

“Answering Questions No Longer Asked’: Nauvoo, Its Meaning and Interpretation In the RLDS/Community of Christ Church”

As most know, there is only one church name more difficult to say than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and that is Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The names accurately suggest a common historical origin, and at least a similar priesthood, scriptural, and administrative structure. And, the Nauvoo experience is pivotal in the life of both movements. For the church headquartered in Salt Lake, Nauvoo represents the crowning achievement of Latter Day Saintism, and for the one headquartered in Independence, Nauvoo represents the movement’s “dark and cloudy days.” I will focus on the latter Latter Day Saint denomination that I know best, now called the Community of Christ, and will review the official and quasi-official literature to reveal a 142-year evolution in the church’s attitude toward Nauvoo to what it is today thus—“Answering Questions No Longer Asked: Nauvoo, Its Meaning and Interpretation in the RLDS/Community of Christ Church.”

Events of the Nauvoo era, from 1839-1845, have been at ground zero in the historical and theological boundary separating the two major denominational segments of Latter Day Saintism. It would be hazardous for any responsible historian to try to summarize in just a few words the impact of Nauvoo on today’s members of the Community of Christ—the spectrum of opinion is far too broad. Some members of the Community approach Nauvoo with the same affection as their Salt Lake cousins. Some communitarians see Nauvoo as the geography for theological radicalism that veered the movement away from the Christian mainstream. The rest of the church membership lies somewhere between the two extremes.

Community of Christ and “Official” Church History

It is important to state that today’s Community of Christ does not take “official positions” in matters of church history. Although this has not always been the case, today’s members (and their historian) are free from the strictures that confuse matters of faith with sound historical methodology. Simply stated: “our history is not our theology.” Thus, the Community of Christ member can ask the tough questions without fear of being considered “weak in the faith.” Today, we believe that our history informs us about our institutional and individual identity—where we have been in the past, where we are at present, and where we are going in the future.

I am going to assume that some here today have just a cursory understanding Community of Christ history. In brief summary, there are three eras in my church’s story—the era of Restoration (1820-1844), the era of Reorganization (1852-2001), and

the era of Community (2001 to the present). Let's look at Nauvoo through the eyes of each era in my church's story.

Approach of the Early Reorganized Church toward Nauvoo

In April 1860, denominational identity was the most important issue facing the Reorganized Church as the members left the small, railhead town of Amboy, Illinois, where *defacto* church leaders designated Joseph Smith III as prophet-president. The circumstances for the small movement were awkward at best. Brigham Young's church dwarfed that fledgling faith group who was short on members and even shorter in funds. They were determined however to restore the original church as they best understood it. Their road would be a difficult one. Rather than being known as the movement led by the oldest son of the Seer Joseph Smith, and a religious movement characterized by an open canon of scripture and modern-day revelation, as they had hoped, the Reorganized Church was quickly tagged by outsiders with polygamy, celestial marriage, and human exaltation to godhood.¹ The focal point for this confusion centered in Nauvoo, Illinois, during the last years of Joseph Smith Jr., and whether or not the Seer could actually have been involved in what Josephites perceived as "theological heresies."

As spokesperson for the New Organization, Joseph Smith III, called "Young Joseph" by those who knew his father, faced a personal and professional dilemma. That a son should be protective of his father's name was perfectly understandable, but how could he do this when many key church leaders around him knew all too well of his father's complicity?² At best, this put Joseph III in a precarious position. Still, the epicenter of the controversy lay in the drained swamplands of the western Illinois community of Nauvoo.

The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

From the beginning of the Reorganization there was need for a historical account that met the needs of the newly emerging denomination. On 1 May 1896, a Board of Publication selected Joseph III and Apostle Heman C. Smith (no relation) to prepare a historical manuscript.³ Heman Smith became the primary author and eventually

¹ Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1959), 486. Use of this source, although antiquated in interpretation today, represented the early view of the frustration Reorganized Church members had with their association with the Salt Lake Church. A more in depth survey of this work, historic in its own right, appears later in this paper.

