

## Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Community of Christ)

By Rick Branch

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**Founder:** Joseph Smith, Jr.

**Founding Date:** Officially founded April 6, 1860.

**Official Publications:** The monthly magazine *Saints Herald* and the bimonthly *Restoration Witness*.

**Organization Structure:** Similar to most other churches which claim Joseph Smith, Jr. as their founder, the RLDS Church is led by a Prophet and his counselors. These men are known collectively as the First Presidency. In addition, the RLDS Church has a Council of Twelve Apostles. There are lesser offices in the RLDS Church such as Bishops, Elders, etc.

**Unique Terms:** An RLDS *Fundamentalist* or *Restorationist* is one who believes the *Book of Mormon* is historically and theologically accurate. They also believe the RLDS Church, as defined by Joseph Smith III, is the only true church.

**Other Names:** The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is often referred to by the abbreviation RLDS. Also, in the 1970's, an official nickname, *Saints' Church* was designated. In addition, in most areas outside the English-speaking world, the RLDS Church is known as the *Restored Church of Jesus Christ*.<sup>1</sup>

### HISTORY

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As with many groups, the history of the RLDS Church actually begins before its official founding date. Most members of the Church will point to Joseph Smith, Jr. as their founder and the events of his life in the 1820's and 1830's as being extremely significant to their church's history. The real history of the RLDS Church as a separate entity actually begins, however, with the death of Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1844. As Gordon Fraser explains, "With the death of Joseph Smith, the entire church was thrust into a state of chaos, with a dozen potential leaders contending for the mantle of the Prophet."<sup>2</sup> Many of these leaders would eventually begin their own churches, each claiming to be the only true church, as originally founded by Joseph Smith, Jr.

Some of these leaders included Brigham Young, who would lead many of Smith's followers from Nauvoo, Illinois to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah to begin The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called the Mormons). James J. Strang would travel to Beaver Island, Michigan and have himself declared King by his followers. Sidney Rigdon, an early associate of Joseph Smith's, called his group the Church of Christ, which was the original name given the church by Joseph Smith. William Bickerton began The Church of Jesus Christ (or Church of Christ, Bickertonites) after a brief association with Rigdon. Another important leader was Grandville Hedrick who began The Church of Christ, Temple Lot.<sup>3</sup>

Other early followers of Joseph Smith were Jason Briggs, Zenos Gurley and William Marks. These three men are most often credited with organizing the group that would eventually be called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This

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small remnant of believers in Joseph Smith formed because they did not accept his 1843 revelation that implemented polygamy.

With regard to the history of the RLDS Church, J. Gordon Melton, explains, “Briggs had been an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at Nauvoo, Illinois, and remained loyal until the trek west.”<sup>4</sup> Briggs had joined Strang’s group in 1848 and the group lead by Joseph Smith’s brother, William Smith, in 1850. However, he left these groups because of a revelation convincing him that Joseph Smith Jr.’s son, Joseph Smith III, was the rightful heir to his father’s prophetic mantle. Melton further states,

Zenos Gurley was senior president of one of the seventies in Nauvoo. He remained loyal to Brigham Young until a few days before the departure west. He joined Strang and was a bishop, but like Briggs he left Strang in 1852. He claimed a revelation similar to Briggs’ concerning Joseph’s son.<sup>5</sup>

Concerning William Marks, he “was the Nauvoo stake president who was excommunicated when he supported the claims of Sidney Rigdon, who founded the precursor to the Church of Christ (Bickertonites). Marks joined Rigdon, then Strang, then several other Mormon groups.”<sup>6</sup>

Being dissatisfied with his previous associations, Briggs set out on his own to find the true church. “Encouraged by his sincere belief that a descendant of Joseph Smith, Jr. should head the church as its prophet, Briggs began writing to others of his belief and other spiritual experiences which had been made manifest to him. Joined by others who felt as he, the first conference of what became known as the New Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was convened in June 1852.”<sup>7</sup>

Though the New Organization was convened, and though Briggs and others had their spiritual convictions that Joseph Smith III should be their new leader, there was a problem. Joseph Smith III refused! In 1859 William Marks joined the New Organization. It was in this same year that Joseph Smith III finally consented to become the prophet and was ordained to that position by Marks. Thus, on April 6, 1860, in Amboy, Illinois, “the New Organization became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints with 300 members.”<sup>8</sup>

