

Reorganized Mormons? Who are these people?

Just east of Kansas City lies the town of Independence, Missouri. People who know of Independence usually identify it as the home town of Harry Truman, the 33rd President of the United States (1945–52). Through the years President Truman has thus been affectionately referred to as “the man from Independence.” Indeed, Harry Truman is the area’s most visible claim to fame. A number of government buildings, schools, roads, hospitals, shopping centers and even a major league sports complex memorialize the Truman name.

Going further back in history we find that Independence played a prominent role in the westward migrations of the previous century. It was the starting point of the Santa Fe, California and Oregon trails, and was an important outfitter of parties preparing to embark upon the hazardous journey west. It also provided an important point of connection between westward exploration and the rest of the nation “back east.” And every fall, the city of Independence commemorates its role as “Queen City of the Trails” by holding a festival called “Santa-Cali-Gon Days,” named in memory of these three major trails.

But Independence holds significance for some other reasons as well, reasons which are not as well known or understood. Students of American religious history will recall that Independence, Missouri was one of the destinations to which Joseph Smith directed his young but fiercely loyal Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1830s. After only a few short years, however, they were forced by mob action and gubernatorial decree to leave the state. In the mid-1840s a major portion of this church would follow Brigham Young to Utah to become the Mormon, or LDS church that we know today. But in time another portion of the church would resettle back to Independence to become known as the *Reorganized* Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or RLDS church. And while these two groups may appear similar on the surface, their differences are extensive and actually far outnumber their similarities.

How it All Began

In 1820, at the age of 14, Joseph Smith claimed the beginning of a series of supernatural experiences which resulted first in the production of the Book of Mormon, and shortly thereafter the commencement of a new church. The Book of Mormon production process actually began in late 1827, and culminated in mid-1829. Throughout the remainder of 1829 and early 1830 Joseph received a number of spiritual messages which provided specific instructions concerning the

organization and functions of the new church he was soon to start.¹ Much of this instruction concerned the duties of a “restored” system of priesthood offices.

In accordance with the instructions he had been given, Joseph Smith, in the company of six of his followers, formally organized his new church on April 6, 1830 at Fayette, New York. Joseph claimed that his church was the literal restoration of primitive first century Christianity, which was necessary because the original Christian church had irretrievably apostatized from the true faith many centuries ago. This apostasy had resulted in a loss of priesthood authority, and as a result Christianity had been taken from the earth altogether. It was now being restored in these “latter days,” in preparation for Christ’s return.

In Search of Lamanites and Zion: the First Westward Mission

The Book of Mormon makes two very startling and interrelated assertions. The first is that a group of Israelites, referred to as Nephites, were led from Jerusalem to the Americas around 600 b.c.² Their departure supposedly occurred during the reign of Zedekiah, just before Jerusalem fell to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Joseph was told that the American Indians were the surviving remnant of this Nephite civilization, and were therefore a lost part of the house of Israel. These Indians are thus referred to as Lamanites, after Nephi’s rebellious brother Laman. Therefore, in any of Joseph Smith’s writings American Indians are always referred to as Lamanites. As early as 1828 Joseph was told that the Book of Mormon would ultimately be preached to these Lamanites.³

The second assertion is that Jesus Christ appeared to these Nephites here in the Americas proclaiming this land to be the chosen spot for the New Jerusalem.⁴ This New Jerusalem was (1) to be here in the Americas, (2) to be built by human effort, (3) to precede His return, (4) to be for the gathering of the remnant of the tribe of Joseph and (5) to co-exist with the old Jerusalem in the age to come. This distorted concept of the New Jerusalem will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

In September 1830, Joseph Smith received instructions which connected these two concepts and formed the basis for his church’s first westward mission. “And now, behold, I say unto thee that thou shalt go to the Lamanites, and preach my gospel unto them; and inasmuch as they receive thy teachings, thou shalt cause my church to be established among them...And now, behold, I say unto thee, that it is not revealed, and no man knoweth where the city⁵ shall be built, but it shall be given hereafter. Behold, I say unto thee that it shall be on the borders by the Lamanites” (*D&C 27:3*).

