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# LDS Misconceptions about the Community of Christ

*Richard G. Moore*

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or RLDS)<sup>1</sup> both trace their roots to the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith. What now are two separate denominations were, from the time of the First Vision until the martyrdom, one common body. Following the martyrdom of Church founder Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, many church members were uncertain as to who should succeed their slain Prophet. Several potential leaders attempted to take the reins of the Church, including the Twelve Apostles (under the leadership of Brigham Young), Sidney Rigdon, and James J. Strang. Although the majority of the Saints accepted the leadership of Brigham Young, this did not end the succession controversy. Some church members followed one claimant to church leadership, and some followed others—each claiming to be faithful to the vision and teachings of Joseph Smith Jr. Some, who had been members of the Church founded by Joseph were unwilling to follow *any* particular leader in the years following his death. During the early 1850s a number of the Saints who had chosen not to follow any of the factions, along with some who had followed various claimants to church leadership only to become disillusioned, came together to create the New Organization.

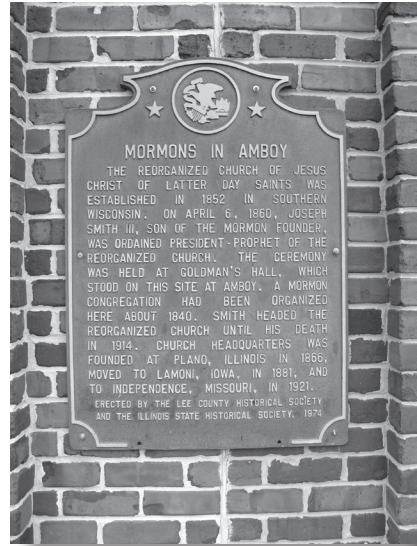
On April 6, 1860, at a church conference in Amboy, Illinois, Joseph Smith III was unanimously accepted by the conference as the “prophet, seer, and

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### Mormons in Amboy

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was established in 1852 in Southern Wisconsin. On April 6, 1860, Joseph Smith III, son of the Mormon founder, was ordained president-prophet of the Reorganized Church. The ceremony was held at Goldman's Hall, which stood on this site at Amboy. A Mormon congregation had been organized here about 1840. Smith headed the Reorganized Church until his death in 1914. Church headquarters was founded at Plano, Illinois in 1866, moved to Lamoni, Iowa, in 1881, and to Independence, Missouri, in 1921. Erected by the Lee County Historical Society and the Illinois State Historical Society, 1974.



Historical marker commemorating the ordination of Joseph Smith III as the prophet-president of the Reorganization, Amboy, Illinois, September 25, 2010. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

revelator of the church of Jesus Christ, and the successor of his father.”<sup>2</sup> This “New Organization” was considered by its members to be the continuation of the original Church restored by Joseph Smith Jr. Several years later, in 1872, the church formally added “Reorganized” to the name, and became known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.<sup>3</sup>

In its earliest days, the Reorganization was defined mostly by what it was not. For example, it was *not* Brigham Young’s organization. Members were *not* polygamists. It was not the strange religion isolated in the Great Basin of the United States with secret temple rituals and unusual doctrines and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Great efforts were made by Joseph Smith III and the Reorganized Church to separate themselves from the Utah Mormons.

The relationship between the LDS Church and the RLDS Church was adversarial from the start, each group determined to prove the other wrong. For years, leaders and members of both religions said and published harsh things about the other. Hard feelings were evident and misunderstandings were common. In recent years, a spirit of open communication and cooperation has developed between the two denominations. Thankfully, the feelings of animosity between church leaders have largely dissipated.<sup>5</sup>

However, among many LDS Church members there still exists much misunderstanding and misinformation about the origin, history, doctrine, and current status of Community of Christ.

When members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints visit Community of Christ historic sites or on the infrequent occasion when the topic of the RLDS Church comes up in conversation, many of their statements and questions reveal that most LDS Church members are still unfamiliar with much of Community of Christ's history and doctrine. The following discussion hopes to bring clarity to ten common misconceptions that many LDS Church members have about Community of Christ.

### **Misconception #1: The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was founded by Emma Smith.**

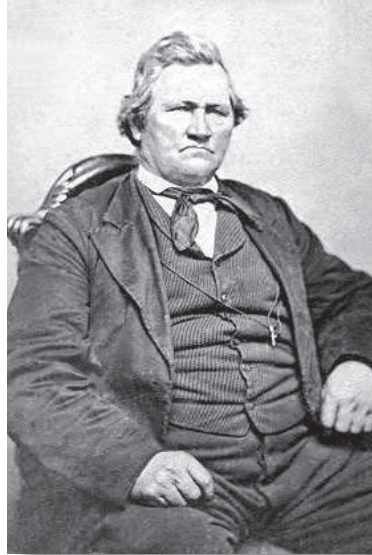
As stated above, a substantial number of Mormons did not follow the majority of the Saints west with Brigham Young. Some followed Strang, Rigdon or others and their claims to leadership.<sup>6</sup> Some remained aloof from any of the groups that came from the succession crisis that shook the Church after Joseph Smith's death. A number of those who did not go west would eventually come together in the "New Organization," which was later renamed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

The two men primarily responsible for beginning the Reorganization were Jason W. Briggs and Zenos Gurley Sr. Both had been members of the Church before the death of Joseph Smith, and both men initially followed the members of the Twelve headed by Brigham Young, and then later James J. Strang. Jason Briggs later became dissatisfied with both groups. His concern about who held the true authority led him to seek divine guidance. He said that the answer to his prayers came in November 1851, in a revelation informing him that a descendant of Joseph Smith should rightly preside over the church.

