

Ui Ishikawa

February 22, 2014

RELG 5330, Community of Christ I

Final Integrative Paper

REORGANIZATION SELF-DEFINITION AND IDENTITY

## REORGANIZATION SELF-DEFINITION AND IDENTITY

After the assassination of Joseph Smith Jr., the Saints would soon tire of having to explain, “We’re not Mormons!” but were consistent and resolute in this assertion time and time again. An excerpt from an autobiography written by one of these early Saints, John J. Cornish, demonstrates the reasons why this defense of the New Organization demanded clarification:

“Why,” he asked, “have you never heard about the Mormons?”

“I never heard that word before, and I don’t know what it is like.”

“Why it is a devilish sect that has been started up by Joe Smith and Brigham Young. They claim to be religious. Oh it is awful! They are the worst people on the earth. They are trying to tear down all other churches, and they are preaching the most damnable doctrine. They claim to speak in tongues and raise the dead, and they marry lots of wives.”<sup>1</sup>

So, from the latter part of the 1800s, members of the Reorganization had begun to defend themselves and the church with: “We’re not Mormons!” To complicate things further, members of the Reorganization continued to study and utilize the same three books of scripture claimed by the Mormon Church yet maintain that they are not associated with the Mormons. Over time, two major factions of the original church –those who followed Brigham Young (Brighamites) and those who waited for Joseph Smith III to assume his role as Prophet-President of the church – began to create this “Mormon Boundary.” The Mormon Boundary is a generic term that refers to the points of departure between the Latter Day Saint Mormon and the RLDS (Community of Christ) faith traditions through the generations. Contributing factors include but are not limited to: differences in leadership and power structure, contrasting theologies, and interpretation of scripture. Other splinter groups developed from Joseph Smith Jr.’s original church but all of these dealt with the same historical and societal challenges of the American Frontier.

---

<sup>1</sup> John J. Cornish, *Into the Latter Day Light* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1929), 10.

By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the early republic's populist religious movements were undergoing a metamorphosis from alienation to influence.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith Jr. was assassinated in June of 1844, after which the church became fractured with various leaders vying for control. Brigham Young, president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, led a majority of the Saints to the Wasatch Range and the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>3</sup> However, many followers became disillusioned under his leadership. What often characterized American Christianity, and certainly became a distinguishing mark in the future of the Reorganization, was the pervasive quality of dissent. This opposition, though difficult to endure at times, allowed the church to grow and evolve along with society. The origins of the new movement grew from dissatisfaction with aspects of the Nauvoo church experience, as well as the humanness of those who claimed legitimacy to succeed the Seer.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1850s, members called for a "New Organization" of the original church and placed great confidence in their belief that the true successor would come from the "seed of Joseph."<sup>5</sup> Basically those who joined the new movement were defectors from the many post-assassination sects that arose and fell within a matter of years. The democratic orientation of American Christianity, audience centered, intellectually open to all, organizationally fragmented, and popularly led, meant that the church prospered in this vast expanse of land, even as loud and competing preachers stormed America's once-hallowed sanctuary.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 193.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration 1820 to 1844* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 463.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Scherer, 462.

<sup>6</sup> Hatch, 209.

Beyond the chaos of the Third Great Awakening, this religious fervor brought Americans to and through the tragedies of war. No event in the nineteenth century did more to shape American society than the outbreak, prosecution, and aftermath of the Civil War.<sup>7</sup> Yet another point of departure, following the Civil War, was the issue of slavery and whether or not the church would allow baptism of freedmen as members into the church as well as accept their service and leadership as priesthood members. Relatively few people of color joined the movement in the post-Civil War years, but those who did demonstrated enormous courage to remain faithful in a white person's church.<sup>8</sup> Opposite Joseph Smith III on the issue of slavery and blacks in the priesthood were the Mormons who, at that time, were using scripture –specifically, The Book of Abraham –to deny priesthood to black males in the church. Brigham Young and Joseph Smith III differed on many important issues such as this; they and the leaders in their churches traveled far and wide debating tirelessly in defense of their beliefs and expounding upon the contrasting views by which they identified themselves.

