

Scripture in the Reorganization: Exegesis, Authority, and the “Prophetic Mantle”

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FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS OF MORMONISM, Latter Day Saints have held distinctive views about scripture. Particular, even peculiar, Latter Day Saint understandings of scripture surface at the very foundations of the movement. Historian Jan Shipps suggests that one of the difficulties with beginning the Mormon story with the First Vision account, as became common in the 1880s, is that it

obscures the centrality of the story of the appearances of Moroni and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and, as a result, also obscures the extent to which Mormonism, through its demonstration that divinity had not ceased direct intercourse with humanity at the end of the apostolic age, responded to the concerns of the inhabitants of the biblical culture out of which it emerged.

She adds,

Surely the story of the vision is important, but too much emphasis on it takes the Book of Mormon away from the limelight, obscuring the fact that it was this “gold bible” that first attracted adherents to the movement. (Shipps 1985, 31)

While the presence of the divine and the texts witnessing to this presence appear at the heart of Mormonism in general and the Reorganization in particular, both major streams of the Latter Day Saint movement remain curiously without an exegetical tradition. Commenting on the lack of such a tradition (and I would suggest the lack is even more pronounced in the Reorganized Church), Louis Midgley rightly laments that neglecting the texts heightens both churches’ vulnerability to the competing values and ideas of the surrounding

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culture (Midgley 1987, 221). Although the RLDS profess to hold scripture in high regard, the church remains deprived of disciplined exegetical conversations which could prove most enlightening and could also help secure the church within the mainstream of the Christian tradition. The Reorganization currently utilizes only two major commentaries on the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants (see Hartshorn 1964; Edwards 1977). As RLDS historian William D. Russell has observed, the church has produced no biblical scholars. At the church's Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa, the two courses specifically examining Latter Day Saint scriptures have not been offered since 1981.

RLDS writing on scripture tends to address specific topics and problems rather than exegesis of specific books or pericopes. Richard P. Howard's *Restoration Scriptures* (1969) deals largely with textual issues. Essays by Sharon Welch (1979) and Clare Vlahos (1983) examine underlying concepts of revelation. William D. Russell's work comes closest to grappling with the substantial questions of textual interpretation. He regularly questions the historicity of the Book of Mormon, urges the church to regard the book as a scriptural second witness for Jesus Christ, and criticizes the use and authority of the Doctrine and Covenants. Russell is the only RLDS writer to consistently define RLDS issues in terms of the scriptures and the exercise of hierarchical power. He recognizes the power of the scriptures in the Reorganization and the need for informed interpretation of them.¹ He also recognizes that the exegesis and authority of scripture in the RLDS Church remain closely linked to the First Presidency, the final interpreters of "the law." Summarizing this relationship, the Council of Twelve wrote in 1982: "We uphold the First Presidency in its essential function as the head of the church. . . . They are the ones who must finally interpret the meaning of the gospel found in the three standard books and in our own experience in terms faithful to the *spirit* of the Restoration" (*Saints' Herald*, November 1982, 32).

From 1986 to 1988, I served as a United Methodist pastor in the South, with a people and strata of American culture much at home with the Bible's stories, images, and metaphors. While serving there, I observed that wherever two or three Baptists gathered in Jesus' name, the subject of biblical inerrancy was with them also. In 1988, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church revised the Disciplinary statement of "Our Theological Task," largely guided by concerns over the primacy of scripture in the Wesleyan understanding

¹ See Russell 1966, 1967a, 1967b, 1974, 1982a, 1982b, 1988, 1989, 1990.

of the relationship among scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in theological development. Issues facing the wider Christian community are further complicated by the particularities and peculiarities of the Reorganization. The RLDS scriptures both facilitate and manifest theological development within the Reorganization. The theological and historical ferment of the last thirty years had aggravated tensions already present within the church, including a broad range of issues related to the nature and role of scripture.