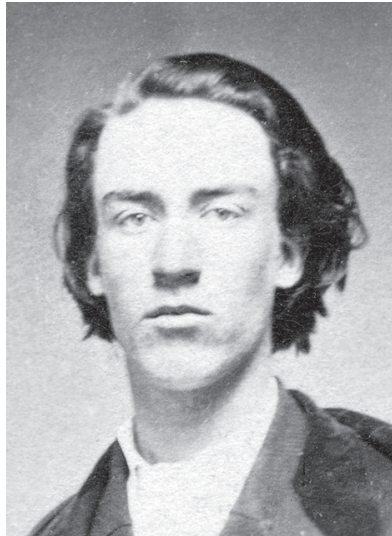
Several months later a copy of Briggs' revelation came into the hands of Zenos Gurley Sr. Gurley attested to having received through the Spirit a confirmation of the revelation's divinity. The message spread to existing branches of Latter-day Saints in the Midwest. Consequently, a conference was held in the summer of 1852 to consider the Briggs' revelation. Of the conference, historian Roger D. Launius wrote: "It was united only in its opposition to other Mormon factions, in its acceptance of the Briggs document as divine revelation, in its belief that Mormonism as set forth in the scriptures was correct, and in its affirmation that the proper successor to the prophetic office was growing to maturity in Nauvoo and would one day step forth to accept his calling."<sup>7</sup>



Jason W. Briggs



Zenos H. Gurley Sr.



Alexander Hale Smith (left) and David Hyrum Smith (right).

Following the 1852 conference, the Reorganization began to function (to some degree), but Emma, while she may have been aware of Briggs and others, was not involved in any way. In 1856, Edmund C. Briggs and Samuel H. Gurley were sent to Nauvoo to invite Joseph III to take his place as successor to his father as head of the church. Learning of the reason Briggs and Gurley had come to Nauvoo, Emma was reticent. She told the visitors, “I have always avoided talking to my children about having anything to do in the church, for I have suffered so much I have dreaded to have them take any part in it.”<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Smith III’s acceptance of the role of president of the new church added greater legitimacy, strength, and stability to the “New Organization.” In addition to Joseph Smith III, his mother, Emma, and his two brothers, Alexander and David, also united with the Reorganized Church. Whether Emma changed her mind and encouraged Joseph III to take the leadership role of the church, or whether she remained hesitant is uncertain. Joseph III clearly stated that it was the Spirit that led to his decision to unite with the New Organization. Emma eventually participated in the Reorganization after her son became its president. She became active in the Nauvoo branch and edited a new hymnal for the church; but she was not involved in its founding or formation.

### **Misconception #2: Emma Smith never actually joined the Reorganized Church.**

There has been some controversy whether Emma Smith ever officially joined the Reorganized Church. The argument stems from the fact that Emma was not baptized as a member of the RLDS Church. A closer look at the history makes it clear that Emma *was* a member of what is now Community of Christ.

The Reorganization was considered by its leaders and members to be the legitimate continuation of the church founded by Joseph Smith Jr. Therefore, anyone who had been a member of the original church was not required to be rebaptized into the Reorganized Church. There is no question about Emma’s involvement with the RLDS Church. On the day that Joseph



Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, circa 1870.

Smith III was ordained as president of the Reorganization, a unanimous vote supported the motion that Emma Smith Bidamon<sup>9</sup> who was also present, “be received as a member of the Reorganization.”<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith III recorded, “Mother and I united with the church at that conference, as is well known.”<sup>11</sup> Emma is also listed as a member of the Reorganization in a compilation of the names of early members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.<sup>12</sup>

**Misconception #3: Joseph Smith III took the position of RLDS Church president only after failing at a number of business ventures, and because he didn’t have any viable means of income.**

Joseph Smith III was eleven years old when his father was killed. As a young adult he heard rumors about the Reorganization and received some of its missionary tracts. He was initially approached by Edmund C. Briggs and Samuel H. Gurley about becoming the leader of the Reorganization in 1856 when he was twenty-four years of age. At that time Joseph told them he was not interested in their proposal. In the years that followed, other efforts were made to persuade Joseph Smith III to accept a role as leader of the New Organization. For several years he did not respond to any communication involving the Reorganization.<sup>13</sup>

As a very young man, Joseph III worked as assistant manager to his mother in the family business, taking in boarders at the Mansion House. After Emma’s remarriage, Joseph’s step-father, Lewis Bidamon, helped the fifteen-year-old get a job as a store clerk. Later, because of Joseph’s experience in Hartwell’s store, Emma reopened the Red Brick Store with Joseph as the manager. For a number of reasons beyond Joseph III’s control, the Red Brick Store was unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup>

For the next few years Joseph III worked at a number of jobs, saving his money for future business ventures. A few of his projects were very profitable, but overall, Joseph enjoyed only modest success in business. He *did* demonstrate managerial talent, and he was a hard worker who was always able to find work and make a living. In 1853, Joseph III began a formal study of law in William McLennon’s Nauvoo law office. Lewis Bidamon, arranged for him to study law under William Kellogg, a well-known attorney practicing in Canton, Illinois, about eighty miles from Nauvoo. Joseph III read law in the Kellogg office until early 1856,<sup>15</sup> when he returned to Nauvoo without completing his legal training.<sup>16</sup>