Emma Hale Smith accompanied her son, Joseph III, to Amboy, Illinois to accept the role of Prophet-President of the church. The question arose about whether or not rebaptism would be necessary for those members who belonged to the original church of Joseph Smith Jr. but who were now joining the Reorganization movement under Joseph III. It was decided by vote that rebaptism for Reorganized Saints would be unnecessary. One influence on Joseph III's position on rebaptism was that Brigham Young required it of old members on their way west. At a time when creating separation was so important, discretionary rebaptism proved useful. It showed that

---

<sup>7</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 141.

the Reorganization was not a whole new church but a “reorganization of the original.” How Joseph III handled the rebaptism issue shows his moderating influence in moving the Reorganization forward.<sup>9</sup> Already, the Mormon Boundary is being established.

Joseph III’s worldview and leadership style was greatly influenced by his family, by society, and by the momentous historical events of his time. He was a humble yet competent leader, willing to consider the opinions and advice of those wiser and more experienced than he. One primary point of departure, which united followers of Joseph and which he stood firmly against from the outset of his leadership, was on the issue of polygamy. Brigham Young and his followers continued this practice within the privacy of the Nauvoo Temple while Joseph III opposed it outright. For members of the Reorganized Church, the rejection of polygamy was as important as it was for Utah Mormons to defend.<sup>10</sup> Smith sought to redefine church identity by eliminating what he perceived to be inherent flaws in the Latter Day Saint experience emerging from his institution’s origins. Joseph III advocated the abolition of polygamy as the denomination’s great theological illness.<sup>11</sup> With encouragement from his mother and close supporters, Joseph III was unafraid to face these challenges and stand up to the opposition in order to sustain the church. Slowly but surely, he witnessed the passing of the “Nauvoo generation” of leaders and members and understood the necessity of embracing change to ensure that his church would not slip into apostasy. Thus, condemning the aberrant marital practice served as a unifying principle like no other belief. Establishing the church position on polygamy

---

<sup>9</sup> Mark Scherer, “Conditions of Church Membership,” *Herald* (April 2009, Historical Reflections): 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 265.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

was a valuable tool to demonstrate the important difference between the church of Brigham Young and the church of Joseph Smith III.<sup>12</sup>

Polygamy was only one of many temple rituals established within the original church which Joseph III and his followers were firmly against. Baptism for the dead was another practice developed by Joseph Smith Jr., which continued as a secret temple ritual in Nauvoo after his assassination, but was also discontinued by Joseph III. The temple ritual of “baptism for the dead” extended salvation to those who had not experienced baptism on “this side of the veil.” By the end of the Restoration era, baptism signaled an uncompromised commitment to a “theology of works.”<sup>13</sup> However, the Reorganized Latter Day Saints, in rejecting this practice, began to shift from a “theology of works” to a “theology of grace.” The Reorganization showed considerable independence from the Restoration church. Their rejection of nearly all temple rituals proved that Joseph Smith III would not follow blindly his father’s lead.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that the Nauvoo temple rituals were salvific in nature. Exaltation in the afterlife was a powerful draw to convert members to the faith. That the large majority of Mormons followed the Council of Twelve rather than other leaders was understandable.<sup>15</sup> The Nauvoo Saints embraced an expanding temple ritual system to ensure their hoped-for celestial status in the next life. The temple ritual system broadened to include endowment ceremonies, marriage

---

<sup>12</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 264.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Scherer, “Conditions of Church Membership,” *Herald* (April 2009, Historical Reflections): 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 106.

for eternity, and the sealing of families together for eternity.<sup>16</sup> Still, as much as the Reorganization desired to avoid identity confusion with the Brighamites, this proved a very difficult task because both claimed the same name and inherited their lineage from the same origin. Both movements also had basically the same canon of scriptures, with the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants. Both endorsed the same bicameral ecclesiastical structure of Melchisedec and Aaronic priesthood orders and observed many of the same sacrament practices.<sup>17</sup> The struggle to establish a unique identity separate from the Mormon Church was one which generations of Saints would be familiar with, but under the guidance of Joseph III and other dedicated leaders, a separate path began to emerge which solidified the boundary.

