

Episode 157 - Seth Bryant: Community of Christ

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Interviewee: Seth Bryant (**SB**)

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About Episode 157:

“Today [Mormon Discussion] sits down with Community of Christ Assistant Pastor Seth Bryant. We talk about the common faith tradition, the shift from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to the Community of Christ (CoC). We hit on the Priesthood, Women’s ordination, LGBT inclusiveness, their view of scripture, Mormon myths of the CoC, and talk about the flexibility that is found today in the CoC’s teachings and Theology.”

About the Podcasters:

Seth Bryant: A Seventy in Community of Christ and a convert from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When this interview took place, Seth Bryant was the serving as the Revitalization and Expansion Minister in the Inland West Mission Center working with congregations in Utah.

Bill Reel: The Founder of Mormon Discussion Inc. and creator of Mormon Discussion Podcast. Bill seek to provide those from the Mormon tradition tools and resources to move safely through a faith transition and spiritual developmental awakening. Bill has created an umbrella organization that hosts multiple Mormon related award-winning podcasts.

About the Podcast:

Mission Discussion: Mormon Discussion is an umbrella of several award-winning Mormon related Podcasts that seek to help those of the Mormon tradition to have the tools and resources to tackle issues of faith and history while reducing the trauma and pain of such development.

How This Discussion Came About:

From Bill Reel: Bill Reel and Seth Bryant got to know each other years ago as they had conversations around the deconstruction and reconstruction of faith issues along with human development. Wanting to provide his listeners with with a informed view of the Community of Christ tradition, Bill sought out Seth Bryant and two beautiful conversations ensued.

[Commercial for Tropic of Candy Corn]

[Introduction Music Plays]

BR: Thank you for tuning into Mormon Discussion Podcast. I’m your host Bill Reel. I enjoy this podcast very much. I enjoy providing for you an opportunity to talking deeply about Gospel issues, examining deeper the history of the Church and helping you and me through our faith transition in this faith journey but please feel free to give me feed back

as well. Please e-mail me today at ReelMormon@gmail.com. R-E-E-L M-O-R-M-O-N @ gmail DOT COM. Share your thoughts, suggestions, questions you have, anything we can do to make the podcast better cuz at the end of the day this podcast is both about you and me. God bless you and now on to what you've been waiting to hear.

Seth Bryant, welcome on Mormon Discussion. How are you today?

SB: Doing really good. Excited to be here.

BR: Good, good, glad to have you on. Today, we're talking with Seth Bryant. He is a member of the Community of Christ formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I have Seth for a long time wanted to have somebody on from the Community of Christ just to have a conversation to talk about some of the commonalities and differences between our two faiths which share a- the same faith tradition but before we just into that wonder if might give the listeners feel who you are with a brief bio.

SB: So, I grew up in Sandy, Utah. I was a son of some inactive Mormons. So, I came from a jack-Mormon family and when I was 14, I rebelled and decided to become active. There was a blonde in my ward, and she had a big impact on me in that regard and got me going to church. I just fell in love with her family and started attending and I actually served a mission at 19. Went to North Carolina, Rolla Mission where I met my wife. We both were serving, and I can say that I didn't unlock my heart although I can't speak for her. We came- we came home and got married and we have three children. We now live in Heber City, Utah. Just on the other side of the Wasatch Range from where I grew up in Sandy.

BR: So, Community of Christ. I mean I always picture it as being in places like Kirtland and Missouri and being- you know Independence there being kind of the big spots but are there a lot of Community of Christ congregations out in Utah?

SB: So, we don't have a lot of congregations. We do have several emerging groups. We've got the Salt Lake congregation which has been in the state of Utah in one form or another since the 1860's. There's a group in Ogden, a congregation in Ogden and like I said he have emerging groups which we call house churches and you can find those all across Utah, but we actually joined and that's a whole other story it itself, but we actually joined in Florida- in Gainesville, Florida.

BR: Gotcha. Well, let's do that. Let's talk about your personal journey of exiting the LDS Church and finding a home in the Community of Christ.

SB: Sure. So, I became I would say a disaffected Mormon somewhere during my undergraduate studies at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah. I had had concerns and frustrations before that, but it became to where it was difficult for me to feel the Spirit or to feel at home within an LDS congregation during my undergraduate studies and as I was driving into Gainesville, Florida, the very first time I drove in- I had headed there to attend the University of Florida. Take part in a Master's program and as I'm

driving in the very first thing I see in Gainesville is the Community of Christ congregation and I just have this overwhelming sense that that's- that I need to check it out. That's where I need to be and so I was taking a class on- on research methods and as part of the class, I had to go and study another congregation and so it just made perfect sense that I would go and visit this congregation so and I just- as I walked in I was amazed. They were having a study on providing sanctuary to illegal immigrants and they had been using restoration scripture, they'd been using Hebrew scripture, Christian scripture, but it really struck me that the kinds of questions they were and ways in which they were using scripture was completely different than from my experience in the LDS Church and while I was listening to this and waiting for their service to begin, I found a copy of their most recent section in the Doctrine and Covenants and again I was just amazed by what I read there and I guess the last part of the experience, the most powerful part was a- the first Sunday of the month which is when the sacrament which in Community of Christ, we call communion- Communion was being blessed and a female High Priest stood up and began to break the bread and then she said the prayers that I had heard so many times before and yet as she said them, I was overwhelmed with the Spirit. I was so overwhelmed it was to the point where it was almost too much for me. I mean it was like- it was peaceful, but it was like fire inside of me as well like a burning inside and I literally said to God- first I said "Stop! That's enough." Second, "what are you doing here? I've been begging to feel the Spirit in Elder's Quorum, in sacrament meeting, at the temple and here of all places is where you greet me" and I just- I guess as I reflected on that experience and even in that experience itself I had this sense that God had bigger vision for me of the Kingdom, of where I needed to be and I also sensed if I embraced it, I could never go back to seeing things the old way but I did. I ultimately- I responded to that. It took several months- I would say even a year and a half but I responded to that sense of calling that I had and to that peace that I found within Community of Christ and within that little congregation within that Gainesville and it was like I had come home. It's like I had come home for the first time.

- BR:** That is so cool and it is- you know I- I'm one of these "yes, I'm a Latter-day Saint and yes, I- I feel, you know, honored and feel the truth claims that our church has are special and things that I love and revere and look up to, but I'm not naive enough to not validate other's journeys and to think I've only got this one true path and everybody else is losing out and so I mean this from the bottom of my heart: I totally, totally look up to you for honoring that call that came from God and respect you for following up on that.
- SB:** Well, I really appreciate that. I- you know, I don't always encounter that. [Laughs] So, I'm- I'm- you know it's always a good thing when you can recognize the things that we have in common in the Restoration and as followers of Christ and not focus on the things that divide us.
- BR:** Yeah, yeah, and I'm excited just about the discussion today even just in your talking about your exit from the LDS faith into the Community of Christ, you hit somethings within the Community of Christ that similar to our faith as well as being different and I want to get into that, but I want to ask you a question prior to that which is you talked a little bit about exiting the LDS Church and I don't need you to go into great detail or

anything but if I could just ask was it- was it a matter of being frustrated with the historical issues, was it a matter of social issues, was it- was it something done a church that just didn't feel right or what was the- what were some of the- I guess the more heightened issues that you- that you felt kind of limited your ability to move forward within the LDS Church?

