

**The Changing Axis of Theological/Spiritual Authority in the Reorganized
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 19th Century and How it
Compares to Community of Christ in the 21st Century**

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The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had much with which to deal as it endeavored to find its own way at the close of the nineteenth century. They wanted to distance themselves from polygamy and the Mormon group that went west with Brigham Young. Some people wanted to distance themselves from other unusual practices that had begun at Nauvoo, but there was not a consensus yet on many of those issues. What role did Joseph Smith, Jr. play in these practices and how were they to separate the Joseph they loved and revered from the reality of events at Nauvoo? The Reorganization had the Biblical Revision, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. How were they to look at these books of scripture, and would additional revelations be placed in the Doctrine and Covenants? How much power and authority should the head of this church have? All this and more fell at the feet of Joseph Smith III as he accepted the role of President/Prophet of the fledgling Reorganization. This paper will deal with how Joseph III chose to manage his leadership in the face of opposition and controversy from within.

When Joseph III first accepted leadership of the church he realized he would have to act differently than his father. The interim leaders, Jason W. Briggs and Zenus H. Gurley, Sr., had led by common consent and that was what the people were accustomed to. He also realized that if he began leading by oracle/revelations as his father had done, some might fear that type of one-man leadership which had led to disastrous effects.¹ With these things in mind, Joseph's first four revelations, Sections 114-117, were accepted at the General Conferences of 1871, 1863, and 1873 with the exception of Section 115 which was approved by the Council of Twelve. He asked for none of them to be canonized and none were until 1878. "...Joseph III would tend to use

1. Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years: Volume II* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1993), 137.

revelation sparingly, tentatively, and with due regard for the feelings and concerns of his corps of leaders. His was to be a conservative methodology.”²

Even with this seemingly non-threatening style of leadership, conflict arose. It is surprising perhaps that disputes would arise from some of the people who had been instrumental in beginning the Reorganization. Jason Briggs and the son of Zenas H. Gurley, Sr., Zenas, Jr., were the most vocal disputants. It is *not* surprising however, that they would be the ones who would be most concerned that the Reorganization followed a course set out for them at the very beginning; one that would veer a great distance from Nauvoo’s troubled past. Issues that concerned them included “the tithing law, the gathering as related to kingdom building, plural gods, baptism for the dead, marriage for eternity, a literal approach to scripture and inspiration, and human preexistence.”³ They wanted to ensure that these concepts did not follow them into the Reorganization and that no one could misconstrue legislation passed at General Conference to condone such practices.

Both Briggs and Gurley were liberal, forward-thinking individuals who were educated and followed the latest in scientific discoveries and scriptural criticisms. For example, Briggs was very excited and accepting of Darwin’s theory of evolution, just coming out in the late nineteenth century. He most likely agreed with John Fiske, an accomplished polymath, who “proposed that evolutionary theory and religion are both concerned with the manifestations of this single, infinite, and eternal Power.... [and] contended that the human impulse to worship, a fact of evolutionary process that conforms to all other analogies of nature known to evolutionary science, happened to be ‘the largest and most ubiquitous fact’ of human existence....The lesson of evolution is...the human soul has not been cherishing in Religion a delusive phantom;

2. Howard, 143.

3. Howard, 143.

but...has been rising to the recognition of its essential kinship with the ever-living God.”⁴ Using his power of reasoning and acceptance of evolution, Briggs rejected the Genesis account of creation as literal. He also had read and studied enough theological criticisms to understand that Moses had not written the Pentateuch.⁵ With these thoughts in mind and others, Briggs questioned Joseph Jr.’s New Translation of the Bible and how we look at prophetic inspiration. Is it literal and inerrant? Briggs did not think so.

Briggs’s method of sharing his ideas was primarily through *The Messenger*, a publication he edited while on his missionary journey to Utah. He shared these ideas on prophetic inspiration. “Inspiration is a development, dependent upon the faculties of the mind, and corresponds with the experience, and does not transcend it, though it may seem to....Hence it follows that inspiration in its lesser and higher sense, is but a helper, - a prompter, impression, influence, or emotion to the mind. And when we reflect how weak and varied the faculties of the mind are, it accounts for all the discrepancies manifest in the inspiration of different ages, and different people.”⁶ Therefore in his mind scripture is not to be taken literally. Inspiration, though from God, passes through human minds and hands, therefore making it fallible. In the same publication he spoke on the issue of preexistence. “So far from it, we assert that it is not even named in any reputed revelation to the church, through any dead or living prophet. Hence as ‘we cannot exactly know what passes behind the veil,’ only by revelation, and preexistence is not so much as named in revelation, it is no part of the ‘faith.’”⁷ Briggs claimed that if humans existed

4. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 316-317.

5. Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844-1946* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2013), 215.