Of primary importance during the Restoration movement was the concept of the Kingdom of God, or Zion, as a physical walled-city to which the Saints would gather and defend it against outsiders, eventually to receive the Lord Jesus at his Second Coming. Many families sold all of their personal assets, abandoned their homes, and left other religious sects to join the Restoration movement for this particular reason –to ensure their salvation and receive an inheritance. Naturally, the issue of gathering to the holy city was one of the first which Joseph III was required to deal with upon accepting the presidency. First, the Prophet said that to create a single isolated faith community would prejudice outsiders to conclude that his followers would be misidentified as yet another false Mormon communal sect.<sup>18</sup> As was his tendency, Joseph III handled the sensitive issue in a pastoral manner and did not dismiss the idea of gathering

---

<sup>16</sup> Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 123.

completely. Joseph III's skillful handling of the gathering principle and his positioning the church on volatile social issues cost him some of his following but only temporarily.<sup>19</sup> It seemed as though inspiration no longer flowed in a single direction –from the top down –instead, the leaders of the Reorganization were guided and influenced by the membership and, in a mutual way, the expanding faith community offered their trust and support in return.

Joseph Smith III's style of presidential leadership was more democratic than his father's. He was committed to the idea of his church becoming a "theocratic democracy" instead of a dictatorship as before. Joseph Smith Jr. saw his prophetic prerogative as transcending human law in order to fulfill God's law, sometimes taking a violent approach to accomplish his ends; whereas Joseph III knew and accepted the limits of his prophetic prerogative. For instance, Joseph III and his church became involved in the Kirtland Temple Lawsuit, seeking legal ownership of the temple lot and the building. Unfortunately, the request was denied by the judge, but the church had achieved its major objective of gaining a judicial opinion ruling them to be the "true" church of Joseph Smith Jr.<sup>20</sup> This was a decisive case which not only resulted in the eventual ownership of the Kirtland Temple, but also loaned credibility to the church at a time when a bombardment of sectarian rivalry had everyone claiming to have found the "true church."

As mentioned previously, the tradition of dissent marked the character of the Reorganized Church. From the protests of two key church leaders, Joseph Smith III faced his most serious challenge as president.<sup>21</sup> These men, Apostles Jason W. Briggs and Zenas H.

---

<sup>19</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 141.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 214.



Gurley Jr., were very experienced and highly intelligent men who sought to open the doors of free and critical thought to the members of the Reorganization by promoting their revolutionary ideas. The problem which now had to be faced in the Reorganization, Gurley felt, was caused by the church's unconditionally accepting Joseph Smith, Jr., as a prophet and his revelations en masse. As a result, the absolute office which Smith had created for himself still persisted in the Reorganization.<sup>22</sup> At this point in history, people began to feel empowered to think for themselves, and Gurley attempted to encourage the membership to do so in denying the infallibility of the prophet and the inerrancy of scripture. Briggs spoke in protest on a similar note. Probably the most controversial issue that emerged was Briggs's views on inspiration, particularly as affecting the role of the prophet and the scriptures. Briggs insisted that "Inspiration is a development, dependent upon the faculties of the mind, and corresponds with the experience, and does not transcend it."<sup>23</sup> Inspiration, therefore, is subject to the individual experiencing it, and the translation of scripture is a unique and personal process. In challenging the scriptures, Briggs truly challenged the church who were yet unyielding in their belief in the scriptures as the literal word of God. Both Briggs and Gurley ended up leaving the church over these issues, but many years later, the people would eventually join them in thinking critically about our humanness and the unique experience of divine inspiration.

Interpretation of scripture also developed as an important point of departure from the Mormon Church. As the Reorganized Church was led and challenged by men like Briggs and Gurley, it slowly began to transition from a literalist approach to scripture to a critically

---

<sup>22</sup> Clare D. Vlahos, "The Challenge to Centralized Power: Zenus H. Gurley, Jr., and the Prophetic Office" *Courage I* (March 1971): 141-158.