In response to this instruction a group of missionaries was quickly formed and left Fayette for the western frontier. Their treacherous winter journey landed them in Independence, Missouri in the early part of 1831. By July, Joseph Smith himself visited Independence and designated it as

1. *D&C* sections 16 & 17; *RHC* pp. 61–73.

2. The Book of Mormon actually reports a total of three migrations to the Americas. The story of the Nephites, however, is the most significant one and their story dominates most of the book.

3. *D&C* 2:6; see also 3:10, 18:3, 27:3–5, 29:2, 31:1, 49:5, 54:2.

4. *BM*, 3 Nephi 9:58, 10:2–3; this concept is further confirmed in *BM*, Ether 6:1–13.

5. The unnamed city in this passage is further specified in Joseph Smith's other writings alternately as Zion, Mount Zion or New Jerusalem.

the site for the city of Zion, or New Jerusalem, for “the gathering of the saints.” At the same time he designated the specific site for their future temple.⁶ From this point on church members began buying up property, building homes, establishing businesses and otherwise laying what they had hoped would be a permanent foundation for their newly designated city of Zion. Within two years these hopes would be dashed. But until then Independence would remain as one of two major theaters of operation for the Latter Day Saints. And it would *always* hold the hope of one day fully becoming Joseph’s city of Zion.

Kirtland, Ohio: the Major Stopping Place

On their way to Missouri, this first missionary party stopped near Kirtland, Ohio, just east of Cleveland. Part of the express reason for stopping there was the hope of winning over “the orator of the Western Reserve, Sidney Rigdon” to their cause.⁷ Rigdon was a preacher of reputation who had been a Campbellite minister for about two years. Alexander Campbell was one of several church leaders in the early 1800s pushing for reform. These efforts have been collectively referred to as the “Restoration Movement,” which sought a return to primitive New Testament Christianity—according to their leaders’ own perceptions, of course.⁸

These efforts to win over Sidney Rigdon were successful. And not only Rigdon, but the major part of his congregation were converted. At 127 members, the church in Ohio now outnumbered that of New York. And Rigdon himself was soon to become one of the most influential leaders in Joseph Smith’s young church.

Almost immediately after he was baptized Rigdon set off to visit Joseph Smith in New York. And before the month was out, Joseph had received instruction that the whole church should relocate to Ohio, all 70 of them. And this they proceeded to do over the next several months. (It is interesting to note that this decision to move the church to Ohio was made before the first missionary party even got to Independence, the designated spot for “the gathering of the saints.”) Fueled by the conversion of Sidney Rigdon and his congregation and by the influx of church members from New York, the church in Ohio continued to grow and became the *de facto* headquarters for the church throughout much of the 1830s.

Perhaps the initial intention for Kirtland was only to be a stopping place on the church’s pilgrimage to Missouri. But it turned out to be much more than just a stopping place. In the summer of 1833 their brethren in Missouri were about to be forcefully expelled from Independence. At the very same time the members in Ohio were actively pursuing plans to build the church’s first temple in Kirtland. This temple was completed in 1836 and stands today as the first Mormon temple.

The very next year, 1837, would prove to be a turning point for the church in Kirtland. Leading church members decided to start a bank in late 1836, only to get caught up in “The Panic of 1837.” A deep economic depression had gripped the country which precipitated a series of

6. D&C 57:1

7. Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1955), p.89.

8. Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 214–215, 1005–1008, 1017. Interestingly, Campbell published an alternative English translation of the New Testament in 1827. As we will see in chapter 9, Sidney Rigdon was to become Joseph Smith’s primary collaborator in the production of his so-called “Inspired Version” of the Bible.

bank failures throughout the nation. The Kirtland Safety Society Bank, as it was called, was not immune. And its failure resulted in mob violence toward the church and its leaders. To this was added the threats of dissenting church members who had come to reject Joseph Smith and his church vowing to overthrow it altogether.