Since that time, each successive prophet has been a direct descendent of Joseph Smith, Jr. They include Joseph Smith III, Frank Madison Smith, Israel Alexander Smith, W. Wallace Smith and Wallace B. Smith. However, the RLDS Church was now faced with a problem. Wallace B. Smith had no sons to take his place as the next prophet. Potentially, this problem was solved in 1984 when Wallace B. Smith received a revelation allowing women to hold the priesthood. Thus, it is possible for the next RLDS prophet to be a woman - possibly one of his daughters.

In recent years, there has been a split in the RLDS Church, between the fundamental factions, headed by Richard Price (the Restoration branches), who more closely adhere to the original RLDS teachings, and the more liberal factions which control the hierarchy of the RLDS Church.

**Editors update:** The RLDS officially changed their name to the “Community of Christ” on April 6, 2001. The name was changed because the leadership thought the new name “more adequately represented the church’s theology and mission.”<sup>9</sup> Steven M. Veazey was ordained as the seventh Prophet/President of the church at the 2005 World Conference.<sup>10</sup>

## **DOCTRINE**

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As strange as it may seem, when RLDS doctrines are spoken of, they are usually stated in a way that simply tells which Mormon doctrines (Utah Church) they do not believe. J. Gordon Melton explains,

The Reorganized Church rejects polygamy, and all the associated doctrines - sealing of marriage for eternity and marriage by proxy to persons deceased - are

rejected most strongly. The doctrine that ‘As man now is, God once was; as God now is, so man may become,’ the Adam-God theory, is felt to conflict plainly with the monotheism of the Bible. The members of the Reorganized Church consider abhorrent the practice of ‘blood atonement’ as enunciated by Brigham Young, by which apostates were killed to save them from damnation. In the Reorganized Church, there are no closed temples nor services from which the public is barred, nor any special temple garments.<sup>11</sup>

This tactic of listing doctrines believed by the Mormons but rejected by the RLDS is common. It seems to occur as a result of the fact that even many RLDS followers have no clear idea as to what their church teaches. Historically, however, the RLDS have taught the following doctrines:

- 1) The RLDS versions of the *Book of Mormon* and the *Doctrine and Covenants* [D&C] are considered to be scripture. They also accept Joseph Smith’s rewritten version of the Bible, the Inspired Version [I.V.], as scripture.
- 2) Complete apostasy of the early Christian church.<sup>12</sup>
- 3) Joseph Smith, Jr. was a prophet who restored God’s church.<sup>13</sup>
- 4) Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods were restored.<sup>14</sup>
- 5) Baptism for the remission of sins.<sup>15</sup>
- 6) Zion will be established in, and Jesus will return to, Independence, Missouri.<sup>16</sup>
- 7) Heaven has three levels.<sup>17</sup>
- 8) Those who do not hear the RLDS gospel in this life will have another opportunity in the next.<sup>18</sup>

While these doctrines were the historical position of RLDS theology, today, their doctrines are in a state of flux.

In 1992, RLDS owned Graceland College, hosted a symposium “dealing with significant RLDS theological issues.”<sup>19</sup> This symposium was sponsored by the First Presidency and Graceland’s Center for Christian Leadership.

At the conference, Paul Edwards, dean of the Park College Graduate School of Religion and Temple School Center director, examined RLDS theology. He exclaimed, “One of the most important needs for RLDS people today is to look existentially at primary experiences as the starting point for their theological activity.”<sup>20</sup>

Simply stated, Edwards is advocating that each individual view theological truths from a personal, subjective perspective, rather than from a historical, objective perspective. Instead of beginning with the Bible, or even RLDS scripture, such as the *Book of Mormon* and/or *Doctrine and Covenants*, the RLDS dean of theology recommends that each believer looks to his or her own existential experience for a basis of truth. Based on this idea, it would be difficult for the RLDS hierarchy to adopt any single Statement of Faith. For each individual would interpret those beliefs in his own existential way.