SB: Well it was- yes it was the historical issues and yes it was the lack of- what I saw as a lack of social engagement in responding to current and pressing issues. I mean certainly LGBT issues were something that frustrated me and I- what I found was that my relationship with God was actually suffering the longer that I stayed in the LDS Church because I was frustrated, because I didn't fit and I say- I want to send- I want to be very respectful in that because I know for many Mormonism fits and works and it's a place where you can connect with God and help to build the kingdom and make the lives of others better and so I'm not say that- that it isn't a part of God's salvation and a potential expression of the Kingdom of God, but for me because of that frustration that I felt over historical issues, over the treat of- well, I have a gay brother. I mean this isn't like abstract like literally over the treatment that I saw of my brother and so the lack of- the lack of honest I saw in how history was engaged and also in how honest of seekers of truth were treated and you know at times excommunicated. All of this just led to this growing frustrated in me on one hand then on the other hand I didn't feel like I was being spiritually fed and so I would be- I was just bored. I mean I was bored out of my mind in Elder's Quorum, at sacrament meeting I would study the scriptures on my own in the back and I- really, I don't think it was a prideful thing. I just the content- I think maybe there's this assumption that because it's the true church that- that people will just come anyway. I don't know. I don't know. Maybe- maybe, you have some thoughts on this, Bill. [Laughs] But I just- I was bored on one hand. I didn't feel like I was getting spiritually fed and then on the other hand I was intensely frustrated with the focus of the church and the way that it engaged its own history.

BR: No, no, I appreciate that and- and in many a ways validate and agree with what you just stated and in no way would take away from that. I experience a lot of those same things. I don't have a solution for it either and I think you're right. I think in some regards the church seeing itself as the One and Only True Church on the earth. It just makes the assumption that, you know, whatever we're doing, it obviously the right way to do it and if people want to come they'll- they'll magically show up and I think sometimes we gonna look at, you know, are teachers prepared, are we being as inclusive as we possibly can within the doctrine and we ask those same kind of questions here on the podcast. So, no, I totally understand where you're coming from and I think in many ways we've all got to come to grips with the fact of regardless of what church you belong to in some ways religion's messy and we gonna kind of filter through and navigate these things. You- you hit on, again, you hit on a moment ago about some of the differences and similarities. Maybe run us through what you see as the major doctrinal or theological differences between the two traditions.

SB: So, I think the biggest difference would be that we would shy away even using the term doctrine and would focus more on theology and that- what that says is that instead of

propositions or- or fixed doctrines that we can assert and they have a sense of being eternal, unchangeable or maybe even- you know, this is- this is the best that we've got but we don't necessarily question it. Within Community of Christ our understanding of God is more of a journey and it- our understanding of God also informs what we're doing here and now. And I'm not saying that is not the case in the LDS Church. I hope- I don't think you're doing this Bill. I hope your listeners understand that every time I say "we do this in Community of Christ" I'm not necessarily contrasting it and say thing that the LDS Church does 180 degrees but our understanding of God demands that we work for justice and seek to establish peace in people's lives here and now and that orientation to this life that salvation occurs in this life and that God is intensively interested that we don't suffer- that we don't suffer needlessly but that conditions where people are living unjustly and that might be because choices that they've made which had alienated them from themselves and from God and how God would want them to live or could choices that others have made that had created unjust conditions but God is- is very much calling us to work towards overcoming those unjust conditions and ending unnecessary suffering and so our focus and our emphasis is very much on this life and on bringing about Zion here and now and as I said that's a reflection of our understanding of God but God lives within- within Triune community of traditionally known as Father, God and Holy Spirit- there is- there is not just unity in purpose but there a combined vision and love and community that provides a perfect model of Zion and our job is to go and look for instances where that kind of unity, that love, that peace doesn't exist and overcome it so that God's reign might be fulfilled and realized throughout the earth.

BR: Yeah, and that's beautiful and I think- I think you hit on something. I don't think it would be- and as you point out, you're not necessarily contrasting between the Community of Christ and the LDS Church but this idea that you're more concerned with relieving suffering in the here and now and I think sometimes I look at my faith, the LDS Church and I think: yeah, I think all religions do that to some extent but I think within Mormonism there certainly is a tangent of if someone's suffering and perhaps let's just use the- the idea of someone being gay for instance and because of the doctrine of the Church, they essentially would have to live a life of celibacy and live of- of aloneness and the LDS Church approach would be, you know, "yes, you're going to have to suffer here in the here-and-now for the then you know 75 years but it will all be worth in the hereafter" but it sounds like what you're doing is pointing people to idea is all you know for sure is what we have at this very moment. Let's do the best we can to encourage, uplift, and help people in this present moment and- and let- let things a million years from now take care of themselves.

SB: Yeah, absolutely. I mean it's not to the exclusion of faith or hope in the next life. We certainly have that, but we would definitely say that this life is to treasured and celebrated and it's precious and so I mean- I don't want to come across as condemning that concept that you just have to suffer through your same-sex attraction because I know there are many that are doing that as a faithful response in their relationship with God and with there community- their faithful community but I- to me that seem like a terrible, terrible shame to- I mean I don't know how else to say but it waste a life. I- because of- because that orientation is so focused on this life it changes a lot of things- are 180 degree. I'm

not saying everything is but this might be one insistence where it is and- and one of the key things that realized is that our sense of sin and salvation are very related so sin is anything that alienates us from the love and the peace and the harmony that God would want us to enjoy whether in this life or the next and so when we look at conditions on the earth and we ask is that- not is there a list of things that we need to be obedient to and are we upholding the list and living within certain parameters but we can ask to each unique situation: is that person in a place of peace and joy and happiness and love and if not then that's contrary to God's desire and God's vision for them and for that community and for creation and so it's on us to go in and to challenge that alienation, to overcome that sin, and to help God's vision to more fully realized.

BR: Yeah, I hope that most members of the LDS Church are aware of how the Community of Christ got its, you know, its origins obviously being in the same faith tradition. Joseph Smith the 3rd and you know Emma and others kind of- you know obviously there is this gap between Joseph Smith Jr.'s death and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints originating with the Prophet's son. I don't really want to go into detail about that kind of story. I hope that anybody can just type in on Google and find a Wikipedia article and find those things out. What I want to focus tonight on Seth is more perhaps the things that have gone on in the last 100 years so let me put it this way: I think if we were to take your- your church and my church and go back a 150 years ago there would be a lot of similarities, course still some differences, but a lot of similarities as the two faith traditions have kind of forked in the road and moved separate ways there's a lot of bigger differences I think today and I want to kind of hit on what some of those are. Would you mind talking about some of the unique changes that the Community of Christ has gone through in the last century?