Because of this violence from both within and without, the church removed itself from Kirtland during 1838 to unite with their other persecuted members at Far West, Missouri.

Together in Missouri

While the church in Ohio was busy building its first temple, the church in Missouri was struggling for its very existence. In late 1833 church members in Independence were forced to leave the area by angry mobs. Many found temporary quarters just across the Missouri River in Clay county. But by 1836 they found they had worn out their welcome in Clay county as well and were formally asked to take up permanent residence elsewhere. They moved again to newly formed Caldwell county just north of Clay county, with the county seat located in the town of Far West. Early 1837 would find most of the Missouri church gathered into the vicinity of Caldwell county. Just one year later they would be joined by church members fleeing the ugly scene in Ohio. By default the church had become headquartered at Far West, Missouri with the largest part of its membership now scattered throughout Caldwell and neighboring counties.

But even now, peace was not to be found in their immediate future. In August 1838 an election day riot broke out in nearby Daviess county over Mormon voting rights. Because of the size of the Mormon constituency, county residents were afraid that their government would soon become Mormon controlled. This riot triggered a set of hostilities over the next several months which would later become known as “The Mormon War.” Based on erroneous information he had received regarding these hostilities, Missouri’s Governor Boggs issued his famous “extermination order” in October 1838, “The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and *must be exterminated* or driven from the State, if necessary, for the public good” (emphasis as in the original).⁹ As a result, Joseph Smith and some other church leaders were jailed on charges of treason against the state of Missouri and the remaining church at Far West given the ultimatum: leave the state of Missouri or die.

Slowly, and in the dead of winter, many church members gathered together their belongings to begin the exodus from Missouri. But where were they to go? Some recalled that there had been a small body of church members at Quincy, Illinois, just across the Mississippi. Perhaps Quincy would be a safe haven for them. With this hope in mind the largest party traveled east to the Mississippi River. After crossing its frozen waters they arrived at Quincy. Their initial reception in Illinois would be infinitely warmer than the nightmare they were leaving behind in Missouri.

Nauvoo, Illinois

Joseph Smith and those jailed with him escaped from custody in April 1839 and quickly joined their families and other church members who were now in Quincy. While the citizenry of

⁹. *RHC* 2:217.

Quincy was initially more than hospitable to these refugees, it became clear that a new location would now be needed as a more permanent settlement for the church. Having considered some other locations, Joseph soon designated the deserted village of Commerce, Illinois, a little more than forty miles north of Quincy. Commerce was located on a bend in the Mississippi River, high enough to afford a good view of the neighboring Iowa hillsides. Impressed with its setting, Joseph said “It is a beautiful site, and it shall be called Nauvoo, which means in Hebrew a beautiful plantation.”¹⁰ And so the Latter Day Saints relocated again to begin work on their new city.

The years that followed would see the deserted experimental village of Commerce transformed into the Nauvoo of Joseph Smith. It would soon become the largest and fastest growing city in Illinois, home to the fastest growing church in the whole country. Its Nauvoo Legion would grow to become the second largest armed force in the country. And Joseph Smith would ultimately run for the presidency of the nation. The social fabric which was nurtured and strengthened in Nauvoo would provide for the development of yet another city when a portion of the church would follow Brigham Young to Utah some years later after Joseph Smith’s murder. The phenomenal success of the church at Nauvoo stood in sharp contrast with their prior experience in New York, Ohio and Missouri.

