

Conceiving God

A Guide for Latter-day Seekers
On Community of Christ Theology



Community of Christ

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Independence, Missouri, USA*

Second Edition, March 2015

Acknowledgments

This book has been prepared to explain the development of Community of Christ's understanding of God to interested people of the Latter-day Saint tradition. In some instances, we have 'translated' Community of Christ terminology into language more familiar to Latter-day Saint usage.

A note on "Theology": Traditionally, the Restoration has upheld doctrines or a list of unchanging, unquestionable teachings. In Community of Christ, we have come to embrace theology as a journey to understanding God that is more fluid but always has the eternal God as our object of study and devotion.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Community of Christ encourages members to "use the most up-to-date translations of the Bible available." This is because translations such as the NRSV "provide students of the Bible with accurate translations based on the best current knowledge of ancient languages in which the Bible was written"—from *Walking with Jesus: Disciples in Community of Christ* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 2011), 33.

We appreciate the work of Seth L. Bryant, Ronald D. Harmon Jr., David J. Howlett, Benjamin Kelsey, Robin Kincaid Linkhart, Dale E. Luffman, Lachlan E. Mackay, and Steven L. Shields.

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1. Conceiving God, in the Hebrew and Christian Traditions

Introduction

Despite affirmations that God is eternal, history shows that human conceptions of God change over time. This is as true in the last two centuries of the Restoration, as it has been during the last two millennia of Christianity, or throughout the Hebrew tradition. Even a casual comparison of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures show very different understandings of God over time. Despite these fluid conceptions, humans often try to make it seem like their religions have never changed in beliefs or traditions. Perhaps they attempt to hide change as though this acknowledgment would undermine the validity of their journey as a people of faith. But religion can be maturing and faithful at the same time: growth and discovery are necessary components to responding to God.

In Community of Christ, we recognize that beliefs and traditions are not the same as the eternal nature of God. It is liberating to acknowledge that religion contains a necessary irony: it makes claims about the eternal and transcendent, yet these claims come through fallible humans in the midst of time and culture. Believers often fail to see this irony (especially those who have never had their faith shaken). But it is reasonable and even necessary to confess that religion is a human construct for a reality ultimately beyond our ability to describe. This confession does not do away with religion, or its surety, but punctuates Paul's point, that "now we see but through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). As we respond in faith, religion provides unfailing answers to anchor our lives which are fluid and uncertain, sometimes tragically so.

Unfortunately, the last thing religious leaders often want to do is pull back the curtain and examine the frailty and potential flaws in faith-based claims regarding eternal principles. But for believers who have had their faith is shaken, who have seen behind the curtain and not liked the vision, an honest discussion can be healing. When we do this, we rediscover authentic spirituality that transforms us even in the midst of our human frailty. With nothing to hide and no need to pretend to more than we know, we embrace God in faith. This new awareness allows that, even with our limited understanding, there is something ultimately real in our faith that we cannot explain, or explain away.

It has been said that mature believers often experience three phases in their faith.¹ The first phase is the original, unquestioned faith, or a believing naïveté. The second is

¹ These three phases of belief are attributable to philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Some might find further exploration of these three phases useful, although they are described in the main body of the text briefly. The first phase is that of unquestioned belief, or a primitive naïveté, when religious myths (or origin stories and scriptural texts) are accepted on face value as explanations for the world. The second phase is described by Ricoeur as a "desert of criticism," when former beliefs are questioned and their associated

a desert of doubt and uncertainty, a time when nothing seems right in their faith tradition, quite the opposite of the first phase when nothing of their faith was questioned or seemed wrong. The third and final phase of mature faith brings the person full circle, back to believing but with eyes wide open. It doesn't mean coming home as though nothing has changed: everything has changed. We come home wiser, missing some of the magic of earlier times, perhaps; but we consciously choose to be restored to the symbols and language of our earlier faith, reclaiming their power and beauty, while at the same time acknowledging and deciding to move past that which was not healthy or honest.

We choose to believe, reclaiming our spiritual childhood without being childish. As Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). Choosing to believe *as* children believe does not mean we accept everything in our faith without question; indeed, the fact that belief is a choice sets us apart from a child who believes without question. Instead, we recognize that the foundational myths that we embrace reflect ultimate truth, and we have faith and trust in them.² In coming home to our spiritual childhood, but with a mature faith, we hear the voice of God calling us once again.

myths and religious texts emptied of meaning and power through critical examination. And, finally, coming full circle, the third phase involves embracing a second naïveté, or reinvestment of meaning and power into that which was previously criticized and devalued. Regarding the second naïveté, in his book *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur writes: "Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive naïveté? Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* that we can *hear* again" (351). Among those inside and out of the church, some have assumed that critically examining religion leads only to a loss of belief without the potential for coming full circle, back to faith. But Ricoeur held out that criticism in itself could be a form of restoring belief. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, he uses the term "dissolution of myth" to describe myths losing their original meaning and acceptance due to critical examination. But, he explains, "[t]he dissolution of the myth as explanation is the necessary way to the restoration of the myth as symbol. Thus, the time of restoration is not a different time from that of criticism; we are in every way children of criticism, and we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative" (350). Of this restorative criticism, Ricoeur also states, "The [modern and critical] epoch holds in reserve both the possibility of emptying language by radically formalizing it and the possibility of filling it anew by reminding itself of the fullest meanings, the most pregnant ones, the ones which are most bound by the presence of the sacred to man" (349). Filled with hope, Ricoeur concludes, "It is not regret for the sunken Atlantes that animates us, but hope for a re-creation of language. Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again."

² An example of this can be found in how one views the traditional Restoration claim regarding the location of the Garden of Eden, and the future location of Zion. A critical mind might reject one or both claims. But a critical believer, even if they didn't accept both myths literally, could find power and beauty in having Eden and Zion co-located, in the sacred story of humanity coming full circle, and back to the presence of God but with our eyes opened. This is the story of the Restoration, the very concept of restoration—*coming back home, full circle, but to a different plane at which we started*. The spiral is meaningful in Community of Christ as a symbol for several reasons, and this is one of them, as it represents restoration. As with the Eden and Zion example, viewing the traditional story of the Restoration with ever new eyes can be transformation for our individual lives, and the life of the Church.

Of course, members of the Restoration do not have to belong to Community of Christ to undertake such a journey; likewise, many within our church embrace a traditional Restoration worldview without criticism, and we respect their faith. But for Latter-day Seekers, even if you only choose to journey with us for a short time, our hope is that you discover the joy in the journey of coming home to a mature faith. This journey is the story of Community of Christ. In many ways, it is the Restoration story: a movement that brought people home to a place where they could reclaim faith in Christianity after becoming disenchanted.

Somewhere along the way, however, many in the Restoration lost sight of how critically important it is to constantly challenge ourselves with the question which was central to our founding: “Is our faith reflecting God’s will?” Sadly, forgetting the reason for our founding, “restoration” became more an event to be preserved than an unfolding prophetic journey leading to new questions and new discoveries. The Reorganization was not immune to this pitfall. Once we felt the foundation of the church was restored by Joseph Smith Junior, we fell into believing that our beliefs and traditions were unassailable—and at times the resulting rigidity caused us to lose sight of the genuine mission of Christ.

Not so long ago our views on the Restoration were absolute and exclusivist. We, like many other denominations, held the position that we alone had the true faith, authoritative priesthood, and salvific ordinances. We have since journeyed through the desert of criticism, where we questioned our original naïveté. Now we have come home, full circle, to proclaim that the Restoration is divinely inspired, that it continues to unfold and illuminate the path forward into the future.

We trust that God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and that we are restored to God through Christ. And our shared experience is that God is still speaking and still revealing. We receive continuing revelation, and trust in its Source, while acknowledging that scripture “has been written and shaped by human authors through experiences of revelation and ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the midst of time and culture” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:7a).³ Though humans are involved in producing scripture as they respond to the Holy Spirit, still we find an overarching eternal message which transcends culture.

Ever aware of our humanity, this is the transcendent truth of which we are sure: as revealed in Christ, God loves us, and calls us to do likewise, loving others through

³ The entire verse of Doctrine and Covenants 163:7a states: “Scripture is an indispensable witness to the Eternal Source of light and truth, which cannot be fully contained in any finite vessel or language. Scripture has been written and shaped by human authors through experiences of revelation and ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the midst of time and culture.” For more about how we view scripture, read “Scripture in Community of Christ,” located online at <http://www.cofchrist.org/what-we-believe/basic-beliefs/scripture-in-community-of-christ>

communities filled with the fruits of the Spirit, of joy, hope, love, and peace. Such is Zion, or the world transformed to its best. In Community of Christ, we lift up Zion as the peaceful reign of God. As a prophetic people, we are called by God to establish Zion here on the earth. Over the last few decades, God has opened our eyes to see that our calling isn't exclusive. We are not diminished one bit to say that we join with all people who pursue God's vision of peace and justice, even the Zion of our hopes.

God is actively working throughout creation, in diverse ways, to bring salvation and restoration. We are very humbled to be one expression, and an essential one at that, of God's ongoing creation. True to our calling, our church mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ, and promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace. This mission reflects both our deep roots in the Christian tradition, and our Restoration heritage. We proclaim Christ and promote communities because Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments are to love God, and to love our neighbor. And we proclaim Christ and promote communities because this is the calling of the Restoration, to reveal a God who still speaks, and to build Zion as communities that reflect God's nature and will.

Jesus prayed, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." Zion is an earthly reflection of heaven—of the unity and love reflected in the perfect community and relationships traditionally proclaimed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Regarding Zion as a reflection of God's nature, Stephen M. Veazey, Prophet-President of Community of Christ, gave this inspired counsel to the church at World Conference in 2013:

Community of Christ, a divine vision is set before you.... As a spiritual venture, boldly follow [Jesus Christ's mission] into the heart of God's vision for the church and creation. *Then, in response to growing insight about God's nature and will, continue to shape communities that live Christ's love and mission.*⁴

In other words, to fully understand the nature of community that we promote, it's essential to understand the God whom we proclaim.

But we recognize that it may be difficult for a Latter-day Seeker to understand why we proclaim a Triune God, especially in light of some of Joseph Smith Junior's teachings. Accordingly, this resource explores concepts of God in the Hebrew,

⁴ Italics added. The 2013 words of counsel can be found at www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/Words-of-Counsel-14-April-2013.pdf. President Veazey has presented this to the church, for reflection and consideration. Inspired counsel may or may not be canonized in the Doctrine & Covenants. In Community of Christ, we live out Jesus Christ's mission through what we call our five *Mission Initiatives* or the five-fold mission of the church: Invite People to Christ; Abolish Poverty, End Suffering; Pursue Peace on Earth; Develop Disciples to Serve; and, Experience Congregations in Mission. Read more about the Mission Initiatives at www.cofchrist.org/mission-initiatives.

Christian, and Restoration traditions, which will provide the foundation for understanding Community of Christ's conception of God, and why we hold these particular beliefs and perspectives. At times, this resource focuses a great deal on our history as a people, especially our journey in the Reorganization, so that readers can better understand how we came to conceive God as we now conceive God.

God, as Conceived in Hebrew Scripture

Much of what we proclaim about God either comes directly from scripture, or is reflective of what we learn in scripture—for example, how we understand the nature of Christ. The most foundational idea scripture proclaims is that there is one God. This is known as monotheism. We find this truth in the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament). But while many believe monotheism is found from Genesis forward, this is not the case.

God, as conceived in the Hebrew Scriptures, begins as the greatest God among a pantheon (or cosmic court) of gods. In this worldview, each nation claimed to have their own god or gods (e.g., see Exodus 15:11, Deuteronomy 10:17, Psalm 82:1). The Patriarchs, Moses, and others made the bold claim that their God was greater than all other gods, and was the only god worth worshiping (which is called “monolatry”). Reflecting monolatry, the first of the Ten Commandments proclaims: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:7).

If we pull back the curtain, we find two things going on in the first half of the Bible that aren't apparent on the surface. First, it isn't until the time of the Babylonian exile that Israel begins to proclaim emphatically that there is one and only one God, or monotheism as we'd recognize it today. One of the first solid proclamations of monotheism is found in Isaiah 44:6, written during the Babylonian Exile, which we'll explore in a moment.

The second little-known fact about the Bible is that authorship is more complicated in the Hebrew Scriptures than a basic Sunday school class would have us believe. The best example are the “Five Books of Moses,” also known as the Torah. Despite claims made in the text, the Torah was not written by Moses—but, instead, it was written long after his death by several authors, at times with competing ideas.⁵ These texts were woven together throughout and tidied up by a person or group, known as a “redactor,” interested in bringing the records together into a cohesive narrative. But the redactor's fingerprints remain, and the separate threads or narratives that were woven

⁵ See Fant, Musser, Reddish, *An Introduction to the Bible*, Abingdon 2001. Mosaic authorship has been challenged for centuries. Key verses that brought about questioning included the death and burial of Moses. This was supposedly written by Moses, with the aside that “no one knows his burial place to this day” (Deuteronomy 34:5-7), illustrating that it had been written some time later and not contemporary with Moses' lifetime.

together can be pulled apart. The different narrative threads are apparent in the dual creation stories in the opening chapters of Genesis, as well as in the two books of Law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy—all written at different times, by different authors, but made to appear as one author, Moses.

Even the Book of Isaiah is not as it seems on the surface. Scholars have long believed that multiple people contributed to the book, woven together to appear as one author. It is a Second Isaiah, or “Deutero-Isaiah,” who, while in bondage in Babylon, wrote these words proclaiming the singular divinity of Israel’s God:

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one. (Isaiah 44:6, 8)

So why does it matter that we understand the context of the verse above, especially if this revisionary knowledge challenges our traditional beliefs?

For one, if we accept the traditional authorship claims of Isaiah, we lose the context that this was written during the Babylonian exile. There is great beauty in knowing that these words were written by a prophet in bondage looking to God for answers. For members of the Restoration, there is a corollary in the prophetic words Joseph Smith Junior penned from Liberty Prison; for all Christians, we see echoes in Martin Luther King Junior’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”⁶ All three prophetically call upon God for liberation of their people.

The prophetic words of Deutero-Isaiah, written while in bondage, affirm that there is only one God, unlike earlier conceptions that each nation or land had a god associated with it. This text from Isaiah declares to God’s people that—even though displaced from their temple, and so far from their divinely appointed lands—God is still God over all nations, accessible anywhere, even and especially in their tribulation and alienation. God does not forget us, even and especially when we’re lost and alone! The context of this revelation helps us locate God’s concerns with the oppressed and those who suffer. Deutero-Isaiah’s revelation, born out of bondage, paved the way for our understanding of the universal God—not of one land, or one nation, but a God of all peoples and places, able to save anyone and everyone, anywhere and everywhere.

⁶ For further reading comparing the prophetic words penned from prison by Joseph Smith Junior and Martin Luther King Junior, see “Prophetic Letters from Jail: A Restoration Theology of Liberation,” by Seth L. Bryant and Elray Gene Henriksen, in *Restoration Studies XIV* (2013): 47-73.

God, as Conceived in Christian Scripture

The later prophets in the Hebrew scriptures were faithful to the monotheistic views captured in Deutero-Isaiah, often decrying those times when the people weren't faithful as well to the one and only true God. This was the theological climate in which Jesus was born, and which informed Christian scripture.