² Historian Roger Launius suggested that Joseph III pursued a variety of approaches in dealing with the accusations of his father as author and practitioner of the aberrant marital practice. First, Young Joseph discounted statements by rationalizing that they were never eyewitness accounts based upon the questions the son would pose. Second, Smith would call into question the character of the person bearing "false witness," simply ignore the issue entirely, or would admit uncertainty about the details of the accusation. As a last resort, the young Smith would concede if it served to benefit the church. See Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 206-209.

³ President William W. Blair, William H. Kelley, and Charles Derry were to provide final review. Blair died suddenly on 18 April 1896 on a train trip returning Kirtland, Ohio, to his home in Lamoni, Iowa. Kelley and Derry performed only limited service in the project due to other ministerial final examination and review assignments. This left Heman C. Smith to focus his full attention to writing the history.

produced four volumes to establish the Reorganized Church's "official history."⁴ Through the first half of the twentieth century four more volumes were added to make the eight-volume set the only comprehensive history of the church from the Reorganized Church's view.

Actually, there is very little narrative to Heman Smith's history. Instead, the author carefully selected segments from diaries, newspapers, personal papers, council meeting minutes, and other historical documents to construct the narrative. The interpretation of the church story came through his careful selection of these sources. Not surprisingly, Heman Smith was critical of the LDS Mormon church at every turn. For example, on the sensitive topic of whether or not the Nauvoo Temple was finished, RLDS historian gave the predictable response. Writing in his second volume, originally printed in Lamoni, Iowa, in 1897, Smith titled in capital letters: "TEMPLE AT NAUVOO NOT FINISHED."⁵ That Heman Smith's generation eventually canonized the statement in the Reorganized Church's Book of Doctrine and Covenants as Section 107 implied that the Reorganization was not the Nauvoo church, a significant admission.⁶ This subtle assertion also implied that the Reorganized church membership, along with their dead, was not rejected.

On the controversial issue of polygamy, Heman Smith went into full denial to exonerate Joseph and Hyrum Smith. However, the author accepted only public statements from the prophet and others as his supporting evidence. Heman Smith also used the public statements of other church leaders to denounce the practice of polygamy. But he left open the possibility of the Seer's involvement by conceding that "if Joseph and Hyrum Smith, or either of them, were implicated in the practice of polygamy or in telling falsehoods regarding it, we have no disposition to shield them; but in justice to them we further contend that neither of these crimes shall be fastened upon them without competent evidence...."⁷ As of the date of this writing the church historian determined that no credible evidence existed to implicate either of the seer and his brother in the practice of polygamy. Instead, Heman Smith promoted a long-standing tradition of blaming polygamy on others and by referring specifically to John Taylor's 1 April 1844 *Times and Seasons* naming Mormon pariah John Cook Bennett as the culprit.⁸

Heman Smith addressed other Nauvoo heresies such as celestial marriage and plural gods by referring to Joseph Smith Jr.'s funeral sermon for his close friend, King Follett, given during the April 1844 General Conference. In his explanation, the Reorganized Church historian did not want to repeat these heretical beliefs so he simply referred the reader to the August 1844 *Times and Season* synopsis and justified his rejection of the Nauvoo heresies with four reasons. He acknowledged that the Seer's sermon was very lengthy while the *Times and Seasons* summary was only five pages.⁹

⁴ Volume One covers events from 1805-1835; volume two from 1836-1844; volume three from 1844-1872; and volume four from 1873-1890.

⁵ Heman C. Smith, et. al. *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* 2:562-563. Hereinafter referred to as *History of the Church*. Joseph Smith Jr. received this revelation on 19 January 1841, more than a year after proxy baptisms were initiated.

⁶ Book of Doctrine and Covenants 107: 10, 11. Hereinafter referred to as Doctrine and Covenants. All references taken from the Community of Christ version.

⁷ *History of the Church* 2:735.

⁸ *Times and Seasons* 5:490.

⁹ *Times and Seasons* 5:612-617.