The Nauvoo period also proved to be a theological watershed for the church. It was during this time that Joseph Smith introduced radical new doctrines such as polygamy, baptism for the dead and eternal progression.¹¹ Secret temple ceremonies also took shape in Nauvoo, born out of Joseph Smith’s new infatuation with Freemasonry. “In the spring of 1842 the simple rites of washing and anointing that had been performed in the Kirtland Temple were transformed into a complicated and mysterious ceremonial, which for a time was kept as secret as polygamy.”¹² Within six months of its installation the membership of the Nauvoo Masonic lodge had by far outnumbered the membership of all non-Mormon lodges in Illinois combined! This sudden rise was so great that Illinois’ Grand Lodge became concerned about the future of its own control.¹³ Joseph Smith became fascinated with Freemasonry because he saw within it the same thing he had come to see in Christianity: a corrupted form of truth. “Joseph taught his men simply that the Masonic ritual was a corruption of the ancient ritual of Solomon, and that his own was a restoration of the true Hebraic endowment.”¹⁴ And so in Nauvoo Joseph’s church became not only a restoration of Christianity, but a restoration of Freemasonry as well—combined now in one body. The temple ceremonies which Joseph borrowed from Masonry and modified for his own purposes continue to be acted out today in every Mormon temple across the world, having

10. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, second edition, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 256.

11. The doctrine of *eternal progression* is also referred to as the “Adam-God doctrine.” This doctrine teaches that worthy Mormons are really “gods” in embryonic form, just as God Himself once was. According to Joseph Smith, “God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a man like unto one of yourselves, that is the great secret.... I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined that God was God from all eternity.... God himself; the father of us all dwelt on earth the same as Jesus Christ did... You have got to learn to be Gods yourselves” (*Times & Seasons* 5:613-614). Humans, therefore, are involved in the same evolutionary process that God Himself once experienced—which will result one day in humans attaining the full rank of deity.

12. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp.278–279.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

been modified only slightly in recent years.

Before long, the church's growth, and its social and economic successes in Nauvoo earned Joseph both the fear and hatred of the surrounding region. And his evolving doctrines, especially that of polygamy, were beginning to reap a harvest of disaffection among his own as well. Several members, bitter and disillusioned over the injuries caused by Joseph's practice and promotion of polygamy, left the church and set up an opposition press to expose these secret practices. Fearing the consequences of such exposure, Joseph engineered the destruction of this press by the Nauvoo Legion. But this only served as the last straw to the citizenry of an already hostile state; in his autocracy, Joseph had infringed upon his peoples' constitutional right of free speech. Illinois' governor proceeded to cite Joseph Smith with treason against the state of Illinois and ordered him to nearby Carthage to stand trial. But Joseph never stood trial. The local militia turned into a mob, stormed the Carthage jail and shot Joseph to death in June 1844.

The Leadership Vacuum

Joseph Smith had not laid out a clear plan of succession for his position, and the church was thrown into turmoil. There were a number of testimonies that Joseph had designated his son, Joseph Smith III, to succeed him as president. But Joseph III was only 12 years old when his father was killed. And besides, two months earlier, in fear that he would soon be killed, Joseph had met in council with the apostles where he seems to have transferred leadership responsibility to them.¹⁵

In response to this leadership vacuum a number of leaders arose and led groups of members to various destinations. Each one justified his action on logical and/or theological grounds. Some of the more notable leaders were: James J. Strang who led a group to Beaver Island in upper Michigan where he promoted polygamy and had himself crowned "King James;" Sidney Rigdon who led a group to Greencastle, Pennsylvania; and Lyman Wight who led a group to central Texas. There were many more.¹⁶ But most of the members in Nauvoo decided to follow the corporate leadership of the twelve Apostles.

Meanwhile, the hostile attitudes in Illinois, which peaked in 1844 leading to Joseph Smith's murder, were still very much alive. Harassment of the church in Nauvoo became so unbearable that by the spring of 1846 the decision was made to leave the area. Under the leadership of Brigham Young, the chief apostle at the time, a body of members perhaps numbering as high as 20,000 began the long trek west. By July 1847 this party arrived in the Great Salt Lake Valley, which Brigham had designated as their resting place. By the end of 1847 Brigham Young had been voted in as Joseph Smith's successor, the new President of the church.

¹⁵. *Times and Seasons*, (Nauvoo, Illinois: September 15, 1844), 5:651. This was the official newspaper of the church at this time.

