was later included in the *Doctrine and Covenants* as Section 17, thus becoming official church scripture. The document contains a strong Trinitarian affirmation in the statement, "...which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end."<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Scherer writes that the lengthy preceding passage, which is not included here for want of space, "focuses on the roles of each member of the Godhead rather than their physical separation, and thus expresses modalistic qualities."<sup>13</sup> Once again we see that Joseph is inconsistent in his pronouncements on the subject of the Godhead.

Doctor Scherer notes a shift in theology on the part of church leaders by the winter of 1834-35, with a turn towards binitarianism. Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon prepared a series of lectures on theology and faith for the elders given at the unfinished Temple in Kirtland Ohio. The following is an excerpt from the fifth Lecture of Faith. "There are two personages who constitute the great matchless, governing and supreme power over all things... They are the Father and the Son." Later in this lecture, the Holy Spirit was identified as "the mind of God."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Restoration*, 384.

<sup>11</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Restoration*, 384-385.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Smith Jr. "Section 17:5a," *Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence Missouri: Community of Christ, Herald Publishing House, 2007), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Restoration*, 385.

<sup>14</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Restoration*, 385-386.

By 1844, Joseph's theology of God had progressed considerably further, embracing the concept of a plurality of gods and the idea that men can progress to become gods. He launched this concept in a funeral sermon known as the *King Follett Discourse* with the words, "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!"<sup>15</sup> He maintained this idea for the remainder of his short life. Less than two weeks before his death, Smith spoke again about the pluralistic nature of the godhead.

I wish to declare I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years.

I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.<sup>16</sup>

While there are a variety of views of the Godhead expressed in the recorded thoughts of Joseph Smith Jr. it is clear that by the end of his life he believed firmly in a plurality of Gods. Since the theology of the church was generally taken directly from the words of the prophet, it is safe to say that the beliefs of the church in the era of the Restoration generally tended to follow this same pattern.

### Reframing God in the Early Reorganization Era

Sixteen years after the death of his father, Joseph Smith III assumed the leadership of what came to be called *The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. While in a broad sense he inherited the theology of his father, young Joseph was not inclined to follow directly in his father's footsteps nor to make the same mistakes. Instead, he was prepared to

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Smith Jr. "King Follett Sermon" in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Period 1. History of Joseph Smith the Prophet by Himself*. Vol. VI. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1959), 305.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, History of LDS Vol VI, 474.

chart his own course, both administratively and theologically. He did not add books of scripture to the RLDS canon, nor did he make revelatory pronouncements on the nature of the Godhead to be included in the Doctrine and Covenants. Several teachings of his father that we might consider heretical were quietly abandoned or minimized as *local* theologies. Under Joseph III's leadership, the Apostles and other leaders were allowed to think more freely, and the theology of the church began to slowly swing back towards a more recognizably Christian position. This theological journey, thus begun, would take nearly a century and a half to complete.

By August of 1897 the church took an official if subtle step to distance itself from the doctrine of plurality of gods. Heman C. Smith was then church historian, working on the official *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. Considering the doctrine of plurality of gods heretical, the historian chose not to include the King Follett Sermon in his history. Instead he referred interested readers to where it could be found in the August 1844 edition of *Times and Seasons*. H. C. Smith offered several reasons in justification for this decision, none of which referred to the doctrine as heresy.<sup>17</sup> Since Joseph III was editor of *The Saints Herald* and deeply involved in such decisions, it is highly likely that this decision was made with his approval. As with some other questionable doctrines, the church was shifting away from a teaching many considered heretical.

In March, 1898, the following question and answer appeared in *The Saints Herald*.

Will you kindly state through the Herald, the faith of the church on the Godhead. Whether there is one or two personages?

There are in the Godhead proper, two personages; God, the Father; Christ, the Son; the Father and the Son; or God the Father, and God the Son...The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the third personage in the Godhead; but is in reality the mind, will, and element of power of both the Father and the Son. This Holy Spirit is the Holy Ghost, the

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<sup>17</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People, Era of Restoration*, 389.

Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, by which all things are controlled, upheld, and sustained, by the will and command of the Father and the Son, through which witness and record of the Father and Son are borne on earth and in heaven.

These three are one in purpose, spirit, and power, and constitute the directing, governing, and controlling power of the universe; the source of life and light, and existence of all things that have been, are, or ever shall be; the One only independent and self-existent head of All in All.<sup>18</sup>

While this statement appears to be more binitarian than Trinitarian, what can be seen from the *Herald* response is that President Smith had clearly distanced himself and the church from the concept of a plurality of gods by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### God in Twentieth Century RLDS Thought

With the advent of the twentieth century, the RLDS church found itself confronted more and more with the ideas of modernity. Realizing the need for skills to lead the church in this world, the soon to be President Frederick Madison Smith went back to school to complete his PhD in psychology.<sup>19</sup> Although unrecognized at the time, this was the beginning of a new age in which highly educated persons would be called upon to play an increasingly important role in the church. It would change the religion and significantly shift its theology.

In 1920, F. M Smith went to England where he met a young man by the name of Francis Henry Edwards. He retained Edwards to provide secretarial services for his eighteen month European tour, and the two became friends.<sup>20</sup> Smith returned to America in time for the 1922 General Conference and called the 25 year old Edwards to the Council of Twelve.<sup>21</sup> Edwards

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<sup>18</sup> (Joseph Smith III?), "The Godhead," *The Saints' Herald* 45, no. 11 (March 16, 1898): 162. While Joseph Smith III was the editor of the *Herald* and is thought to be the author, it cannot be conclusively proved. It is certain that as editor, he was aware of the substance of this response.

<sup>19</sup> Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 426.

<sup>20</sup> Scherer, *Journey of a People: Era of Reorganization*, 450.

<sup>21</sup> D. & C. 134:3. 180.



would spend 44 years in leadership roles in the church. He was the first of a new breed of church leaders who were bright, articulate and often well educated. Edwards' was a moderate voice within the church who helped soften the often harsh rhetoric of RLDS ecclesiology. He wrote upwards of fifteen books, and in 1936, released *Fundamentals: Enduring Convictions of the Restoration*. The book was hugely popular and stayed in print for many years. In this work, Edwards wrote somewhat less about what was normally described as RLDS *distinctives*, but included several chapters on the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In a chapter entitled *The Holy Spirit*, he writes of the relationship within Deity as follows. "A great amount of time and thought have been spent in attempts to discriminate between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...The Redeemer who works without and the Comforter who works within are in such perfect harmony that each constantly penetrates the domain of the other, and that the full and divine ministry thus afforded is necessary in every part to our full life in God."<sup>22</sup> In 1936, the church was slowly inching closer to a Trinitarian theology.

Edwards' time in the Council of Twelve overlapped that of fellow Englishman Arthur Oakman who was called to that council in 1938. Oakman became a popular writer and preacher. He was a student of theology who also wrote several books for the church. In 1961, he released *God's Spiritual Universe*. The bibliography for this work includes 39 titles, many of them recent books by theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Soren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Temple, Arnold Toynbee, and others.<sup>23</sup> Oakman was well read in theology and wrote with elegance. The following is a sample of his writing on the atoning work of a personal God.

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<sup>22</sup> F. Henry Edwards, *Fundamentals: Enduring Convictions of the Restoration* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1936), 75.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Oakman, *God's Spiritual Universe* (Independence, Missouri: Herald House, 1961), 188.

If God is personal and eternal, to whom or what does he communicate himself in those eternities of which the temporal is a manifestation or mode of existence? The answer is, of course, that he communicates himself eternally to him of whom he said, 'The same was in the beginning with God' – his Word. 'Word' as rendered in the New Testament means the 'ground of all existence, the reason giving life to all things and the breath of God's lips.' This Word is Christ. God communicates himself – his mind is in eternal self-expression.<sup>24</sup>

Oakman's teaching concerning the nature of Divinity provides an interesting contrast to the expressions of Joseph Smith Jr. almost a century earlier.