<sup>23</sup> Alma R. Blair, "The Tradition of Dissent -Jason W. Briggs" *Restoration Studies* (1980): 146-161.

discerned study. Saints of the Reorganization grew within but ultimately beyond a worldview that literally interpreted every production of a prophet to be prophetic and binding.<sup>24</sup> Several revisions of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants were initiated since the churches went their separate ways. *Herald* editor Isaac Sheen prepared the first RLDS edition of the Doctrine and Covenants published in 1863. Revisions in this edition addressed the sections mandating baptism for the dead and also accommodated the issue of Negro priesthood. The door was now open to the canonization procedure so familiar to the RLDS members. Now the Doctrine and Covenants would expand from time to time, as the prophets gave their revelatory counsel to succeeding General Conferences and generations of the Saints.<sup>25</sup>

At the General Conference of April 1906, the Council of Twelve initiated a reversification of the Book of Mormon; a committee also determined that the Printer's Manuscript (P MS), as opposed to Joseph Smith Jr.'s later revision, would be used as the benchmark against which to determine the text. The acquisition of the P MS in 1903 made possible the clarification of a text which in the Reorganization's historic warfare against polygamy was considered in 1906 to be very important to the cause.<sup>26</sup> It was also a decisive event influencing the Reorganized Church's ultimate discontinuance of Joseph Smith's final revision of the Book of Mormon –the Nauvoo 1840 edition –as the source for the modern text.<sup>27</sup> Later, the Reorganization produced a 1966 edition of the Book of Mormon, edited by Paul A.

---

<sup>24</sup> Seth L. Bryant. "Reformed Egyptian and the Book of Abraham Papyri: A Shared Scriptural Dilemma across the Restoration" *Restoration Studies XI* (Herald House, 2010): 164-179.

<sup>25</sup> Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 174.

<sup>26</sup> Howard, 38-41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

Wellington. The primary objectives of those preparing the Book of Mormon text for the 1966 edition were to preserve the original message and to communicate it more effectively by replacing archaic language and grammatical structures with more precise and meaningful ones.<sup>28</sup> The Reorganized Church continues to utilize a decision-making process via common consent and contributes to and embraces an open canon of scripture as a discerning, prophetic people.

For the RLDS Church, identifying as ‘non-Mormon’ became less trivial as the boundary became more clearly defined, creating distinction in areas of leadership, theology, and interpretation of scripture. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints changed its name to the Community of Christ in 2001, much to the delight and overwhelming acceptance of the church, as this change further distinguished them from the Mormon Church. Each generation of the church along its journey has found it necessary to interact with the outside community. These interactions caused a transformation that shaped its identity as it moved into the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, as the Mormon Boundary continues to evolve –as each generation of the church deals with new challenges –the necessity of distinguishing one from the other might also decrease. However, at least for now, the Community of Christ shares much in common with the Mormon Church and, therefore, will continue to define and redefine a unique identity along its journey, pursuing Christ’s mission and the building up of Zion upon the earth.

---

<sup>28</sup> Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 45.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946* (Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 227.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blair, Alma R. "The Tradition of Dissent –Jason W. Briggs" *Restoration Studies* (1980): 146-161.
- Bryant, Seth L., "Reformed Egyptian and the Book of Abraham Papyri: A Shared Scriptural Dilemma across the Restoration" *Restoration Studies XI* (Herald House, 2010): 164-179.
- Cornish, John J. *Into the Latter Day Light*. Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1929.
- Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Howard, Richard P. *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*. Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995.
- Scherer, Mark. "Conditions of Church Membership," *Herald* (April 2009, Historical Reflections): 22-23.
- Scherer, Mark. *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization 1844 to 1946*. Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.
- Scherer, Mark. *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration 1820 to 1844*. Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.
- Scherer, Mark. "Standing on Strong Shoulders: Church Identity and Historical Consciousness." *Restoration Scriptures X* (2009): 135-43.
- Vlahos, Clare D. "The Challenge to Centralized Power: Zenus H. Gurley, Jr., and the Prophetic Office" *Courage I* (March 1971): 141-158.