Speaking from outside the RLDS community, I suggest here directions in which RLDS theology may profitably travel. For the movement to be relevant and vital, authentic RLDS theologies must be found which creatively integrate contributions from the particular matrix of RLDS symbols, stories, and events; the wider Christian community; and the modern world. Undergirding such theologies will be the conviction that God is at work in and through all three.² The fundamental, guiding principle for integration must be faithfulness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

RLDS thinkers need to move toward a more compelling integration of RLDS symbols and stories with those of the wider Christian community and tradition. Undergirding these developing theologies will be the conviction that God is at work in and through the RLDS context, the wider Christian context, and the contemporary context. Unfortunately, some RLDS progressives discount the contributions of their own tradition, allowing that tradition to be edged out by modern norms and mainline Christian thought. Meanwhile, RLDS fundamentalists value only the RLDS tradition. To be RLDS is to live with the tension between the church's origins in Mormonism and its openness to Protestantism. That tension is the defining characteristic of the Reorganization. When that tension collapses, one abandons the Reorganization. (See Conrad and Shupe 1985; Conrad forthcoming.)

Sensitive to these concerns and to the issues central to the church's future, I hope to illuminate three distinct areas of concern in RLDS scripture and to offer some constructive, preliminary suggestions for a fresh understanding of scripture. The three major areas, although interwoven, need to be carefully distinguished: (1) the exegesis and interpretation of scripture; (2) the authority of scripture; and (3) the role of the RLDS president.

² For more on the last thirty years of RLDS reformation and current streams of RLDS thought, see Shupe and Conrad (1985). Fruitful correspondence with Louis Midgley over the years has led me to realize that the RLDS have been revisionists, even dissenters, from the beginning and that their faith differs vastly from Utah Mormonism. It is to the RLDS that I direct the theological suggestions in this paper.

EXEGESIS AND INTERPRETATION

Although some RLDS progressives question the authoritative role of scripture in the church (see Mesle 1990), the primary, underlying issue facing the church is the way the scriptures are interpreted. Perhaps RLDS progressives question and even scoff at the authority of their scripture because they are justifiably dismayed over past and present uncritical interpretations of the church's text. Generally, members have leapt ahistorically across twenty or thirty centuries and read the texts as if they were directly addressed to the modern reader. All too often, RLDS tradition has failed to differentiate between meanings of the text in its time and in our time. The result is an essentially uncritical interpretation.

This approach to scripture dates back beyond the Reorganization to the very beginnings of Mormonism. Jan Shipps notes that the reopening of the canon was directly tied to a dispensationalist theology and helped establish direct, ahistorical continuity with the apostolic era (1985, 2). She explains:

Actually, the very first Mormons did not merely have a past that differed from the past of other nineteenth-century Americans; they had no recent past at all. Just as the outcome of the American Revolution had left the former English colonies without a usable political history, by designating all existing churches—not just the Roman Catholic variety—as corrupt abominations growing out of a “Great Apostasy” that began in the days of the ancient apostles, the Book of Mormon left the Saints with an enormous 1,400 to 1,800 year lacuna in their religious history. (1985, 51)

The uncritical reading of scripture and the reopening of the canon are thus grounded in what Shipps calls the “profound historylessness of early Mormonism,” as well as in the Mormons’ reinterpretation, recapitulation, and “reliving” of early Hebrew and Christian history (1985, 51–52, 62).

The Book of Mormon itself represents an apocryphal response to the human desire for scripture that speaks in an immediate way to a person or community. The Doctrine and Covenants, especially in its continuing RLDS form, attempts to extend the Book of Mormon experiment, providing immediately applicable, authoritative scripture for the present, without the apocryphal veiling of authorship. Given the distance from the early days of the movement, a distance enhanced by the developments of the last thirty years, the church must turn its attention to questions of exegesis and interpretation. At the very least, the church must assume responsibility for cultivating the theological and biblical disciplines (see Gilkey 1985, 29–41).

The church could also benefit from dialogue with the theology of David Tracy, especially his ideas on religious classics which open new ways of being in the world and disclose and conceal the divine presence. Throughout his writings, Tracy addresses questions of interpretation and authority. The scriptures deserve, even demand, critical exegesis because they witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and rightly serve as the primary dialogue partners in the Church's ongoing work of discovering, clarifying, and embracing the divine activity in the world.