Jesus grew up hearing the law and the prophets. As Messiah, he was the living embodiment and fulfillment of scripture. Interestingly, he referred to himself most often as “the Son of Man,” a reference to the apocalyptic book of Daniel:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14, KJV)

Of course, Jesus' titles were not restricted to “Son of man.” We often call him the Son of God, rather than the Son of Man. Although Jesus alluded to his divine sonship, he wasn't making unique claims. Israelite kings had been referred to as “son of God” and even “begotten” of God. King David proclaims in Psalm 2:7: “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” In calling himself the Son of man, Jesus, however, was making a distinction between himself and all other kings of Israel, consistent with the language in Daniel which ascribes divinity, honor, and glory to the Son of man usually reserved for God alone. He was telling us that, while he spoke in the tradition of Israel's kings, he was more than the king of an earthly nation.

Deeply committed to the Jewish insistence of monotheism, early Christians had the difficult task of figuring out how Jesus was divine, while at the same time affirming monotheism—that there is only one God. How could Jesus be human, and suffer and die (an odd set of propositions for a god), and yet still be God? Even to this day, these are not easy questions or issues, and not everyone agrees on one answer. Even in the Gospels, we read complementary, if not competing, views on Jesus' divinity. Just as concepts of God developed over time in the Hebrew Scriptures, the same can be traced in the Gospels. We clearly see understandings of Jesus' divinity developing from Mark to the much later writing in John.

Written three decades after Jesus' death, Mark is the oldest of the Gospels. As it reads today, Mark 1:1 opens with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Scholars inform us that the last part of that verse—“the son of God”—

was probably added later, based on the fact that many ancient sources of the text simply state “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” It is quite possible that the original author of Mark did not think Jesus was fully divine until later in life. For Mark, this probably occurred at Jesus’ baptism, Mark 1:11 being the first uncontested instance in the original text when divine sonship is stated: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

The Gospel of Mark may very well be representing an early Christian view known as “Adoptionism.” This view suggests that God called Jesus to become Christ, because God knew, before Jesus was born, that he would live a sinless life. As Jesus accepted his calling and lived that sinless life, according to this view he was adopted into the Godhead at his baptism (or, as some believed, at the resurrection and ascension). However, many Christians were uneasy with Adoptionism, because they felt Jesus should be God from the beginning in a more concrete way, or else salvation and God’s plan would be unsure and conditional.

In all likelihood, in an effort to address the concerns regarding Adoptionism, Matthew and Luke added to the story. Unlike Mark who begins the narrative at Jesus’ baptism, Matthew and Luke begin their accounts with Jesus’ birth, recounting the virgin birth. These two Gospel writers communicate that Jesus is not adopted into the Godhead later in life, but is God from the time of his birth, which was miraculous and different from any other human birth. Matthew and Luke reassure that Jesus wasn’t just a good pick for Messiah: he was the only potential candidate, and there was never any question that he would fulfill his role. Accordingly, salvation became sure from the beginning.

Despite these differences between Mark and Matthew and Luke, all three are referred to as “synoptic” Gospels, which means that they *look alike* or mostly agree on the major details of Jesus’ life and ministry. John is called the non-synoptic Gospel because it contains little repeated material from the other three Gospels. The Gospel of John is dated much later than Mark, after Matthew, and likely after Luke. For John, Adoptionism is grossly unacceptable. It isn’t even enough to have Jesus as Lord from his birth, as Matthew and Luke wrote. The Gospel according to John thunders into its first verses with a cosmic Christ who is Lord before anything even existed, and even more so, “was God”⁷ and is the source of all that exists.

The first chapter of John re-imagines the first chapter of Genesis, both starting with “In the beginning.” The Gospel of John informs its readers that when God said in Genesis, “Let there be light,” that light was Christ—who was there in the beginning, even

⁷ John 1:1-3 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

before the beginning. When you accept John into the canon, its theology is so overwhelming that Mark is often read through the lens of a pre-existent Christ. Indeed, Mark 1:1 was likely augmented later on to reflect Johannine⁸ theology, adding the phrase “the Son of God.” Furthermore, the Gospel of John crowds out any other gospels that cannot be subsumed into its theology, such as the “lost” Gospel of Thomas which does not present Jesus as messianic. John’s targeting of Thomas isn’t just implicit: The Gospel of John goes out of its way to paint Thomas as a doubter and a fool so no one believes him, from which we get the phrase “doubting Thomas.” But as far as the Gospel of John is concerned, there’s no room for doubt: Jesus was with God in the beginning, and Jesus is God, from the very beginning.

God, as Conceived by Early Christians

In the centuries following John’s affirmation of the pre-existent divinity of Christ, Christians were left to sort out how Jesus was truly human and truly divine; and how there is one God, but how that one God could be revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the beginning, there was no orthodoxy or heterodoxy, or correct and wrong teachings: there was simply *doxy* or teachings. But, divergences in the Gospels portray that, very early on, Christians began to debate the validity of one belief over another.

Although this book is not intended to be a historical review of all the Trinitarian debates and seemingly endless nuances and technical terms on the topic, a brief consideration of two other positions (besides Adoptionism) will be helpful for understanding why Christianity espoused the doctrine of the Trinity. First, known as the Arian controversy, some Christians believed that Christ had been created at some point, and was inferior to the Father. And second, some Christians argued for a position that came to be known as Monophysitism (or “one nature”). Quite unlike Adoptionism, Monophysitism suggested that the human Jesus didn’t have true agency, his mortal body being almost like a puppet, overwhelmed by his divinity, Christ being the active agent.

Over time, a position developed within Christianity that was considered orthodox or an accurate reflection of the nature of God and even necessary to believe for salvation. The boundaries of the orthodox debate worked within the following concerns, questions, and parameters:

- Jesus displayed both divine and human natures: God to save us, and human to claim us. That is, only God could offer salvation to humanity, and only a human could claim other humans while restoring and reconciling humanity with God. But the real issue for early Christians was how could he be both? How could God suffer? How could God die? Or, how could a mortal rise again and become immortal?

⁸ *Johannine* is an adjective meaning “of or relating to the Gospel of John or its ideas.”

- Jesus had to be one with God, of the same substance. To be of separate substance, as some claimed, would run counter to monotheism. At the same time, to be wholly human, to be one with us, Jesus must also have agency, choosing to endure the atonement freely as a human being, his humanity not being a mindless sacrifice.
- Jesus wasn't just a mode of God, or a mask that God wore, but a real, living human with agency and personhood. The same is true of the personhood of the Holy Spirit, in the sense of not just being a mode or mask of God. The members of the Trinity are individually distinct; and yet, they are somehow one, too.
- Jesus had to be Christ from the very beginning. God didn't just pick a perfect human who could be tasked with the atonement, and adopted into the Godhead, but Jesus was Christ in every sense from before his birth.
- Lastly, Christ wasn't created at some point, but is eternal.

For Christianity at large, the orthodox and accepted answer came at Nicaea in 325 CE, and the councils that followed. Although not all attended, the 1800 Christian bishops at that time were invited to the Council at Nicaea by Constantine, the Roman Emperor. Constantine was looking to unite Christianity against heretical teachings (specifically the Arian controversy, over whether Christ was eternal or created).

Collectively, the bishops were accepted by the church as able to judge this matter, as representing the apostles. A word on why the bishops held this role will be useful. Originally, apostles were eye witnesses to Christ's resurrection. The apostles established churches, which were overseen by bishops (the title bishop meaning "overseer"). Bishops could only be ordained by apostles—or, after the apostles' deaths, by multiple bishops—to ensure that they had been vetted as having a solid and sound understanding of Christ's teachings and the traditions of the church. So, in the post-apostolic church, the role of the bishop was to maintain the purity of the teachings passed to and through them from the apostles, who had received the gospel or good news directly from Jesus and witnessed the resurrection.

The expression of what the bishops in Nicaea determined has since been called the Nicene Creed. It declares that Jesus was not created, but eternally begotten of God, and of one being with the Father. Building on Nicaea, later councils affirmed Jesus' dual nature as being both human and divine in one person. The church also further wrestled with the nature of the Holy Spirit. What eventually arose from these councils was the doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God (honoring monotheism), but three Persons (recognizing the individuality of both Christ and the Holy Spirit).

Two related things must be admitted: First, these councils were the products of their times and cultures; and second, they were attempting, as limited humans, to define the eternal nature of God in attributes, logic, and words. These two facts alone mean that the councils could never fully succeed to capture the nature of God, let alone our emotional experience with God for which we lack words. Scripture proclaims that God is mysterious—meaning, at least in part, that God is beyond our ability to fully describe on a chalk board, the characteristics of God evading philosophical formulas. As humans, what we have as our sure revelation of God is Jesus Christ, and the experiences of the Holy Spirit that can never be conveyed beyond our own hearts. And yet, despite everything admitted above, the doctrine of a Triune God is a logical conclusion of Christian scripture and thought that helps ground our conversation and belief, even if the nature of God is beyond our full comprehension.

Although it is a complicated history, most Christians trace their common foundation to Nicaea. While we do not uphold any creeds, including the Nicene Creed, Community of Christ affirms a Triune God as well: Three Persons in one God, as proclaimed in the Bible and Book of Mormon. Members of Community of Christ have diverse beliefs on exactly what “Triune God” means; and, indeed, there are no specific belief requirements in order to enter or maintain membership. This doesn’t mean that anything goes: we have a common testimony that God loves us, which love is best revealed to us through Christ, and witnessed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Because God loves us, in the name of Christ and following where the Spirit leads, we seek to build sacred community or Zion here on the earth. We seek to reflect the unity and love found within the perfect community of the Triune God.

2. God and the Restoration

No matter what one's beliefs may be about the Trinity, clearly conceptions of God were not static in the Hebrew or Christian traditions. One of the objectives of the Restoration was to overcome this confusion, and offer a sure and unchanging theology of God. The irony, however, was that concepts of God in the Restoration have been just as fluid, despite claims of the prophet being a mouthpiece that could transcend culture and time and offer unmediated knowledge and revelation on the nature and will of God. This will be demonstrated through an assessment of the First Vision narratives, and the theology of the Book of Mormon. We will then examine concepts of God during the Kirtland and Nauvoo eras, and finally during the Reorganization.

God in the First Vision

There are several accounts of the First Vision, written or dictated by Joseph Smith Junior, which we consider primary sources. There are also several accounts written by people who heard his testimony. In each version, including the primary sources, there are deviations from narrative to narrative, not unlike the differences we find in the chronology and content of the four Gospels. But unlike the Gospels, when Smith was so closely involved in the production of most of the narratives, it is difficult to explain away the deviations as different authors having unique points of view. Some have pointed to disparities in the Prophet's accounts in an effort to undermine the validity of the experience. Instead, we hold that the differences demonstrate how the Prophet, over time, gained new insights to his understanding of his calling and of the nature of God.

The different accounts of the First Vision involve a grown man reflecting on an event that took place in his youth, many years earlier. He had time to reflect and then convey the vision in narrative form. With so much depth and power belonging to an experience like this, of course Joseph would convey different things at different times. Most would admit that the meanings of pivotal events in our lives take on different hues and shapes as we mature and reflect. Particular seasons of our lives tend to shape our memory of where we've been, or tend to bring new things to the surface that were always there but previously un-emphasized.

The best known version of the First Vision was written by Joseph Smith Junior in 1842 (which has been canonized by the LDS Church in the Pearl of Great Price, and which was often shared by members of the Reorganization). In this most popular First Vision account, we read what Joseph understood of the vision in that season of his life. For members of the Restoration, the 1842 account has taken on mythic, immovable form; but the vision was never fixed in Joseph Smith Junior's lifetime, and ought to retain some of its fluidity in our lives, as we reflect upon what it means to us today.

In Community of Christ, we acknowledge that the First Vision—like all experiences with the Divine—could not be fully expressed in human language. The marvel and impact of such a powerful spiritual experience upon the heart of the young boy was simply beyond words, even as he matured into the Prophet. As with Jesus’ prayer in the Book of Mormon, the total meaning of the vision simply “cannot be written” (3 Nephi 8:16-20; LDS 17:15-18). Indeed, in the 1842 account, Joseph acknowledged that some things from the First Vision were not able to be expressed per God’s command, presumably because those reading the account were not ready or able to understand the full meaning.⁹

The First Vision is a prime example of what it means to be prophetic. The role of the prophet is often thought to be someone who tells the future, or reveals some hidden knowledge. But the most basic function of a prophet is to reveal or remind people of God’s will, especially when they’re living contrary to it in unrighteous and unjust ways. At times prophets speak of a glorious future, of Zion, if people will only realize God’s vision. Or, they warn of a future filled with desolation if people do not repent and return to God’s covenants. But these two modes of future telling are secondary to the prophet’s most basic call: *prophets call on people to know or remember God’s true nature, and then live accordingly through just and peaceful actions*. Throughout scripture we find prophets calling us to repent and return to how God would have us live, in sacred communities filled with just and right actions, especially towards the most vulnerable among us.

Contrary to the claims of many that God no longer gave humans new revelations for life today, Joseph dared to re-enter the sacred narrative and receive God’s will. Whatever Joseph took from the grove, he became a seeker of Zion—which is truly a prophetic vision, to see humanity becoming of one heart and one mind, dwelling in righteousness, with no poor among us.

In Community of Christ, we also seek to be prophetic, by daring to discern God’s will for our lives, individually and collectively, and then working to establish that inspired vision of peace and justice. Just as Joseph learned that God’s words were not limited to the Bible, the promise of the First Vision isn’t something that God restricted to Joseph Smith or former generations of Saints. We are called to be a prophetic people today!

Being prophetic is a living journey because it means responding to the breathing of the Spirit of God. The First Vision came about because Joseph sought God out in prayer, because Joseph was listening. But as we review the different narratives of the First Vision, we find that Joseph gives us different reasons for seeking out God, reflecting

⁹ “...and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time...” (In the LDS Pearl of Great Price, see JS-H 1:20).

that his conceptions of God, and how God came to speak to him, changed over time.¹⁰ In earlier accounts of the First Vision written in 1832 and 1835, he was more motivated to pray because of his own sins and over concerns for the welfare of his soul than he was to inquire which church was true. In these earlier narratives, the Lord forgives Joseph for his sins. By later accounts, the mention of Joseph being forgiven is lost from the story, and the focus is placed upon Joseph inquiring about which church is true.

Of course, for centuries it has been common for people to worry about the state of their individual souls, while having anxiety over the validity of their faith community. So it is quite understandable that the first two accounts speak mostly of Joseph's sins being forgiven, and the latter accounts speak mostly about the authority of Christianity at large. But, it cannot be overlooked that, as the Restored Church became more established, the First Vision narratives focused less on Joseph as an individual concerned about his soul, and more on the corporate claims the Church was making as the one true church.¹¹

Comparing earlier and later accounts of the First Vision reveals other things about how Joseph processed the vision over time. Another difference between earlier and later narratives is how Joseph Smith Junior tended to focus more on persecution in the later accounts of his experience. One might wonder what influence persecution of the early Latter Day Saint church had upon his retelling. As the Saints were persecuted more and more by other Christians, the claims against all other Christians become increasingly stronger in the narratives. As the narratives focused more on the young boy being persecuted after he recounted the vision, Smith became a model for all Mormons persecuted for accepting the truth of his prophetic calling.