6. Jason W. Briggs, “Inspiration. – No. 2,” *The Messenger* 2, no. II (September 1876): 41.

7. Briggs, “Inspiration. – No. 2,” 42.

with God before being created physically, it “implied that God did not create mankind and, therefore, was less than all powerful.”⁸

Zenas Gurley’s views were printed in the *Saints’ Herald* with responses from W.W. Blair. He took up such issues as a literal gathering to Zion. According to the article by Blair Gurley wrote, ‘the gathering as taught and practiced by Joseph Smith ** has produced withering blight in every instance,’⁹ Gurley also objected to the law of tithing, explaining that as described in the Old Testament, Melchisedec is accepting the spoils of war and not tithes from wages earned and that as Jesus Christ rejected war, this “did not represent the law of Christ as revealed in Christ.”¹⁰

Many who read the articles written by Briggs and Gurley became upset that such things would be published in church periodicals. People were writing President Smith, complaining and “demanding that he stop the presentation of what many considered the heretical teachings of the two apostles.”¹¹ The prophet responded with a “cautious and tolerant approach toward both positions.”¹² He asked each side to be tolerant of the other, be more careful of what they said and how they said it, and in time things would work themselves out. This only served to make Briggs more determined. He wrote a letter to William Kelley bemoaning the fact that “there is but little encouragement for an Elder who thinks as well as feels.”¹³

Both Briggs and Gurley were mostly concerned with the powerful authority given to the president/prophet of the church. The church members were showing an “unbending devotion to the Smith family and obsequious obedience to the president of the church.”¹⁴ As mentioned previously, both men were wary of the power Joseph Smith Jr. had wielded and did not want to

8. Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 274.

9. W. W. Blair, “The Gathering,” *Saints’ Herald* 32, no. 13 (28 March 1885): 201.

10. Zenas H. Gurley, “Elder Blair’s ‘Rejoinder’ Examined,” *Saints’ Herald* 32, no. 14 (4 April 1885): 217.

11. Launius, 276.

12. Launius, 276.

13. Jason W. Briggs to William H. Kelley, 31 October 1875, William H. Kelley Collection.

14. Launius, 276.

see that repeated. They were also opposed to some of the things that remained in the Doctrine and Covenants that were from Joseph Jr., but that they did not feel was truly what God had in mind; another argument against seeing scripture as literal and inerrant. “The June 1852 Conference had affirmed that the whole law of the gospel was contained in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants.”¹⁵ Briggs and Gurley argued that would mean that we believed everything in them and that with Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible and its preface to the first edition which stated, “that it was done by direct revelation from God,” the church was saying it was inerrant.

President Joseph Smith III shares how he remembers some of this controversy in his memoirs. “As President of the church I had given my pledge at Amboy in 1860 that I would not advocate any doctrine that should not meet the approval of the body and of the code of good morals, adhering to the proposition that such code was to be found in the Bible - the New Testament, especially – the Book of Mormon, and the revelations which had been given to the church.”¹⁶ He goes on to say that in 1866-67 some were strongly opposed to the ‘centralization of power’ or ‘one-man’ power, and time for debate during a conference at Stewartsville, Missouri in 1884 was given. He remembers that when it was Brother Briggs’s turn to speak, “a complete change of attitude seemed to come over him. He seemed to be influenced by some power which caused him to abandon his former position...the Spirit of the Master....dispelled the clouds which has hovered over the conference, and we all breathed more freely.”¹⁷ Brother Joseph seems to recall things in a kind and gentle manner, giving life to the idea that he was one

15. Howard, 144.

16. Richard P. Howard, ed., *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III (1832-1914)*, Photo-Reprint of the Original Serial Publication edited by Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, *Saints’ Herald* (November 6, 1934-July 31, 1937) (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 210. Hereinafter referred to as Joseph Smith III, *Memoirs*.

17. Joseph Smith III Memoirs, 210-211.

who dealt with problems as a pragmatist. He seemed to carry a Spirit of peace and calm, patiently waiting for others to be led by that same Spirit.

In the midst of these debates, the September 13, 1878 General Conference decided it must take action to resolve the questions. They passed three resolutions. GCR 214 endorsed “the Holy Scriptures, as revised, corrected and translated by the Spirit of revelation, by Joseph Smith, Jr., the Seer and as published by the church we represent.”¹⁸ GCR 215 asserted that the church would “recognize the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Mormon, the revelations of God contained in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and all other revelations which have been or shall be revealed through God’s appointed prophet, which have been or may be hereafter accepted by the church as the standard of authority on all matters of church government and doctrine, and the final standard of reference on appeal in all controversies arising, or which may arise in the Church of Christ.”¹⁹ The third resolution, GCR 216 accepted the revelations given by Joseph III as being equally binding on the church and that they should be published in the Doctrine and Covenants.