¹⁶. Steven L Shields in *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 3d edition (Bountiful, Utah: Restoration Research, 1982) describes over 100 groups and significant leaders stemming from Joseph Smith's original church.

Various Factions

It is estimated that in 1844 the church in Nauvoo numbered around 30,000.¹⁷ In addition to this number were church members in other states who had never lived in Nauvoo. What the total membership of the church was, we do not know. While Joseph himself had estimated a total of 150,000 to 200,000,¹⁸ this is most likely an exaggeration. But regardless of the actual numbers, it is clear that Brigham Young did not take the entire church to Utah. So what did these other members do? Some became disillusioned and left the Mormon church altogether. And as mentioned above, some went with a variety of other leaders, some of whom had sizable followings. In the early years, for example, J.J. Strang had a group which rivaled that of Brigham Young. Others, however, remained where they were and did not follow anyone in particular.

There was a lot of instability for a number of years. Many would initially associate with one group only to become dissatisfied and then search out another. This resulted in a number of people who had been associated with multiple factions. Several leaders in these groups continued to practice and promote polygamy, and that was frequently cited as the basis for breaking fellowship with them. By the early 1850s there were a number of independent congregations scattered across the Midwest which had rejected both polygamy and the leadership claims of the various factions.

The Reorganization

Beginning in late 1851 some leaders in these independent congregations began receiving spiritual messages indicating that Joseph Smith's son, Joseph III, would eventually become the leader of the church. In anticipation of this they decided to hold a conference in Beloit, Wisconsin in June 1852, where these scattered congregations were officially organized into a common body which would become the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Over the next few years various representatives of this Reorganization visited Joseph III asking him to come and lead the church, but he rejected all of them. Representatives from the Utah church had already asked him to join them, but he had rejected them because of their belief and practice of polygamy. In 1859, however, Joseph III began receiving his own spiritual manifestations directing him to become the leader of the Reorganized Church. In response to this direction, he attended a conference of the Reorganized Church in April 1860 at Amboy, Illinois and was accepted as their president. During his initial message to this conference he reflects upon his personal process. "For some time past I have received manifestations pointing to the position which I am about to assume. I wish to say that I have come here not to be dictated by any man or set of men. I have come in obedience to a power not my own, and shall be dictated by the power that sent me."¹⁹

Among those who had not followed any other leader was Emma, Joseph Smith's wife. She had remained in Nauvoo, raised her five children and remarried a Major Lewis Bidamon, formerly of the Illinois Militia. She accompanied her son, Joseph III, to this 1860 Amboy

17. *RHC* 3:25.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Joseph Smith, III, *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1952), p. 162; *RHC* 3:247.

conference and was also accepted as a member of the Reorganized Church. Ever since her husband's murder Emma had been safeguarding the original manuscript of his revision of the Bible. Upon the request of the Reorganized Church Emma offered up the manuscript which was first published in 1867 as Joseph's *New Translation* of the scriptures. It is known today as the *Inspired Version*.²⁰

Back to Independence

After the Amboy conference of 1860 the RLDS church headquartered itself first at Plano, Illinois and later at Lamoni, Iowa. But the desire of many of its members was to eventually return to Independence, Missouri, the site Joseph Smith had designated as the city of Zion. And so during the late 1800s and early 1900s a slow but steady migration occurred back to Independence. This migration was a rather quiet process and so did not anger the Missourians; the hostile attitudes of the 1830s had quieted. Such a large portion of the church had relocated to Independence that in 1918 the church decided to move its headquarters there as well, where it remains to this day. In the 1920s the church began work on a meeting hall in Independence called the Auditorium which seats 5,500. This Auditorium also served as the church's headquarters building for many years.