There is both push and pull between the past and the present. That is, in various ways, communities are shaped by their past; but they also interpret their past based on where they are at in the present. Accordingly, the First Vision is a story that is both fixed in time, and beyond time. It is a story of a young boy, and the story of all of us in the Restoration. It is a community story, a foundational story, a mythos. Nobody since Jesus has had their personal story so tied up in the story of salvation (Luther comes closest, but Luther isn't to Lutherans as the Prophet is to most members of the Restoration). Events like Christmas and Easter belong to both Jesus and to us as pivotal and meaningful. And the First Vision belongs to all of us, too, though it is Joseph Smith Junior's story: We've all gone into the grove, longing to hear from God. We've all been

¹⁰ For a chart illustrating the differences in First Vision narratives, see Mark Scherer's *The Journey of a People Vol. I*, Herald House, page 62.

¹¹ The relationship between individual sins and the authority of the faith community is reflected in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, in the claim that the Restored Church is "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I the Lord am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually—for I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (1:5e-f; LDS 1:30-31).

ostracized for some unique beliefs and experiences, by those who ought to love and embrace us. We've all seen the light, and it's transformed us. When we tell his story, we're telling our story.

In the Restoration movement, the traditional method of conversion and reinforcing faith is to duplicate the experience of Joseph Smith. Traditionally, new converts hear the story of the young prophet's frustration with all the different churches; then, mirroring the experience in the grove, they pray for an answer from God about which church is true or which church should one join; and like the prophet, finally they receive the Book of Mormon, as a witness that reinforces the one true church, and sidesteps denominational differences or contests.

Believers are also caught up in the struggle that the boy prophet experienced with Satan. Although key to the 1842 account, the struggle with Satan is not present in some of the Prophet's accounts of the First Vision; and when it is, it is at either extreme: either Joseph is on the verge of destruction, or only startled by sounds of someone or something walking around him in the woods. In two accounts, after encountering the darkness, he goes on to pray and contemplate for many additional days before returning to the grove and experiencing the First Vision. Of course, the 1842 account states that, as God descends, the light delivers him from the darkness and destruction. In some of the accounts, he doesn't use the word "light" but "fire" (as in, God descended in "a pillar of fire"); in other accounts, the light has the quality of fire, Joseph marveling that the trees didn't combust.

Within this marvelous pillar of light or fire, Joseph recounts seeing various beings, either angelic or God: in one account, he sees "the Lord"; in two other accounts, he sees two personages who are not named; but in one account, he does name these Beings as the Father and Son.

What Joseph is told, in terms of instructions, varies. In some accounts, he is told that he will play an important role in the coming forth of the fullness of the gospel. In others, he is told that his sins are forgiven; or to be aware that the end of times is coming soon. And in an account near the end of his life, echoing the sacred caution of the emerging temple ceremonies, Joseph simply states, "and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time."

Reflecting how the concerns of the day shaped the narrative, Richard P. Howard, Historian Emeritus of Community of Christ, notes a correlation in the accounts written in 1831-32 and the work of the Prophet. During that time, Joseph had been working on his revision of Matthew 24, and its end-times themes appear in the First Vision narratives, as

well as in revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants from that same period.¹² End times, however, are not mentioned in the Prophet's narratives of the First Vision from any other time period. It may be that apocalyptic instructions were always part of Joseph's understanding of his experience in the grove, but he only accentuated it in the narratives during a period when it was of importance to the life of the church, or his own life; or, that in later life, as he reflected back, he interpreted this into the vision and instructions received, as a meaning that he didn't previously comprehend.

In connecting the dots between how Joseph shaped the narratives, and what was going on at that time in the church, Howard voices a hope for

a deeper capacity to sense and live comfortably with the chasm between the event and the interpretation. That gift would ensure an even greater talent—the ability in a single act of the imagination to embrace the whole historical tradition as it is understood at any given moment. A by-product of that would be the courage to leave behind those aspects of it that engender idolatry at the altar of precedent—that distract the body of Christ from its true mission.¹³

When we realize that interpretation of a sacred event has changed over time, that it never has been fixed, it frees us to focus on what matters most—the mission of Christ. And when Christ's mission is put first and foremost, we can live out our tradition accordingly, as directed by the Spirit of God. Important to this is the honest and healthy awareness that we, like all former Saints, are re-imagining the sacred story as we live out our calling as God's covenant people, embracing both that which is new and that which is everlasting.

We believe that we embody the spirit of the Restoration now more than ever. As a recent section of the Doctrine and Covenants reminds us:

Again you are reminded that this community was divinely called into being. The spirit of the Restoration is not locked in one moment of time, but is instead the call to every generation to witness to essential truths in its own language and form. Let the Spirit breathe (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2e).

Because the Restoration is an ongoing journey, and God is still speaking, we admit that we do not embrace everything that Joseph Smith Junior taught or practiced; and we

¹² "An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Restoration Studies* (1980), 114-15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

challenge the idea that Joseph Smith Junior's final interpretation of God was constant throughout his life, or that it is the only way to understand God based on our tradition.

Our experience in the Restoration always passes through the lens of our best understanding of God as revealed in Christ, which is as true for us today as it was for Joseph Smith in his day. An awareness of this lens is the gift of Reorganization to the Restoration—to place Restoration understandings in the context of the broader Christian tradition, to determine what to bring forward and what to leave behind in light of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, concepts of God changed over time in Christianity, in the Restoration, and in the Reorganization—and are continuing to change even to this moment. Our only concern is to uphold the living God, acknowledging that our knowledge grows as we reflect on that which God has revealed, is revealing, and will reveal. Following the example of the boy prophet, we are continually journeying into the grove, seeking further light and truth on who God is, and what God would have us do, to bring about the peaceable kingdom.

God in the Book of Mormon

Historically, members of the Restoration have been more interested in the fact of the Book of Mormon rather than the content of the Book of Mormon. The book's existence, and miraculous origins, were and are used as proof of the validity of Joseph Smith Junior's prophetic calling, and of the truth of the Restoration. For believers, Book of Mormon stories might be used as moral guides; and Book of Mormon teachings of Christ might help buttress those found in the Bible; but the fact remains that the theological content of the Book of Mormon has largely been ignored.

One might wonder if the theological content has been overlooked because the Restoration outgrew the Book of Mormon's theology, mainly its Trinitarianism.¹⁴ Note well that the Book of Mormon emphasizes the unity of the Godhead. It says nothing of exaltation, of separate Personages, of God the Father having a physical body, or of God living in a Celestial Kingdom. Rather, all of these teachings came in later revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith Junior, some of which were canonized. These later teachings overshadowed the theology of the Book of Mormon.

If a church were to develop in a historical and cultural vacuum, with a blank slate and only the Book of Mormon as its guide, that church would be quite unique from any Restoration church. This reveals an important truth for all scripture. Believers read *into* scripture as much as they read it. To varying degrees, we all read our current understandings, biases, and traditions into the text. Simply put, Mormonism is the lens by which Mormons read the Book of Mormon. It is just another case of religious traditions and beliefs being in flux over time, even if the average believer isn't aware of it.

Beyond Trinitarian teachings on God in the Book of Mormon, consider two additional concepts that have changed over time in the Restoration, priesthood and preexistence. Rather than support the complex priesthood offices and structures we know in the Restoration, the Book of Mormon's priesthood is quite simplistic. Surprisingly, priesthood in the Book feels more Protestant than Mormon in how it emphasizes the discernment of a calling as being most authoritative, as with Lehi and Alma the Elder.¹⁵ Regarding preexistence of souls, the Book of Mormon says nothing,¹⁶

¹⁴ The theology of the Book of Mormon might be best classified as Trinitarian modalism. Such would be consistent with the frontier theology of nineteenth-century America. While Trinitarian, modalism was still deemed heretical by early Christians for presenting the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as different modes of the same God—denying the individuality or personality of each member of the Godhead. For verses in the LDS Book of Mormon presenting Trinitarianism, see 2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:26-44; and 3 Nephi 11:27. (If using a Community of Christ Book of Mormon, look up 2 Nephi 13:32; Alma 8:79-104; and 3 Nephi 5:27).

¹⁵ Moroni 3 does detail the laying on of hands for ordination, but this comes in the closing passages, as almost an afterthought. And even this instruction would not be foreign to a Protestant understanding of ordination and calling within a church body.

except for affirming the pre-existence of Christ. Both observations regarding priesthood and preexistence are important, because the development of the two doctrines were closely tied to later developments on plural marriage, exaltation, and the Mormon concepts of God and humanity.

Again, as the beliefs of Mormonism expanded, the Restoration moved beyond the theology of the Book of Mormon. Consider the words of Orson Pratt, who systematized much of early Mormonism out of the unformulated teachings of Joseph Smith Junior. In 1872, Pratt gave a discourse entitled “Pre-Existence of Our Spirits.” In it, he recounts how Joseph Smith revealed that a spiritual creation occurred before a physical creation. Pratt states that this revelation came about during Smith’s inspired translation of the Bible (after the Book of Mormon was published). He then states, “This same doctrine is inculcated in some small degree in the Book of Mormon. However, I do not think that I should have ever discerned it in that book had it not been for the new translation of the Scriptures [...]”¹⁷ Just as believers do today, Pratt had to read Mormonism into the Book of Mormon through the lens of later theological concepts presented by Joseph Smith.

In his discourse, Pratt goes on to say that he “searched the Book of Mormon to see if there were indications in it that related to the pre-existence of man.” And he states that he found such an indication in the vision of the Brother of Jared, who

saw the spiritual personage of our Savior as he existed before he came to take upon him flesh and bones; and Jesus, in talking to this great man of God, informed him that as he appeared to him in the spirit so would he appear to his brethren in the flesh in future generations, and said he, “I am

¹⁶ One exception may be Alma 13 (LDS versification), which refers to high priests being ordained from before the foundation of the world according to God’s knowledge. But to read a contemporary conception of preexistence into this passage is misleading. For readers of the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth century, Alma 13 would have been understood in light of predestination over preexistence. Alma 13 clarifies the seeming contradiction in the Bible between passages on election, and passages on free will, not to mention the centuries-old debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. Charles R. Harrell, in “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844” (*BYU Studies* 28:2), states that, for Saints of the 1830s “familiar with this controversy surrounding the doctrine of election, Alma’s teaching may have been received as being merely a free will statement on priesthood: (1) that all humans are born into this world ‘on the same standing’ in their favor with God; (2) that every man has the same opportunity to live worthy to receive the priesthood, ‘being left to choose good and evil’; and (3) that because God knew who would be obedient and receive the priesthood, their calling was (with [God]) ‘before the foundation of the world.’ In 1841, approximately one year prior to the publication of the Book of Abraham, in which foreordination based on preexistent worthiness was first publicly introduced, Brigham Young and Willard Richards published a widely circulated article entitled ‘Election and Reprobation,’ which shows evidence of this interpretation of Alma” (79). Of course, Brigham Young would later expand and modify his views to include a preexistence, but still it would be misleading to conflate current LDS teachings with Young’s, or with those taught in the Nauvoo and early-Salt Lake eras. Harrell concludes that “While a rudimentary concept of preexistence began to take hold in the Church by the mid-1830s, it was still quite different from our current thinking” (81).

¹⁷ *Journal of Discourses* 15:249, emphasis added.

he that was prepared from before the foundation of the world, to redeem my people.”¹⁸

While this vision is remarkable, the concept of Jesus’ preexistence does not, however, speak to the preexistence of the rest of humanity. Indeed, Jesus implies his own pre-mortal existence in scripture (John 8:58).

In expanding preexistence to all of us, Smith was creating space for and revealing a system of entirely new worlds, and new forms of human organization, to include marriage. A spiritual existence allowed for spiritual marriage and spiritual offspring, which of course was closely tied to plural marriage. Creating new spiritual space in the sacred narrative and cosmos allowed for Smith and Mormons to invest priesthood with new meaning and new dimensions. It provided space for them to expand teachings on the progression of humanity, and on the origins of God. But none of this is in the Book of Mormon, which instead offers a very simple view of our origins and of our response to God’s calling, and very traditional Christian teachings on the Tri-unity of God.

Conceiving God, in the Kirtland-era Church

One of the first public deviations from the Trinitarian teachings of the Book of Mormon came from the Lectures on Faith. These lectures were delivered in what was termed a “Theological class” to the School of the Prophets in Kirtland in 1834-35, having been compiled by the presiding elders of the church, listed as Joseph Smith Junior, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams. Writing down theology and systematizing beliefs was an interesting balancing act when a basic cry among Restorationists of that period was “No creed but Christ!” Acknowledging this, the presiding elders wrote in the preface:

There may be an aversion in the minds of some against receiving any thing purporting to be articles of religious faith, in consequence of there being so many now extant; but if men believe a system, and profess that it was given by inspiration, certainly, the more intelligibly they can present it, the better. It does not make a principle untrue to *print* it, neither does it make it true not to print it.

Ultimately, these lectures became the “Doctrine” portion of the Doctrine and Covenants, with the “Covenants” being the revelations and inspired writings mostly belonging to Joseph Smith Junior. The Lectures on Faith were printed at the beginning of the Doctrine and Covenants from 1835 until 1897 for the Reorganization (and 1921 for the LDS Church). They were removed because their theology no longer represented the

¹⁸ Ibid.

beliefs of the church(es) in the generations following the Kirtland-era Saints, even though they had been written, delivered, and canonized with the approval of the Prophet.

In the Lectures on Faith, there were seven lectures altogether, and the fifth relates to the nature of God. Different from Book of Mormon Trinitarianism, Lecture Fifth proclaims:

There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things... They are the Father and the Son: The Father being a personage of spirit, glory and power: possessing all perfection and fulness: The Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle ... possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit, that bears record of the Father and the Son, and these three are one, or in other words, these three constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things....

After each lecture is a catechism. Lecture Fifth includes the following questions and answers:

Q. How many personages are there in the Godhead?

A. Two: the Father and the Son.

Q. What is the Father?

A. He is a personage of glory and of power.

Q. What is the Son?

A. First, he is a personage of tabernacle.

Q. Do the Father and the Son possess the same mind?

A. They do....

Q. What is this mind?

A. The Holy Spirit.

Q. Do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit constitute the Godhead?

A. They do.

Notice that while there are three within the Godhead, there are only two *personages*, or two individuals. In this thinking, the Holy Spirit is the mind of the Father, shared with the Son—and while part of the Godhead, the Spirit does not have individual agency or personality. This view is often called binitarianism. It was the canonized belief of the church in Kirtland, with Joseph Smith Junior's seal of approval. This belief stuck

around in the Reorganization for some time, and can be found today among some members, although the official position is a Triune God.

Comparing the Book of Mormon to Lectures on Faith (and later Nauvoo teachings), clearly Joseph's views were ever evolving. Growing knowledge about God, however, was lauded in the early church (although with exceptions¹⁹) as a mark of the Restoration. Learning *line upon line* was welcomed, and the elders of the church, to better serve the Lord, sought to prepare both their hearts and their minds by expanding their knowledge, taking courses of all kinds in the Kirtland Temple.

Joshua Seixas, a teacher from the nearby Oberlin Seminary, was hired to teach Hebrew in Kirtland, his star pupil being the Mormon Prophet. The study of ancient languages was caught up in Joseph's ever-developing theology. Charles Harrell, in his book *This is my Doctrine: The Development of Mormon Theology*, notes that, "having learned that the Hebrew term *Elohim* was actually the plural form of God (*El*), [Smith] translated the book of Abraham to read that the 'Gods' created the heavens and the earth."²⁰ Joseph began speaking of gods in the plural sense from the late 1830s forward, although it wouldn't be until Nauvoo that he would fully expound on what this meant.

