

“The Theme of Peace in Church History”

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June 2006

The purpose of this position paper is to discuss the theme of peace within the history of the Community of Christ. As a “work in progress,” much more scholarship on the topic is necessary than this brief statement can provide. In no way do I suggest that this is a comprehensive statement on the role of peace within our movement.

In the early nineteenth century frontier environment that hosted the foundation of Latter Day Saintism, the theme of peace seemed far removed from the founders. In this historical context, peace usually meant the maintenance of law and order, amidst wilderness and frontier violence. At a time of Indian exploitation and removal, and human bondage, the voices for peace were relatively unheard by society, particularly those on the frontier.

Certain experimental communities embraced the cause of peace, but limited their effectiveness when they embraced a closed, communal lifestyle. Such an approach to peace associated those who embraced its values as being outside the mainstream of American society. The “rough and tumble” frontier lifestyle and those accepting its costs—high infant mortality rates, disease, and inexperience with the hazards of wilderness travel and natural disaster—grew accustomed to violence, and not peace, as a way of life.

As much as they may have tried, the early Latter Day Saints could not escape this social milieu. Though examples of the language of peace could be found, it certainly was not followed with action. References to peace are made only in passing through letters, written well wishes, and in the concluding statements of church publications. Because the Latter Day Saints were uprooted constantly during the period from 1830-1844, the hopes of enjoying a peaceful lifestyle eluded them. Instead, they saw peace as a tool to survive the difficulties of their theological uniqueness. On one occasion, their efforts to promote peace became a ruse when, during the spring and summer 1834, a Latter Day Saint volunteer militia, headed by their prophet, marched on Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, from Kirtland, Ohio, under a banner waving “Peace” to suspicious onlookers. Known as Zion’s Camp, their truthful intent was to forcibly regain their sacred, lost lands in Zion. Undaunted by a hail storm and a plague, only a revelation from God would end their march.¹

Opportunities to initiate the peace theme during these early years abounded, yet other themes prevailed, relegating the peace theme to a very low priority. At the dedication of the House of the Lord, in Kirtland, Ohio, in March 1836, church leaders had the opportunity to weave the theme of peace through their pentecostal experience, but chose otherwise. At the founding of the church at Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri, the church program included building another temple, purging of heretics from within the movement, and the establishing a barricade mentality; all held sway over themes of peace. At the founding of the City of Nauvoo in spring 1839 Joseph Smith Jr. created a political and military kingdom on the Mississippi rather than a peaceable kingdom. This decision to isolate Mormonism from the gentile community proved fatal to the prophet and his brother, and had dramatic implications for the future unity of the religious movement. Finally, during his bid for the presidency of the United States, Smith

missed a prime opportunity to establish a strong peace plank in his political platform, but, again, chose otherwise.

In all these cases, historical circumstances prevented an elevation of the peace theme. The frequency of property confiscation, tar and feathering, rape, murder, political misrepresentation, and fraud created such an environment that it would have been very difficult for any church leader to initiate a theme of peace within the new religious movement. Instead, Smith and other church leaders spoke frequently in terms of revenge and retribution. Simply stated, there were no “voices of peace” within the early years of Latter Day Saintism. Because Joseph Smith Jr. retained single-handed authority to speak on behalf of the church, no other message could have been signaled to the outside world, assuming that there were those who were even willing to listen to such a message from the embattled frontier prophet. In their fourteen-year diaspora the saints would only know an uprooted lifestyle absent of peace and tranquility.

A second “era of opportunity” to embrace peace occurred after the Carthage murders, and with the reorganization of Latter Day Saintism. At this time the social environment changed dramatically. Peace societies in the United States grew strength and number. In the international arena, nations even moved to outlaw war as an instrument of foreign policy.ⁱⁱ In arbitrating the Russian-Japanese War with the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) Theodore Roosevelt received the Nobel Peace Prize, the only president in United States history to do so. At the time of the Great War for Democracy, the most popular song in the United States was “I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier,” and Woodrow Wilson’s 1916 presidential campaign slogan was “He Kept Us Out of War.” Wilson defeated Republican opponent Charles Evans Hughes who advocated a militarist foreign policy. Thus, the electorate used the election as a referendum on national priorities. In such pacifist social conditions, dramatically different from the founders, decision-makers in the new Reorganization pursued other themes, thus missing another opportunity to connect with the larger society.

Primary to the administration of Joseph Smith III, were themes to show the distinction from Utah Mormonism. Overt efforts to expose the “Mormon heresies” of polygamy, plurality of gods, and spiritual wifery remained central to the Reorganized Church’s existence. Joseph III’s efforts to clear his father’s name of such theological aberrations were constant and consistent. Church leaders sought to establish the legitimacy of Joseph Smith III as the true successor to his father, to flatten the hierarchy by elevating the authority of the Council of Twelve in the field, to reinterpret the principle of “the gathering,” and to proclaim the Book of Mormon as the prime proselyting tool. The first prophet of the Reorganization moved with skill to accomplish those goals. Only in the creation of a church seal did the theme of peace arise during this era.