SB: Sure, and it's hard for me to talk about that trajectory without at least hitting partly on Joseph Smith the III because his- the course that he set for the Church really- I mean there are echoes of it- there's still today, I mean we are very much a church that comes out of that vision of Joseph Smith the III as he received it from his father and so he would have felt that Zion could only come about through peaceful interaction with the Gentiles. That's still a term that they're using late 19th-early 20th century but this- this idea that there was to be cooperation. That we can't build an insular little kingdom away from the world, but that Zion is- is working and cooperating with your neighbors to bring about this vision that God has: the peaceable kingdom. So, he was very much interested in returning to Independence, Missouri and eventually does that personally in 1906. He dies about a decade later and he actually- his son becomes- Fredrick M. Smith- becomes the President of the church- the Third President of the Reorganization. But, in that desire to go back to Independence, it's certainly based on his father's vision for Zion and an understanding of the center place but it's with that cooperative mindset which Fred M. Smith who had a Ph. D. and was very interested in the Social Gospel takes that even one step further. So, you've got to remember that in contrast with the geographic isolation of the Saints in Utah, the Reorganized Saints are in the midst of you know a whole lot of stuff going on that isn't necessarily just the Restoration, but they are living side-by-side with their neighbors. There's certainly influences that come in so for example: you know I heard a story that I didn't realize this until this weekend that it was pretty common for

RLDS members not to dance and they probably got that from their Baptist neighbors, but what they also got was an understanding of the need for cooperation and with that social gospel emphasis that Fred M. gave the church, they felt that they could almost scientifically go about to literally bringing Zion back on the earth. It gathering the Saints back to Independence and- and Christ would return and so that creates a different climate in many ways all of that creates a different climate that what was experienced in the Restoration in Utah and the Presidents of the Church following that so we after Fred- we have Israel A. Smith and then he was killed in a car accident and then after that W. Wallace Smith. They continue to expand that vision of Zion as less of fortress building and getting out of the world, but more to Zion is the world transformed to it's best and it demands that we go out and that we find, you know, a way to experience Christ in each culture, to experience it uniquely. Not to just take a Mid-Western culture and trans-plant it all over the world, but to recognize God's influence and God's voice in all of these diverse peoples and that's especially significant or powerful in the 1960's and so as the Church feels the Spirit calling it into Asia and into beyond it's traditional footprint. Much like we read in the New Testament; the Spirit going first and then the Disciples following. They find themselves- they find themselves in Asia, in places where Christianity maybe isn't known at all or if it is it certainly not the dominate religion and so they go with the traditional narrative that they've always had that, you know, there was this Christianity then an apostasy, and then the Restoration came along and then the Reorganization was the correct form of the Restoration and they set up this- this narrative that really doesn't seem to answer the problems of poverty and also the social upheaval that's going on in the 1960's throughout the world and so these- these missionaries begin to question their own narrative that they're sharing. What relevance do some of these truth claims have in a culture where they don't even know about Christianity. Let alone the Restoration, let alone the Reorganization. So, they begin- and I think this is a very said question to ask. I mean the Restoration began to provide answers- granted they were based on eternal principles but they're answers for pressing problems and questions of the day and as some in the Reorganization have both laughed and lamented, we have all the answers to the questions that nobody asking anymore so things like where did the- where did the native Americans come from? I mean it's just- these are questions that maybe in the 19th century on the frontier in America were very pressing but as we go into Japan post-World War II, it just didn't seem to provide the same sorts of answers that were really needed to bring about God's kingdom and that joy and peace that they felt was a marker or a sign of Christ's reign and so unlike most missionaries- these RLDS missionaries were actually transformed more by you know the people they were sent to convert than the people that were actually brought into the Church. So, they're deeply transformed by this encounter and by a wiliness to question: what is transcendent and eternal in our message and what's contingent or what was only something that was caught up in one culture in time and place? And does it necessarily apply to another culture and for seeing for that transcendent or eternal message of the Restoration, it very much lead to a deconstruction and from the 60's into the 70's they- they questioned and analyzed and really were on this prayerful journey of discernment to find out what matters most and the answer they had in the 70's and the 60's, but we- that we'd affirm today is Christ is what matters most. And specifically, the mission of Christ and mission before might have been seen as a proselyting activity. Well today through- through this

journey we found that the mission of Christ while it includes proclaiming Christ to others. It's also abolishing poverty and ending suffering. It's also establishing peace on the Earth and so it's more than just missionary work in the traditional sense but the mission of Christ is the redemption that we experience through Christ as it touches us in all aspects of life and so we very much become a people of mission and less- it's not that the story doesn't matter- we certainly tell the sacred story. We see ourselves as a prophetic people and that journey begins with Joseph Smith Jr. in the grove but the mission and bring people into right relationships with God and overcoming injustice and establishing peace. Realizing Christ incarnate throughout all these cultures that's what becomes central to who we are and so we might say that before we were a people about the Restoration and in this journey we've become a people of the Restoration- that- you know the Restoration was a wild and wooly ride in the beginning and we're still in the midst of it. I mean it challenges us being prophetic and having that impulse is very charismatic and it's challenges us. It's disrupts us and calls us to do things that maybe we weren't comfortable with or to experience things in new ways as they- you know, different ways that might challenge a more traditional orientation.

- BR:** Awesome. I wonder if you might spend a moment- I mean obviously both churches are led by a person who serves in the office titled Prophet and- and because of that there's obviously a prophetic mantle- there's revelation that is being claimed to being received in scriptures that are being added to in both of our churches. Maybe for a moment just take some time and explain the difference of the prophetic mantle having been in both churches, between the two.
- SB:** So, even the concept prophetic mantle, I don't know if I've ever heard that within Community of Christ. There certainly is a sense of it and to give you an example, our current President and Prophet Steve Veazey, he was President of the Church for several years before he presented his first revelation and what I've heard- this is before I came in- but what I've heard is that members would say to him: you may be the President but you're not the Prophet yet as in until we some sort of revelatory guidance- inspired counsel to the Church, you haven't fully living into that role as the Prophet of the Church and I think it's important to note too that our understanding of what it means to be prophetic in Community of Christ is very, very different from the LDS Church where we would look to the Prophets at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures so the Old Testament and those Prophets are constantly calling on the people to return to the covenant and a sign that they have strayed is that they are treating others unjustly. They are alienating. They are marginalizing. They are taking God's beloved children and treating them as something less than human or people less than themselves- you know not honoring that all of us are created in God's image and they're also breaking the covenant with God to live faithfully to act justly, to walk in paths of righteousness so the prophets are constantly saying "You need to repent! You need to go back and remember the covenant and treat everyone equitably and so to be prophetic in Community of Christ means to challenge any structures, any cultural elements, any political elements that are contrary to God's reconciling and restoring purposes and you know we look to the Prophet- yes, a prophet whether it's Steve Veazey or Amos or you know any other example a prophet can declaim: "hey, look if you don't change- if you don't repent, things are going to get really

bad and here's a vision of the future if he don't repent and if we continue in these unjust conditions" but also prophets obviously, they offer future visions if we do embrace God's vision this is what Zion looks like. So, there is a sense that the prophet potentially can have this vision of God's kingdom realized or maybe the opposite. This dystopian- the covenant completely denied and the terror that would bring, but in Community of Christ first and foremost it's not about the sense of future-telling, it's more about that prophetic impulse to honor God's Spirit, to return back to the convenient and to embrace that vision of peacable kingdom that God would want us to embrace and so that's I- I mean I- I think that's for us the President of Church- I don't know- I- maybe it's a subtle nuance. I definitely- I sense a very real difference that- and it's probably because all of us are called to prophetic. That Steve Veazey calls on all of us to discern God's will and then we all come together in establishing Zion so I don't know. Does that answer your question, Bill?