Conceiving God, in the Nauvoo-era Church

The 1842 account of the First Vision was written during the Nauvoo era. It has echoes of language from the Lectures on Faith, for Joseph speaks of seeing "two personages," Father and Son, in line with the binitarian language of Kirtland. This description also echoed Stephen's description of God from Christian scripture who, just before he was stoned, exclaimed, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:56). Stephen's vision of two personages is consistent with Jesus' teachings of his own standing and title, and would not be considered by any orthodox Christian to be an impossible text to reconcile with their Trinitarian theology. But Joseph's 1842 description wasn't Trinitarian or binitarian, but reflected tritheism, or three separate and individual Personages who are only one God in terms of purpose.

Joseph wouldn't just separate the substance of God, but would radically alter the nature of God from traditional Christian and even earlier Restoration concepts. He distanced himself from classical concepts of God the Father as being "a personage of spirit, glory and power," as stated in the Lectures on Faith. In Nauvoo in 1843, he expanded his theology on God the Father as being not only material, but materially separate from the Son, instructing that "[t]he Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also..." (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 LDS). Unlike the

¹⁹ Some early church members did have a difficult time with Section 76, and specifically the departure from traditional Christian theology in the three degrees of glory.

²⁰ Harrell, *This is my Doctrine*, 114-15.

binitarianism of the Lectures on Faith, Smith also adapted his theology on the Holy Spirit, by further identifying the Spirit as a personage: “but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.”

This interpretation of the nature of the Godhead was one that developed over time. By the time the First Vision narrative was written, much of the Prophet’s thought on God reflected the growing influence of emerging concepts of plural marriage and exaltation. During his last few years, the Prophet came to see God the Father as having a physical body because Smith believed that God had once lived on an earth, and had progressed and advanced to his present Godhood. Such understandings made it possible for all men to become gods, if faithful to what were then the emerging ceremonies of the temple. Eternal life, or to live as God lives, meant having eternal offspring—all of humanity having been begotten spiritually before being born on earth.

In the early 1830s, Joseph was wary of being locked into orthodox or creedal concepts of God, though he held roughly trinitarian views; during the final years of his life, he had completely jettisoned all previous concepts of God that were remotely trinitarian, becoming tritheistic. Charles Harrell, in *This is my Doctrine*, writes:

Joseph’s teachings regarding the members of the godhead appear to have progressed from essentially a trinitarian three-in-one God with a modalistic flavor, to a godhead consisting of “two personages” united by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to a godhead consisting of “three personages,” and finally to a godhead consisting of “three Gods.”²¹

Citing BYU professor and Mormon historian Thomas G. Alexander, Harrell concludes this discussion by noting that a variety of concepts of God existed for decades within the LDS Church, until tritheism became exclusively taught in the beginning of the twentieth century.²² Members of the Reorganization also displayed diversity of belief in their concepts of God during the same period.

Conceiving God, in the Reorganization (1860-1960)

In the 1860s, the RLDS theology of God was as scattered and diverse as the new members joining our movement from many different Restoration traditions. Some prominent RLDS members, like William Marks and James Whitehead, had been part of Joseph Smith Junior’s inner circle in Nauvoo. They believed that humans would progress in eternity to higher and higher levels of eternal life, eventually becoming gods themselves and ruling over eternal worlds. In this understanding of God and gods, the

²¹ Ibid, 114.

²² Ibid.

line between humanity and divinity had been erased altogether. People were simply gods in embryonic form.

Many RLDS members were startled by such assertions and embraced a version of the Restoration gospel that differed little on the doctrine of God from the doctrine embraced by their Methodist neighbors. The fact that a member of the RLDS First Presidency (Marks) embraced such a different doctrine of God than these other believers needs some explanation.

Marks embraced a doctrine of God whose origins can be traced to the teachings in Joseph Smith's inner circle in Nauvoo. The concepts were taught by Smith and modified by people like Orson Pratt and William W. Phelps who helped give them new form. One historian has called this 1840s conception of God the "Mormon Chain of Belonging," a modification of the medieval Great Chain of Being.²³ While the medieval Great Chain of Being posited that there existed distinct orders and species of beings, from the Trinitarian God, down to angels and archangels, to humans and animals.

The Mormon Chain of Belonging saw all beings as composed of the same substance: Archangels had once been human and might evolve to Godhood. The Medieval Chain of Being was static, and substances different and stratified from one being to the next: no one evolved, but all existed in divinely orchestrated hierarchy. The Mormon Chain of Belonging also had a strict hierarchy, but it was one that constantly evolved as beings gained experience and evolved further and further up the divine chain. This necessitated the notion that if humans could evolve to be a God, the God of this world had once been human and inhabited a body, too. Furthermore there had to be a God above the God of this world. This divine pantheon extended worlds without end.

The Mormon Chain of Belonging reflected a nineteenth-century American proclivity to embrace concepts like "progress" with unqualified abandon. Seen in this way, the Mormon Chain of Belonging was simply one logical possibility to emerge from a period and culture which was driven by a faith in boundless expansion in every sense—imperial territorial expansion, technological expansion, and spiritual expansion. The Mormon Chain of Belonging was manifestation of a new confidence in human goodness, a religious doctrine that elevated effort and choice, and a heavy-handed polemic against the Calvinist God that was caricatured by critics as far removed from humanity.

However understandable the development of these doctrines were, given the cultural climate, the Mormon Chain of Belonging and its concomitant pantheon of gods created a startling departure from the monotheism that most nineteenth-century American Christians embraced. Even if most American Christians were optimistic about the

²³ See Samuel Brown's "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging" in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Spring 2011: 44.1), 1-52.

goodness of human nature, they drew back from constructing a doctrine of a God that literally made everyone a potential God in a divine and unending hierarchical chain of physical kingdoms.²⁴

Those who objected to what has since been called the Mormon Chain of Belonging were several RLDS leaders, including Joseph Smith III. Unlike Marks and Whitehead, Joseph III was just a boy during the Nauvoo era. What Whitehead and Marks saw as grand and glorious doctrines, Joseph III saw as theological speculation. In a joint council meeting in 1865, church leaders debated and affirmed that the Nauvoo doctrine of the Godhead (a plurality of gods) was scripturally valid. However, Joseph Smith III made certain that the leaders also affirmed that such a doctrine would not be a test of fellowship and that it only be taught on rare occasions. Joseph III counseled priesthood holders to preach only the first principles of the gospel and to leave aside the “mysteries of the Kingdom,” including progression to Godhood.²⁵

By the late 1870s, the old Nauvoo-believers were rapidly passing from the scene, and a new generation of RLDS members associated eternal progression very strongly with the then-polygamous LDS church. These RLDS believers would go to great lengths to disassociate their church from any connection with the LDS church and its more unusual doctrines. Consequently, RLDS members by and large embraced a conventional Trinitarian Christian framework for God, even if they occasionally speculated on the relationship between Father and Son in that divine trinity. They might read a passage in the Book of Mormon and wonder if Jesus and the Father were the same person in the Godhead, but they did not wonder if they themselves would be gods. Only LDS who practiced polygamy believed such things, thought these RLDS believers.

In the subsequent decades, the RLDS doctrine of God was relatively ambiguous, though it never affirmed the Nauvoo doctrines as some early believers had. Rather than talk about the trinity, most RLDS priesthood were intent on convincing people why they should affirm the RLDS church’s exclusive authority, the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, and the “six principles of the gospel”: faith, repentance, baptism by water, the laying on of hands for the Holy Ghost, resurrection, and eternal life. These ideas dominated RLDS theology until the 1960s, and formal theology on the doctrine of God was subordinate to this larger missionary-minded project.

For instance, Apostle Joseph Luff in his popular 1908 book, *The Old Jerusalem Gospel*, spent the bulk of his work arguing for these formulations of the RLDS message.

²⁴ For further reading and references to this section, see Samuel Brown, *In Heaven as it is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203-278.

²⁵ See Roger Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 152-153.

When he did refer to God, he talked about the “Godhead” and referred to it as “God, Christ, and the Spirit.”²⁶ For Luff, God equaled the Heavenly Father, and Jesus was the incarnation of God. The Holy Spirit was “the third agency in the Godhead—the power by which all the divine behests are executed in, above, and beneath our sphere.”²⁷

Luff did not clarify if he thought of the Godhead as composed of three distinct beings in covenant with one another (the Nauvoo doctrine) or if he thought of the Godhead in the classical Trinitarian manner (three persons of the same substance). However, since Luff was a Methodist minister before his conversion to the RLDS church, it’s unlikely he had been deeply influenced by Nauvoo doctrines. For certain, Luff did reflect wider theological trends of his age. Like Social Gospel theologians,²⁸ Luff affirmed the “Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man,” a statement of the equality and worth of all people under one God.²⁹ While his LDS counterparts re-contextualized this same liberal Protestant phrase to affirm eternal progression, Luff made no such connection.³⁰

By the 1930s, a member of the RLDS First Presidency, F. Henry Edwards, wrote the first attempt at a modern RLDS systematic theology. Similar to the influence of Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine* in the LDS Church, F. Henry Edwards’ widely reprinted book *Fundamentals* articulated RLDS theology for the average church member with the aid of some rather optimistic, modernist theological language. This is manifested in his statements such as “If any man really wants to know about God, his best course is to devote himself to some Godlike cause and to discover God as a working comrade,”³¹ reflecting a belief that motivated action was “infinitely more important than merely believing about God.”³²

Nonetheless, Edwards spent the first few chapters of his book discussing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This was a move that imitated statements of Christian belief as old as the Nicene Creed. In contrast, Protestant fundamentalists of Edwards’s age would have started their theological discussions by addressing doctrines of scriptural infallibility (and often still do). For fundamentalists, doctrines about God were secondary to affirmations about the Bible as a book without any error. Edwards might

²⁶ Luff, *The Old Jerusalem Gospel*, 78.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 94-95.

²⁸ The Social Gospel was a largely American Christian perspective that the world had to be cleansed of its ills before Christ would return. Proponents believed that problems such as alcoholism, prostitution, economic inequality, etc., should be overcome through realizing Christian principles in social contexts. Prohibition in the United States is one prominent example.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 7-9.

³⁰ For the LDS recontextualization of Protestant Social Gospel thought, as well as the doctrines of Fundamentalist Protestants, see Matthew Bowman, “The Crisis of Mormon Christology: History, Progress, and Protestantism,” *Fides et Historia* 40.2 (2008): 1-26.

³¹ *Ibid*, 11.

³² *Ibid*, 19.

have titled his book *Fundamentals*, but he was no fundamentalist. His discussions of the importance of belief in God, as opposed to beliefs about God, certainly bore this out.

By the 1960s, the RLDS church had long forgotten the doctrine of eternal progression that had vexed a young Joseph Smith III. Still, they maintained an optimism about human potential that was a product of the older nineteenth-century doctrines of God they had inherited from earlier generations. RLDS were well-positioned to be more receptive to classical Trinitarian formulations about God, though their lay priesthood structure often militated against the formal study of theology and Christian history.

The ecumenical Christian turn that the RLDS church would take in the 1960s, as manifested in its doctrines of God as well as its policies and practices, had a much longer trajectory than one might first suspect. Joseph Smith III had decisively moved the church back to the restoration of classical Christian doctrines of God. Subsequent thinkers, intentionally or not, also pushed the church toward broad-mindedness regarding conceptions of God.

3. From Reorganized to Community of Christ

To understand how Community of Christ came to affirm the Triune God, it will be useful to explain the transformation the church has experienced in the last few decades. Community of Christ, originally known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) from the late nineteenth century until 2001, experienced a radical transformation in the last fifty years. Much of this change can be attributed to shifting internal and external boundaries, within the church and in relation to the outside world. Traditionally, Reorganized Latter Day Saints saw themselves as a peculiar and special people because they had three things no one else had: 1) special scripture, 2) special leaders, and 3) a special mission.

This identity of being a peculiar people set the church apart from the world and the rest of Christianity. It provided differentiation from the outside world, and meaning within the church. But, while RLDS identity was dynamic, traditional foundations of identity seemed to erode during the administration of W. Wallace Smith from 1958 to 1978. During this period of cultural upheaval in the West and church globalization, church leaders and missionaries became aware that the traditionally exclusive way they framed their message failed to provide answers to pressing problems around them. This section explains how the church came to rethink or re-imagine its traditional views, as an

emerging global church wanting to authentically respond to various cultures and pressing cultural issues.³³

The transformation of Community of Christ is a clear example of the truth that no church is unchanging, even when churches attempt to conceal changes to their supposedly eternal truth claims. As any objective historian will confess, change has been constant within the Restoration. The expressions of Mormonism that came to be after the founding prophet's death all tried to stay true to their best understandings of the original church. Indeed each claimed to be the only true expression, though they all took different directions and had evolving journeys.

Joseph Smith III, with a desire to faithfully continue his father's work, but also in response to the prophetic impulse, redefined how Zion was to be accomplished, and redrew the boundaries between Saints and Gentiles. Reorganized Latter Day Saints, Joseph III taught, should work with outsiders in building Zion, while exercising caution against becoming corrupted in the process. Given in 1909, Section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants states, "It has been prophesied that the Gentiles shall assist in rebuilding the waste places of Zion" (128:7a). Accordingly, the Saints would have to form organizations and associations with the Gentiles,

yet it is incumbent upon the Saints while reaping the benefits of these organizations ... to be in the world but not of it,

living and acting honestly and honorably before God and in the sight of all men, using the things of this world in the manner designed of God, that the places where they occupy may shine as Zion, the redeemed of the Lord. (128:8b-c)

To avoid tension, Joseph Smith III taught that the church should limit its entanglements in civil government (a lesson he took from the violence in Missouri and Illinois).³⁴ In his biography of Joseph III, historian Roger Launius writes: "While convinced that his father's approach toward organizing utopian communities was basically correct, Smith [III] realized that the early Mormons had tried to accomplish too much too quickly."³⁵

In Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo, the Saints lacked the piety and respect necessary to achieve harmony with their neighbors; and their neighbors, accordingly,

³³ For a detailed overview of Community of Christ's transition, see Matthew Bolton's *Apostle of the Poor: The Life and Work of Missionary and Humanitarian Charles D. Neff*, John Whitmer Books, 2006.

³⁴ Hallwas, "Nauvoo from a Non-Mormon Perspective," in Launius and Hallwas, eds., *Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited*, 168.

³⁵ Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 169.

misunderstood the Saints' intent to build a utopian community, and instead "invariably castigated it, and in some cases sought to destroy it."³⁶ Instead, Joseph III

believed that the Reorganization's Zion-building effort should be more liberal and all-encompassing than it had been during his father's lifetime. He maintained that the millennial kingdom of God could be initiated only through personal righteousness and moral perfection, and would reach full fruition only if the righteous attacked evil in society. Young Joseph's hope that the Saints would purify themselves and become moral crusaders in the world stood in direct contradiction to his father's zionic program, under which early Mormons had retreated from secular society to create their utopia away from outside influences.³⁷

Reflecting his times, Joseph III's embrace of social activism brought the RLDS Church into greater contact with other religious organizations and governments, working alongside them to perfect society from moral deficiencies. Despite this, the RLDS orientation to the world still retained much of the insularity introduced by Joseph Smith Junior. For the Reorganization, Zion was accomplished through peaceful interaction with its neighbors, but there were limits: Reorganized Latter Day Saints sought to lift an ensign of peace, but were also wary of becoming corrupted by those outside the one true church.