Joseph Smith, III: "My father was not a polygamist"

Before Joseph III became president of the RLDS church he had been studying law in preparation for becoming an attorney. He was a very intelligent and articulate man, and much of his work as the RLDS president was in developing a socially respectable image for the church. Regarding the image of his father he once said, "If the father shall be judged by the son, then with the assistance of God I will so order my life that it shall be a living testimony, refuting the accusations against him."²¹ Joseph III and his family had lived through the aftermath of the Nauvoo fiasco which culminated in the murder of his father. As a young man he had experienced acute shame from accusations that his father had been unfaithful to his mother through the practice of polygamy. Clearing his father's name, and that of his family, would become one of his life's major pursuits. This became especially true after he became president of the RLDS church. To this end he made multiple visits to Utah in order to interview people who had been in Nauvoo with his father. After having spent a substantial amount of time in Utah, and having spoken to quite a number of people, he satisfied himself that his father had neither introduced nor practiced the doctrine of polygamy. His conclusion on polygamy became the official position of the RLDS church and the principal doctrine upon which it differentiated itself from the Utah church.

Disowning the Rest of the Nauvoo Period

As we discussed earlier, polygamy was not the only radical doctrine introduced in Nauvoo. Among the others were baptism for the dead, eternal progression, celestial marriage and a variety

20. This *Inspired Version* of the Bible will be discussed more fully in chapter 9.

21. Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, p.444.

of other secret temple ceremonies. Over the years the RLDS church came to disown much of what happened during this period of the church's history, including these doctrines. The spiritual trajectory of the Nauvoo period went straight to Salt Lake City, and of this the RLDS did not want any part. Instead, they developed ways to distance and insulate themselves from what happened at Nauvoo. They deal with Joseph Smith's personal involvement with those matters in three principal ways: (1) they exonerate him from all responsibility in these matters by convincing themselves that he had absolutely no part in them whatsoever, that they were the work of conspiring men in the leadership of the church whom he could no longer control, most of whom went to Utah, (2) if they admit to any degree of Joseph's involvement they excuse it as a very human and understandable lapse of a man who was spending much of his time under persecution or in hiding or (3) some believe that Joseph may have indeed been involved in some of this, and therefore became a fallen prophet during the Nauvoo period; but even if he was a fallen prophet in Nauvoo, everything else he did up to that time was still legitimate.

Baptism for the dead, however, has been a lingering question for RLDS down through the years. Even their own historians generally agree that Joseph authored three revelations dealing with the practice. Historically their position on this has been "wait and see." They have never officially denounced the doctrine, but have decided to wait for additional spiritual instruction before they take any steps toward its implementation. However, in 1970 the three revelations in their *Doctrine and Covenants* which deal with baptism for the dead were moved to the book's appendix. And in 1990 these three sections were removed from the *Doctrine & Covenants* altogether.

Kirtland Temple

The church left Kirtland, Ohio for Missouri in 1838 amidst intense social pressure due to its failed banking enterprise and threats of overthrow from dissident church members. They left behind the first of their temples which they had constructed there. During the middle 1800s the temple was often abandoned and ultimately sold by the local Probate Court. In 1879 the RLDS filed a lawsuit in Ohio in an effort to untangle the temple's title and ownership issues. The Utah church was also joined in the suit. The final decision of the court was to award title to the RLDS church, and not the Utah church, as the legal successor to Joseph Smith's original church. In its decision the court felt that the RLDS church was "organized upon the same doctrine and tenets and having the same Church organization as the original Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints organized in 1830 by Joseph Smith," while the Utah church had "materially and largely departed from the faith, doctrines laws ordinances and usages of the original Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints."²² This was quite a blow and an embarrassment to the Utah church, but a source of great pride to the RLDS. Since then, the Kirtland Temple has become a national historic landmark, and the RLDS church conducts guided tours of it and operates a visitors center there.

22. Aleah G. Koury, *The Truth and the Evidence: A comparison between the doctrines of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1965), p. 106; *RHC* 4:303.

So Much for Lineage

“My Three Sons.” Joseph Smith, III continued to lead the RLDS church until his death in 1914. Unlike his father, he had carefully prepared documents designating one of his sons, Frederick M. Smith to succeed him. Upon his death in 1946, Frederick M. was succeeded by a younger brother, Israel A. Smith. And when Israel A. died in 1958, he was succeeded by an even younger brother, W. Wallace Smith.