In 1853, the same year that Joseph began studying law, he also began to study Mormonism in earnest, and came to the conclusion that pre-Nauvoo Mormonism rang true.<sup>17</sup> In addition, he examined the beliefs and claims of

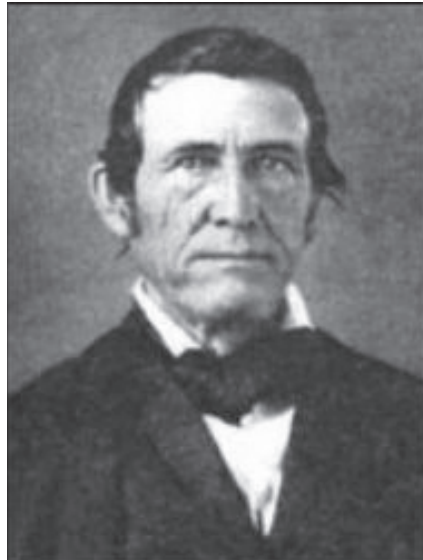
a number of the groups that claimed succession. In the course of his serious study of Mormon doctrine, Joseph III prayed for divine guidance. He said that he experienced a spiritual manifestation in which a messenger gave him a choice between worldly success and renown, or a happy, peaceful life without honor or notoriety. This experience foreshadowed the choice that he would be given when invitations came to serve as the leader of the Reorganized Church.

Joseph III married Emmeline Griswold on October 22, 1856. Emmeline had never been a member of any of the movements associated with the restoration. The marriage was performed by a Presbyterian minister, and the couple settled in Nauvoo. Joseph continued to study Mormonism and, based on his spiritual experience, believed that one day he would be given the choice between secular success and religious service. This would not be a simple decision for him. Joseph was interested in a number of things outside religion, including politics and the moral issues of the day, such as slavery. In 1857, Joseph was elected as justice of the peace in Nauvoo.

A series of family crises ultimately led him to decide to become involved with the Reorganization—something he discussed with his mother and other family members.<sup>18</sup> In March 1860, Joseph III wrote a letter to William Marks, who had recently joined the Reorganization, expressing his willingness to seriously consider accepting the office of president.<sup>19</sup>

Even though the leaders of the Reorganization were excited by the possibility that Joseph III would become their church president, some wanted to make sure that he was getting involved for the right reason. Church representatives, including William Marks, traveled to Nauvoo to interview Joseph III. Marks, who came in person to satisfy his own curiosity about the sincerity of Joseph's decision, said to Joseph: "We have had enough of man-made prophets, and we don't want any more of that sort. If God has called you, we want to know it. If he has, the Church is ready to sustain you; if not, we want nothing to do with you."<sup>20</sup>

Joseph III, along with his mother and brothers, made the



William Marks, date unknown.



Tintype of Joseph Smith III, circa early 1860s, about the time he was ordained as the president of the Reorganization. Photograph courtesy Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

trip to Amboy, Illinois, and on April 6, 1860, he became the president of the Reorganized Church. Those who were in attendance at the conference heard Joseph testify that it was God's will that he accept the calling. "I came not here of myself, but by the influence of the Spirit," he declared. "For some time past I have received manifestations pointing to the position which I am about to assume. I wish to say that I have come here not to be dictated by any men





Plano Stone Church, Plano, Illinois, September 26, 2010. The Plano Stone Church was the first meetinghouse constructed by the RLDS Church. It was completed and dedicated in November 1868. Joseph Smith III and his family lived in Plano from January 1866–1881. The Plano Stone Church served as church headquarters for that time period.

Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

or set of men. I have come in obedience to a power not my own, and shall be dictated by the power that sent me.”<sup>21</sup>

It is unfair to say that Joseph III accepted the church leadership position for financial reasons.<sup>22</sup> Had there been some failures and unsuccessful business ventures prior to his involvement with the Reorganization? Yes. However, Joseph personally considered his life’s setbacks as experiences to humble him in preparation for his calling in the church.

On the day he was accepted as church president, he said to the congregation, “I have been well aware of the motives which might be ascribed to me—motives of various kinds, at the foundation of all which is selfishness—should I come forth to stand in the place where my father stood.”<sup>23</sup> He told those gathered in conference that day that there had been a time when the very thought of assuming leadership of the church had been repulsive to him, but he now felt that this call had come from heaven and not of his “own dictation.”<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Smith III served as president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from 1860 until his death in 1914—over half a century of leadership and service. Those who have studied his life recognize his devotion to God and to the church he led.

**Misconception #4: Community of Christ changed its policy of being led by a descendant of Joseph Smith because it ran out of descendants of Joseph Smith.**

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was founded upon the premise that a descendant of the Prophet Joseph Smith should rightfully preside over the church. The tradition of being led by a descendant of Joseph Smith Jr. was consistent from 1860 until 1996, when W. Grant McMurray became the first non-Smith family member to serve as president of the church.

Through the years most members of the Reorganized Church expected a descendant of the Prophet Joseph Smith to hold the position of church president, and it came to be viewed by many as a necessity. However, succession through the line of Joseph Smith Jr. was by tradition rather than requirement. Even Joseph Smith III did not see being a descendant as a prerequisite to becoming the prophet-president of the church. He explained, “It is not necessarily a birthright to be the President of the Church. It comes by virtue of fitness and qualification. . . . The existence of the Reorganized Church does not depend on my lineal successorship as I understand it.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1995, Reorganized Church President Wallace B. Smith wrote a “pastoral letter” to the members of the church. In the letter he reminded the membership of the requirements to be president of the church as established by Joseph Smith III:

There have been those over the years who have felt that only a direct descendant of Joseph Smith, Jr. is eligible to occupy the office of president in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Indeed, one of our claims to legitimacy as a movement, especially in the past, has been that we have always been so led.