The sons of Joseph Smith III who served as his successors in the office of prophet-president, like their father and grandfather, also made changes to ensure that Zion could truly be at peace with the world around it, but without the church being corrupted. However, during the administration of W. Wallace Smith, boundaries (which had been changing long before W. Wallace) were radically altered, and along with them the traditional elements of RLDS worldview. The last son of Joseph Smith III to serve as prophet-president, W. Wallace, although upholding the traditional beliefs, mission, and vision of the Restoration as a peculiar people, projected the trends of the past by further relaxing traditional RLDS boundaries in identity as being set apart from the world. His son, Wallace B. Smith, pushed the church even further.

Some have assumed that 1) W. Wallace Smith, and Wallace B. Smith, made radical changes without any precedent; or 2) that they stepped aside as subordinates took the church in radical directions. Neither perspective captures the whole story.

To answer the first point, although there were changes, they didn't come out of nowhere but instead had a trajectory traceable throughout the history of the Restoration. Indeed, historian Roger Launius suggests that factors influencing theological change have

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 169-70.

roots much deeper than the events of the 1960s. Launius states that, “[w]hile some have suggested” that the theological alignment of Community of Christ closer to mainline Protestantism than Mormonism “is a recent development, it is more likely a consequence of a course charted in the earliest years of the Reorganized Church’s history.”³⁸ As to the second point, W. Wallace, and then Wallace B., *although surrounded by strong voices*, did not bend to those voices. In the final analysis it can be said that the prophet-presidents led the church in a direction they believed represented the mind and will of God. They strongly sensed God calling them to rediscover what it means to be a restored church that can embrace continuing revelation while staying true to the past, being both new and everlasting.

Looking at the history of the last two Smiths to serve as President of the Church, and influential church leaders of the period, will be useful. In 1958, W. Wallace Smith—then the newly ordained prophet-president over the church—called a non-Smith descendant to the office of Presiding Patriarch. Breaking with patrilineal descent, W. Wallace seemingly undermined his own right to preside over the church as a Smith descendant. This blurred a boundary between the Smiths and the rest of the Reorganized Saints that had existed for a century, previously setting their special leaders apart.

A year later, in conjunction with examining their traditional truth claims, church appointees³⁹ at RLDS Headquarters began attending Saint Paul School of Theology, a Methodist seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. In spite of the traditional understanding that the Restoration overcame centuries of apostasy, these church appointees entered a seminary to learn from other Christians. In some ways, this might be seen as being in line with an earlier call within the Restoration to seek out truth from all sources, just as a seminary teacher had been invited to teach Hebrew to the early Saints of the Restoration at Kirtland. But calling a non-Smith descendant and entering the seminary were only the beginning of larger changes.

One question remains: What led the then-RLDS Church to become open about and even critical of traditional truth claims in the first place? Historians have identified at least three causes: 1) increasing education among church leaders, and progressive policies of church leaders throughout the twentieth century; 2) a shift of membership into the middle class, seeing themselves as firmly rooted in their communities and not isolated; and 3) a focus on world-wide missionary efforts, especially in lands with religious traditions other than Christianity where traditional truth claims made little sense

³⁸ Launius, “An Ambivalent Rejection: Baptism for the Dead and the Reorganized Church Experience,” *Dialogue: a journal of Mormon thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 61.

³⁹ Church appointees include leaders of the church and others, who serve in full-time, mission positions for the church, similar to members of the LDS First Quorum of the Seventy.

to people who had never heard of Christ, let alone the Restoration and then the Reorganization.

By the 1970s, the transformation was apparent. Apostle Clifford Cole, who was responsible for much of the transformation during the 1960s, wrote this in a paper titled “The 1970’s, a Decade of Promise”:

During the past decade the church has gone through [a maturing] transition. We have opened missions in non-Christian lands. We have opened the door to becoming a world church. We have been confronted by a theological revolution.

Perhaps the greatest characteristic of the change which has come to us, however, is seen in the fact that we have changed from a church primarily concerned about itself to one turning its eyes outward toward its mission.⁴⁰

He concluded that the church need not defend its existence any longer, but instead focus on its mission, asking: “What would Jesus Christ have us do in this community this year?”⁴¹

Honoring Joseph Smith Junior’s vision as “inspir[ed],” Cole indicates that the mission is still Zion.⁴² In another article titled “The Meaning of Zion in Our Time,” Cole, however, cautioned that the sort of Zion sought in Independence and Nauvoo by earlier Saints undermined itself as an imperious bastion against outsiders: “We recognize that the church must not allow itself to become an all-encompassing owner of property and director of political affairs which challenge the sovereignty of the state. It must leave freedom for the members to move out under the direction of *local* [church leaders] to accomplish what they sense to be God’s will.”⁴³ Deeply influenced by Joseph III to work with and not against government, Cole’s vision of Zion is even less centralized, and is administered from the local level, and potentially anywhere.

Cole’s decentralized view of Zion stemmed from his own growing cultural awareness and sensitivity, in conjunction with apostle Charles Neff, who was assigned to Asia. Together with other like-minded thinkers and leaders, Neff and Cole sought to take the church beyond the Midwest United States. In sharp contrast to a traditional missionary mindset, RLDS missionaries from the 1960s forward were more transformed by their encounter with potential proselytes’ culture than the reverse. They came to argue that the traditional approach of focusing on a Zion in Independence, Missouri

⁴⁰ Cole, “The 1970’s, a Decade of Promise,” in Wellington, ed., *Readings on concepts of Zion*, 217-18.

⁴¹ Ibid, 218.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cole, “The Meaning of Zion in our Time,” in Wellington, ed., *Readings on Concepts of Zion*, 290, emphasis mine.

sacralized American culture. Decentralizing Zion, as Cole urged, was part of shedding cultural baggage to find a universal message that transcended any one culture.

Traditionally, Zion was supposed to transform the Saints; in the 1960s, Cole and Neff transformed Zion. In the process, the peculiarity of RLDS identity was replaced with a certain amount of suspicion—by modern-leaning church leaders and staff—in an effort to encourage awareness of and sensitivity towards other cultures.

While W. Wallace was not opposed to modernizing the church to meet the contemporary demands of a globalizing church, and to answer the questions of social unrest in the 1960s, the church president's views did not always match the conclusions of Cole, Neff, or other like-minded church appointees. Nor did W. Wallace's views match those of many traditional members, who were much more hostile than W. Wallace towards the modernists, and highly critical of their conclusions. For the traditionalists, the seeming identity crisis of the seminary educated was not their crisis, and W. Wallace Smith's modified posture in relation to the world was dangerous to everything they believed regarding their special and separate place in the world.

The tension continued into the presidency of Wallace B. Smith (W. Wallace's son). Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the model for Zion emerged transformed, from one place (Independence, Missouri), to the entire world. Here the boundaries between Zion and Babylon, church and world, were obscured. Zion was literally everywhere, if the Saints would pursue it; and they should pursue it, not by separating from the world, but by engaging and transforming all of the world into the kingdom of God. In this shift, peace wasn't just a tactic for redeeming Zion, but peace was an end unto itself.⁴⁴ No longer looking inward to the Center Place and separating ourselves from the world, church identity and mission expanded, shifting the focus of vision and mission outward.

Looking outward brought new eyes as the church reflected inward as well. Tradition stories and symbols were re-envisioned, and many began asking deep soul-searching questions. Chief among them: "What, beyond the traditions of patriarchal culture, prevented women from serving in the priesthood of the church?" This question launched the church on a difficult journey, one which benefitted from both the voice of the people and the prophetic guidance of the President of the Church. It was not an easy process, and while it brought us closer to realizing Zion and taught us much about how to embrace difficult questions in the future, it proved to be one of the church's greatest trials.

⁴⁴ For this distinction, we are indebted to Gandhi's instruction to Howard Thurman, that non-violence must be at the core of who you are, and not a tactic to achieving a specific political goal, or else true peace will be forever elusive. This insight, that peace is not a tactic, helped shaped the nonviolent direct action undertaken during the American Civil Rights Movement.

Section 156 of the Doctrine and Covenants, presented to the church by President Wallace B. Smith in 1984, proved too much for some members. Some chose to vote with their feet and left the Reorganization, to affirm a more traditional Restoration message. But for many, the revelation flung open the door to new horizons, expanding our vision of not just *who* God is calling, but the very nature of God. From that document we read:

Hear, O my people, regarding my holy priesthood. The power of this priesthood was placed in your midst from the earliest days of the rise of this work for the blessing and salvation of humanity.

I have heard the prayers of many, including my servant the prophet, as they have sought to know my will in regard to the question of who shall be called to share the burdens and responsibilities of priesthood in my church.

I say to you now, as I have said in the past, that all are called according to the gifts which have been given them. This applies to priesthood as well as to any other aspects of the work.

Therefore, do not wonder that some women of the church are being called to priesthood responsibilities. This is in harmony with my will and where these calls are made known to my servants, they may be processed according to administrative procedures and provisions of the law.
(Doctrine and Covenants 156:7a, 9a-c)

As Community of Christ moved into the 1990s and the twenty-first century, there has been a growing awareness that God is moving in our midst, to reveal a new vision for creation which requires prophetic leadership and compassion. Our name change to Community of Christ reveals our growing sense that mission is what matters most. We are neither ashamed of our Restoration past, nor afraid to engage with other Christians, allowing God to shape us into the community we are called to become in order to accomplish the mission of Christ. This has stretched us! At times, it's stretched us beyond our community's resiliency, and some have left our midst, which saddens us. But we are cheered by the peace of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to proclaim Christ and establish Zion as an earthly reflection of the divine community of the Triune God.

*Concepts of God by Community of Christ in the 21st Century*⁴⁵

We humbly recognize it is beyond our human capacity to fully comprehend God's nature. However, a basic understanding of God's nature is essential to and foundational for our identity, message, mission, and beliefs. Our foundation and center is articulated in Community of Christ's Basic Beliefs, which states regarding "God":

We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit. We affirm the Trinity – God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.⁴⁶

The "three persons" referred to in this statement are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are **one God**. The "three persons" have distinct "identities" which exist in inseparable relationship. The meaning of "persons" is different from the common usage which generally refers to individual humans. . . . When we use "persons" to describe the Trinity, we mean that God is personal and relational, and that we experience God's personal character through God's triune nature.⁴⁷

The triune community of three Persons who are God is proclaimed by Jesus as recorded in the Book of Mormon:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and I bear record of it from the Father; and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost.

And thus will the Father bear record of me, and the Holy Ghost will bear record unto him of the Father and me; for the Father, and I, and the Holy Ghost are one. (3 Nephi 5:36-38; LDS 11:35-36)

There are, of course, Bible verses which seem to affirm the separateness of Jesus and the Father. These include Jesus' baptism when the Father announces the Son (Mark 1:11), or other instances when Jesus prays, such as in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." (Luke

⁴⁵ Adapted from "Ministry and Priesthood in Community of Christ" Part I: Theological Foundations p 5-7 (September 2013, Draft).

⁴⁶ *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs*, 3rd ed. Our Basic Beliefs are also available online at <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>.

⁴⁷ This is markedly different from how Joseph Smith Junior referred to the Father and Son as "personages," which suggests that members of the Trinity are like individual humans.

22:42). In scripture, we read of the relationship between Father and Son—sometimes affirming the unity of God, other times the individuality within the triune community. In response to all of the testimonies before us, we affirm the God who is a community of three persons, but also one living God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

While we can appreciate the relationship between a father and son, and we have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, fully understanding God is something beyond us. As Jacob proclaimed:

Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God. (Jacob 3:8-11; LDS 4:8)

Though ongoing revelation brings us closer, still our language and capacity falls short to fully capture the grandeur and mystery of God—of which we were reminded in Doctrine and Covenants, Section 1:

Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. (Doctrine & Covenants 1:5a; LDS 1:24)

Or, as a recent section of Community of Christ’s Doctrine and Covenants explains, regarding scripture, human language, and the nature of God:

Scripture is an indispensable witness to the Eternal Source of light and truth, which cannot be fully contained in any finite vessel or language. Scripture has been written and shaped by human authors through experiences of revelation and ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the midst of time and culture.

Scripture is not to be worshiped or idolized. Only God, the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies, is worthy of worship. God’s nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, provides the ultimate standard by which any portion of scripture should be interpreted and applied. (Doctrine & Covenants 163:7a-b)

The triune nature of God affirms that God is relational and God is divine community. In the words of Daniel L. Migliore, “In all eternity God lives and loves as

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In God's own eternal being there is movement, life, personal relationship, and giving and receiving of love."⁴⁸

Though we cannot fully understand the mystery of God, we have experienced and understood enough to know that God is worthy of our praise. In part, we praise God as Trinity for being a model for peaceful community and for individual wholeness. The word "community" means "with unity" or "in oneness." God, a community of three persons, means that God *in three persons* lives eternally in mutual love, purpose, devotion, and communion. Community also means God's nature has room for distinct identities that are united in boundless love and are fully inclusive of differences. This has profound implications in the life of the church.

We are created in God's image. As such, God calls for humanity to be an expression of divine nature. God lives in community, and calls us to live in community. The foundations of sacred community are relationships of receiving and giving love, devotion, unity in diversity, and shared vision.

True authentic community bears witness to God's nature and ultimate purpose for creation. The purpose of creation is to share in God's love, generosity, and inclusiveness of differences. God is present and acts in human history to reconcile all of creation to these divine purposes, through loving relationships in sacred communities that reflect God's true nature.

The perfect example of God's nature and purposes are found in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, enduring suffering and offering sacrificial love to reconcile and redeem creation. Jesus' acts of compassion, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, sacrifice, and promoting true community reveal God's way of bringing salvation and peace to the whole creation.

As we experience and respond to God's nature and redemptive activity, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, we become devoted disciples of Jesus Christ in community with others. We understand the importance of coming to faithful discipleship through Christian community.

⁴⁸ *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 77.

Spiritual Practice

Keep a Spiritual Journal: Record prayers, feelings, questions, experiences, thoughts, insights, images, dreams, and memories. God can “speak” to us in any and all of these ways. Writing them becomes part of the conversation with God. Surprising insights can come through writing. Journals are private, so we can be completely honest with God and ourselves.

Buy a small journal or notebook, or use any paper you can find. Write as a daily spiritual practice or when you have a specific question, experience, prayer, or scripture you want to record.

Breath Prayer: In breath prayer we breathe God’s Spirit in and out with a prayer phrase. Use a breath prayer to create a receptive space for God through attentive breathing and the anchoring phrase: “Be still and know” (as you inhale); “that I am God” (as you exhale).

Questions for Prayerful Reflection

- How does viewing God as the triune community of Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier guide us in relationships?
- How do we reflect the qualities of the Trinity in the way we express love, devotion, commitment, mutuality, shared purpose, and community?
- How does the variety in creation reflect God’s desire for loving and affirming relationships?
- Given our Enduring Principle of Continuing Revelation, how do we remain open to new understandings about God's nature?
- What does it mean that all human beings are created in God’s image for divine purpose?

Appendices

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“Trinity: God is Love”

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“Conceptions of God: A Personal Journey”

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“Patriarchy, Feminism, and the Search for the Feminine Divine”

By Robin Kincaid Linkhart

Appendix A: “Trinity: God Is Love”

by Don H. Compier

As the church engages in sustained reflection on the Enduring Principles⁴⁹ that bind us together, we do well to reflect very intentionally on the foundation and source from which they emerge and to whom they seek to point: a majestic, awesome, yet deeply compassionate God.

Community of Christ always has insisted that we do not impose dogmatic formulations on persons as tests of fellowship. We understand that God cannot be conveyed fully or adequately in human words. We deeply value each individual’s quest for a very personal understanding of the ultimate reality that calls for an ever-growing relationship. Yet our community of faith also relishes expressions of our sense of shared identity and common mission. Some reflect the unique insights emerging from our particular journey as a people [of the Restoration]. Others of equal importance affirm the heritage we share with all Christians.