He concluded that such a brief review could not present accurately the prophet's teachings. Second, the Follett sermon was not printed until after the prophet's death and thus could not receive the Seer's scrutinous review for accuracy nor his endorsement. Third, Smith claimed that the Follett sermon's style varied widely from other speeches and writings of the prophet thus casting even more doubt upon its authenticity. And lastly, Heman Smith called into question the memory of those who recorded the prophet's sermon claiming that there was "no evidence that a *verbatim* report was made when delivered..." [italics in the original.]¹⁰

During the early years of the Reorganization, baptism for the dead was the only Nauvoo Temple ritual to be embraced. Alexander Hale Smith, the younger brother of Joseph III, joined the Reorganization in May 1861 with the satisfaction of knowing the possibility of proxy baptism for his beloved, deceased brother, Frederick Granger Williams Smith.¹¹ Church leaders staunchly defended the ritual in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, the official church journal, in November 1864.¹² However, its actual practice in the Reorganization had a brief lifespan thus demonstrating a lack of commitment to the ritual. In 1865, after discussions with the leading quorums of the church, Joseph Smith III acknowledged his father's decision that proxy baptism was "necessary...in order to show completeness of the plan of salvation, but wisdom dictates that the way should be prepared by the preaching of the First principles."¹³ By 1874, Joseph Smith III declared, "Baptism for the dead is not commanded in the gospel...[and] there is but little of direct scriptural proof that can be adduced in support of the doctrine...."¹⁴ By 1886 Joseph III ruled, "the elders of the church are not authorized to preach [baptism for the dead]."¹⁵ Then, writing in 1893, Joseph Smith III admonished "the eldership...to let it [baptism for the dead] alone in their public ministrations, for it is at best present only a matter of speculation with the majority; and none may speak authoritatively about it."¹⁶ By this time, the "Nauvoo generation" had passed on and Joseph III could halt its practice.

Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*

In 1934, Inez Smith Davis published *The Story of the Church* and provided the Reorganized Church membership a single volume summary of what her father, Heman C. Smith, provided for his generation. Davis's family roots in the church date back to her great grandfather, Lyman Wight. Following in her father's footsteps, Davis authored a

¹⁰ *History of the Church* 2:735-736.

¹¹ Vida E. Smith, "Biography of Patriarch A. H. Smith," *Journal of History* 4 (January 1911): 13-14.

¹² "As the dead can not [sic] be baptized for themselves, and as they can not [sic] enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water, and as the Lord said that the gospel was preached to the spirits in prison that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, therefore substitutes in the flesh must be baptized for them, and these substitutes are saints." "Baptism for the Dead," *The True Latter Day Saints Herald* 6 (November 1, 1864): 130.

¹³ "Council of Twelve Minutes," Book A, (May 2, 1865): 13, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. Presumably Joseph III gave priority to such "first principles" as faith, hope, repentance, forgiveness, laying on of hands, and eternal judgment, for example.

¹⁴ *True Latter Day Saints Herald*, 21 (July 15, 1874): 435.

¹⁵ *Saints' Herald* vol. 33 (December 18, 1886): 787.

¹⁶ *Saints' Herald* vol. 40 (February 25, 1893): 115.

heroic interpretation Reorganization's history. However, Davis ignored some of the more controversial aspects of the Nauvoo experience such as proxy baptism and plurality of gods.¹⁷

The issue of polygamy could not be avoided so Davis provided a short chapter titled "The Fight Against Polygamy."¹⁸ Different from her father who blamed polygamy on John C. Bennett, Davis placed responsibility for the aberrant marital practice at Brigham Young's feet. She based her opinion on the ruling of Federal Judge John F. Phillips during a lawsuit testing the ownership of the Temple Lot in Independence, Missouri, in the 1890's.¹⁹ Davis also indicted the *Nauvoo Expositor* as a "scurrilous sheet" and then denied the existence of the polygamy revelation based, like her father, on the public statements of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Davis stated: "...polygamy was never put forth as a belief of the church until announced by Brigham Young eight years after Joseph Smith's death." She admitted polygamy's existence in the Nauvoo period, then wrote: "Whatever its origin, the Reorganized Church has taken a firm position against it..."²⁰ To conclude her discussion of polygamy, the author encouraged members to focus more on "the two great affirmative objectives of the church, the redemption of Zion and the evangelization of the world, beside which all else pales to insignificance."²¹ Davis's approach to polygamy is significant because she communicated the institutional approach to this sensitive issue in the church's past.

Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*

In 1965 Robert Bruce Flanders, a member of the Reorganized Church, published his Wisconsin University doctoral dissertation as *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*. Flanders succeeded in writing the first account of the Nauvoo experience using scholarly inquiry and professional historical methodology. Far from an institutional apologia Flanders steered clear of approaching Joseph Smith Jr. only as a great religious figure in American history. Instead, Flanders described Smith as "a man of affairs—planner, promoter, architect, entrepreneur, executive, and lawgiver—matters of which he was sometimes less sure than he was those of the spirit."²² Flanders explored the political, social, and economic culture of Latter Day Saintism in Nauvoo, and identified the Mississippi river community as the pinnacle of achievement in historical Latter Day Saintism.

Because polygamy allegedly had revelatory origins, Flanders carefully explained its circumstances but left room for those who denied its existence. Rather than arbitrarily placing the blame for polygamy on any one individual, Flanders addressed plural marriage as emerging from a secretive atmosphere of temple rituals starting with celestial

¹⁷ Davis raised these issues only tangentially in reference to the production of a proposed pamphlet during discussions in December 1859 about the possible merger of a church group led by Granville Hedrick and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, *Story*, 433-434.

¹⁸ Chapter LV, 486-490.

¹⁹ *Reorganized Church v. Church of Christ, et. al.* 60 Fed. 937. Legal proceedings of this case are available to researchers in the Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰ *Story*, 489.

²¹ *Story*, 490.

²² Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), vi.

marriage.²³ The author identified numerous church leaders who resisted “plurality”—some who left the church permanently and others who left but eventually returned.²⁴ Rather than deferring to simplistic interpretations of early RLDS historians, Flanders expressed the complexity of the social and theological issues involved in the marital practice.

Few scholarly writings within the church history corpus have had the enormous impact of *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*. To appreciate its contribution one must understand the context of its writing. Flanders’s scholarly approach used the methodology of the “New Mormon History” movement popularized in the 1960’s.²⁵ Historian D. Michael Quinn, observed that the New Mormon History scholarship willingly analyzed controversial topics and dealt openly with sensitive or even contradictory evidence; followed that evidence to revisionist interpretations that countered traditional assumptions; avoided the temptation to insult Mormon beliefs; upheld scholarly standards and expectations of the academe; avoided public relations pressures; and finally, resisted the temptation “to proselytize for religious conversion or defection.”²⁶ The Flanders interpretation of the Nauvoo experience has withstood the test of time and still remains the “gold standard” upon which Nauvoo scholarship is measured.

Influences of Richard P. Howard and Paul M. Edwards

The most significant institutionally-sponsored historical study to follow Inez Smith Davis’s *Story of the Church* was the two-volume history, *The Church Through the Years*, authored by then Reorganized Church Historian Richard P. Howard in the early 1990’s.²⁷ Following in the New Mormon History paradigm Howard offered a comprehensive account of the church through the late 1980’s. Dealing with the difficult issues of Nauvoo he agreed with Flanders’s approach that plural marriage extended from the Mormon theology of the afterlife. Howard acknowledged from the testimonies of William Marks and Isaac Sheen, early leaders in the Reorganized Church, that “Joseph Smith bore responsibility for the start of Nauvoo polygamy.”²⁸ But then Howard stated that Marks and Sheen noted that “shortly before his death Joseph saw the error of plural marriage, and tried to end it, to save the church from ruin.”²⁹ Howard’s analysis stems from his landmark “The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis” originally published in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* in 1983.

Similar to need of an earlier generation, the church needed a short, concise statement of its history. Paul M. Edwards, then director of Temple School, the church

²³ Flanders, 268.