The first action on the church seal came in the General Conference at Plano, Illinois, on April 8, 1874 on a motion to appoint a committee of three “to adopt a style and form of Church Seal, and procure the same, and report before the close of the Conference.”ⁱⁱⁱ The committee included Joseph Smith III, Jason W. Briggs, and Elijah Banta. Quickly deciding, the committee of three issued their report to the General Conference on the same day, reporting: “We, your committee on Church Seal, respectfully submit the following design, with legend, date, and motto: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Emblem, a Lion and a

Lamb lying down at rest. Motto, 'Peace.' Incorporated 1872.

Respectfully,

Joseph Smith
 J. W. Briggs Committee
 E. Banta”

The motif for the seal seemed to be based on the millennial condition found in the Old Testament scripture stating, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”^{iv} It is interesting to note that the seal has gone through at least six revisions, one service mark, and one commemorative Sesquicentennial design, and in each case, the “Peace” logo remained.

Following their father’s lead, the next two prophetic successors to Joseph Smith III did precious little to elevate a programmatic peace theme within the Reorganized Church. As the Nazi terror spread through Germany, Frederick Madison Smith did counsel the membership to support the values of peace when he wrote:

“We are bound to stand for peace, to lift up the ensign of peace; to maintain peace in our own midst as well as with neighbors. Our motto is peace; and the whole work of the church as a religious organization centers about the development and maintenance of brotherly love or fraternity, which is the essence of peace when it becomes dynamic.”^v

Moving through two world wars, a conflict in Korea, and a controversial military conflict in the Indochina peninsula moved the church toward positions embracing a greater social consciousness—the church in the world. While abroad, church members who served in the military encountered different cultures and took advantage of the opportunity to bear their witness. The product of these efforts resulted in a “flowering of the Reorganization” around the world.^{vi}

Some church leaders expressed concern about the relevancy of particular church tenets in some foreign cultures, particularly in Asia. Over time, and after numerous failed attempts to make the church doctrine applicable in the lives of indigenous peoples, several within the Council of Twelve sought theological precepts that could be universal in divergent cultures. Also, specific programmatic efforts to meet physical needs of deprived populations emerged with several projects such as the La Buena Fe mission in Honduras in 1957.^{vii} Elevated quickly for the first time in the history of Latter Day Saintism, in ways that were more specific and intentional, was the theme of peace which spoke meaningfully to impoverish peoples in Europe and Asia.

The Book of the Doctrine and Covenants provides the “constitutional framework” for the Reorganized Church, and expresses the values, directions, and challenges for the membership, accepted by them as reflecting the mind and will of God. There are only six uses of the term “peace” in the entire constitution. None occurred during the administrations of Joseph Smith III, Frederick Madison or Israel A. Smith. Only one use is found during the administrations of W. Wallace Smith and Wallace B. Smith. If it could be concluded that the Doctrine and Covenants records the theological evolution and inspires the programmatic direction of the church through each generation, then it is possible to conclude also that we have not been a “peace church.” Of

course, this does not preclude us from becoming one. However, it does mean that we must recognize where the church is positioned in the chronology of these efforts—at the very beginning.

Only one champion of peace during the first half of the twentieth century stands out. F. Henry Edwards committed his life to the cause of peace. He modeled his philosophy in his everyday life and took an activist stance when confronted by forces for violence and war. At the outbreak of the First World War, he spent months in Dartmouth Prison near Birmingham, England, and served for four years in a prison work-release program because of his conscientious-objection stance against war as a tool of international foreign policy and as an incredible waste of human and natural resources.^{viii} Using the pen against the sword, F. Henry Edwards wrote prolifically in church journals on peace.^{ix} However, it is accurate to say that, as important as his contribution was to the cause of peace in that era, he was a relatively lone voice.

The social upheaval of the 1960's provided the backdrop for the greatest call for peace within the Reorganization. Created by the periodic assassinations of leading governmental and civil rights figures, protest marches against the violence of racial segregation, and public deception at the highest levels of government, the challenge of peace took on a new relevance. Trained in seminaries sponsored by activist churches, many church leaders applied their understandings of the church in the world in terms of social action. Difficulties arising from the inability to gain strong World Conference endorsements on issues of peace meant that most activities were practiced in “unofficial” capacities, however.^x

Institutional moves toward peace came more clearly into focus with the construction of the temple in Independence, Missouri. Andrew Bolton argued that such a move was “inseparably linked” to the efforts of the early saints at the time of the organization of the church.^{xi} Because of the “omnibus nature” of the 1984 revelation, the peace emphasis got lost in the malaise following the documents presentation to the World Conference and its subsequent approval.^{xii} Attaching the issue to the construction of the temple was strategic in that it opened opportunities for peace as a primary church theme to receive a vote of approval from church membership.