Like the vast majority of past and present Christians, Community of Christ understands God as “one in three persons, blessed Trinity.” In our modern world some people struggle with this core teaching. It may seem needlessly complex, affirmed simply for the sake of tradition, and lacking in relevance.

We must take note, however, of the way that reflection on the Trinity has become one of the leading themes in recent Christian theology (faith seeking understanding). Moreover, representatives of all schools of thought—process, feminist, liberation, liberal, evangelical, orthodox—have joined this lively conversation. As usual, good theology emerges from disciplined devotional practices. In spirituality, too, reflection on the Trinity helps many to walk more closely with God. Let’s consider, then, some ancient roots of this vital doctrine, as well as reasons for its continuing relevance.

After much reflection and conflict, the Christian church established the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century CE. But its roots go back much further and are found in the witness of various biblical books of both testaments. The people of Israel knew that God was vastly different from creation, including humans, and how dangerous it was for people to cast God in their own image. They experienced how God freely and graciously entered into their lives in intimate ways.

⁴⁹ The Enduring Principles are a set of statements that embody who we are as a community. They are: Grace and Generosity, Sacredness of Creation, Continuing Revelation, Worth of All Persons, All Are Called, Responsible Choices, Pursuit of Peace (Shalom), Unity in Diversity, and Blessings of Community. To read more about the Enduring Principles, see <http://www.cofchrist.org/enduring-principles>.

So while the writers of the Old Testament praised God as supreme ruler of the universe, they also extolled the Spirit as the breath of God, filling creation, giving and sustaining life in all its variety. The early church inherited all of these insights and expanded them through reflections on God's work in and through Jesus. Every page of the New Testament reflects the wonder of persons who encountered God when the prophet from Nazareth entered their lives. They attempted to bear witness by calling him Christ, God's anointed, and even Lord, a term usually reserved for the Holy One. God's Spirit empowered them to become a diverse community, to proclaim good news, and to live in hope. It was entirely natural, then, to baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The language of the fourth century, about "person" and "essence," may seem philosophically abstract to us, but those who formulated it were doing their best to profess their belief that the various ways we experience divine activity point to one marvelous God. So when Jesus and his message transform our lives, the same God is at work as the one who brought all creation into being—the same one who gives us strength, comfort, and insight in intimate spiritual experiences.

The doctrine of the Trinity praises God, who can work in so many ways, yet for the same end, seeks to bind all of creation together in one loving embrace.

Ancient peoples took community for granted as the foundational reality of their lives (see I Corinthians 12, for instance). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Western individualism and communist collectivism threatened genuine community. Contemporary writers on the Trinity therefore underscore the implications of ancient teaching for human life together and for human relationships with all of creation.

We might express the renewed insights gained by seeing the doctrine of the Trinity as an interpretation of what it means to say that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8). Confident that God really does disclose the divine self to us, affirming that God is Triune means that God is community. Establishing true community is something God always does because God is communitarian through and through. God's own being honors diverse gifts—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—while always stressing that all is done for the sake of the whole. Community modeled on the Trinity always will seek to respect individual rights and the entire web of connections.

These reflections should resonate in Community of Christ, which throughout its history has sought to establish the cause of Zion. We know, perhaps better than most, how human attempts to establish ideal communities are frustrated time and again. Yet the Triune community gives us hope, for if God is community, and community is of God, in the end all things are destined for joyous relationships.

If we humans are, as the Bible affirms (Genesis 1:26), made in God's image, we are made in the image of Trinity, of true community. We cannot fulfill our purpose in any other way than to be builders of communities of joy, hope, love, and peace.

Over many centuries Christians have not hoped for the fulfillment of our notions of community, but for the fulfillment of God's Triune work. Through witness, Christ, and the indwelling power of the Spirit, God intends to bring all of us together in the loving community of the Trinity's divine life.

May all that we do and say serve this wondrous purpose. May these Enduring Principles, in all their human frailty, continually point the church back to its only foundation, the source of all of its life, the end of all its striving, and empower us to reach out to all of creation in love.

Appendix B: “Conceptions of God: A Personal Journey”

By Seth L. Bryant

Years into my conversion from the LDS Church to Community of Christ, I was uncomfortable with the concept of the Trinity. How uncomfortable? Let me tell you two stories, and then tease out my own personal and ongoing journey, as someone who struggles with theological language regarding God.

For the first story, a little background: I’ve been known to change the words to hymns as I sing them, to fit my mood or beliefs. When I do this, my wife Jenn always gives me an uneasy smile with a look that I’ve come to interpret as “Seriously?” And I would get that look and smile a lot during LDS sacrament meetings. I was bored. Now keep in mind, you have to be quick on your toes to change the words of a hymn while it’s being sung. Such creativity is at the heart of worship, and is something the Restoration’s earliest hymn writers did on a regular basis, to insert their theology into the Protestant hymns they were borrowing. One of my favorite personal remixes is with “All Creatures of our God and King,” to which I end with “Jenn praise Him, Alleluia.” It’s always guaranteed to get the patented response from the wife; so in other words, totally worth it.

My modification of hymns continued even after I joined Community of Christ, though I was less bored during worship. But as a member of Community of Christ, I used it in a subtle act of protest regarding Trinitarian language. For example, my Community of Christ congregation loved to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” which ends with “God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity.” That last part I would sing, “blessed Unity.” That’s right. At that time, I was more comfortable being labeled a Unitarian than a Trinitarian.

On to the second story. Once I was leading a class discussion as a doctoral teaching fellow. It was a graduate level divinity course on the formation of the Christian tradition. An MDiv student asked about *homoousios* versus *homoiousios*, and the potential issues with hyperstatic union.⁵⁰ I rattled off my best explanation. The professor was in the room, and nodded accordingly, seemingly pleased with my answer. I then said, “Well, if we’re done with the Trinity, can we move on to something that matters?” There was an audible gasp in the room. As a member of the Restoration, I had really shown my true colors, and didn’t care if my joke offended, for at that time I honestly felt like the theological nuances were nonsense. I still don’t care for them, though my respect has grown for human conceptions of the Trinity overall.

⁵⁰ These three terms—*homoousios*, *homoiousios*, and hyperstatic union—aren’t really that important to my point. But if you’re curious, they refer to, respectively, the Father and Son being of the same substance, or of a similar substance, and to the union of divine and human in Jesus Christ.

For those who know the timeline of my life, it wasn't that long ago that I was such a little heretic. So what's changed? Honestly, very little in terms of my views regarding the theological constructs humans have developed to explain God. I believe that the conclusions the church and theologians have drawn about God over the centuries are as much rooted in culture and time as they are inspired or based on a true and correct conception of God, as if we have language for such. And as such, they are not immutable, and at times can be barely informative in how we should live as followers of Christ.

If it was just semantics, I'd probably not care as much. But power struggles have played out over these constructs with tragic results. I recoil that Western and Eastern Christianity split over the *filioque* clause, whether the Holy Spirit proceeded just from the Father, or from the Father and the Son (although this was just the straw that broke the camel's back). I'm appalled that Christians were so upset over this that we can no longer break bread together. And, as I mentioned my former Unitarianism sympathies, I have to mention that there was a Christian named Michael Servetus that other Christians were willing to kill because he didn't espouse the correct theology—Calvin himself being caught up in the execution of a brilliant mind and true believer in Christ, simply because Servetus wasn't a Trinitarian. There's been a lot at stake here, over the years (no pun intended).

But despite my hesitations, especially early on, I'd like to share what changed my mind, or expanded my views so that I could appreciate a Triune conception of God. It started as I read an article by Don Compier, dean of the Community of Christ Seminary, entitled "Trinity: God is Love."⁵¹

It wasn't like Brother Compier was Ananias, I was Saul, and the article was a blessing that instantly removed scales from my eyes (Acts 9:17-18). But, it did help me to see the potential beauty in the Trinity that I was previously missing, largely because I had been enculturated to believe that anything involving the Trinity was both wrong and anti-Restoration. It also helped me realize that, for me, theological jargon is the worst way to approaching an understanding of God; that instead, I'm interested in the relationships involved in the Godhead, and the ways in which those relationships model healing and transformative community, or, in a word, Zion. With this, my appreciation grew for the very Restoration-centric possibilities in the Trinity, not to mention the beauty in the relationships.

Now I can hear myself of 2007 responding to both Don Compier's article, and what I'm typing right now. As my two stories should indicate, I came into Community of Christ with reservations; but I trusted the Holy Spirit that was leading me into the

⁵¹ Appendix A of this resource.

church. In 2007, I would have said, “What about Joseph Smith Junior? Did he not say, ‘Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject’?”⁵² And now you want to tell me that you’re going to accept these seminary-informed, verbose, and ambiguous formulae that seem to say that Community of Christ leaders have done anything but gaze into the heavens for even five seconds? Isn’t a correct conception of God everything (John 17:3)?”

First, I’d ask my former self for patience and faith. Understanding God even on a limited level isn’t the work of five minutes, but of a lifetime, regardless of what Joseph Smith taught—as the multiple versions of Joseph Smith’s First Vision portray, for he only came to understand what God’s vision meant to him over time.

And then, I would ask a lot of questions of the disenchanted but true believing Mormon that I was. All of these questions would fall under the main inquiry of “What are the fruits of believing God is three separate persons, and that the Father and Son have resurrected bodies? To what end?” From there, the examination would stem out, to include questions like:

- If I believe that God was once a man, and that I too can become a God, have I not elevated humanity at the expense of Deity?
- If humanity is so empowered, don’t I run the risk of focusing only on works, with consequences in anxiety and obedience that may be neither healthy nor necessary?
- Isn’t it time to talk about grace?
- Wouldn’t I rather go to church to worship God, than to reinforce personal knowledge?
- And wouldn’t I rather stare out at the stars and the heavens and the mountains and think “My God, your works and glory are beyond description,” over “My God, I can’t wait to do the same thing”?
- Isn’t there something to be said for the mystery of God, beyond creating a system of ordinances, of checks in the boxes which ensure we’re on the road to exaltation?

Finally, I would point out that the Mormon conception of God (that I lifted up as so superior) is in its umpteenth reformulation. The only difference between the LDS Church and Community of Christ on this is that Community of Christ isn’t concerned about admitting that the journey is messy and ongoing. Perhaps we’ve misunderstood the 9th Article of Faith, that, as we mature in the journey as a people of faith, our understanding of God matures as well, though it is still the same God who leads us.

⁵² *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 324

In this final point, I would specifically appeal to the budding intellectual historian that was me of 2007, and remind myself of when I read all of the *Journal of Discourses* (*JoD*). I found a complete set of the *JoD* in the LDS Institute Library at the University of Florida. In the Institute library, I would read, and then document my findings using a digital voice recorder—after which, I would type up my notes. One of the most repeated tags I dictated into that recorder was “Development in the Doctrine of the Godhead.” Over and over again, I read Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, and countless others describe a God that didn’t sound anything like the God the LDS Church was teaching about in the 21st Century. And I marveled, and worried.

I didn’t make it much past the first volume before it became quite clear that the doctrine of the Godhead developed over time in the LDS Church. Because I believed in the LDS Church with all my heart and mind, my thesis while studying the *JoD* was that it took time for the latter-day church to fully realize the correct conception of God, hence the deviations then and developments over time. When I shared this with an institute teacher, he became quite angry with me. We had been friends, and I had spoken to him many, many times before that discussion—which, sadly, would be our last. He basically said, “The doctrine of God is as unchanging and eternal as God is. Joseph Smith knew God, completely, and conveyed that knowledge to the church. Brigham Young received that knowledge, and he passed it down, perfectly, to the prophet today.”

I replied, wanting to be intellectually honest to myself and him, but not offend his faith, “That’s not what I’m seeing. Have you read the *Journal of Discourses*?”

He said, “No. Everyone who reads them leaves the church. I’m not sure why we have those damned things in here.”

In what is a story for another day, I will briefly comment that I reached a point where I could no longer stomach sacred-history making when it became Orwellian and with dangerous consequences—when I, as a historian with the facts, was seen as a threat to the truth. Anyone who tells you that the Mormon concept of the Godhead has been fixed and sure from the beginning is distorting history to the ends of a faithful narrative. They are overlooking the Trinitarianism of the Book of Mormon; overlooking the Binitarian formulations of the Lectures on Faith (which were the “doctrine” part of the Doctrine and Covenants for decades); and overlooking that it wasn’t until 1901 that Brigham Young’s Adam-God lecture was removed from the St. George Temple endowment “lecture at the veil.”

As much as I didn’t like Trinitarian language originally, I valued the historical honesty of Community of Christ, and that, as Don Compier states in “Trinity: God is Love,” Community of Christ does not “impose dogmatic formulations on persons as tests of fellowship.” Of course, this big-tent approach to God is welcome news for a heretic

Mormon looking for a new Restoration-based community of faith; but terrible news for a believing Mormon who bases a church's value on its ability to draw accurate flowcharts of the eternities.

Embracing what I saw as good and bad, a few months after my conversation at the Institute, and following an amazing religious experience and the promptings of the Spirit, I joined Community of Christ. I did so in faith, a little uncomfortable with certain things, but no longer disenchanted (if anything, I found an increase of the Holy Spirit and was excited to go to church). As I said, Community of Christ is a big tent, and at times I've found myself solidly near the center pole, and other times up against the stakes, and that's perfectly fine so long as I'm in the tent. That doesn't mean that anything goes; but it does provide a great deal of freedom. Over time, I have become more comfortable with a Triune God as Community of Christ teaches.

I have come to love that God is community, showing us how to live in harmony and unity within ourselves and within our families and communities. The Triune Community of Three Persons in One God models a perfect vision of Zion, as a people of one heart, and one mind, with no poor among them.

I value the masculine and feminine traits of a Triune God, even as I recognize the location of Jesus as a male Jew of a particular time and place. God was revealed to us in a living human being. God understands us. But God is greater than us. And God wants us to live in peace, as a people who embrace grace and seek justice. Those are the fruits of a Trinitarian concept of God, and they are most sweet to the soul as Lehi said of the fruit of the Tree of Life.

Now do I understand how everything works? Do I still use big theological terms? No. I simply talk about the love of God manifest in Christ, and affirmed by the Holy Spirit. I believe in a Creator, a Redeemer, and a Sanctifier. I experience God in all three ways. Yet it is one God. And that is enough for me. No, that is everything for me.

In closing, I have to say something of exaltation and endowment. I believed in those terms in a traditional Mormon sense. Leaving the endowment behind was difficult. Still is difficult. But I have come to relish in the endowment of the Holy Spirit. I believe that the spiritual practices of the early saints and their speculative theology were progressively wrapped up until Mormonism lost sight of the original purpose: to receive the Holy Spirit, so that we could be endowed to transform the world into Christ's peaceable kingdom, into Zion. Letting God's holiness transform your heart, walking through sacred space, and considering God's creation and seeing the plan of salvation from beginning to end: these were all available to me in the LDS temple endowment; and they are available to me today through the sacraments and spiritual

disciplines offered in Community of Christ, to include walking the Worshipper's Path at the Temple in Independence.

I don't claim to know what the next life will ultimately hold. Even when I was a Mormon, I only had a vague idea of the "day to day" activities of the next life, even if I claimed knowledge about the degrees of glory. But I believe that God's plans involve more than just sitting on a cloud and playing a harp. I expect to be together with those I love, with my family, because Christ has redeemed us all. I expect to see and to be involved in amazing things. But at the end of the day, as inscribed on the outside of all Mormon temples, I proclaim "Holiness to the Lord." All praise, honor, glory, and holiness belongs to God. And I thank God when I get to share in that holiness, and divine community.