From my perspective, the Reorganization is divided by two fundamentally opposing views of scripture. The progressives give too little weight to scripture, the fundamentalists too much. The theology of David Tracy provides a way of interpreting scripture which views scripture as essential to theological development but makes the Bible neither an idol nor simply one more good book among many. Christianity cannot be a strict religion of the book since the Bible did not create the Church; the Church created the Bible. The Church shaped the biblical record, yet the biblical record also shaped the Church and continues to exercise authority in the Church. The Bible guides, inspires, and also corrects the Church. The biblical record's authority is not based solely on a centuries-old decision to canonize certain texts. On the contrary, the biblical record remains authoritative through its centuries-long, faithful, evocative witness to the divine activity in history. Most important, the Bible faithfully witnesses to the Christ event. Through the biblical words, the Church still encounters the living Word, Jesus Christ (Tracy 1981, 248–304).

The scriptures, Tracy insists, serve as “the normative, more relatively adequate expressions of the community's past and present experience of the Risen Lord, the crucified one, Jesus Christ.” As relatively adequate expressions of the early Christians' experience of the risen Christ, the scriptures nevertheless

remain open to new experiences—new questions, new and sometimes more adequate responses for later generations who experience the same event in different situations. Yet throughout the Christian tradition these scriptures will serve as finally normative: as that set of inspirations, controls and correctives upon all later expressions, all later classical texts, persons, images, symbols, doctrines, events that claim appropriateness to the classic witnesses to that event. (1981, 249)

Overshadowing the classic texts which witness to the Christ event stands the Christ event itself.

Modifying Paul Tillich's method of correlation, Tracy suggests that “Christian theology is the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an

interpretation of the contemporary situation” (in Grant and Tracy 1984, 170). In interpreting the scriptures, theologians will benefit from the hermeneutics of retrieval and of suspicion, both of which are enabled and encouraged by the New Testament texts themselves.

A hermeneutics of retrieval seeks to preserve what is faithful and valuable in the text. The hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, supposes something may be wrong in the text and therefore approaches it with suspicion. The interpreter recognizes the possibility of a systematic distortion. A patriarchal culture, for instance, might have distorted the texts of the biblical witness. Tracy notes a person conversing with a psychotic may notice something is wrong or distorted and therefore have to break off the conversation to diagnose and identify points of disease, recognizing the need for healing (Grant and Tracy 1984, 162–63). The Church needs both types of hermeneutics. It learns, Tracy says, “to retrieve and suspect all in the light of the revelatory event of Jesus Christ. . . . All traditions—and even all scriptural texts—must on their own inner Christian grounds allow themselves to judge what is said by what is meant. The event of Jesus Christ judges the texts and traditions witnessing to it and not vice versa” (Grant and Tracy 1984, 184–85; see Küng 1988, 42–99).

The complex relationship between the Christ event, the texts witnessing to the event, and personal tradition and experience does not excuse the church from wrestling with the issues. Contemporary Christian expressions need not be identical to early Christian expressions, but neither should they be in radical disharmony with them. The RLDS need to develop criteria for appropriate expressions and must be more willing to engage the texts. This means, of course, taking a risk. Tracy observes that the most dangerous act for a fundamentalist may well be to engage the texts in conversation since the texts may well challenge the fundamentalist’s preunderstanding (Grant and Tracy 1984, 173).

AUTHORITY

If the RLDS church is to move forward in its theology and mission, it must confront its history and its uncritical use of scripture. In addition to cultivating the theological and biblical disciplines, reconsidering its approach to scripture, and learning from historians like Shippo and theologians like Tracy, the church would do well to reaffirm the centrality of the Christ event and consider the consequences for understanding the authority of and relationship between the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants. Moreover, as the RLDS come to understand themselves as “part of a total [Christian] stream, affected by that stream and in [their] own way affecting that

stream" (RLDS n.d., 101), they will need to value the distinctive contributions of RLDS symbols and stories but also accept nontraditional interpretations that more accurately describe theological heritage and habits.