Echoing Edwards views, Anthony Chvala-Smith, who received his Ph.D. from Marquette University, “explained there can be no ‘perennial theology, only a theology of wayfarers.’”<sup>21</sup> Thus, each believer in the RLDS religion is left to stumble in darkness, making their own way through the maze, with no help from higher authorities.

Finally, Robert Mesle, professor of religion at Graceland, in speaking about the place of the Bible in RLDS theology, stated, “We need to be teaching our young people to be responsible, discriminating readers of scripture (who) use scripture as a

springboard not a trap.”<sup>22</sup> In RLDS theology, the Bible is simply a beginning point for the individual’s personal theology. The important source for theological truth is not God’s word, but rather that subjective, existential experience. It is felt by many cult researchers that this ambiguity of doctrine may be due, in part, to both the on-going controversy between Fundamentalists and Liberals within the RLDS Church and the church’s tendency to reflect the latest social trends.

### Other Doctrines

Of the Holy Spirit, Kurt Goedelman of Personal Freedom Outreach, writes, “While it is easy to find stated that the Father and Son are regarded as persons in RLDS literature, it is difficult to find references to the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost) as a person. Rather, He is mainly regarded as ‘the living power and presence of God.’”<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the Mormon Church, most RLDS members view the *Book of Mormon* as a 19th century product.<sup>24</sup> The RLDS version of the *Doctrine and Covenants* also contains additional and different revelations than will be found in the Mormon version. In addition, they do not use the *Pearl of Great Price* as do the Mormons.

In recent years the RLDS Church has avoided viewing the Restoration of the Church as an actual historical event. In a speech given at the First Presidency Meetings in 1979, it was stated, “When we are honest about our own personal and corporate history, we realize that the apostasy and the Restoration were not events that happened one time in history but rather are processes continually at work among us.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, by denying the Restoration was an actual historical event, the RLDS Church has undermined the very foundation upon which all of Joseph Smith, Jr’s later work depends. Thereby, undermining their own foundation.

## RECOMMENDED READING

*The RLDS Church: Christian or Cult* by Carol Hansen. In this book, Hansen provides material on the RLDS history, basic theology and important differences of which Christians need to be aware. It contains sections on false prophecies, RLDS Scripture, the Fundamentalist versus Liberal debate and testimonies. 132 pages, soft back.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Steven Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, (Los Angeles: Restoration Research, 1990) 67.
- <sup>2</sup> Gordon H. Fraser, *Sects of the Latter-day Saints*, (Eugene: Industrial Litho Inc., 1978) 16.
- <sup>3</sup> Shields, 31, 37, 40-41, 76, 89.
- <sup>4</sup> *Encyclopedia of American Religions Vol. 2*, J. Gordon Melton (Tarrytown, New York: Triumph Books, 1989) 203.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Shields, 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Melton, 203-204.
- <sup>9</sup> “History—W. Grant Murray,” Community of Christ, <http://www.cofchrist.org/history/Grant.asp> (accessed June 9, 2005).
- <sup>10</sup> “2005 World Conference Updates,” Community of Christ, <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2005/dailyupdates.asp> (accessed June 9, 2005).
- <sup>11</sup> Melton, 204.
- <sup>12</sup> F. Henry Edwards, *Fundamentals*, (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1940) 175-210.
- <sup>13</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1962) 1:4a and 1:5d-e.
- <sup>14</sup> *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Vol. 1*, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1952) 34-35.
- <sup>15</sup> *Doctrine & Covenants*, 39:2a-b, 16:4e.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Smith Jr., *Holy Scriptures Inspired Version*, (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1973) Gen. 7:20-25. *Doctrine & Covenants*, 57. *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, 710.
- <sup>17</sup> *Doctrine & Covenants*, 76:5-7.
- <sup>18</sup> *Doctrine & Covenants*, 76:6c.
- <sup>19</sup> *Saints Herald*, December 1992, 8.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> M. Kurt Goedelman, “Sizing up the saints,” *Quarterly Journal Vol. 8 No. 1*, January-March, 1988, 7.
- <sup>24</sup> *Position Papers*, Department of Religious Education of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Independence: Cumorah Books Inc., 1967-1968) 103-112.
- <sup>25</sup> *Presidential Papers*, RLDS (Independence: Cumorah Books Inc., 1979) 28.



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