W. Grant McMurray

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This has never been a requirement, however, as Joseph III indicated in his “Letter of Instruction.” While it is important, it is not an over-riding consideration.<sup>26</sup>

He went on to say that even though his personal feelings were that leadership through the Smith line had generally been positive for the church, “there are many well-qualified persons available and it is now timely to broaden the base from which leadership of the church is to be selected.” Wallace B. Smith then said that it had been made known to him that W. Grant McMurray should be designated his successor as president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—the first person to hold that office who was not a descendant of Joseph Smith Jr. The calling of W. Grant McMurray was, in President Wallace B. Smith’s words, “to fulfill the role of bringing prophetic leadership to the church.”<sup>27</sup>

There are many direct descendants of the Prophet Joseph Smith who are actively involved in Community of Christ and who could serve as prophet-president, if called. It is a misconception to believe that Community of Christ ran out of Smiths and was, thus, required to change its policy. Such is hardly the case.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Misconception #5: The desperate need for money motivated the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to merge with a wealthier Protestant church, which resulted in the name change to Community of Christ.**

There was no merger between the Reorganized Church and any other church. The name change took place as the church’s theological focus changed. As the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the focus was more on its historical origins and its connection to founder Joseph Smith. The connection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was unmistakable.

Changing the name of the church was considered for a number of years. At the World Conference held in 2000, legislation was brought to change the name to Community of Christ. The name change was made to more adequately reflect the church’s mission and theology: “We proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love, and peace.” Church President, W. Grant McMurray expressed his belief that the name captures two central focuses of the church: (1) the centrality of Christ, and (2) the emphasis on building model communities, caught up in the church’s tradition of Zion.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Misconception #6: Community of Christ brokered a deal with the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches that if they**

**abandoned the use of the Book of Mormon these organizations would recognize them as a Christian Church and give Community of Christ financial funding.**

First, it should be known that the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches are completely different organizations, not connected to each other. Second, Community of Christ has never been a member of the World Council of Churches.

In recent years, Community of Christ began to move away from a previously held position that it was “the only true church.” Rather, it began to see itself as part of the large group of people who worship Christ. With the understanding that they are part of the larger Christian community, church leadership felt a growing need to become more involved with ecumenical and interfaith ministries. This led to a dialogue with the National Council of Churches (an organization in the United States) that lasted for several years. Community of Christ officially became a member of the National Council of Churches on November 10, 2012. On that day, delegates at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches USA approved the application of Community of Christ for membership, with no stipulations on the church’s beliefs or scriptures.

It is a misconception to think that membership in the NCC would provide funding for Community of Christ. In reality, the NCC needs funding from the churches that are members of that organization to be able to function. According to Community of Christ Apostle Dale E. Luffman: “There are no required fees or dues for those accepted as members in the NCC. Each member church is invited to make an annual contribution according to its capacity and desire. Consideration is being given to what amount is appropriate, with the understanding that the NCC contribution will not increase the limited funding budgeted for contributions to partner organizations.”<sup>30</sup>

From my communication with Community of Christ leaders who were directly involved with the application process for membership in the National Council of Churches, it appears that some members of the NCC were concerned with Community of Christ’s use of the Book of Mormon. A memorandum to the NCC General Assembly, dated November 3, 2010, reported that Community of Christ representatives made clear their stand on the Book of Mormon:

They acknowledged that “the Book of Mormon is in our DNA,” and suggested that it confirms God’s revelation in Jesus Christ as testified in the Bible. But it is not, in any sense, equivalent to the Bible in the life of their communion. Subscription to its teaching is not required for membership or ordination. While the Book of Mormon is sometimes used in worship, there are parts of the Community of Christ that seldom refer to it.<sup>31</sup>

Contrary to rumors, membership in the NCC did not require rejection of the Book of Mormon. Community of Christ did not renounce the Book of Mormon to gain membership in the NCC. As one Community of Christ author noted: “The Book of Mormon has not been decanonized, and the D&C (Doctrine and Covenants) not only remains canon, new sections of canon continue to be added. The Community of Christ is governed by World Conference Resolutions, not the NCC’s report. What’s happened here is that a group of liberal Christians has recognized that Community of Christ is Christian without requiring the Community of Christ to give up its Restoration scripture.”<sup>32</sup>

The Book of Mormon remains one of the standard works of Community of Christ, but it does play a less prominent role than it does in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

**Misconception #7: Even though the Book of Mormon is considered one of Community of Christ’s standard works, its leaders and members no longer consider the Book of Mormon as scripture and have almost completely abandoned its use.**

This is a very common misconception among Latter-day Saints. In 2012, Community of Christ published *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs*, in which the following statement appears:

Scripture is writing inspired by God’s Spirit and accepted by the church as the normative expression of its identity, message, and mission. We affirm the Bible as the foundational scripture for the church. In addition, Community of Christ uses the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants—not to replace the witness of the Bible or improve on it, but because they confirm its message that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God. When responsibly interpreted and faithfully applied, scripture proves divine guidance and inspired insight for our discipleship.<sup>33</sup>

The Bible is preeminent as scripture in Community of Christ and is the foundational scripture of the church. Even though the Book of Mormon is still considered one of the standard works of Community of Christ, among church membership there are differing opinions as to the historicity and origin of the Book of Mormon. Some maintain a belief that the Book of Mormon is of ancient origin, written on plates, and translated by Joseph Smith through the gift and power of God. Others see the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth century creation authored by Joseph Smith—scripture, nonetheless, because it promotes faith in Jesus Christ.