With the conclusion of, and lessons learned from, the Vietnam War seeming to grow old, with relative peace in the world,^{xiii} and with the dedication ceremonies of the Independence Temple to peace fading into the past, the urgency of peace as an issue seems to be waning, thus creating problems for advocates to move the church in the direction of peace and justice. Initiation of the Prayer for Peace, Children’s Peace Pavilion, International Peace Award, and the Peace Colloquy are direct steps to ameliorate complacency. Perhaps it is too soon to observe if participation in these activities is limited to the same individuals, thus relegating the advocacy of peace as a mere parochial issue embraced by a limited few, or becoming the leading issue of the church as it moves toward, and into, the new millennium. Advocates will confront a “tyranny of inertia” that must be overcome to elevate peace in the minds of the church membership.^{xiv}

To summarize, the nineteenth century frontier social environment was not conducive to launch a strong tradition as a peace church at the time of organization, but opportunities to do so soon abounded. With the Reorganization, other issues prevailed in the “search for legitimacy” within the Latter Day Saint community and in the secular world. Placing peace on the church

seal and identifying it as the church motto was not followed with implementation. There were no prophetic champions to carry the peace theme into programmatic action, nor was there revelatory direction to do so. With the passing of several generations the social turmoil of the 1960's coincided with the desire and ability of some in the highest levels of church administration to move the church toward a “new social gospel” of which peace would be an significant tenet. The international circumstances of war provided opportunities for church expansion, necessitating a new, more universal belief structure—one that would be relevant in foreign cultures. Peace provided a vital component in that ideological transformation. Though recently, church leaders have launched several significant programs to demonstrate peace as a church priority, we do not have the wisdom of historical perspective to be able to say that Reorganized Church has established an enduring peace tradition. It is possible say, however, that we are now on the road. Only future generations will be able to assess the effectiveness our effort to begin a lasting tradition of being a church of peace. With “the power of imagination”^{xv} and the paradigm shifting that the church is experiencing, we are faced with a third “era of opportunity” to firmly implant peace in the church identity as it enters the twenty-first century.

ENDNOTES

- i. Doctrine and Covenants: 102.
- ii. See the Hague Conferences in 1899 and 1907 to which the United States was a signatory.
- iii. *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, vol. 21, no. 9, May 1, 1874: 271.
- iv. Isaiah 11: 6.
- v. “Our Attitude in War,” *Saints Herald*, vol. 86, no. 46, (November 18, 1939): 1443.
- vi. During the years from 1840-1900, there were five seven nation openings of the Reorganized Church. In the next half century only two were added. Since 1950 people in over thirty nations hosted the work. Statistical analysis by Apostle Larry Tyree, Council of Twelve, Interoffice Memo, February 6, 1997 in the possession of the author. Also see Chapter 33, “Evangelistic Resurgence since World War II,” in Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, vol. II, Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1993, 319-352.
- vii. Howard, 342.
- viii. Reminiscences of Paul M. Edwards, and in Paul M. Edwards, *F. Henry Edwards: Articulator for the Church*, Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1995, 44-46. This prison record created some problems for F. Henry Edwards who served in the Council of Twelve during World War II and then later, in the First Presidency, during the post-war period when church peace issues were discussed in the media.
- ix. Edwards used his editorial prerogative in *Zion's Ensign* through 1929 to 1932 to promote his

views on peace. See his “Editorial Paragraphs” in *Zion’s Ensign* 41 (November 14, 1929): 722, and in *Zion’s Ensign* 44 (February 11, 1932): 82, as examples. Perhaps the best example of his peace argumentation is “An Unarmed Army of Peace,” *Zion’s Ensign* 44 (May 5, 1932): 275. Also see his “World Peace,” *Saints’ Herald* vol. 82, no. 19 (May 7, 1935): 581.

x. Attempts at strong peace stances were muted when concerns arose from delegations representing third world dictatorial nations felt the safety jeopardized.

xi. Andrew Bolton, “Learning from Anabaptism: A Major Peace Tradition,” *Restoration Studies V*, Paul M. Edwards and Darlene Caswell, eds., (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1993), 13.

xii. Doctrine and Covenants 156: 5.

xiii. I do not mean to suggest here that the numerous crises around the world are not a factor in the world atmosphere toward peace. I observe today that there are no major crises which cause our church membership to see the need for an aggressive peace program. Pauline Maier, in *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain*, New York: Knopf, 1972, explored the difficulty of assuaging a population to action during times of relatively tranquility. She argued that complacency is difficult to overcome unless there is a perceived sense of urgency.

xiv. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

xv. Barbara McFarlane Higdon, *Committed to Peace* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1994), 133.