Appendix C: “Patriarchy, Feminism, and the Search for the Feminine Divine”

By Robin Kincaid Linkhart

The words “Patriarchy” and “Feminism” evoke a wide range of feelings in our world. Patriarchy looms large in our culture. Humanity’s way of life for 7000 years, patriarchy crosses all borders, boundaries, colors, cultures, nations, and religions. To question its efficacy may do little more than ripple the air with the breath of unheard voices, or be brushed aside like an annoying hair. Stirring the pot can conjure up anger, denial, fear, laughter, snide remarks, guilt, shame, confusion, sorrow, blame, awkward silence, and defensive behaviors too numerous to list, not only among men but women as well.

For those who seek to know the feminine nature of God, navigating the terrain of long-standing culture, traditions, and norms can be daunting and confusing even when the compass seems sure. This paper will explore many questions on our search for the feminine divine.

What is Patriarchy and how does it color our perspectives of and responses to the many diverse expressions of Feminism as we seek to understand God? How does Patriarchy impact culture, church, and the way we see our bodies? What are the many voices of Feminism saying about our journey of faith? How do Patriarchy and Feminism inform our search for Mother God? How do two very different doctrines, the LDS Doctrine of Embodiment, and the Doctrine of Trinity -- both espousing feminine divine dimensions -- shed light and cast shadow on our path of understanding both the feminine and masculine nature of God?

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a male centered, male identified, male dominated gender paradigm. It is a social system based on the control and oppression of women. Patriarchy is not an umbrella term for “men.” It does not refer to any group of people or individuals. It is a social structure, a cultural norm; it is a way of living together in society.

In a patriarchal society, human characteristics defined as superior and dominant, like rationality and power, are associated with males. It associates females with characteristics defined as inferior and auxiliary, like intuition and passivity.⁵³

⁵³ Parsons, Susan Frank, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

Both men and women participate in the perpetuation and propagation of patriarchy.

News, movies, political arenas, and religious circles all reveal society's central focus on males. The male experience is the default representation of the human experience with little to no regard for that of women.

Patriarchy holds distinct standards and definitions of manhood. Society celebrates men. Men are revered for all accomplishments, which fans the flames of competition and further encourages male self-centeredness. Women are affirmed for nurturing others, denying self, and reinforcing patriarchy.⁵⁴

In reality many men feel lost. Seldom can anyone live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood for a sustained period of time and the system offers precious little alternative options toward authentic relationship, stable centeredness, and healthy sense of self for the ordinary non-superhero male. All too frequently the resulting inner conflict and turmoil men feel leads to damaging, even dangerous, behaviors and attitudes toward women.

Males dominate positions of authority across government, legal, political, economic, military, education, corporate business, and religious realms. Already celebrated for maleness alone, the overwhelming presence of men in roles of authority underscores and further perpetuates the power differential with women. At the same time it insures males have greater income, influence, and control to shape and mold culture to benefit the male gender.

At the core of our culture, ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity. For example, values like strength, competitiveness, logic, decisiveness, self-sufficiency, and emotional control are key descriptors of male masculinity. The less valued qualities of cooperation, mutuality, compassion, vulnerability, emotional expressiveness, intuitive and nonlinear thinking are all associated with weakness, femininity, and femaleness.⁵⁵

Society values women according to beauty as the objects of male desire and gaze, possession and control. Patriarchal culture romanticizes women in general especially as mothers, and while it may sound all warm and fuzzy, it has little to no positive impact on the day-to-day reality of women's lives.

Though the world has several stellar examples of women in power, the general subordination of women under patriarchy continues. Women holding positions of

⁵⁴ Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2005), 9-12.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 5-7.

power is a positive step forward. But that alone does little to change the patriarchal systems in which powerful women operate, or effect any fundamental change in the short term.

Our world continues to identify men as the standard human norm, superior and of greater value than women.

Highly valued aspects of culture and human experience are associated with men more than women, experiences like religion and God: "...every monotheistic patriarchal religion worships a male-identified God -- gendered as masculine."⁵⁶ In my opinion this is perhaps the linchpin in the legitimacy of men's claim to privilege and dominance.

Any social system which ensures one group of people consistently has more power and control than another inevitably leads to the oppression of the subordinate group. The unavoidable consequence of patriarchy is oppression of women. The degree of that oppression is directly proportionate to the level of patriarchy present in any given culture or society.⁵⁷

More literature emerges every day documenting not just the various forms of institutionalized sexism, but a consistent pattern of pervasive violence in the lives of battered wives, the pornographic industry, sexual harassment, sexual assault,⁵⁸ and a growing culture of rape.

There is a high price to be paid for the social system of Patriarchy.

Feminism

Feminism refers to a spectrum of movements, ideologies, and critical perspectives which challenge patriarchy and work to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic, and social rights for women. Although the egalitarian impulse of feminism is the normative position, reversal patterns have emerged periodically reflecting humanity's struggle to re-imagine and define gender relations from an inclusive nonhierarchical foundation.⁵⁹

Feminism, like all change movements, critically seeks to understand the reality of the present, of how we came to be in this place, and to identify a path forward. Multifaceted and diverse, feminism represents over two hundred years of rich analytical and ideological thought birthing profound contributions toward framing and

⁵⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 8-16.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁹ Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 1.

understanding gender inequality and the experience of women and men in relation to themselves and patriarchy.

While the wide diversity of feminism tends to defy conclusive definition, some core ideas remain constant across the spectrum of feminist thought.⁶⁰

Feminism rests on the assumption that women should have political, social, and economic equality with men. It is a multifaceted movement which addresses gender inequality in our world. To varying degrees, all branches and expressions of feminism share a lens of seeing the world in relation to gender. Feminism recognizes patriarchy as a deeply rooted social system and clearly understands the dominant group's vested interest in the subordination of women, maintaining patriarchal values, and control of institutions which perpetuate patriarchal values including the arenas of politics, economics, religion, and education.⁶¹

Without a doubt, the feminism umbrella includes multiple schools of thought with diverse social change agendas and ideologies: Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Radical feminism, Socialist feminism, Cultural feminism, Womanist theory, Post-modern feminism, Third World-Postcolonial feminism to name a few.⁶²

Some seem to believe feminism emerged in the 1970s in full form ready to blaze the trail to gender justice. However, feminist roots can be traced back to ancient Greece with Sappho (d. c. 570 BCE), Hildegard of Bingen in the medieval world (d. 1179), and Christine de Pisan (d. 1434). Most definitely Olympus de George (d. 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797), and Jane Austen (d. 1817) are counted as foremothers of the modern women's movement. All of these afore named women advocated for the dignity, intelligence, and basic human potential of females.⁶³

Although feminist resistance to male domination is seen in various degrees throughout history and across cultures, in the United States three successive "waves" of feminism emerged starting in the late 19th/early 20th Centuries, each of which focused on particular women's issues important to their time and context.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 99.

⁶¹ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 112-113.

⁶² "Feminism in Waves: A Brief Overview of the First, Second and Third Wave" Mountain Writer Yahoo Contributor Network, October 1, 2007 (<http://voices.yahoo.com/feminism-waves-brief-overview-first-second-568867.html>) accessed 7/26/2013 9:58 am.

⁶³ Rampton, Martha "The Three Waves of Feminism" (Pacific: The Magazine of Pacific University Vol. 41. No. 2, Fall 2008), http://www.pacificu.edu/magazine_archives/2008/fall/echoes/feminism.cfm; accessed 7/26/2013 9:21 am.

The First Wave of Feminism

The “First Wave” of feminism focused on opening new opportunities for women, especially the right to vote. The effort supported important social movements of the day including the abolitionist and temperance movements, many advocating for Prohibition. Sidelined between two World Wars, feminism revived with the Second Wave.

The Second Wave of Feminism

The “Second Wave” of feminism started in the 1960s continuing into the 1990s. This wave was active in anti-Vietnam protests and the civil rights movement. It stressed important social and economic issues related to equal employment, environment, reproductive rights, and sexuality, including sexual harassment. Female intellectuals made significant contributions in the area of feminist theory conducting comprehensive studies focused on patriarchy, gender issues, and associated social and political implications. The subjugation of women was intensely researched and tied to broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and women’s role as wife and mother. Passing the Equal Rights Amendment was a major focus, consuming tremendous energy.

In contrast to a vast majority of middle class white women in the First Wave, the Second Wave attracted women of color and women from developing nations. In this era, men and women were still viewed as essentially different. Second Wave feminists felt certain, if empowered, women’s nurturing and collaborative natures could facilitate world peace.⁶⁴

The Third Wave of Feminism

“Third Wave” feminism continues to advocate for women’s empowerment as today’s young feminists endeavor to find a voice of their own and become a fully inclusive, diverse, multidimensional group reflective of all colors, sexual orientations, and socio-economic positions. Informed by post-colonial and post-modern thought, notions of “universal womanhood,” body, gender, sexuality, and hetero-normativity are being questioned and deconstructed.

⁶⁴ West, Thomas, “The Three Waves of Feminism” (<http://suite101.com/article/the-three-waves-of-feminism-a231137>) accessed 7/26/2013 10:43 am. Note: This article uses sources from both Pacific University and Conduive Magazine which offer insights into the three waves of feminism.

Mystifying their feminist foremothers, these young feminists readopted the high heels, lipstick and cleavage earlier waves linked to male oppression. The Internet is a vital aspect of the Third Wave providing home pages for “cybergrrls,” “netgrrls,” and growing numbers of largely women-only spaces for dialogue, sharing, and rallying the forces. Ironically, disembodied cyberspace gives opportunity to cross all kinds of gender boundaries which seems in harmony with Third Wave’s celebration of ambiguity, refusal to use “us-them” framing, and at times resist self-identification as feminists. Third Wave feminism breaks boundaries.

Some Second Wave feminists are troubled by Third Wave’s seeming ignorance and disregard for the struggles and achievements experienced in earlier efforts and see little progress since their heyday. For example, the pay gap has not significantly narrowed in 60 years. Some even fear the younger women are losing valuable ground.

However, this seems highly unlikely. Feminism has always been a movement of multiple voices representing diverse ideology and the creative tensions of varied perspectives and foci. The current dynamic is healthy and a positive sign of thriving vitality.⁶⁵

The Response

Feminism is a movement which promotes a critical understanding of an accepted social system and advocates for change. Like any movement which asks difficult, uncomfortable questions and pushes against the boundaries of culture and long standing social structures, feminism continues to experience a massive and effective backlash.

Attacked from all sides, feminism is resisted in countless ways spanning the spectrum from quite subtle and passive to overtly hostile and even violent. In many circles, trashing feminism is commonplace. Often women won’t risk calling themselves feminists even if their perspectives are in full alignment with the goals of feminism.

The general public understanding of feminism is superficial at best, and media coverage is largely limited to benign forms or ideas taken out of context and sensationalized to sell the story. In those ways, feminism is minimalized, marginalized, and ignored. Stereotype labels are effectively used to discredit feminism across the board, appealing to general public bias. Feminists are called Anti-family, No Fun

⁶⁵ Rampton, “The Three Waves of Feminism” (Note: Martha Rampton is a professor of history and director of the Center for Gender Equity at Pacific. Her specialty is the early medieval period with an emphasis on social history and the activities and roles of women. She holds an MA in medieval history from the University of Utah and a doctorate in medieval history from the University of Virginia.)

Angry Cold Bitches, Man-Hating Male Bashers, Lesbians, or Whining Victims to name a few favorite labels among ill-informed critics.

Feminists are also accused of being all sorts of heretics: religious, political, tribal, familial, professional, you name it. The result: Feminism becomes invisible.

If we can't see feminism, we can't see patriarchy. Without feminism and the critically important body of work it has and continues to produce, we run the costly risk of seeing gender inequality through the lens of patriarchy only.⁶⁶

Without feminism, it becomes easy to ignore male dominance or write it off as human nature, creation's way, or God's holy plan complete with "normal" divinely appointed male and female differences fully intact. Without feminism we are tempted to say, "Take a break. Feminism did its work, look at all the changes in the world." Then walk through the emerald gates, put on the green lensed glasses, and live in the mythical postfeminist Land of Oz.

Embodiment

As women struggle to break the chains of patriarchy and claim their place in our world, questions emerge around embodiment and the full integration of body and spirit. Embodiment has to do with *how* a person lives in their physical body, and the *relationship* between one's mind and body. This does not occur in a vacuum, but within the greater context of time, place, social context and culture. Bearing the stamp of social patriarchy, culture imposes certain expectations and control on women and their bodies.

The objectification of women's bodies in our world is pervasive. In countless ways and from all directions the message of culture impacts how men and women see and relate to women's bodies. A long-term culture of objectifying the female body has effectively resulted in women's alienation from their own bodies. The interaction of mind and body becomes twisted to "how does body as object interact with the world," rather than how do mind, body, and spirit relate and become fully integrated within the self of each woman. Body as object precipitates a fixation on physical perfection to the point of extreme. This is especially harmful when a person's worth is understood to be integrally connected with the perceived value of the body as object. Some see the prevalence of eating disorders and cosmetic plastic surgery directly connected to women's pursuit of the ideal body and society's seal of approval.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 99-130.

The objectification of women's bodies results in dysfunctional embodiment. Contributing pressures range far and wide. For example, cultural myths around menstruation, long held understandings of the sex act as male centered and focused on reproduction, the general objectification of women's bodies in media, and the lack of basic education to inform women about the female body and its functions all contribute to dysfunctional embodiment.⁶⁷

Bottom line: Long term oppression has significantly affected women's relationship with their own bodies.

For women of faith, religion and our understanding of the nature of God are paramount to the discussion of embodiment. It is crucial to understand the power of religion to transmit social culture, perspectives, and attitudes. "Religion is perhaps the most prominent cultural use of myth."⁶⁸

Myth is story. It is not fantasy, make believe, or a collection of lies. Myth is a way of communicating that helps ordinary people understand that which seems to escape human capacity to comprehend. Myth as story points to truth in powerful ways. Considered a great thinker of our time, academic Karen Armstrong says myth "is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality."⁶⁹

In religion, myth is sacred story passed down generation to generation thereby imparting religious culture, traditions, and beliefs. "All three of the major monotheistic world religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – struggle with ancient patriarchal traditions."⁷⁰ By way of myth—the sacred story—patriarchy became deeply embedded in the theological and spiritual beliefs of Christianity. Fingerprints remain. Male language dominates prayer, word, worship, and song. The use of "father" communicates not only the love and care of parent, but also power – including the power to enforce laws.⁷¹

Christianity and its organizational structure emerged in a patriarchal society. Until recent years, positions of power were held nearly exclusively by men. The fact

⁶⁷ For more information about the objectification of the female body in USA culture see *Miss Representation*, a 2011 American documentary film written, directed, and produced by Jennifer Siebel Newsom which explores how mainstream media contribute to the under-representation of women in influential positions by circulating limited and often disparaging portrayals of women. The film premiered in the documentary competition at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival

⁶⁸ Scholz, Sally J., *Feminism*, (Oneworld Publications: Oxford, England 2010), 110. (ebook 2012) location 1485.

⁶⁹ Armstrong, Karen, *A Short History of Myth*, (Canongate: Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne 2005), 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 109 (1480).