An End to the Smiths. In an unprecedented move, W. Wallace Smith resigned from his role as president of the RLDS church in 1978, was awarded the title of President Emeritus and selected his son Wallace B. Smith to succeed him. In the fall of 1995 Wallace B. Smith also announced his resignation as president, as his father had done, and designated his successor. But for the first time, the new RLDS president would not be a Smith. Wallace B. Smith designated a prominent church official, W. Grant McMurray, who succeeded him as president in April 1996.

As we discussed above, the founding tenets of the Reorganization were: (1) an unequivocal stand against polygamy and (2) a president in the lineage of Joseph Smith. This move by Wallace B. Smith illustrates that the institutional RLDS church is continuing to move away from its founding principals.

The Break Up of 1984

When W. Wallace Smith came to office in 1958 the RLDS church leadership began a program of liberalization whereby they endeavored to move the church away from its Latter Day Saint doctrines and identity while moving it closer to mainstream Christianity. His son Wallace B. Smith continued this program when he came to office in 1978. They began to talk of the Book of Mormon as a “product of the American frontier,” and tried to gain acceptance by Christian bodies such as the World and National Council of Churches.

While these moves were welcomed by many church members, they were deeply resented by others. These actions created a growing “liberal v. fundamental” split in the church during the 1960s and 1970s. This feud came to a head in 1984 when Wallace B. Smith presented an “inspired” document to the church conference which recommended the ordination of women to the RLDS priesthood. Knowing full well that this move would create major problems for the church, he “sweetened the pot” by including in the same document instruction to begin building their long-awaited temple in Independence. After a long and heated debate this document was accepted by the conference as an “inspired revelation” and was therefore canonized as section 156 in their *Doctrine & Covenants*.

When the decision to ordain women was approved by the conference many fundamentalists found they could no longer remain within the confines of the “liberal” institutional church. Over the coming months and years many individuals and even entire congregations declared their independence and started meeting outside the auspices of formal RLDS leadership. In the beginning these groups claimed to still be members of the true RLDS church, but were merely meeting apart until the institutional church was straightened out. But without the anchor of these fundamentalists, the institutional church became even more “liberal.” And they proceeded to raise enough money to build their temple in Independence.

Since the institutional RLDS church has maintained its “liberal” course, a number of these fundamentalist groups have formalized their own church organizations. Many of these groups can be identified by their use of the word “Restored” or “Restoration” in their names. Each maintain that they have preserved Joseph Smith’s original church, including its doctrines and priesthood authority. And so each of these break-away groups now faces issues similar to those faced by the groups which formed the Reorganization in the first place. Who has the correct doctrine? And who has preserved Joseph Smith’s priesthood authority?

The RLDS Church Today

Unshackled by the fundamentalists who began their departure in 1984, RLDS leadership have continued their program of liberalization. This evolution has created a strange posture whereby they continue to promote a dramatically watered-down version of Joseph Smith’s “Restoration tradition,” but within a framework of religious tolerance and acceptance called “pluralism.” And so while they continue to distance themselves farther and farther from Joseph Smith’s original teachings and claims, they are not moving any closer to genuine Christianity.

Significant elements of this evolved doctrinal position are contained in the first sermon of the new RLDS Prophet/President, W. Grant McMurray. This sermon was given on April 21, 1996 at the close of the RLDS World Conference, just a few days after his ordination as Prophet. There he downplays the significance of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ alone in favor of the enhanced communitarian mission inaugurated by Joseph Smith.