Another educated scholar who had an impact on the theology of the church was Dr. Roy Cheville, the first person born and raised in the church to complete a PhD in religion. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Cheville was on the faculty of Graceland University for many years before being called by W. Wallace Smith to become Presiding Patriarch in 1958.<sup>25</sup>

Cheville wrote 25 books including *The Bible in Everyday Living* and *The Role of Religious Education in the Accommodation of a Sect*. In 1959, Cheville released *The Field of Theology*. This title constitutes an introduction to the study of theology and an explanation of why it matters to RLDS members. Cheville was a modernist theologian, and the book devotes a chapter to the differences between fundamentalist and modernist theologies.<sup>26</sup>

Like Edwards and Oakman, Cheville felt it was important to bring not only Graceland students but RLDS members into dialogue with mainstream Christian theology. The impact of the thinking and writing of these leaders should not be overlooked. Their contribution to the changing theology of the church was significant in its own right. At the same time, they were paving the way for a new generation of theologians who were about to follow.

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<sup>24</sup> Oakman, *God's Spiritual Universe*, 125.

<sup>25</sup> D. & C. 145:4b, 189.

<sup>26</sup> Roy A. Cheville, *The Field of Theology* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1959), 55-70.

Despite the efforts of theologians such as Edwards, Oakman and Cheville, many church missionaries continued to preach the same concepts they had always held; that the *Old Jerusalem Gospel* had been restored to earth in 1830 and the RLDS church was the only authoritative custodian of that gospel. In the remarkable decade of the 1960s, however, several important events occurred that would have a significant impact on the theology of the church. Historian Richard Howard notes that in 1960, the First Presidency appointed a “Committee on Basic Beliefs whose task would be to generate, over time, some useful theological statements on God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the gospel, revelation, the church, priesthood, scripture, and other topics.”<sup>27</sup> At almost the same time, under the leadership of President W. Wallace Smith, the First Presidency sent Apostles Charles D. Neff and D. Blair Jensen as missionaries to the Orient. Clifford Cole was President of the Council of Twelve at that time and would later write concerning the impact of this important development.

Apostle Neff wrote the Basic Beliefs Committee soon after arriving in Japan to say, ‘Can the church provide me anything in Japan to help in our missionary work? Everything that I can find shows how the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is different from other Christian churches. Only 3 percent of the people here are Christian and they do not want to know how we are different from some other Christian denomination. They want to know what we as Christians believe.’<sup>28</sup>

Cole went on to say that this forced the leadership to take a fresh look at the message they had been proclaiming and realize the need for a shift to teach the basic Christian faith rather than concentrate on what had been called *distinctives*.

Cole also drew to the attention of the First Presidency the need for official statements of church objectives. The Presidency and the Twelve worked on this together and, at the 1966

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<sup>27</sup> Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years, Volume 2: The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860 – 1992* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1993), 359.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford A. Cole, “The World Church: Our Mission in the 1980s,” *Commission*, (September, 1979): 42.

World Conference, released a *Statement on Objectives for the Church*. First among the five objectives was the need to “Clarify the theology of the church and unify the membership in their faith.”<sup>29</sup> Partially in response to this goal but also because of a demand from congregations throughout the church, the decision was made to introduce a new curriculum for church school classes at all levels. It was hoped that this would help to better educate priesthood and members alike around a more current theology.