What disturbs me about the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and especially instant canonization practice of the RLDS, is the rapid elevation of contemporary materials to the status of scripture. The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and recent RLDS Doctrine and Covenants sections are given scriptural status within a decade of their appearance or in RLDS practice within seventy-two hours. It is not prudent to place such untested texts alongside those which have been tested over 2,500 years, giving an RLDS section 156 the same canonical authority as Luke or Romans. My plea here is simply for RLDS to again confess the centrality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is fundamental, then the biblical witness takes on a priority that supercedes that of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. Why? Because of the New Testament's historical closeness to the Christ event and its authoritative role in all subsequent Christian history. From a Mormon point of view, the Book of Mormon could be said to play roughly the same role. Like most Protestants, however, I regard the Book of Mormon as the writing of Joseph Smith in 1830 and thus quite different from the New Testament. William D. Russell and other leading RLDS thinkers and writers also regard the book as authored by Smith, not the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. Thus many of the Reorganization's own leaders already relativize the place of the Book of Mormon.

The Reorganization should come clean on the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. The books should not be in the canon of scripture in the first place. The progressives do not read them, and there is no point calling them scripture if one does not read them, preach from them, or teach from them. Texts should not be called scripture just because they once played a role in the church's history. Now that the RLDS want to move into the Christian mainstream, they should take these questions more seriously. Placing the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants on a level equal to the Bible is a significant barrier to ecumenical understanding.

Two key paragraphs in the Basic Beliefs Committee's *Exploring the Faith*³ provide sound guidance for a re-evaluation of the canonical status

³ Under the leadership of Clifford A. Cole, then president of the Council of Twelve Apostles, a Basic Beliefs Committee developed a new statement of the Reorganization's faith. The Statement of Belief was published along with a series of

of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. According to the Statement of Faith,

Revelation centers in Jesus Christ, the incarnate word, who is the ultimate disclosure of truth and the standard by which all other claims to truth are measured. . . . We believe that the scriptures witness to God's redemptive action in history and to [human] response to that action. When studied through the light of the Holy Spirit, they illumine [human] minds and hearts and empower them to understand in greater depth the revelation in Christ. (1970, 14)

Given the primacy of the revelation of God in Christ, RLDS theologians developing a working canon within the canon ought to give priority to the biblical witnesses rather than to the other two books erroneously accepted as canonical within the Reorganization.

Whether or not one accepts the entirety of Shipps' interpretation of Mormon origins, it seems clear that the reopening of the canon was directly tied to dispensationalism and the uncritical reading of scripture. Both dispensationalism and the traditional RLDS approach to scripture have been sharply undercut, if not altogether devastated, by the developments of the last thirty years of RLDS reformation. The canonical status of the Bible, unlike that of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, derives not merely from decisions of Church councils centuries ago, but from its power to mediate the divine presence through the centuries in provocative, evocative, and transforming ways. While the Bible incorporates the diversity of centuries of interpretation and reinterpretation and has acquired classic status, the Book of Mormon stands as the earliest book-length expression of Mormonism's founder. The Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants acquired canonical status within the RLDS community a few decades after their publication, without benefit of prolonged testing through time. In recent years, additions to the Doctrine and Covenants have been authorized within a week of their presentation to the church.

The dangers of canonizing too rapidly may be seen in the action of the 1970 World Conference in removing Sections 107, 109, and 110 to the appendix of the Doctrine and Covenants (Compiers 1986). Twenty years later, the World Conference authorized publication of

expository essays as *Exploring the Faith* in 1970. In the book's preface, the First Presidency observed that Joseph Smith's *Epitome of Faith* (known among LDS as the *Articles of Faith*) was dated: "In more recent times it has been recognized that a more adequate statement of the beliefs of the church should be developed" (p. 5). The book is the most significant RLDS theological work in recent RLDS history and reflects the depth to which the contemporary Reorganization has been influenced by Protestant thought.

the Doctrine and Covenants without the appendix (World 1990). The canonical status of the two books appears especially troublesome for RLDS progressives. In response to remarks I made on this subject at a Graceland College religion class in May 1990 and at the RLDS Theological Forum in Independence, Missouri, in June 1990, questioners defended the inclusion of these two books and the community's right to make decisions about its canon. Yet many of the progressives quickly insisted that they seldom if ever read or preach from the two books. In reality then, the two books are *not* functioning as canon for them.⁴

In practice, the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants have neither classic nor canonical status among the progressives within the Reorganization. When judged by an ecumenical Christian context and the time taken to test the writings before granting them authoritative canonical status, neither book merits theological inclusion within the canon of Christian scripture. Denying a book canonical status, however, in no way suggests that one could not benefit from its careful reading and study. Obviously dependent on the Bible, the Book of Mormon claims to be a witness for Jesus Christ. The book, therefore, should be regarded as authoritative only to the extent that it echoes the fundamental revelation of God in Jesus Christ. "The Book of Mormon," Russell insists, "is important for us not in giving us events to affirm as historically accurate but rather in helping us become better disciples of the One for whom the book claims to be a 'second witness'" (1983, 198).