⁷¹ Scholz, Sally J., *Feminism*, (Oneworld Publications: Oxford, England 2010), 108-109. (ebook 2012) location 1440-1486.

that women leaders existed in the early Christian church is largely ignored. Two examples remind us that the Apostle Paul worked in ministry side-by-side with women sharing the message of Jesus with all who would listen.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1-2)

Most expressions of Christianity continue to describe women's roles as primarily connected to family. Women's bodies are indicted as a source of sin and temptation, whose bodies must be controlled or covered up. In a multitude of ways the patriarchal culture of Christianity yields the natural conclusion that men are more like God than women.⁷²

Two critical questions loom large: First, are patriarchal traditions absolutely necessary to the belief and practice of Christianity? Second, how much did men (read as male humans) create God in their own image?

For those who understand the Divine act of Creation to be "God created ALL humankind in God's image," embracing the Feminine Divine is critical to informing our understanding of God and living into the fullness of life God gifts all creation. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Embracing the Feminine Divine is absolutely essential to the health, well-being, and full inclusion of females in "the circle of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ."⁷³

⁷² Ibid, 110-113.

⁷³ Doctrine and Covenants 161:1b (Community of Christ)

The doctrine of the Godhead, how we see and understand God, is vitally important. How does doctrine inform perspectives on social systems, perspectives on patriarchy? How does doctrine empower the search for the Feminine Divine, the search for Mother God?

I will consider two: The Mormon Doctrine of Embodiment, and the Doctrine of the Trinity. First, a bit about the lens through which I see.

My Lens

I am a scientist. My undergraduate degree is in biological sciences. I spent hours, days, weeks, months, and years studying plant and animal life. I chased after birds, foraged the fields for plant specimens, sorted fruit flies, dissected worms and frogs and rats. I stabbed my fingers for blood samples, and spent hours looking down the tube of a microscope. Part of my learning journey included memorizing facts and assigning living things to their proper place on the big chart of Life: Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species...a massive grid -- listing additional super and sub categories in between each level. It is a taxonomic system with ranks placed in a taxonomic hierarchy.

Exciting was the day we received news that, based on new information, an organism had just been switched from one species to another. Or, even better, the day a brand new discovery revealed an unknown life form, now to be named and assigned its correct place on the expansive chart of Life.

I vividly remember the day my plant taxonomy professor crisply announced to the class: "You do realize this entire system is manmade and artificial." There was an audible gasp as the class instantly sat at full wide-eyed attention.

He went on, "Life existed long before our study of it. This is simply a human framework that provides a valuable tool for us to organize our knowledge. It gives us a common language to discuss, discover, and learn. Changing the names, adding new ones, or placing a certain microbe in a different box never changes the reality of our world. When it is used as intended, it helps us see and understand."

I share that as preface to saying: "doctrine" is human made. It is a framework for understanding the mystery that is God. It gives us language and form. Doctrine is humankind's very best efforts at making sense of our experience of the divine over millennia of time, generation, to generation, to generation.

At our best we worship and praise the God scripture points to, and doctrine seeks to define and explain. At our worst we worship the frames we ourselves have invented and the words we have written.

When our understanding of one presses against the frame of the other it is incredibly tempting to chisel away at God until God fits, rather than undergo the stress of expanding our own minds and adjusting the frame. It is absolutely critical that we keep this in mind as we search for the Feminine Divine.

Mormon Doctrine of the Godhead

In Mormon theology God the Father is literally the father of all human spirits “and was himself once a man who went through the same stages of progressions that humans go through. As an exalted man, God now knows all things, is all-powerful, and permeates all of his creations through his imminent spirit.”⁷⁴ Mormon teachings from *Gospel Principles* state “...our bodies are like his body. His eternal Spirit is housed in a tangible body of flesh and bones.”⁷⁵ This echoes sacred LDS scripture which states, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.” (LDS Doctrine and Covenants 130:22)

Jesus Christ, the second member of the Godhead, also fully embodied, is the Creator and Redeemer of the world.⁷⁶

The Holy Ghost is the third member of the Godhead. The Holy Ghost is a begotten human spirit that has the form and likeness of man and is a God in his own right.⁷⁷

Today accepted LDS doctrine holds that the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit in human form that is incapable of appearing in any other shape. However, it is not the person of the Holy Ghost but rather his influence that fills the universe. The Godhead is three separate Gods.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Harrell, Charles R., *This is My Doctrine: The Development of Mormon Theology*, (Greg Kofford Books, Inc., 2011), 125.

⁷⁵ Chapter 1 “Our Father in Heaven” from *Gospel Principles* (2011), 4-7

(<https://www.lds.org/manual/gospel-principles/chapter-1-our-father-in-heaven?lang=eng> accessed 7/26/2013, 3:14 pm).

⁷⁶ Harrell, 149.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 185.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 185-190.

Additionally Heavenly Mother exists alongside Heavenly Father. She has a physical body but according to LDS hierarchy she has not revealed herself to humankind and members are not to pray to her.⁷⁹ Questions and speculations regarding Heavenly Mother are generally discouraged. Although many have written eloquent theological treatises expanding the vision for Heavenly Mother, church authorities have yet to offer even cursory discourse on Heavenly Mother.

As Mormon author Janice Allred states in her book *God the Mother*, "...picturing God exclusively as male, and using his fatherhood as the principal metaphor to describe him, justifies, symbolizes, and even causes the subordination of women and the devaluation of attributes and roles considered to be feminine."⁸⁰

Although the Mormon doctrine of the Godhead fits neatly with Mormonism's cosmology and understanding of eternity, it is woefully lacking toward addressing the full spectrum of women's reality and life in the church.

On the contrary, in its current form and accepted use, it appears to lock women, and men, into rigid gender roles held tightly within the patriarchal system not only now but for all time and eternity.

Trinity

The Doctrine of the Trinity informs Christian liturgy and frames the ancient creeds with the words "I believe in God, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit." It supports two tenants which at first blush appear diametrically opposed: God is One, and, there is diversity in the Godhead.⁸¹

Critics sometimes claim a Hellenistic influence on an otherwise pure Gospel. Proponents support use of the tools at hand, namely Greek philosophy, to address the practical and pastoral concerns of the early church. The doctrine of the Trinity provides a frame for central convictions. It provides a language of Christian faith and safeguards the core of Christian witness.

Certainly the Doctrine of the Trinity is not without its critics. Feminist theologians in particular bristle at what appears to be a three man club reinforcing patriarchy and the maleness of God. Others object to a sense that God the Father always

⁷⁹ Hinkley, Gordon B. "Daughters of God" *Ensign* (November 1991) <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/11/daughters-of-god> accessed 4/25/2014 10:40 am

⁸⁰ Allred, Janice. *God the Mother: and Other Theological Essays*. (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1997), 30.

⁸¹ Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 132.

comes in first, with Christ the Son second, and the Holy Spirit lagging behind a distant third.

Seen as such, it's still an all-male hierarchy with a keen potential to lock patriarchy and maleness into eternal perpetuity. Others effectively argue that it is in fact the doctrine of the Trinity which saves Christian doctrine from "stifling androcentrism."⁸² As informed by the feminist critique of theologian Janet Martin Soskice, four important points can be made.

First, it frees us from anthropocentrism. "The triune God is not male." We are baptized in the "NAME" (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost), not in the "names" of (plural) "two men and a mysterious third."⁸³

Second, it defeats covert Monarchianism, the distant lonely god of deism: superior, aloof, indifferent. In contrast, the God of scripture is totally present with creation. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a literal blueprint detailing the inner workings of God. It lifts up the conviction that God is fully present throughout human history: Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us; Holy Spirit, Comforter, God present now.⁸⁴

Third, it endorses physicality and the fundamental goodness and beauty of human beings through the Incarnation of the Word. Christ is the Savior not because he is male but because he is human.

Fourth, it moves us beyond binarism which poses two distinct opposites, for example, this and that, good and evil, male and female, higher and lower. As Soskice explains, "A one in which there can be no genuine otherness, but only the 'Other of the Same.'"⁸⁵

The persons of the Trinity only exist in relation to one another; there is no hierarchy, only difference, exhibiting unity in diversity. All three persons can be addressed in masculine or feminine terms.

Julianne of Norwich provides poignant examples especially through her styling of Christ as mother in *Revelations of Divine Love*. "God is really our Mother as he is our father. He showed this throughout, and particularly when he said that sweet word. 'It is I.'" "Jesus is our mother because he made us, but all the making, redeeming, and sustaining is the work of the triune God. God is our Maker, Keeper, and Lover."⁸⁶

⁸² Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 133-136.

⁸³ Ibid, 136.

⁸⁴ Parsons, 136.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 136-137.

⁸⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Walters (London: Penguin Books, 1966), Ch 59, p. 157 quoted in Parsons, 142.

In Julianne's words I hear notes of Janice Allred's work, again from God the Mother:

"Jesus Christ is also a revelation of God the mother, not in the sense that Jesus embodies the spirit of the father, but in the sense that he models the role of the mother."⁸⁷

She goes on to quote from Third Nephi 10:4-6 (LDS):

"O ye people of these great cities which have fallen... how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you.

And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings... and ye would not.

O ye... whom... I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart."⁸⁸

It is important to note that the love modeled in Christianity is not the love between two, but the love found in Trinity – not a love of numbers but a love of MORE. More than the number-word "three," more than gendered imagery of love. God is more. Human concepts about the nature of God are always challenged by the limits of our human speech. Soskice shares, "The love of Trinity is a template for the fundamentally ethical love which calls us beyond any narcissism *a deux* to a love creative and open to others."⁸⁹

The doctrine of the Trinity is not invincible to criticism, but the intention of Trinitarian thinking is not to state the unequivocal, but rather to avoid the deficient.⁹⁰

The mystery of God is complex.

My Thoughts

At this point I share candidly some of my own theological ponderings through the lens of the fact that I choose to live out my discipleship in covenant relationship with Community of Christ.

⁸⁷ Allred, *God the Mother*, 30.

⁸⁸ Nephi 10:4-6, LDS Book of Mormon, quoted by Janice Allred in *God the Mother: and Other Theological Essays*. (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1997), 31.

⁸⁹ Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 143.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 143.

First, as humans our very best understandings of God just scratch the surface. God is beyond our total grasp. God is infinite, all powerful, all knowing, all loving, and so much more than we can ever even imagine. The words we use to define God are clearly human constructs. Our understandings rest on the shoulders of all who went before. Yet, even the finest theologians and greatest prophets can only glimpse a tiny portion of the mystery we call God.

Community of Christ is comfortable with the Mystery even as we seek to give voice to our journey with God and write down the words we hear God's voice speaking to our generation. We believe in all that God has and will reveal to us through Continuing Revelation recorded in Community of Christ's Doctrine and Covenants.

Second, we are not scripture literalists. Likewise, we try to look at our unique Restoration history in a similar way. We allow for human error and find a deeper understanding when we look at any one piece of scripture or history against the backdrop of the whole. We see more when we can see it in context.

In consideration of Joseph's first vision, we understand it as an encounter with the Divine. However, for us, it did not generate an embodied anthropomorphic understanding of God as a totally separate being of flesh and bone. Nor do we subscribe to a Godhead of three separate beings. We are monotheists.

Over time, as we continued to experience God's presence moving and working in our midst, we found great resonance with the Trinitarian understanding. It affirms our belief in one God (monotheist); it affirms our experience of God through both Christ and Spirit. It affirms our belief in the power of community: God who is one, God who is three in one, God who is a community of three persons (three experiences of God's presence). It affirms our belief that God is all of all – which does not limit God to one gender. In that sense, Jesus is the only gendered aspect of God we experience as an embodied presence.

Feminine Divine

When we look at the Biblical text we find many feminine words and images used to describe God, often associated with the workings and presence of the Spirit. If we step back and take note that the Biblical text was written, preserved, and passed down generation after generation in an absolute Patriarchal social culture, it is astounding that any notion of God's feminine aspects would so impress humanity that it was not only noted, but recorded and survived. In most official writings Community of Christ uses "gender neutral" words to speak of God. This is to affirm God as Holy One – Heavenly

Parent, Mother God, Father God, the all of all, encompassing both male and female, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Ghost, ever present Spirit.

That said, like the rest of the world Community of Christ also exists and swims in the waters of a Patriarchal society. Our hierarchal structure is reflective of that fact. It will take generations to live into our growing understanding of women as full-fledged partners, co-equals with men, ordained since 1985 and represented at all levels of church polity including the First Presidency.

Likewise it will take generations to live into an understanding of God that fully embraces both genders or, for that matter, fully embraces the diverse variety of human ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status, etc. We still have many, many members who are not comfortable with anything but a male understanding of God. That is the reality of any group of people moving from one perspective of understanding to another resulting in a paradigm shift of culture.

It is also somewhat common to hear reference to Mother God, and “she” as Community of Christ members pray and/or speak of God. Officially we embrace the feminine aspect of God. We also find there is way more room to embrace the Feminine Divine in a Trinitarian understanding, or way of thinking about God. We have room in our theology for “Goddess” because we allow a very diverse bandwidth for personal theology and open discussion in classes and other venues of dialogue. However, I doubt we would actually use the term “Goddess” officially for all the reasons I have already stated.

We can fully celebrate the “she-ness” of God without creating another “personage” or “being” in our theological construct. God can encompass the all of femininity in our current framework. We recognize that God comes to us in many diverse ways and is not limited by any image. If fully female imaging is meaningful and brings us closer in our relationship with God, that is good. Likewise, the word “God” for those who embrace the feminine nature of God is not a gendered word, therefore the term Goddess is not necessarily needed.

Finally, it is important to remember that depending on cultural context the Feminine Divine may be very well developed concepts in some parts of the world and near heresy in others, a condition that is highly connected to the prevalence of Patriarchy. We are on a journey of faith seeking understanding. It is a truly awesome adventure made richer and deeper by the Restoration Heritage we hold so dear.

In my current ministry assignment, I spend much of my time with women who swim in very rigid patriarchal waters due to their religious culture and denominational affiliation, women struggling to find their place in our world. I hear these women and

others talk about their relationships with each other, their relationships with men, their relationships with the church, their relationships with the world and their relationships with God. These are some of the words I hear, sometimes shared in whispers, sometimes spoken through tears.

“Women long to be their authentic selves.”

“What does the voice of God really sound like?”

“We need to spend more time thinking more about what it means to BE a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”

“I struggle to know that God loves females as much as male... I struggle to know God loves me as much as my brother.”

“Bodies, our physical bodies, matter. They matter in the life of the church. They matter in the Body of Christ.”

“You cannot **be** what you cannot **see**.”

For me, the doctrine of the Trinity offers more possibilities for embracing the all of God: the masculine, feminine and more. God, Christ, Spirit. Wisdom, Omnipotence, Goodness. Mother, Daughter, Breath. The images are limitless and I am free to dance in the circle of “three” blessed as God’s beloved child, free to be all of who God created me to be. I am free to be authentic, to hear God’s voice, to faithfully live my discipleship, to know God loves me “just as much,” to live in my body with joy, to become because I can see.

I rejoice in that.

Patriarchy is about all of us, it is a social system we allow to continue, and it is a social system that hurts.

It will take all of us to break its chains and live into the “all” God dreams for us.

“Collectively and individually you are loved with an everlasting love that delights in each faithful step taken. God yearns to draw you close so that wounds may be healed, emptiness filled, and hope strengthened. Do not turn away in pride, fear or guilt from the One who seeks only the best for you and your loved ones. Come before your Eternal Creator with open minds and hearts and discover the blessings of the gospel anew. Be vulnerable to Divine grace.”

— Doctrine and Covenants 163:10 a, b