BR: It does, it does! And I want to follow it up because I think- obviously, the questions I've got set out to ask you are just to kind of gain insight but this one is going to sound critical. I don't mean it that way. I need to at least explore this issue so we can kind of get a feel for where things were and where they are, but in the Community of Christ- let's just go back to the very beginning as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. One of things they hinge their authority on is this idea that Joseph Smith the III is called to- to lead the Church after his father and that- that office of being Prophet or President of the Church is passed from decedent to decedent and it's seems at least- it seems like to me in the LDS tradition that I look at RLDS Church or Community of Christ and looks like they had planned on that always being the case that were in a sense basing their proper authority on the fact that the office of Prophet was suppose to stay in the family and of course, that doesn't happen. I mean it does for a long time, but eventually that doesn't happen, and it seems like I know that that switch was turbulent at the time for the Community of Christ but it seems looking back now that that's become a pretty smooth transition. How have you guys gone from a tradition that says "hey, this is supposed to be in the family!" to it completely not being the case and without jeopardizing everyone walking away and saying "No! We're not doing what we said we were doing."

SB: Right, well no. That's a great question! And no need to apologize for seeming to be critical or even being critical. I was actually in the [Independence] Temple the other day and one of members was incredibly critical to President Veazey as he- like we were like having a discussion [Laughs] and it's just something that we're okay to question things in Community of Christ in a way I could never imagine in the LDS Church, but to answer your question: so when the Joseph Smith is looking at succession options certainly one of the possibilities was Joseph Smith the III and I- I think that it's very valid to say that Brigham Young had an excellent claim and that was within the possibilities that Joseph Smith [Jr.] envisioned as well as well as a few others. I- I think my read of history is that Joseph Smith expected Hyrum to be his successor and I think that's one of the reasons why he- I mean obviously his brother had been killed in front of him and that would be incredibly traumatic but I one of the- one of the reasons for anguish in addition to his brother's death was the fact that this clear succession option that he had set up was now

gone and so in the Reorganization certainly early on they would have said that Joseph Smith the III is the only potential option and that there was no other- there was no other valid succession route and one of the things they would have looked to is to scriptures that support patrilineal suggestion within the Doctrine and Covenants and that's something that was continued in Utah as well in the office of Presiding Patriarch up until the late 1970's. This idea that certain rights of the priesthood descend from father to son and so in the Reorganization they definitely understood early on that- that was- that was one way that- that God could continue of the office or succession in the office of the president of the Church not only the patriarch, but Joseph Smith the III was clear that it wasn't the only route. He was clear that it wasn't the only route. It was just the route that he felt that God was using both with this ordination and with the ordination of Fred M. Smith but there was this clear sense that- that it didn't necessarily have to be that way and by the time of the 1950's and 1960's into the '60's as that traditional- a lot of the traditional elements are being examined that's one of the things that is- is questioned and we have for the first time a Presiding Patriarch that didn't come through the Smith line which was problematic for many more traditional members of the Church and by the time that W. Wallace- excuse me Wally B. Smith whose the- make sure I get this right- great-grandson of the Joseph Smith Jr.- by the time that he is ready to retire and a successor is being identified he- he just simply states that God is calling Grant McMurry. God is calling from outside of the Smith family for the leadership of the Church and it was an understanding that had existed there from the very beginning, but it also stretched the Church as well. There's an LDS myth about Community of Christ that this happened because we were out of Smith heirs. Male Smith heirs, but I can assure you that that's not the case. A good friend of mine in Community of Christ and a decedent of Joseph Smith so that wasn't the case at all. It's simply that as the leadership, as specifically as the President of the Church discerned who the next successor should be God made it clear that it should be Grant McMurry and so there- I can understand, you know, ever time there that there's a transfer of power and we sometimes use this with American political history but every time there's this transfer of power, there's you know this question of you know of is it going to go off smooth? But, in Community of Christ, there's the understanding that the President of the Church will probably designate a successor. Hasn't always happened. I mentioned the car accident as one- as one example and even in that case actually it was pretty much designated if not explicitly then implicitly but in the case of Grant McMurry who resigned because of health issues and other things. There's this understanding that the leaders of the Church including the counselors in the First Presidency: the 12, the Presiding Bishopric, others that- that they can enter a period of discernment and together that God will reveal who the next leader of the Church should be and then that's still presented to the Church and there's a period of discernment for the Church and a vote is taken and together we are on a journey and there's certainly- I mean not in the case of succession but there certainly have been times where not everybody has discerned the same thing or felt the God was calling us to do the same thing and you know it's resulted in schisms and you know at times people feeling alienated if they remain but the desire that we have is together to be a prophetic people lead by a prophet but be a prophet people who discern God's will together and we go on this journey together and we grew where there's instances where we need to grow together.

BR: You mentioned it. I just want to just be clear. There is lots of LDS folklore about the Community of Christ just for the record. [Laughs] I just heard- I just heard the other day I was teaching a- I started a class here at our ward where I was teaching an evening class on church history hoping to bring some members more up to date with some of the- the issues so that- so that wouldn't encounter them from a critical source later on and we were talking just about Joseph Smith and I don't remember what the exact subject was but the one lady in the back raised her hand and say "Oh, yeah, the Community of Christ, they're broke and they went to President Hinckley and he loaned them lots of money and they basically promised someday that when they were ready they would just give us back the Kirtland Temple." I'm guessing that that's not true. [Laughs]

SB: [Laughs] No, no that's not true-

BR: There's tons of that.

SB: Right, now I will say this- there was and you know how sometimes things have a kernel of truth-

BR: Sure.

SB: -in them but yeah. So- so there was a case where we were building a new visitor's center at Kirtland and President Hinkley pulled out his checkbook and I believe- this is my memory so who knows but I believe he wrote a check for \$10,000 to assist us in building this visitor's center because a great deal of the visitors are LDS and you know just the in the spirit of being good neighbors and recognizing our common heritage and history, he wrote us a check and President Veazey turned to our Presiding Bishop and said "where my checkbook?" because in Community of Christ the money is controlled very closely [laughs] by the Bishops and you know ultimately by the Presiding Bishopric and so apparently President Veazey didn't have the same kind of checkbook so there was a check written but with "oh and by the way, we're going to come and you know give you the Kirtland Temple." Certainly not, we- we value our church history and our heritage and there just is no way that we would ever sell the Kirtland Temple. There have been cases where historic lands that maybe meant more to the LDS Church have been sold, but you know if you go to Nauvoo or Kirtland, you'll see we have very much interested in preserving our history and telling our common sacred story.

BR: So, we can squash the Chapter 11 ideas right now. [Laughs] Kay, good, good. I want to hit on another idea. Why don't you tell us a little bit about the Community of Christ transformation on the LGBT issues and on women's ordination because those are two hot topics right now in the LDS Church and just want to get your feel for how the Community of Christ has navigated those two.