In a 2006 article, one Community of Christ member wrote: “I know of no one in the leadership of the Community of Christ who accepts the Book

of Mormon as a work of history, even if they view it as scripture. Of course, some rank and file members still accept it as such.”<sup>34</sup> Opinions about the Book of Mormon range from both ends of the spectrum within Community of Christ membership, each church member being welcome to have his or her own beliefs.

Community of Christ leadership takes no official position on the historicity of the Book of Mormon. The church encourages members to find sacred truths in scripture, including the Book of Mormon, through responsible and inspired interpretation and to apply the truths they find so that they might be divinely guided throughout their lives.

The Book of Mormon is certainly not viewed in the same light as it used to be by many Community of Christ leaders and members. That being said, it remains part of the official canon of Community of Christ scriptures.

### **Misconception #8: Emma Smith wanted her son Joseph Smith III to lead the church when the Prophet Joseph died, and that is what led to her conflict with Brigham Young.**

The relationship between Emma Smith and Brigham Young is a complex one which has been examined by both Community of Christ and LDS scholars. While there is no evidence of animosity between Emma and Brigham before Joseph’s death (Brigham even named one of his daughters after Emma), whatever friendship there might have been *initially* deteriorated quickly when Brigham Young assumed leadership of the Church. Blame for the rift between the two has been attributed to each. The challenge is to clearly see and understand the initial problems that developed. Through the years, and for whatever reason, the anger and bitterness between the two increased, and insults and accusations were hurled freely from both sides.

A careful analysis of the enmity between Emma and Brigham reveals a tendency by both to misinterpret each other’s actions and motives. Additionally, a lack of sensitivity and poor judgment was manifested by both parties, perhaps because they “never understood the other’s position; they were victims of circumstance, personality, and differing doctrinal views.”<sup>35</sup> Did Brigham Young place police around Emma’s home because he did not trust her, essentially putting her under house arrest? Or were guards placed there to protect Emma and her family from possible attacks on Joseph’s family?<sup>36</sup> Perception makes a world of difference.

The essential issues between Emma and Brigham appear to have been the disagreement over what property was owned by the Church and what consisted of Joseph Smith’s private assets.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the practice of polygamy caused Emma considerable personal anguish because of the

persecution and suffering brought upon members of the church, and because of how it reflected upon Joseph's legacy. It was primarily the polygamy matter that caused Emma to oppose Brigham Young as Joseph's successor. Emma's opposition was an embarrassment to Brigham Young. She was adamantly against plural marriage and knew that Brigham Young would continue the practice.<sup>38</sup> As the relationship began to deteriorate, a greater spirit of divisiveness arose between Emma and Brigham. These were two very strong-willed individuals now at odds with each other.

Emma did not get involved with the public debate regarding succession in church leadership.<sup>39</sup> There is evidence that Joseph III received a blessing under the hands of his father that he would someday lead the church. Emma would have been well aware of such a blessing.<sup>40</sup> While some believe that this blessing settled the question of who should succeed the Prophet Joseph, Emma does not appear to have viewed any such blessing as the final word. She told Joseph III's private tutor that William Marks, Nauvoo stake president, should become president of the Church, saying that Joseph had contemplated making Marks his successor.<sup>41</sup>

The belief that the conflict between Emma Smith and Brigham Young was based on Emma's desire that Joseph III become the president of the Church is unfounded. Joseph III was not yet twelve-years-old when his father died. Emma and her family had suffered greatly because of her husband being the leader of Mormonism. Her husband had just been killed because of his position as church president, making it highly unlikely that Emma wanted her son to take the reins of church leadership. An 1846 letter written by Emma's brother-in-law, William Smith, stated that Emma "would not let [Joseph III] have anything to do with Mormonism at present."<sup>42</sup>

When the Prophet Joseph died, Emma may have considered the possibility that someday her son would lead the Church that his father had begun, but that was not an issue immediately following the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum. Whatever the cause of the conflict between Emma Smith and Brigham Young, it was not a result of Emma's insistence that Joseph III be the successor to his father. When Joseph III did take control of the Reorganization, Emma was fully supportive of his role as church leader.

### **Misconception #9: Community of Christ believes that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet.**

For many years Joseph Smith Jr. has been venerated by members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. One author went so far as to say "to generations of faithful followers he was and is a demi-god."<sup>43</sup> In recent years the assessment of Joseph Smith by Community of Christ

historians and scholars has him in a place “strikingly different from that he has attained among the Utah-based Latter-day Saints.” Currently, Joseph Smith is without question “much less revered and less legendary” in Community of Christ “than among the Latter-day Saints, for whom Joseph Smith is significant, not just for his life but for his religious innovations.”<sup>44</sup>

There is no way of knowing what the feelings are among the rank-and-file of Community of Christ members concerning Joseph Smith. The same would be true among the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—individuals have varying feelings about the Prophet Joseph. I believe it would be safe to say that most Community of Christ members have a less idealized view of Joseph Smith than do the majority of Latter-day Saints. Today’s Community of Christ honors and acknowledges the accomplishments of Joseph Smith Jr., but it also recognizes that he was an ordinary human being who had faults and made mistakes like everyone else.