THE "PROPHETIC MANTLE"

Having argued against an uncritical, ahistorical view of scripture and also against attempts to unduly diminish scripture's authority, yet also arguing for critical exegesis and conversation with those scriptures whose authority derives from their witness to Christ, I now question the role of the RLDS president, the church's desire for authoritative interpretation, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Any discussion of the Doctrine and Covenants must include mention of the integral role of the RLDS successor to "the prophetic mantle." The RLDS president assumes a unique role in the book's continuing growth, as

⁴ Among the RLDS, Russell denies the historicity of the Book of Mormon but retains the book in the RLDS canon. His definition of scripture includes the qualification that it be "authoritative for the faith of that community" (1983). While the LDS may regard the Book of Mormon highly, the RLDS largely neglect it, and RLDS progressives do not take the book's theological perspectives seriously.

well as in the interpretation of all three books of RLDS scripture. The president's power to speak with such binding authority on questions of faith and morals has its closest parallel in the papacy.⁵

In 1982, in response to dissent from the conservative Restoration Festival, Inc.,⁶ the Council of Twelve addressed a letter to the entire church:

In a real sense they set themselves above the head of the church when they proclaim that they intend "to continue to function until the church returns to the original doctrines of the Restoration." In other words the R.F.I. leadership is expecting to identify and interpret what are "the original doctrines of the Restoration." One key doctrinal point in the Restoration as it is continued in the Reorganization is that it is the First Presidency that interprets the doctrine of the church, not a self-appointed board of men.

This letter displays the RLDS tendency to regard differences of interpretation as attempts to diminish the supreme directional control of the First Presidency rather than as legitimate disagreement on fundamental issues. The authority of the First Presidency is firmly established in RLDS tradition, at least as long as a lineal descendant of Joseph Smith, Jr., remains in office, and especially since Frederick M. Smith consolidated and concentrated power in the First Presidency from 1915 to 1946. Whether the issue is the Council of Twelve opposing the president (under Frederick M. Smith), baptizing those who practice polygamy (under W. Wallace Smith), or ordaining women and constructing a \$75 million temple (under Wallace B. Smith), presidents use their power to settle disagreements and provide authoritative direction.

At this point, let me point out the theological difference between the authority of scripture and the authority of the RLDS president to speak "by revelation" in interpreting the tradition and its texts. I disagree with C. Robert Mesle who concluded a discussion on circumstances leading to the 1984 decision to ordain women by adding: "Reliance on the prophet is still fundamentally reliance on the authority of scripture" (1990, 17). To the contrary, the continuing RLDS dependence on the president is anything but reliance on scripture. The instant

⁵ A further parallel is the infallibility of church and presidential teaching. See K ung (1983) for a good Catholic treatment of the problem, and also K ung's constructive proposals on indestructibility or indefectibility (1980).

⁶ Founded in 1979 and led by Greg Donovan of Detroit, Restoration Festival, Inc. was a conservative organization dedicated to traditional RLDS beliefs, which drew a negative and forceful response from the RLDS hierarchy. A brief history of recent RLDS dissent is William D. Russell's "Defenders of the Faith: Varieties of RLDS Dissent," *Sunstone*, June 1990, pp. 14-19.

canonization of presidential utterances is an aberration in Christian history and an assault on the authority of scripture. Instant canonization is oxymoronic, a gross trivialization of scripture. The Old and New Testaments required centuries to acquire canonical status, a status validated in succeeding generations. The biblical witnesses merit a degree of authority above that of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants (see Brown and Collins 1990). Arguing against the instant canonization of biennial presidential pronouncements, therefore, represents a higher, not a lower view of scripture.