To help with this effort, a number of very bright young ministers were employed in the Department of Religious Education and elsewhere at headquarters. Although raised in the RLDS church, young men such as department head Don Landon, Wayne Ham and others had achieved graduate degrees from a variety of protestant seminaries throughout the country. The influence of these seminary trained young scholars was soon felt throughout the church through writing that reflected a more modern, progressive protestant theology. It was not always appreciated in the field. As Richard Howard notes, “In 1968 Harold Schneebeck’s book *The Body of Christ* called its readers to see the RLDS Church as part of the Body of Christ universal—a piece of the whole, instead of the exclusively commissioned ‘one true church.’ This approach insulted and grieved many RLDS people.”<sup>30</sup> The efforts of Schneebeck, Landon, Ham and others to update the theology of the RLDS church were not well received by many members of the church. They were often treated with hostility. Despite this, their influence was important and lasting.

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<sup>29</sup> The Joint Council of the First Presidency and the Council of Twelve, “Statement on Objectives for the Church” in *World Conference Bulletin* for April 18, 1966 (Independence, MO: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 1966), 238-240.

<sup>30</sup> Richard P. Howard, “Seeds of Schism: Adjustment and Canonization of the RLDS Anti-polygamy Policy, 1967-1972,” in *Restoration Studies: Theology and Culture in the Community of Christ and the Latter Day Saint Movement* Vol. XIII. Ed. Peter A. Judd (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Historical Association and Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2012.), 77.

In 1968, after almost eight years of study the Basic Beliefs Committee began issuing a series of theological statements in the *Saints Herald*. In 1970, these were published in the book, *Exploring the Faith*. The following is an excerpt from what is referred to as *Paragraph Three*, titled, *The Holy Spirit*. “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the living presence of the Father and the Son, who in power, intelligence, and love works in the minds and hearts of men to free them from sin, uniting them with God as his sons, and with each other as brethren. The Spirit bears record of the Father and of the Son which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God.”<sup>31</sup> It will be obvious to all that this is clearly a Trinitarian declaration. Despite widespread study of the book in many congregations, Richard Howard notes that the concepts in each of the nineteen theological statements seemed strange and technical for much of the RLDS membership...The anxiety and anger grew.”<sup>32</sup>

In the late 1960s, the general officers of the church organized a series of seminars, often employing theologians and historians from Saint Paul School of Theology, a United Methodist Seminary in Kansas City, to help “shape and stimulate” their discussions.<sup>33</sup> A close working relationship between the RLDS church and this school resulted in a number of appointee ministers studying at St. Paul over several years. Through this means, the teaching of the church continued to shift away from what is sometimes referred to as the *preaching chart theology* towards more modern Christian thought. This was not popular among many church members who felt that leaders should teach and preach as the church had traditionally believed.

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<sup>31</sup> Committee on Basic Beliefs, *Exploring the Faith: A Series of Studies in the Faith of the Church Prepared by a Committee on Basic Beliefs* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1970), 52.

<sup>32</sup> Howard, “Seeds of Schism,” 78.

<sup>33</sup> Howard, “Seeds of Schism,” 76.

Perhaps the best illustration of the influence of Saint Paul School of Theology comes from Wallace B. Smith as he described his training period in preparation for taking over the presidency of the church. To be ready for his new task, it was clear that theological education was needed. In a 2009 presentation to the John Whitmer Historical Association, President Smith recalled this element of his preparation as follows.

My attendance at seminary did not seem advisable, given the climate of suspicion regarding seminary education in many parts of the church at the time. Instead, a plan was devised whereby several of the professors at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, would tutor me privately. Indeed, for almost two years, Dr. Carl Bangs, Dr. Paul Jones, Dr. Charles Baughman, and other faculty members came to my home two or three times a week to instruct me in Christian church history, Old Testament, New Testament, comparative theology, philosophy of religion, and other subjects, almost literally opening up my skull and pouring in a concentrated course of study that could not have been achieved in any other way. I will always be extremely grateful to those good men for their willingness to assist me and the church so unselfishly in this endeavor.”<sup>34</sup>

The influence of Protestant theology on Community of Christ had now advanced to the highest level of the church. Only one step remained in order to cement the replacement of the old *one true church* teaching with classic Christian theology as the official position of the church.