SB: Alright, so I will touch on women ordination first and there- there certainly has been the question of why not ordain women since the very early days of the Reorganization and would say it even goes back to Nauvoo with the founding of the Relief Society and women being told they were priestesses and being given keys in relation to the Relief

Society and so, I think the question comes up during Israel A. Smith's presidency and that would have been in the 1940's but if I'm remembering history right, he dies in a car accident that happened but the question never really goes anywhere partly because of that and it comes back up again I guess as an extension of women's liberation and the feminist movement. This question that if women are you know- women should be treated equally. Why not involve them in the priesthood and by the 1980's a revelation is presented to the Church and in it, God says, "don't wonder if I start to call women to the priesthood. Remember, all are called" and that was an idea that "all are called" that's been present in the Reorganization from the beginning and so this revelation is presented and I believe it was 1984 and generates as you can imagine a great deal of discussion and discontent and a lot of the folks who were upset about it had been upset ever since a non-Smith had been ordained a Presiding Patriarch back in the 60's and so maybe even before that. Maybe it was '58 but in any event you have a conservative portion of the Church that reacts against this revelation and decidedly says this is not God's will. This is not the direction that we want to go and- and there reacting to against the deconstruction of some of these traditional truth claims and you know the reimagining of the restoration that the Church was undergoing and so by 1986 at the Conference there is an acceptance of section 156 into the canon with allows for women's ordination and it causes a large- well, I wouldn't say large in some ways. It causes a portion of the Church to break off and part of the challenge was a lot of these folks have been very active in their congregations and so it was a very difficult time and in part and I'll certainly touch on this as we discuss LGBT issues but in part the attitude from the leadership was: well, this is what God says and the Church has spoken by common consent and you're just going to have to follow. End of discussion. And so, maybe it wasn't that harsh but in- in demanding you know that those that were upset just fall in line, it polarized things and made things even more difficult but through that very difficult time women were ordained and have since have been called to serve in the highest offices of the Church. We have yet to have a female President of the Church, but we do have one member of the First Presidency who's a woman, Becky Savage and we have several Apostles. We have Presidents of Seventies, Seventies, Pastors, throughout the entire organization. In priesthood organization we have women serving and really enriching the life of the Church and helping us collectively I guess to better realize what priesthood is and not to take it for granted as- as something as a man I guess I can say this is something that's a right or something that belongs to me but is a calling to serve as a minister and an expression of Christ and there's for us nothing that says your gender determines or not you can serve. And so, as we go on that journey of course it's only natural and with our understanding of sin and what salvation is. It's only natural to ask why not gay and lesbian members if they are living in committed relationships, why can't they serve? And so, this was another divisive issue but it was undertaken very differently and so unlike women in the priesthood, there a lot more discussion and a lot less black and white but when we actually voted on this in our national conference, you were allow to vote anywhere 1 to 5 in terms of your support or lack thereof and the discernment process, the discussion, and the journey as over many, many years and ultimately it was decided by Section 164 our most recent section in the Doctrine and Covenants that national conferences should be established and national jurisdictions of the Church or large regional jurisdictions such as Europe should determine the policy of the Church for that area and part of the reason for that is that

there are places in the Church where if a homosexual minister- well, I should say there are places where if people knew our Church allowed gays to be ordained, our existing priesthood and members could actually be in danger and so you know it's a real challenge because we seek to be prophetic, we seek to honor that- that enduring principle that all are called and the idea that God calls whomever God calls and that's the ideal and yet on the other hand there are cultural realities, regional realities that it actually produce danger and harm if a World Church- at the World Church level we were to say that priesthood is, you know, not based on your sexual orientation just as it isn't based on your gender. So, where we're at now is several national or regional conferences have been called and in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe- I believe those are the only ones at this point but in those place as long as somebody is in a committed relationship and they need to be married if marriage is an option legally but as long as they're in that monogamous relationship that there's nothing that limits or prohibits them from serving and in fact in Salt Lake so we recently had a guy ordained an elder and he's gay and nobody cares. I mean it just really doesn't matter and one of the great things we had a reunion which is like a camping experience. We all go up in the mountains and sleep in cabins and sing and pray together and swim and talk and eat. It's just a great-great experience but at the very end of it he said, "this is the first time that my family had been accepted as a family" and I mean I'm tearing up right now even thinking about that experience and you know just- just the reflection on that helps me to say "yeah, that's a moment when Zion was more fully established. When there was no poor among us" and poverty takes many forms and it's not just limited to the lack of access to economic resources but anytime we alienate someone and tell them that they can't come sit at the table with us, we impoverished them, and Zion is fled.

BR: Yeah, I like that, and I appreciate that answer. I want to ask you a couple of other questions about ordination. You mentioned pastors and obviously the Community of Christ separates Bishops and pastors whereas the LDS Church kind of meshes the two of those together. We do have the General Bishopric of the Church that oversees the funds and things, but we have a Bishop in each ward. My question I guess it's a simple one. Pastors which I assume are the head eclastical leader of a congregation, are they part of a lay ministry or are they paid?

SB: So they're lay ministers, almost always. There are a few exceptions but for the most part our priesthood is lay minister. It's bi-vocational just like you'd see in the LDS Church. I think that that's a Restoration commonality that we have. It comes right out of the Book of Mormon that the priests should labor with their own hands. In terms of the office, it's not really an office but the calling of pastor. There actually were pastors in early Restoration and for a time we can look to historical documents that show that people were being ordained to the office of pastor within the Melchizedec priesthood and this is- this is own common heritage. You know you look to the 6th article of faith. It lists the offices of the Church. I think based on Ephesians 4:11, but it says that one of the offices is pastor and so overtime though within the Mormon side of the Restoration, you had the bishop, like you said Bill, taking on the role of the pastor until they became synonymous and today you know when I say like "I'm the associate pastor," I think some Mormons think "oh, there's just another example, how you've become more Protestant but it in

reality it is very much based a common Restoration heritage and it's just a term we have for the presiding elder so in the old days you would have been the presiding elder of the branch which is also a pastor which means somebody who takes care of the sheep which is exactly what a Bishop does. I mean a lot of these are very common ideas and yeah, so the Bishop in Community of Christ is a financial officer that oversees the temporal affairs of the Church and also provides direction and guidance to the members of the Aaronic Priesthood but generally you would not see a Bishop in that Presiding Priesthood role over a congregation.

BR: Good, good and I wonder too- people that are listening as members of the LDS Church are gonna be- I think that's gonna be a new piece of information to them that there were pastors in early on in the faith tradition. Would you mind when this is all said and done maybe send me a link where they can read the history of that and see that that's occurred and that way I think Latter-day Saints are always eager as they learn things to find resources and source material. And that way we can kind of share it with them and give them a nice place to go to where they can see that that's the case.

SB: Yeah, absolutely. I'd be happy to do that.

BR: Awesome.

SB: Obviously the most one the Sixth Article of Faith which most of them can probably quote on the top of their heads, but yeah, I will- I'll go back and dig that up. If I remember correctly it was actually occurring in England during some of the initial missionary efforts, there.

BR: Awesome, awesome and another follow up question with priesthood. I know that in the LDS Church same thing, it's a lay ministry but there also comes a point where someone is called into the general leadership so if one's serving not an Area Seventy but a guess- I don't know what they want to call them but a regular member of the Seventy as well as the Quorum of the Twelve, the President of the Church, First Presidency. As well as even Mission Presidents get paid. Do the top leaders in Community of Christ do they- are they paid for their serve?