GCR’s 214 and 215 were of especial concern to Briggs and Gurley in that they pointed to the inerrancy of scripture and that in their eyes it made sections in the Doctrine and Covenants dealing with some of the Nauvoo anomalies authoritative. In response to Brother Gurley’s objection, President Smith wrote him a letter assuring him “That the resolution no more compels the belief in everything contained in the D. of C. as directly from God, than the statement made by you in reference to the Bible and B. of M. compels belief in all in those books as from the same God; the resolution simply affirms that these books...contain the Word of the Lord to the

18. “Inspired Version of Bible, 214,” *Rules and Resolutions*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 13 September 1878.

19. “Standard of Authority, 215,” *Rules and Resolutions*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 13 September 1878.

church and are the standards of final decision.”²⁰ Joseph did not hold the interpretation of any one piece of scripture as a test of faith.

With confusion ensuing, the September 1879 General Conference passed GCR 222 to clear up any question as to what GCR 215 meant. It attested that a belief in the revelations or “abstract doctrines” contained in the Book of Covenants was not to be a “test of reception and fellowship in the church; but that the things therein contained relating to the doctrine, rules of procedure, and practice in the church should govern the ministry and elders as representatives of the church.”²¹ It made the point that it would be “destructive to the faith...to preach, or teach contrary to the revelations in said Book of Covenants...”²² Furthermore “elders should confine their teaching to such doctrines and tenets, church articles and practices, a knowledge of which is necessary to obedience and salvation,”²³ avoiding areas of controversy. This resolution made it clear that we were a scripture based people and that by using these three standard books of scripture and the Epitome of Faith and Doctrine as our guide, the First Presidency was the one who interprets our beliefs and therefore holds all the cards.

Debate continued. President Smith attempted to stay above the fray, letting William Blair write responses in the *Saints' Herald*, but eventually made him associate editor of the periodical to foil “any attempt to remove Joseph III’s decision-making influence from its pages...”²⁴ Briggs and Gurley tried many tactics to test the authority and power of President Smith. When arguments in the church’s periodicals did not get their desired response, they tried resigning their posts. This too failed. President Smith let the Conference decide their fate and even though he

20. Joseph Smith III to Zenas H. Gurley (Sedgwick, Iowa), 2 April 1879, Joseph Smith Letterbook #2, Vault Collection, Community of Christ Archives.

21. “Standard of Authority, 222” *Rules and Resolutions*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 29 September 1879.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Scherer, 222.

gave them considerable leeway, the Conference finally voted not to sustain Briggs and Gurley as general officers of the church. Finally in 1886, the Conference voted in favor of letting them ‘withdraw from the church, and that their names be stricken from the Church Records.’”²⁵

Having worked through the issues that were challenging the authority of Joseph Smith III and that of scripture, let us compare the Epitome of Faith, GCR’s 215 and 222, and the Scripture Statement of Community of Christ today. The Epitome of Faith as given by Joseph Smith, Jr. and as upheld in GCR 222, states, “We believe the bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.”²⁶ This appears to take a fairly literal and inerrant position with the exception that the Bible had to have been translated correctly, which Joseph was taking care of with his Biblical Revision project. GCR 215 adds the Doctrine and Covenants to the list and gives them all three the same value and authority as “the final standard of reference on appeal in all controversies arising...”²⁷ Once again, it seems to tend toward inerrancy and give the prophet extreme power as the mouth-piece of God. GCR 222, as covered above, echoes GCR 215 in making the Bible, Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants the standard authority by which we solved controversy and differences of opinion. It also holds all three books of equal value, but ensures that belief or nonbelief in certain revelations in the Book of Covenants was not to be a test of faith. It seemed to take a softer stand on inerrancy, saying that the priesthood should not discuss the “vexed questions now pending” until the quorums of the church could settle the issues.

In contrast to these, our Scripture Statement today explains the manner in which we view scripture in much more detail. The preamble states that “scripture provides divine

25. “General Conference Minutes,” *Saints’ Herald* 33, no. 16 (24 April 1886): 251.

26. Joseph Smith, Jr., “Wentworth Letter,” *Times and Seasons* Vol. 3 (March, 1842), 709.

27. “Standard of Authority, 215,” *Rules and Resolutions*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 13 September, 1878.