“So many people in the religious world today are satisfied with that sense of personal salvation, feeling confident that the only job of the Christian is to get right with Jesus—establish that relationship and then celebrate it until you move to the next world.... But I also want to declare that it is not enough.... We are the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, inheritors of the Restoration tradition, seeking to create in every age the spirit and forms of community that our Lord sought to establish...that the founders of our movement sought to establish...and that we now seek to create....”²³

McMurray then goes on to explain why he clings to Joseph Smith’s Restoration tradition. “I do not claim it as the only story of God’s work in the world....I do not claim it because of some intellectual argument that it is authoritative. I claim it for just one reason—because it is *my* story, because it is the place where I have discovered the love of God and where I have sought to live out the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ He makes it clear that he rejects antiquated claims of unique RLDS authority; he embraces the Restoration tradition only because it is the unique story of his *personal* religious life.

McMurray’s sentiments are certainly at variance with the teachings of Joseph Smith, but they are very much in line with the teachings of theological “pluralism.” Pluralism teaches that there are no right or wrong religions, because God authored all religions and is at work in all of them today. This includes not only Christianity, but Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and countless other lesser-known religions. According to pluralism, our job as humans is therefore to respect and

23. W. Grant McMurray, “A Prophetic People,” *Saints Herald*, June 1996, p. 7.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

appreciate the rich diversity that God has authored. A most significant tenet of pluralism is that no one religion can claim to be superior to the others, even Christianity, because salvation can be found in all religions. In his sermon, McMurray explains that the RLDS church indeed has a “commitment to pluralism,”²⁵ and goes on to encourage church members to “seek knowledge...in interfaith forums whereby [they] can explore together the nature of [their] spiritual journeys...with those who come from different religious communities.”²⁶ Whereas the authoritarian Joseph Smith decreed, “*Ye are not sent forth to be taught, but to teach the children of men the things which I have put into your hands*” (D&C 43:4b), the pluralistic McMurray concedes, “We have much to give. We have much to learn.”²⁷

Summary

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was comprised of church members who elected to not follow Brigham Young to Utah. They had rejected polygamy and believed that Joseph Smith had designated his son, Joseph Smith, III, to be his lawful successor as president of the church. Although initially reticent, Joseph Smith III finally accepted the invitation of a group of congregations which claimed to be a reorganization of his father’s original church, and became their president in 1860. His mother joined this Reorganization with him. The RLDS church rejected not only polygamy as an unacceptable doctrine, but also a number of other doctrines and practices introduced during the Nauvoo era, such as baptism for the dead, eternal progression and secret temple ceremonies.

Notable factors which set the RLDS church apart from Utah Mormonism are: (1) they have continuously had a direct descendant of Joseph Smith as their president (until 1996), (2) Joseph Smith’s widow, Emma Bidamon, joined with them, (3) they own and publish Joseph Smith’s revision of the Bible, the *Inspired Version*, (4) they were awarded the Kirtland Temple, where a court declared them the legal continuation of Joseph Smith’s original church and (5) they are headquartered in Joseph Smith’s city of Zion—Independence, Missouri—where they completed building their own temple in 1994.

Since the 1950s, however, RLDS leadership has endeavored to move the church away from Latter Day Saint doctrine and identity while attempting to gain acceptance by mainstream Christianity. In April 2001 the RLDS church actually changed its *public* name to “Community of Christ,” as a further step in this direction. Beginning in 1984 a number of fundamentalist groups broke away from the RLDS church over these doctrinal issues, most of which have now incorporated as independent churches.

Unshackled by this fundamentalist movement, the surviving RLDS church has become increasingly “liberal.” Whereas Joseph Smith claimed for his church exclusive truth and authority, today’s RLDS church now openly promotes religious “pluralism.” Pluralism teaches that God authored and is at work in all of the world’s religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and that salvation can be found in them all. Pluralism also promotes “dialogue” amongst the world’s religions in order to create a high level of tolerance and respect for each others’ particular

25. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

27. *Ibid.*

religious heritage. It is in this sense that today's RLDS church continues to identify with the religious heritage left them by Joseph Smith. They no longer claim this heritage as authoritative, as Joseph Smith did. Rather, they claim it as their own unique contribution to the religious fabric of the world, of which they so desperately want to be a part.