Although LDS Church members would admit that Joseph Smith was neither perfect nor infallible, they might struggle with the practice of highlighting his personal faults or the mistakes he made. Statements about Joseph Smith being “brilliant and visionary, probably a religious genius,” but also “deeply flawed, with profound human weaknesses, inconsistencies, and shortcomings” would not sit well with most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>45</sup>

Community of Christ takes no official position as to whether Joseph Smith became a fallen prophet or not. He is viewed as the founder of the church. Recognizing that his personal views on Joseph Smith may not be the same as many Community of Christ members, Roger D. Launius wrote:

I suspect that many [Community of Christ] members still view [Joseph Smith’s] early structuring of the Church and its basic doctrines as prophetic. Even so, their view of his prophetic role in the Church is severely limited when compared to the view of the LDS Church and perhaps to early RLDS views. By distancing itself from many of his actions and selectively emphasizing his prophetic role, the Community of Christ views him as more human than he is in the LDS tradition. His Nauvoo innovations are an “embarrassment,” but many still view him as a figure of significance in the formation of the Church.<sup>46</sup>

There simply is not the focus on Joseph Smith Jr. that used to exist in the Reorganized Church. Community of Christ Theologian Tony Chvala-Smith made it clear that “Community of Christ no longer treats the Joseph Smith story as the normative lens through which it interprets the Christian message.” Community of Christ Apostle Andrew Bolton said, “We used to see Jesus through the eyes of Joseph; now we see Joseph through the eyes of Jesus.”<sup>47</sup> Current Community of Christ President Stephen M. Veazey gave this healthy perspective on church history:



Seeing both the faithfulness and human flaws in our history makes it more believable and realistic, not less. Our history has stories of great courage that inspire us. Our history also includes human leaders who said and did things that can be shocking to us from our current perspective and culture. Historians try to not judge—instead, they try to understand by learning as much as possible about the context and the meaning of those words and actions at the time. The result is empathy instead of judgment.<sup>48</sup>

LDS Church members could certainly come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith is viewed as a fallen prophet by Community of Christ leaders and scholars based on statements made in recent years. It would probably be more correct to say that many Community of Christ leaders and members view Joseph Smith as being correct in his thinking when he was led by the Spirit, but his views were not always inspired. While honoring his role in the formation of the Church, Community of Christ distances itself from Joseph Smith, and other human leaders, with what church leadership hopes to be a greater focus on Jesus Christ.



Stephen M. Veazey

**Misconception #10: The Community of Christ leadership is going to sell the Kirtland Temple to the LDS Church because it cannot finance the upkeep of the temple and the grounds; and the LDS Church has already provided financial backing for the Kirtland Temple and the construction of the Kirtland Visitor Center.**

Though the selling of the Kirtland Temple to the LDS Church has been suggested by individuals on a number of occasions, the proposal has never been well received by Community of Christ leaders. Lachlan Mackay, director of Community of Christ Historic Sites, has said they have never seriously considered selling the Kirtland Temple to the LDS Church.<sup>49</sup>

There was no financial involvement by the LDS Church in the building of the Kirtland Visitor Center. The money for the visitor center was raised through a behind-the-scenes five million dollar capital campaign involving a number of Community of Christ families.

Like all site visitors, LDS Church members do help with the care of the Kirtland Temple through their three-dollar-per-person preservation fees, purchases at the museum store, small fees for the use of the temple for meetings, and donations. In addition, there certainly have been family organizations, historical organizations, and other groups whose membership is partly composed of LDS Church members who have given donations to the Kirtland Temple and other historic sites. Some individuals from the LDS Church have also donated money for site preservation. That being said, LDS Church-related donations like the ones mentioned above would likely total less than a few tens of thousands of dollars in an era when millions are spent on the temple and support facilities.<sup>50</sup>



Kirtland Temple, May 23, 2003. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh

Community of Christ welcomes and appreciates donations to their historic sites, but money from the LDS Church does not keep Community of Christ historic sites and visitor centers afloat. Speaking of Community of Christ membership, the historic sites director said, “Our appreciation for the temple and our financial commitment to the temple and supporting staff and facilities are at a high point.”<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

Ignorance and misunderstanding have for many years negatively influenced the relationship between Community of Christ and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even though that relationship has significantly improved in recent years, unfounded rumors and hearsay still fuel misconceptions and hinder understanding between members of the two organizations. Here are two churches with a common origin which have developed into substantially different religious entities. Recognizing the areas where the two churches are similar and where they differ can lead to a better understanding between the organizations. I do not believe the common saying “familiarity

breeds contempt.” The more we come to know and understand the beliefs of others, the more likely we are to build positive relationships and even appreciate differences. This is certainly true of these two restoration churches.

### Notes

1. The name was changed from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to Community of Christ, not “The” Community of Christ. The name change took place on April 6, 2001.

2. April 6, 1860 conference minutes as quoted in Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1992–93) 1:375.

3. The official name of the church became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on October 21, 1872. See Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 152. Because it was viewed as a continuation of the church founded by Joseph Smith, the original name under Joseph Smith III was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. To avoid confusion with the group that followed Brigham Young, it was often referred to as the New Organization or the Reorganization. In 1872, when the Reorganization became incorporated for the first time, the title “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” was already taken. At this point the New Organization became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the RLDS Church.