²⁴ The term “plurality” was a later Mormon reference to polygamy. Flanders, 267.

²⁵ The term “New Mormon History” was coined by Jewish historical observer, Moses Rischin. See Moses Rischin, “The New Mormon History,” *The American West* 6 (March 1969): 49.

²⁶ Quinn, viii.

²⁷ Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, 2 vols., Independence, Missouri, Herald Publishing House, 1992-1994.

²⁸ Howard, I: 293.

²⁹ “Epistle of William Marks, . . .” in *Zion’s Harbinger and Baneemy’s Organ* (July 1853): 53; Sheen’s admission came in his statement in the October 9, 1852, issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was reprinted for church consumption later in the *True Latter Day Saints Herald*, 1 (January 1860): 24.

educational arm, responded with *Our Legacy of Faith*.³⁰ Edwards's approach to Nauvoo was similar to Howard's, though leaving some doubt in the reader's mind. *Legacy* is worth mentioning because of its popularity with readers.

From Remnant Church to Missional Church: The Community of Christ

Arguably, the most important development to impact the future of the Reorganized Church was the decision to move the Reorganized Church away from its claim as the "true remnant church" of Joseph Smith Jr. to become missional church. No longer did church leaders aspire to replicate the Nauvoo, Kirtland, Independence, or even Palmyra churches. Instead primary emphasis was placed on the church in the world. Successful mission to international peoples replaced heritage as the church's key source of validation.

It is difficult to determine exactly when the movement away from "remnant church" actually began. Certainly by 1967 evidences of the movement were noticeable when the First Presidency initiated the first in a series of Joint Council seminars to explore issues of theology and church history with intensity to find honest answers to difficult questions raised by scholars from both within and outside the church. Members followed the leadership. Delegates to the 1970 World Conference intended to purge the Doctrine and Covenants of all evidences of Nauvoo revelation. The compromise was a historical appendix that stripped the Nauvoo revelations of their scriptural status but allowed them to remain in the back of the book. For twenty years this accommodation lasted until the 1990 World Conference performed a "scriptural appendectomy" and completely removed the Appendix.

Conclusion

I would not want to suggest that Nauvoo has no role to play in today's Community of Christ. We are fortunate to own the south half of the historic village of Nauvoo that includes the Smith family burial plot, the Mansion House, the Nauvoo House, and the Red Brick Store. On an average, ninety-eight thousand visitors come to our historic site. We estimate that 70% are LDS Mormon, 5% are Community of Christ members, and the remaining 25% are not affiliated with the movement. This makes our historic sites program the single most popular method to introduce the Community of Christ to North America. We do so very carefully. Our tour guides speak openly about events that happened. We anticipate these numbers to at least treble in the coming years due to the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. In this regard, we find the reconstruction project a positive development and wish the LDS Church well.

Today, *Restorationist positivism*, expressed in incontestable claims to be "the only true church," has been replaced by a *theological ecumenism* that values all religions to be of inestimable worth. The adoption of the new name, Community of Christ, symbolizes the movement away from the apocalypticism implied in Latter Day Saintism to a new challenge to live in Christian fellowship for today. Today's focus is not so much on Nauvoo as on Nairobi and Nepal; not so much on Palmyra as on Papeete and Peru; not so much on Far West as on the Federal Republic of Germany and France; and not even so

³⁰ Paul M. Edwards, *Our Legacy of Faith*, Independence, Missouri, Herald Publishing House, 1991.

much on Kirtland as on Kinshasa, Kenya, and the Ukraine. Today's Community of Christ is in fact a world church with many more church members living outside North America than inside. On any given Sunday more people worship in French than in English. This is because of the enormous success of the church in Haiti and in French-speaking populations of Africa where thousands, members and non-members, worship. In these settings, the name Joseph Smith has little relevance and is probably unknown.

This may explain why the request to answer questions about Nauvoo seemed rather strange to me in light of the present direction of the church in the world. About Nauvoo I have been asked to answer questions no longer asked.