SB: Yes, they are so we do have a professional priesthood- portion of the priesthood as well so the President of the Church, the Twelve, the Presiding Bishopric, and then we have several throughout the Church that are field ministers or you know they're assigned to do various things where it is a full-time, paid position for them.

BR: Yeah, and that makes sense. I wanted to- you know, a couple more questions I wanted to ask you. One of them is the Community of Christ's view of temples. Obviously, the LDS Church is known throughout the world for having these buildings. These sacred edifices all over the place and yet most non-members are also aware there are very strict standards for entering an LDS temple. What is the differences between our LDS temples and the temples that the Community of Christ has?

SB: So, in Community of Christ we have two temples. We have Kirtland and Independence. Kirtland is still used for worship and you probably know this Bill. You lived fairly close I believe to there. It's much a historic site as anything although we do have our- our worship services that take place in there and many times, you know, others from the Restoration can come and can worship there as well. Originally Kirtland served as a site of Church Administration, so President of the Church led the church from there as well as others. It served as a place for education and the elders and others would gather and take classes on various subjects for Hebrew to English and History and then third role that it served as for worship and all those three elements of administration and education and worship are found within Independence so it's the site of the Headquarters, the President of the Church, the Twelve, and others have their offices there. They administer all of the Church's functions from the Temple and it's also a place that we gather for learning and education. We have something called Temple School which courses- they're largely correspondence courses but they can be done in person as well but they're administered through the Temple and so it's a place for training of the priesthood as well as just our general membership and we have symposium and other things that take place there. We have a Peace Colloquy where we just this last one we learned about poverty and how to abolish poverty in the world so it's a place of education and then the third one is it's a place of worship and part of that model for worship comes from Acts Chapter 2 back to primitive church where they were gathering at the Temple and in the narrative so we start in Luke- the very end of the Gospel of Luke Jesus says: I want you to take the Gospel to all nations but I need you to wait in Jerusalem until you're empowered with the Holy Spirit so you know the traditional language is "until you're endowed with power from on High" and that occurs as the Apostles and other Disciples are gathered at the Temple and the Holy Spirit comes at the day of Pentecost and so they are endowed with power to actually fulfill that Commission- that Great Commission of Christ and that's you know that's the first time the Gospel is preached after Christ's death and resurrection. The first time it's preached with power once the Holy Spirit descends and so we gather at the Temple to receive the Holy Spirit, to be endowed for mission, to go and share that message of Christ and to transform the world to Zion and so if you ever look at Google Maps at where our Temple is at in Independence, you'll see that it's a spiral which is meant to be something we gather in- the spiral gathers us into the center and then it also sends us out and as we are sent out of the Temple, we're sent into what's called the World Plaza and it's a huge brick plaza that has images of all the nations of the world. I mean it's the globe and so as we're sent out through the doors that say "Peace" with the church seal: The Lion and the Lamb and the child as Isaiah saw- as we're sent out to establish this vision of peace into the world. I mean that's what the Temple is calling us to do to be transformed then go out and to transform the world.

BR: Awesome, awesome. Glad to hear that and I appreciate the conversation we're having. I hope that this episode is listened to by a lot of Latter-day Saints who- who perhaps haven't done a lot of research into the Community of Christ and just to be aware of the differences that are out there and maybe to kill some of those stories of folklore that we've talked about earlier. I want to talk a little bit about required beliefs for membership so let's say Seth that Bill Reel comes to a Community of Christ congregation and wants to get baptized. What does- what does somebody have to say, do, show, act as before they

can enter the waters of baptism and maybe- maybe even talk to us a little bit about some of those- initial ordinances that one has to participate in enter into the Kingdom.

SB: Sure, so if you were to show up or anybody else there's actually the potential that you could be baptized just on your desire to follow Christ and then before you were confirmed there are lessons that you would have to take and you know- you'd have to show that you're committed to living in this community and following Christ as a disciple but for the most part people come and we don't require them to say you know well I believe this and I don't believe that but more its do you have a desire to follow Christ? Do you have a desire to take Christ's message and make the world a better place? And if- and if they have that desire then we'll baptize them. [laughs] So, and the big thing is I mean it's kind of self-discriminating. You know they've got to learn about the Church. They're going to learn that we've got- if they're not in the Restoration or from a Restoration tradition they're going to learn that we have some quirky- you know, beliefs or practices or history and so their desire to be part of our community- I would hope that they know about that. I think they've got to. They've got to know that our canon of scripture is different from most other Christians but at the end of the day, they're not required to believe in the Book of Mormon. They don't have to confess a belief in Joseph Smith Jr. There just has to be that desire to follow Christ within Community of Christ and to want to go forth through that- that vision of Christ's peaceable kingdom- make the world a place of joy, hope, love, and peace.

BR: I want to talk for a moment about the Book of Mormon so I'll give you another piece of LDS folklore about the Community of Christ which I'm sure you've heard before and you probably already know where I'm going which is that the Community of Christ in order to be accepted by a Christian Council out there somewhere had to change it's name and had to essentially give up the Book of Mormon as scripture and I know that's not the case so you at least have one person here who's aware of the facts but maybe walk us through that idea as well as Community of Christ's view of the Book of Mormon. What regard it holds it in and then I think what that will do is lead to maybe a discussion of what is scripture and how perhaps the Community of Christ defines that.

SB: So, in the Reorganization in the beginning there was certainly a belief that the Book of Mormon was a literal history and among of all the of the followers of the Restoration it's the Reorganization that very first attempts to go down to Central America and prove the Book of Mormon is a literal history. Not that others- I mean I think that B. H. Roberts and Orson Pratt. I mean others had done studies but members of the Reorganization are literally pouring through Mesoamerican studies. The very best scholarship available and they're sending people down to Central America and they're looking for evidences so by I think it's 1894, 1896 somewhere in there a World Conference of the RLDS actually appoints a committee on American Archeology and they publish a report and the report is just fascinating and it's on Google Books so maybe I'll send the link so that you're listeners can take a look at that Bill, but they are doing everything they can to pour through this Mesoamerican literature to try to prove that the Book of Mormon is a literal history and the problem though is that although they find false positives. What I would call false positives. They find a cliff that does a cross in it and they take a plaster cast and