4. Alma R. Blair, a professor of history at the RLDS church’s Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa, wrote that polygamy, temple rites, plurality of gods, the Book of Abraham, and doctrines taught by Joseph Smith in the King Follett sermon were either repudiated or denied as being authentic. In 1878 the RLDS church conference established the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants as the “standard of authority on all matters of church government and doctrine.” The Reorganization rejected much of what was taught or purportedly taught by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. A. R. Blair, “Moderate Mormonism” in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, ed. F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 223.

5. Much of this cooperative spirit was generated because historians and scholars from both churches began a dialogue and developed friendships. There is joint participation in many conferences, and research and writing collaborations are not uncommon.

6. It is difficult to determine the Mormon population in the United States at the end of the Nauvoo era. Estimates are often exaggerated. According to Susan Easton Black’s careful study, residents of Nauvoo likely did not exceed much more than 12,000. “How Large Was the Population of Nauvoo,” Susan Easton Black, *BYU Studies* 35, no. 2 (1995): 93. Between 4,000 and 6,000 lived nearby Nauvoo, including hundreds across the river in Iowa. Hartley estimated that the Mormon population in the Nauvoo area never exceeded 20,000 and, at its peak, was likely closer to 17,000. He also wrote, “During an eight-month interval in 1846, they (Mormons) vacated the Nauvoo area, and by 1852 at least three-fourths of them had relocated to Utah.” William G. Hartley, “Mormons and Early Iowa History (1838 to 1858): Eight Distinct Connections,” *Annals of Iowa* 59 (Summer 2000), 220–21. Dean May estimated that as many as forty percent of Mormons in the Nauvoo area did not go west with Brigham Young. Dean L. May, “A Demographic Portrait of

the Mormons, 1830–1980,” in *After 150 Years: The Latter-day Saints in Sesquicentennial Perspective*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander and Jesse L. Embry (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1983), 39. The number of Mormons not going west is higher than most LDS members are aware. The Mormon population in other parts of the United States also needs to be considered. The number of Mormons outside the Nauvoo area who did or did not go west would be difficult to ascertain. Of those who did not go west, several thousand followed James J. Strang. Sidney Rigdon’s biographer writes that initially, the numbers of Mormons who followed Rigdon were impressive, but he gives no estimate. See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 367. Rigdon’s followers possibly numbered in the hundreds.

7. Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 88. Launius is a member of Community of Christ.

8. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 269.

9. In January 1847, Emma received a letter from Lewis C. Bidamon inquiring about the possibility of renting the Mansion House in Nauvoo. Bidamon, not a Mormon, had lived in Nauvoo before the assassination of Joseph Smith, but had moved out of the city during the 1846 “war in Nauvoo.” He returned to Nauvoo in the spring of 1847, where he became attracted to Emma Smith. They saw each other throughout the summer and fall of 1847. Bidamon proposed marriage and Emma accepted. The two were married on December 23, 1847, three and one-half years after Joseph Smith’s death. See Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 242–46.

10. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 272.

11. Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1952), 115. Joseph Smith III biographer, Roger D. Launius, wrote that at the 1860 Amboy conference, a resolution was both moved and passed that “both Joseph Smith and Emma Bidamon be accepted as members of the church on the strength of their original baptisms during the lifetime of Joseph the Prophet.” Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 118.

12. Susan Easton Black, comp., *Early Members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), electronic database, under “Hale, Emma.”

13. Until 1860, Joseph III also rejected invitations from James J. Strang’s group, Charles Blanchard Thompson’s group, and envoys from Utah. See Scherer, *Journey of a People*, 57–66.

14. The exodus of most of the Mormons from Nauvoo and a cartel-controlled grain trade on the Mississippi contributed to the Red Brick Store being an unprofitable venture. Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 59.

15. Even though some law schools have existed in the United States since the late 1700s, “reading law” was the method by which many people entered the law profession without graduating from a law school. A person prepared to take the bar exam by “reading law” or studying law books, often as an apprentice and under the direction of a practicing attorney.

16. Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 67–69.

17. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has always felt a greater connection the Church’s Kirtland era than to the Nauvoo era. Alma R. Blair wrote: “The Reorganization leaders recognized the validity of the endowments of Kirtland Temple as having given the elders great power as they went to preach, but saw these endowments as quite different from the mystical ceremonies performed in the Nauvoo

Temple. . . . Rejecting plural marriage in either earthly or celestial form, the Reorganites rejected all the temple ceremonies, with one exception. That was baptism for the dead. It had an appeal difficult to erase for those who believed baptism was essential for salvation. . . . Several long defenses of the doctrine appeared early, but the emphasis slowly dwindled.” Blair, “Moderate Mormonism” 222.

18. Joseph III’s wife Emmeline became very ill and nearly died on several occasions. The couple also lost an eight-month-old daughter to illness. Joseph also faced some financial problems.

19. William Marks was the president of the Nauvoo Stake. After the death of Joseph Smith Jr., Marks became involved with the groups led by Charles Blanchard Thompson and James J. Strang. Marks joined the New Organization in the summer of 1859.

20. Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Joseph the Prophet* (Plano, IL: The Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1880), 774.

21. Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, eds. *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 4 vols. (Lamoni, IA: Herald Publishing House, 1896–1903), 3:247–50.

22. In his memoirs, Joseph III wrote: “I had engaged myself with others then few in number, in a religious movement that has never been blessed with a large exchequer (treasury). The greater proportion of the members were either poor or in medium circumstances only. And I was a servant of the church with no personal wealth of my own. All I had to offer it was my service, and therefore I could only expect to receive from it a competency in return for the labor I tried to render.” Anderson, *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, 384.