In the early 1990s, under the quiet guidance of the First Presidency, feelers were put out in a variety of forums concerning how members would feel about the church having its own seminary. While some members were cautious about this, others were enthusiastic, particularly those who had received the benefit of higher education in either theology or other disciplines.

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<sup>34</sup> Wallace B. Smith, “Experiences in Growing a Faith: Reflections on a Twenty-year Journey, 1976-1996,” *Restoration Studies: Theology and Culture in the Community of Christ and the Latter Day Saint Movement* Volume X, ed. Peter A. Judd (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Historical Association and Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2009), 3.

Church leaders moved slowly and carefully on the matter, but in 2002, the Community of Christ Seminary began operation in conjunction with Graceland University.

From the beginning the Seminary has been staffed by noted academic scholars trained in a variety of Christian understandings. These include Dr. Don Compier; the school's first Dean, Dr. Anthony Chvala-Smith, Dr. Priscilla Eppinger, and several others including the new Dean as of 2016, Dr. Matthew J. Frizzell. All are highly skilled instructors trained through a variety of acclaimed schools of theology. Under their guidance, ministers and members of the church are able to receive graduate level training in Christian Theology and other disciplines such as Church History and Scripture. And perhaps most important, mainstream Christian theology is now taught officially as the doctrine of Community of Christ.

As further evidence of Community of Christ's transition to classical Christian theology, I offer the following quotation from Professor Anthony Chvala-Smith, the Paul E. Morden Seminary Chair of Religion at Community of Christ Seminary.

First, what do I mean by "Trinity"? The term refers to the Christian conviction that the one God eternally exists in three, co-equal persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Though this doctrine reached its classical expression only in the fourth century, its origins are to be found in the New Testament confession that Jesus Christ is "Lord." Trinitarian doctrine begins with the Christian experience of God in the person and work of Christ. "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed (John 20:28 NRSV). In Jesus Christ faith experiences nothing less than the fullness of God.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

In the preceding pages I have tried to trace the evolution of Community of Christ's theology of God from its roots in the early teachings of Joseph Smith Jr. to the present day. It

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<sup>35</sup> Anthony Chvala-Smith, "A Trinitarian Approach to World Religions," *Restoration Studies VIII: A Collection of Essays About the History, Beliefs, and Practices of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* ed. Joni Wilson (Independence, Missouri: Temple School/Herald Publishing House, 2000), 128.

has proven not an easy task, however the journey from early Mormon teaching to classical Christian theology has been an even harder one for the church. The passage has been fraught with many dangers and the church has lost the membership lives of many along the way. Some have been sacrificed on the altar of inherited RLDS belief, while others, weary of the struggle, have given up the trek before the final goal was in sight. It has been a long and costly voyage.

Like the descendants of early pioneers who made their difficult way westward, we are the beneficiaries of those courageous souls who braved this theological passage. In addition to being the children of Jesus, we are the progeny of William Law, Joseph Smith III, Heman C. Smith, Frederick Madison Smith, and W. Wallace Smith. Our forefathers include such courageous souls as Garland Tickemyer, Charles (Chuck) Neff, Robert Flanders, Harold Schneebeck, Donald Landon, and Robert Smith. Our progenitors include those who travelled bravely, often in the face of overwhelming odds, such as Wallace B. Smith, Maurice Draper, Duane Couey, Howard (Bud) Sheehy Jr., Grant McMurray; the list goes on and on.

At times it may be tempting to discount or forget the long and difficult journey. There is a risk that we may fall into the rut of taking the freedom to study our theological Christian roots for granted. To do so would be a sad and unfortunate failure.

The journey of theology is ever before us, and never complete. As we look towards the future, may we do so in the spirit of the counsel brought to the church in 2000 by President W. Grant McMurray. “Lift up your eyes and fix them on the place beyond the horizon to which you are sent. Journey in trust, assured that the great and marvelous work is for this time and for all time.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> D. & C. 161:1a, 214.



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