they bring it back to the Auditorium and everyone marvels at this evidence and other things like that but ultimately they are unconvinced that there is any archeological evidence to prove that the Book of Mormon is actually literal history and there are then RLDS apostles that are involved or at least aware of this and this would be the 1940's or so. This deeply transforms their understanding of what is scripture and more importantly what's the value of scriptures so as the leadership of the Church is involved in more and more training and there certainly is a desire as part of that attitude that we should engage with the rest of the world and hone our message based on the very best science and research and the very best that's available just as it says about the Kirtland Temple you know "seek ye out of the best books." The leadership of the church is learning and growing and eventually we have a cohort that attends a seminary and so they engage in biblical scholarship. They are learning about scripture and they're apply those same research tools of higher and lower criticism to the Book of Mormon and they take that in conjunction with some of these past archeological studies which have prove to be disappointing if you're a scriptural literalist and they come to the conclusion that the Book of Mormon highly problematic as a literal history and part of that conclusion is based on things like Deutero-Isaiah being present within- anachronistically present within the Book of Mormon, but there's other- there's other things that led them to be suspicious and some of them determine that the best course of action so actually to minimize the Book of Mormon. Now guess you asked about personal belief. I'll share my personal belief and then I'll share where the Church is today on the matter. I think what they were doing that there's nothing wrong with the kind of study of the Book of Mormon that they were doing and critical standards to which they were holding it. The problem however is we cannot hold religious truth to a scientific standard or a scientific standard to a religious proposition. I guess what I'm getting at is you shouldn't try to prove religion is true with science or science is true with religion. Usually it's that science is false with religion, but that these are two different ways of approaching the world. Two different forms of knowledge with different ways we arrive at meaning and purpose and value and so I think what they were doing in terms of scholarship was fine, but they left discouraged and dishearten thinking that there was nothing that they could do with this book. I might look to the Book of Job as an example. So, I have a friend whose an English professor in Salt Lake and he's Episcopal and his scripture study group was looking at the Book of Job and so after a- after this very power experience with Job, he's talking with his neighbor and he wants to share and his Mormon neighbor listens politely but seems very, you know, disturbed by what the professor is saying about Job and its message. And he's like "I just gonna stop ya. I just got to make sure that you understand that Job was a literal person." And my friend said, "like okay, I don't know what that has to do with the message?" And the Mormon neighbor, "no! It has everything to do with the message! He's got to be a literal figure." And I like this story because it speaks the differences in how a scriptural literalist versus someone that might see the symbolic meaning behind scripture how they find value and meaning so Job by all accounts there just no- no Biblical scholar that would say that Job was an actual person. At the same time, I don't know, it isn't any less meaningful to me that is an account that isn't necessarily based on history or that it has a historicity that I can't trace back. I think we put demands based on our current location and our understanding of history, we put demands on scripture that scripture doesn't put on itself or that the writers of scripture

never would have intended to place upon it. That it's meaning and it's value transcends the sorts of question that we normally engage in a critical study and so that would be my critique of what the RLDS was doing and that deconstruction of the Book of Mormon and really a lack- there lack of reliance on the text. Some of them during that period and I would say that Community of Christ has come a long way since then we actually have a statement on scripture in Community of Christ and you can find that on our website at CofChrist.org or perhaps that's another link we can share but I'm looking at Affirmation 5 in that statement and it says "scripture is vital and essential to the Church" but not because it is inerrant in the sense that every detail is historically or scientifically correct. Scripture makes no such claims for itself. Rather generations of Christians have found scripture simply to be trustworthy is keeping them anchored in revelation, in promoting faith in Christ, and in nurturing the life of discipleship for these purposes scripture is unfailingly reliable." So, in Community of Christ today you'll find a variety of beliefs on scripture. You'll find folks that believe that the Book of Mormon is a literal history. In fact, on Sunday I had a conversation to that- with a person who had that exact belief and he honor that. There's no- you don't have to believe in the Book of Mormon. At the same time if- if you want to look at it in a traditional understanding, there's nothing wrong with that. What I would hope though is that rather than having arguments back and forth about whether if it is literally a history or it's not. It doesn't hold up to some scientific standard and therefore should be discarded like rather than falling within that rut. Let's talk about the content and what is the value and the meaning of the text and so I guess my last example would be what Mormons will know as Jacob 5 the allegory of the olive tree. In Community of Christ it's Jacob 3 and there's some pretty good evidence if you want to look at this from a critical standpoint that Romans- I think its Romans 11 and one of the Gospels that- that you know if you look at this critically that it's been lifted as an expansion upon these New Testament texts that rather than- I think it's the prophet Zenos, but rather than some forgot prophet presenting this allegory that it's a 19th century production and people get caught in this trap and fight back and forth but my friend John Hamer- I attended a class he gave on scripture just this last weekend and he pointed out within the text it says- God basically says- the gardener says that it grieves me that I should loose this tree." Now, I know for a fact that John Hamer does not believe that this is an ancient text that comes from some Mesoamerican period or I guess it would be even beyond that, but for John he applied that to the Church and to the desire that God has for the Church to be a living, viable entity within the world to herald in the peaceable kingdom and God is deeply interested in moments when the church struggles. That God is deeply interested and would grieve to lose the tree and that was powerful and neither John and I are going to insist it's a literal text and yet it has value and meaning and purpose just like my friend would say the same thing about Job. I think that you know in the church today what we're moving towards is finding that kind of value and meaning within scripture. Not that- not that its inerrant. Not like the prophet is like a mouthpiece and this is God speaking in the prophet just writes it down, but that scripture is a message that is unfailingly reliable that it- while it is coming though time and culture and it involves a human element, there's a dance between the human and the divine. That it's a creative weaving between the divine voice and the human voice and when we look at the totality of scripture, instead of nit-picking one verse here or there and proof-texting, but when we look at the totality of it we find a message of God's love that is unconditional

and it demands this lens, this overarching message, demands that we value the worth of all persons. They we- you know we- we actually live out the Golden Rule and we seek to be peoples of peace and justice.

BR: That is truly- I've said this a lot as you've been talking-That's truly beautiful and it sounds to me that not that the Community of Christ has said hey, the Book of Mormon is not historical or they said it absolutely has to be historical but rather they've just taken the question off the table and said "look, scripture, scripture is sacred writing regardless of where it comes from. It's sacred writing puts us in touch with the divine." Is that accurate to say?

SB: Oh, yeah absolutely so I mean if you'd like I can read from Doctrine and Covenants 163 because it's specially to this and I mean there's value actually in reading it and maybe expanding on exactly where Community of Christ sits.

BR: Yeah, please do and obviously for the Latter-day Saints that who are following along, they're not going to find this in their Doctrine and Convents, but yeah please read it. I would love to hear it.

SB: 7 a. 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.

b. 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.

c. It is not pleasing to God when any passage of scripture is used to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings. Much physical and emotional violence has been done to some of God's beloved children through the misuse of scripture. The church is called to confess and repent of such attitudes and practices.

d. Scripture, prophetic guidance, knowledge, and discernment in the faith community must walk hand in hand to reveal the true will of God. Follow this pathway, which is the way of the Living Christ, and you will discover more than sufficient light for the journey ahead.

BR: See that's gorgeous. I and maybe just to relate a little of a personal experience I think that ties into this. People often ask me because I'm trying to help people navigate this faith transition where we move out of this simple way of thinking and begin the gap onto more nuanced and more complex ideas and I'm in that journey myself and so people will, you know, message me on Facebook or write me an e-mail through the podcast and they'll say you know: "what is your view on the Book of Mormon? Is it historical in your view?" And I do the same thing. I take the question off the table. I say: "look whether it is historically true or not- it is true in that sense in that it draws me closer to Christ and for me, right now, where I'm at that is enough." And I think the Community of Christ as

a whole has- has taken that step and I think that offers a lot of flexibility for people to not to get hung up on the historical questions but rather ask themselves: does this draw me closer to Christ? And if so, it is sacred and true scripture.