23. “The Mormon Conference,” *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 1, no. 5 (May 1860): 102–3, as cited in Scherer, *Journey of a People*, 96.

24. Scherer, *Journey of a People*, 97.

25. Taken from Joseph Smith III’s testimony at the Temple Lot case as quoted in W. Grant McMurray, “‘True Son of a True Father’: Joseph Smith III and the Succession Question,” *Restoration Studies I* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1980), 142.

26. The First Presidency, “A Pastoral Letter to the Church,” September 19, 1995, accessed at [sainthistorychannel.wordpress.com/2008/01/02/0137-world-church-smith-wallace-b-presidential-succession-1995/](http://sainthistorychannel.wordpress.com/2008/01/02/0137-world-church-smith-wallace-b-presidential-succession-1995/)

27. The First Presidency, “A Pastoral Letter to the Church.”

28. The current president of Community of Christ, Stephen M. Veazey, is not a descendant of Joseph Smith. Perhaps at some future day a descendant of Joseph Smith might again serve as the prophet-president of Community of Christ.

29. Taken from a brief history of the Church under W. Grant McMurray accessed at [CofChrist.org/history/Grant.asp](http://CofChrist.org/history/Grant.asp).

30. Accessed at [heraldmagazine.wordpress.com/2011/02/19/national-council-approves-church-for-membership](http://heraldmagazine.wordpress.com/2011/02/19/national-council-approves-church-for-membership). Dale E. Luffman was serving as the ecumenical and interfaith officer at the time Community of Christ was accepted into the NCC.

31. “Witnesses of These Things: Ecumenical Engagement in a New Era,” 2010 Centennial Ecumenical Gathering and General Assembly of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and Church World Service, November 3, 2010, Memorandum to the 2010 General Assembly of the NCC from Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh, Chairperson, Membership and Ecclesial Relations Committee, accessed at [www.nccusa.org/witnesses2010/ga-merc-report-community-of-christ.pdf](http://www.nccusa.org/witnesses2010/ga-merc-report-community-of-christ.pdf)

32. John Hamer comment, December 4, 2010, accessed at [www.wheatandtares.org/1461/community-of-christ-sets-conditions-for-membership-and-joins-ncc/](http://www.wheatandtares.org/1461/community-of-christ-sets-conditions-for-membership-and-joins-ncc/)

33. *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and*

*Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Independence, MO: Community of Christ, 2012), 15.

34. Roger D. Launius, "Is Joseph Smith Relevant to the Community of Christ?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39 no. 4 (Winter 2006): 61.

35. Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell, "The Lion and the Lady: Brigham Young and Emma Smith," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 81.

36. With the repeal of the Nauvoo charter, the city was left without a judicial system or militia. Brigham Young organized the people of Nauvoo for self-protection from increasing mob violence. Guards were placed around the homes of many of the Church leaders, including the home of Emma Smith and her family. The Smiths "regarded this action as hostile house arrest." Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 213. In his memoirs, Joseph III wrote: "During this period, both while living in the old house and in the Nauvoo Mansion, a police surveillance was established over Mother and her premises, and along in 1845 and 1846 no person was allowed to come to the house without passing a cordon of police. This unpleasant state of affairs was caused, apparently, by Mother's having become obnoxious to some of the leading men of the church, including Brigham Young. He had assumed control of the church affairs and seemed inclined to dominate and make everything and everybody bend to his will. This inclination did not suit my mother." Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed. *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III* (Independence, MO: Price Publishing Company, 2001), 38.

37. Joseph Smith did not leave a will. Also, several years before his death he was made trustee-in-trust of property owned by the Church. Everything was in the Prophet's name—personal and real property—making the dividing of things going to his family and things going to the Church very challenging. There were perceived inequities by both sides.

38. It should be noted that Emma steadfastly maintained that polygamy was solely the creation of Brigham Young. To her death, she denied that Joseph Smith had any part in it.

39. Some historians have suggested that Emma supported Sidney Rigdon's claim to church leadership, but that assertion is based on one fourth-hand account. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 206.

40. The Joseph Smith III blessing has been a controversial issue for many years. While evidence does exist that the blessing did take place, a number of others had received similar blessings by the Prophet Joseph designating the possibility of their future role in leading the Church. See D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 187–233. In the early 1980s the waters of debate were muddied when a copy of the blessing appeared, later revealed as a Mark Hoffmann forgery.

41. James Monroe, Diary, April 24, 1845, as cited in Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 206–7.

42. Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 53.

43. Robert Flanders, "Dream and Nightmare: Nauvoo Revisited," in *Restoration Movement*, 141.

44. Roger D. Launius, "Is Joseph Smith Relevant to the Community of Christ?," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006), 58.

45. This statement was part of a presentation made by then, Community of Christ president, W. Grant McMurray in 2003 when he spoke to the Mormon Historical Association. See McMurray, "A 'Goodly Heritage' in a Time of Transformation: History and Identity in the Community of Christ," *Journal of Mormon History* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 65–66.

46. Launius, "Is Joseph Smith Relevant to the Community of Christ?," 61.

47. Quoted in William D. Russell, "The LDS Church and the Community of Christ: Clearer Differences, Closer Friends," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4

(Winter 2003): 189.

48. Stephen M. Veazey, "Perspectives on Church History," *Herald* (October 2008), 11.

49. Lachlan Mackay, personal communication with the author.

50. Lachlan Mackay, personal communication with the author.

51. Lachlan Mackay, personal communication with the author.