The RLDS church tends to place its president and contemporary thinking above the biblical witness and the Christian tradition. This tendency began when Joseph Smith, Jr., interpreted his vision to condemn all existing churches and when he attempted to retranslate the Bible without studying ancient texts or mastering Hebrew and Greek. Had Joseph Smith, Jr., held a high view of the Bible, he would not have so radically revised Genesis, Isaiah, or the prologue to John. It is surely no coincidence that persons most offended by Mormonism are persons with a high, even fundamentalist, view of scripture.

Instant canonization trivializes the genre of scripture, separates the church from the wider Christian community, fosters anti-democratic trends in polity, and concentrates ecclesiastical power in the hands of a few. Not only does the RLDS practice imply the insufficiency of the Bible, but it ignores the centuries required for the Old and New Testaments to achieve canonical status. Breaking with tradition of the 1850s and 1860s, the contemporary church canonizes within days, and recently without even a copy of the text in their hands. Once approved, the documents bind the church with only extremely limited possibility of repeal, since the First Presidency ruled in 1986 that only those who introduce documents for canonical status have the authority to initiate their repeal (Compier 1986; World 1986, 288–90).

Having argued against instant canonization and the canonical status of the Doctrine and Covenants, how should one understand the book and the presidential office? Part of the RLDS desire for biennial presidential pronouncements stems from the continuing longing for scriptures which speak to the present moment without the need for detailed exegesis, hermeneutics, and mutually critical correlations. The RLDS desire to read a text from one context and apply it directly to another context is most easily fulfilled with the Doctrine and Covenants, which helps explain why the book's language pervades so much of RLDS discourse. The presidential utterances, however, should be understood as more than anachronistic exercises of hierarchical power; they should also be understood as responses to the church's genuine

need for authoritative and considered guidance to help them live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the contemporary world.

This need, however, may be met most responsibly in other ways. The guidance sought may best be offered by a teaching office. The authoritative teaching and interpretation rightfully delivered by the First Presidency need not be enshrined in scripture. On the contrary, not enshrining it in scripture heightens our appreciation and respect for scripture, removes a barrier to ecumenical understanding and progress, increases interest in the history and development of doctrine, and encourages creative theological reflection and dialogue.

The First Presidency functions best not when it arbitrarily settles discussions by preempting dialogue, but when it teaches and fosters the dialogue that helps all levels of the church hear, discern, and respond to the Spirit. Rather than determining and defending the truth, the Presidency's goal should be teaching and leading others to discover and embrace the truth. More specifically, the First Presidency serves the church effectively, responsibly, and faithfully when it encourages the production of the *Position Papers* for dialogue on education and growth in discipleship, supports projects like the Basic Beliefs Committee's *Exploring the Faith* (1970), and offers the *Presidential Papers* (1979) for study, reflection, and dialogue. It should teach, encourage, lead, and explore rather than issuing instantly canonized instructions like section 150:10–11 on polygamy and section 156 on temple building and the ordination of women. Although the First Presidency still responds to the church's need for authoritative guidance and interpretation through traditional means, better means are available and should be utilized.

World Conference resolutions already acknowledge the First Presidency as chief interpreters of "the law" for administrative and program purposes. RLDS theologians should develop the concept of the teaching office while noting the roles of the ordained ministry, theologians, lay members, and World Conference as interpreters and decision-makers.⁷ The various sections of the Doctrine and Covenants should be regarded more as authoritative teaching, rather like papal

⁷ In the United Methodist Church, for example, "the Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world, and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships" (*Book of Discipline* 1988, par. 527.2). However, the highest legislative and policy-making authority is vested in the General Conference: "No person, no paper, no organization, has the authority to speak officially for The United Methodist Church, this right having been reserved exclusively to the General Conference under the Constitution" (610).

encyclicals or pastoral letters from the United Methodist Council of Bishops, respected and authoritative but not canonical.