guidance...when responsibly interpreted and faithfully applied.”²⁸ This stands in contrast to the Epitome of Faith, upheld in GCR 222, which says scripture is God’s word when “translated” correctly. Interpreted and translated are very different terms. Interpretation implies using proven theological criticisms to delve into the scripture and attempt to discover the context, deriving its meaning for its first hearers, and only then what meaning it has for us today. Translation, as used here, implies a literal hearing of the word as given to humanity from God, such as Joseph, Jr. seemed to claim. Our newest scripture statement also speaks much about Jesus Christ. Affirmation One declares that Jesus Christ “is the Living Word of God. It is to Christ that scripture points.”²⁹ Affirmation Four again mentions Christ, saying that “Scripture’s authority is derived from the model of Christ....Therefore....scripture is not the authority to oppress, control, or dominate.”³⁰ The earlier statements on scripture do not even mention Christ. Affirmations Two, Three, and Five speak of the church forming the canon; that it is a “...library of books that speaks in many voices....written in diverse times and places....not apart from the humanity of the writers, but in and through that humanity....Scripture is vital and essential to the church, but not because it is inerrant....Scripture makes no such claim for itself.”³¹ Further affirmations encourage us to study the scriptures, using “Faith, experience, tradition, and scholarship.... [that disciples might] grow in their knowledge and understanding...increase in love for God, neighbor, and self...uphold the dignity and worth of all persons...and faithfully follow the way of Jesus Christ.”³² I can see none of these things mentioned in the Epitome of Faith or the GCR’s. Our current statement, in Affirmation Nine, states that the Bible is “the foundational scripture for the

28. Community of Christ, *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, Third Edition* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 2012), 25.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 25-26.

church.” It upholds the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants as scripture, “because they confirm its message that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God.”³³ As pointed out before, the original statements treat all three books of scripture as of equal authority, while our new statement affirms the primacy of the Bible. An interesting thing to note is that the Epitome of Faith speaks of continued revelation while our new scripture statement does not. However, our Enduring Principles cover that area quite nicely when it says, “God graciously reveals divine will today as in the past.”³⁴

Would Joseph Smith III be comfortable in the Community of Christ today? I believe he would. He is no stranger to controversy, which has never ceased to be a part of our church, but he surely would be pleased to see how we have grown in grace as we handle it. He would have loved Listening Circles in which all the people had an opportunity to share what they thought and how they felt about issues, learning to love each other even when we disagreed. The methods of reaching consensus at National Conferences in 2013 would have thrilled his heart. He wanted to give space for those who disagreed, yet affirm the loving, grace-filled direction in which God was and is leading the church. Our statement on Faithful Disagreement seems to match quite nicely with the counsel he gave to Zenas Gurley and others.

It is my opinion that he would have been pleased with the manner in which President Stephen Veazey was selected as Prophet/President, and how the church managed during the interim. As published in the *Saints' Herald*, he gave explicit instructions as to how the office should be filled in an emergency situation where no one was chosen by the last-serving president. He had in place a sort of checks and balances plan, with the three leading quorums of the church holding equal sway. He provided that the remaining two members of the presidency “would still

33. *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 26.

34. *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 12.

hold the office of presiding high priests over the high priesthood and be authorized to act in such duties of the presidency...restricted only by the exceptions found in the law....”³⁵ Brother Joseph would be gratified to see that these instructions were followed and that they provided quite nicely what was required for a smooth transition.

Another matter in which I think Joseph III’s vision is being fulfilled is our movement toward peace and justice issues. In his presidency, he saw the need to help provide social justice for those in need. He publicized in the *Saints’ Herald* the need for a fund to be started for “The Saints’ Home for the Aged”³⁶ Then a few months later, he shared that the building materials were “upon the ground...and now is the time when all who can do so should aid this benevolent work.”³⁷ Another Saints’ Home was established “for orphaned and homeless children.”³⁸ President Smith shared a spiritual experience he had in which it was shown to him the need for a hospital to serve those in need of medical care.³⁹ Section 163:4a would echo his concern in these issues: “God, the Eternal Creator, weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering....Do not turn away from them. For in their welfare resides your welfare.” Joseph III was on a three person committee to design a church seal. It was a symbol of peace. How fitting that we still use this seal, though modified, and have devoted ourselves to the pursuit of peace.

Community of Christ today has adopted Joseph III’s modification of the gathering principle. We believe that Zion conditions can exist as a “human condition achieved wherever the believers reside[d].”⁴⁰ As a group of disciples, we have a long way to go to achieve Zion, but

35. Joseph Smith III, “Editorial: A Letter of Instruction,” *Saints’ Herald* 59, no. II (13 March 1912):242.

36. “A Fund for the Saints’ Home,” *Saints’ Herald* 40, no. 18 (6 May 1893): 273-74.

37. “The Saints’ Home,” *Saints’ Herald* 40, no. 37 (16 September 1893): 582.

38. Scherer, 202.

39. “Minutes of General Conference 1906,” *Supplement to Saints’ Herald*, Tuesday 10 April 1906, 882-883.

40. Scherer, 78.

we do catch glimpses of it from time to time. Joseph Smith III would fit right in with us as we journey on our path coming closer and closer to imitate our model who is Christ and to whom God would have us be.

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