SB: Yeah, absolutely. I mean there are question of what is canon for the community? I mean somebody could say well- well this book that I found at the library- I mean this draws me closer to Christ so I want to read from it in sacrament meeting or something. There are obviously at least for me I would say there are some parameters that the community has to live within but I love- I love that- that its not a question of whether it is literally true or not. It's not this black and white question that scripture never claims to a history book. [laughs] It never- it never makes those claims of itself but rather this is something that points me to God and then, so it is worthy of my consideration.

BR: Yeah, yeah, and I totally agree with you too that it can't be just a book that any of us find. A poem, you know "two roads diverged in a yellow wood," right and "I travel..." We could sit and get into those kinds of things and debate back and forth whether pieces of literature are scripture, but as you point out I think it needs to be a commonly accepted writing within the community. Not just as a particular member saying "this is scripture to me therefore its scripture."

SB: Right.

BR: Yeah, I wanted to finish off you mentioned there is there's this black and white and I was talking a little bit about that. Kind of as a wrap up question: are you familiar with Fowler and Stages of Faith? [Seth nods] Okay, so this will make a soon transition kind of into this question. I- I think often most religions teach at a very Stage 3 or what we would say a very black and white kind of level where things are either-or and things are cut-and-dry and it's a very simply way of organizing the world, but what happens is many of us as we kind travel this journey, we realize that the world is just way messier. There's- there's exceptions to every rule. There- things are just as not as cut-and-dry as we like to point them and I think the LDS Church does this stage three black-and-white thing just a lot of other religions do, but seems to me talking to you and I don't mean to put my faith down and to put yours up on a pedicle but simply to make an observation. It seems to me as if the Community of Christ has moved more into a Stage 4 or maybe even tip-toeing into Stage 5 of what Fowler would label you know basically understanding there's messiness, understanding there's nuance, giving people a lot more room and flexibility to set- to set their faith kind of at their own terms. Maybe speak for a moment about what it takes or what one has to be or do to be considered a faithful member of the Community of Christ?

SB: That's a great question and you know, I really see the Stages within the journey that Community of Christ has taken. That there was a definite maturing that happened in the 60's and the 70's and becoming comfortable with who we are. For a long time we were a people that had a negative identity. We aren't the Mormons. We don't practice polygamy, but there has been a growing awareness that we want to move beyond the simplistic, naive faith that's unquestioned and I guess I would look to maybe not Fowler as much but your probably familiar with Ricoeur's Second Naivete but there's definitely a journey

that many of us in Community of Christ have taken from that unquestioned faith into the desert of criticism where before we didn't question anything and now in the desert of criticism, we question everything. And the hope is that you come full circle. That you come back and re-claim your faith that it doesn't have the same naïve assumptions that you have previously. I mean your eyes had been opened but that you are saying this is something powerful and meaningful to me and therefore I will choose to believe it. Despite of my doubts, despite of the paradoxes that might exist or the difficulties. I choose to believe. I choose to claim this and I re-claim its power for me and the hope is in so doing you become much more accepting of other people's faith journeys that even if- you want to- if the LDS Church is stage 3, I'm completely alright with the LDS Church being Stage 3 and that's there- how they engage with God. I mean it doesn't- the fact that somebody has a different way of seeing God doesn't challenge my faith nor do I feel like I need to proselyte. That I need to go knock on my neighbor's doors and convince them. You know I live in a mostly Mormon town. I don't need to convince them that they're wrong in order to feel better about my faith and so the hope is that in Community of Christ we can develop disciples who strive to model Christ in the world, who strive to be as Jesus was to challenge oppression, to cry out against any form of religion that pulls people down, but to say that all are called- all are worthy that all humans have worth and in becoming that champion of God's vision for creation and for humanity- we're all transformed. You're transformed internally as you seek to bring about Zion externally. So, it's a very delicate thing because I- you know- I don't want on one hand you know I want to be able challenge conditions in the world that are contrary to God's will and on the other hand I very much seek to be respectful of other people's religious views. I mean there comes a point where I draw a line and say this isn't just cultural relative that you can have it your way and I can have it my way and that's fine. I mean there are certain points where I'm required in being prophetic- I'm required to stand up and say "no, that's wrong" but for the most part our faith should a positive journey that's not contingent upon you know I- I hate to say it this way but it's not contingent upon proving somebody else is wrong. I'm not right because somebody else is wrong.

BR: No, I like that. I want to ask you one more thing with wasn't necessarily in the outline that we talked about, but kind of taking off this last question. How much dissent in the Community of Christ is welcomed? How much dissent is tolerated? And maybe perhaps any idea of kind of where that line is?

SB: Well, quite a bit of dissent is tolerated compared to my experience in the LDS Church, and we actually have Principles for Faithful Disagreement that came out recently. And the idea is if you disagree with the Church, if you have your own personal theology, if there's something you just feel strongly it should be a different way and your priesthood or you're in a position where maybe you're teaching a class or something like that. It's not that you- It's not that you can't- you can't bring up challenging questions, but at the end of the day and you're a member of the priesthood and you know, if you're a pastor- especially someone in a position like that- you're expected to keep your personal theology to yourself and represent the Church to which you're ordained. Now, that might sound harsh. If you came to- or that might some repressive- but if you came to a Community of Christ congregation. I mean you literally see there is a whole variety of

options on just about everything. That we welcome discussion and disagreement that we don't- I mean one of our Enduring Principles is Unity in Diversity. We value our unit and our diversity. And you know God isn't intending for disciples to be cookie-cutters. I think President Uchtdorf said that recently. I really like President Uchtdorf by the way, but that God throughout nature shows so much diversity in creation and our congregations are the exact same way to the point where even two congregations are completely different like there's no one congregation in Community of Christ that's exactly the same. So, I mean we're expected- members of the priesthood are expected to represent the church faithfully. I don't there's anything wrong with that, but at the same time we're also allowed to be intellectually honest with ourselves and with others and at times that kind of diverse community can be painful. There's always pains that come along with the joy, but in honoring the different views that all of us have we really are strengthen by that and it expands our vision. We are not in any way lessened by the diversity of option. It strengthens us to recognize the worth in somebody else's views and the journey they've been on and that maybe even if I disagree with them that God is there with them in their journey.

BR: So, in the average Community of Christ congregation, you meet every Sunday. How long does church last?

SB: So, normally 2 hours. Maybe more. I mean can speak for Salt Lake congregation specifically although there's plenty of other congregations that do it differently but we meet for Sunday School at 10 then we have a worship service at 11 and that worship usually ends around 12:15 and we might have a potluck after or you know we might just sit and talk and fellowship but I mean generally it's not a 3-hour block experience for the most part but if we have a priesthood meeting which can happen. I mean you could potentially three-hour service but that's definitely not the norm.

BR: Gotcha, gotcha. We're talking today with Seth Bryant. Seth I just wanted to say thank you for being on. I think people are really going to enjoy this episode. You're really good. I think you're just a nice, smooth speaker and you take out ideas I think pretty quickly and put really good thoughts together. I just appreciate you taking time out of your day to spend with us, and thanks so much for being on the podcast.

SB: Well, Bill I really appreciate it. Thank you.

[Outro Music]