The major obstacle to developing the kind of teaching office I envision, however, is the immense satisfaction felt by all ends of the RLDS theological spectrum whenever a biennial presidential pronouncement meets with their approval. All sides of the church contribute to this problem, but over the last few decades, and particularly during the last ten years, the progressive wing has been especially guilty. RLDS progressives, who profess to prize dialogue, tolerance, pluralism, and a more democratic RLDS polity, seemingly cannot hail enough the presentation and implementation of section 156 of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants. While numerous RLDS progressives have written about the ordination of women and “temple ministries” since April 1984, precious few have denounced the hierarchical power used to bring forth the document and the subsequent suppression of dissenting views. Since April 1984, the hierarchy has created special membership categories to prevent dissenters from blocking calls to the priesthood for women, ruled out of order attempts to reconsider section 156 on the World Conference floor, denied the Conference’s right to initiate repeal of canonical status, silenced hundreds of dissenting priesthood members, and disorganized stakes, all to suppress dissent within the church. The silence of progressives on these issues has been deafening and inexcusable.

RLDS theologians, historians, and scholars remain too content with trying to influence the church’s direction through its leaders in the Joint Council, bureaucracy, and appointee staff. Lacking forums to win popular support or even to openly dialogue on the issues, the temptation is to try to impose one’s agenda on the church through the hierarchy. Neither the left nor the right will assist the Presidency in developing and implementing the teaching office as outlined here as long as they continually try to get the hierarchy to adopt and impose their own respective theological agendas.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary discussion and offering of constructive suggestions related to exegesis, authority, and the presidential office again demonstrates the urgent, critical need to do theology within the RLDS church. Wide-ranging dialogue should clarify what RLDS theology ought to be. The questions and crises of the last thirty years of RLDS reformation remain with the church in 1991, aggravated now by a polarization within the denomination. RLDS tendencies toward moderation and openness to the broader Christian community, present

since the early days of the Reorganization, have become more pronounced in recent decades, displacing the opposite tendencies toward emphasis on distinctiveness and the restoration of the New Testament era church.

Reforms have come to the church, but at great price. For the last thirty years, RLDS progressives have steadily dismantled traditional RLDS beliefs: challenging the notion that the Inspired Version is more than a theological revision of the Bible by Joseph Smith, Jr.; denying the antiquity of the gospel; arguing against the position that the gospel is a set of principles to be rationally held and believed; denying that the Reorganization is the only true and living church on the earth; rejecting the view that the Reorganized church is the restoration of the New Testament church and its priesthood offices; undermining belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon; deemphasizing the gathering to Zion and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Especially since 1984, the leadership, supported by progressive members, has vigorously sought to suppress dissent among those speaking out for traditional RLDS beliefs. Although concerned about dialogue with the wider Christian community, non-Christians, and the modern world, RLDS leaders and progressives show no concern for dialogue with members of their own church who believe the way the church taught them to believe for generations.

One of the costs has been the polarization of the denomination and the church's inability to recognize, confront, and appreciate its own tradition. Having hurriedly placed new wine in old wineskins, the church is now torn between fundamentalists who would fossilize the tradition and progressives who would discard and forget the tradition. In the midst of this theological confusion, the church, still dazed from its recent reformation, struggles to find its center and itself. The confusion is most evident in the current church program and the priesthood. In pursuit of its primary program objective, the church, which never had an inkling of a theology of temples, now devotes all its resources toward completion of a \$75 million temple project in Independence by the mid-1990s. In the rush to ordain women to the priesthood without considering the theological implications, the RLDS church has become the first church in history to ordain women to the office of patriarch! A decade ago, Paul Jones, professor at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, lamented that the RLDS church consisted of two divisions: "the conservatives who are chasing the wrong vision and the liberals who have lost any vision."

One can only hope that having spent years explaining what the RLDS church can no longer believe, the church's leaders and theologians will turn their efforts toward articulating what the church may

and should believe if it is to be centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ and fulfill its unique mission in the world. Perhaps some of the problems in the Reorganization stem from a tendency to see the church as an end in itself rather than as a means of divinely led creative transformation. Finally, the Voice which beckons us does not call us to be faithful to the RLDS tradition or to the currents of the modern world. Ultimately, the call is to be faithful to the God of grace and love revealed in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior of the world. In the light of this call, the issues related to scripture in the Reorganization are permeated by a single, overriding question: Given the insights and challenges of historical and theological research over the last thirty years of RLDS reformation, can RLDS theologians offer a compelling, comprehensive theological vision for faithfully following Jesus Christ within the RLDS church in the 1990s?

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