

What does Nauvoo mean today to members of the Community of Christ (formerly RLDS Church)? How have their views changed through the generations? Does the way our two traditions differ in their views of Nauvoo reflect different spiritual understandings as well?

ANSWERING QUESTIONS NO LONGER ASKED

NAUVOO, ITS MEANING AND INTERPRETATION IN THE RLDS CHURCH/COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

By Mark A. Scherer

A COLLEAGUE OF MINE RECENTLY OBSERVED, “Only one church name is more difficult to say than ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,’ and that is ‘The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.’”¹ The similarity of the two names accurately suggests a common historical origin, a similar priesthood, scriptural, and administrative structure. And the Nauvoo, Illinois, experience is pivotal to both movements. For the church headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, Nauvoo represents the crowning achievement of Latter Day Saintism; for the church headquartered in Independence, Missouri, Nauvoo represents the movement’s “dark and cloudy days.” I will focus on the Latter Day Saint denomination I know best, now called the “Community of Christ.”

Events of the Nauvoo era (1839–1845) have been at ground zero in the historical and theological boundary separating the two major denominational segments of the Restoration movement begun by Joseph Smith, Jr. It would be hazardous for any responsible historian to try to summarize in just a few words the impact of Nauvoo on today’s members of the Community of Christ—for the spectrum of opinion is far too broad. Some members of the Community approach Nauvoo with the same affection as do their Salt Lake cousins. Some Communitarians see Nauvoo as the site of the theological radicalism that veered the movement away from the Christian mainstream. The views of the rest of the membership lie somewhere in between these extremes.



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Today’s Community of Christ does not take “official positions” in matters of church history. Although this has not always been the case, members (and their historians) are free from the strictures that confuse matters of faith with sound historical methodology. Simply stated: “Our history is not our theology.” Thus, a member of the Community of Christ can ask tough historical questions without fear of being considered “weak in the faith.” Today, we believe our history informs us about our institutional and individual identity—where we have been in the past, where we are at present, and where we are going in the future.

I am assuming most SUNSTONE readers have only a cursory understanding of the Community of Christ’s history, and I will therefore organize this article on the changing views of Nauvoo around the three eras of my church’s story: the era of Restoration (1820–1844); the era of Reorganization (1852–2001); and the era of Community (2001 to the present).²

VIEW OF NAUVOO DURING THE ERA OF RESTORATION *Could Joseph Smith have been involved in such “heresies”?*

I N APRIL 1860, the most important issue facing the Reorganized Church was denominational identity. As the members left the small, railhead town of Amboy, Illinois, where de facto church leaders had designated Joseph Smith III as prophet-president, circumstances for the small movement were awkward at best. Brigham Young’s church dwarfed that fledgling faith group, which faced a shortage of members and funds. However, they were determined to restore the original church as they understood it. Their road would be difficult, for rather than being known, as they had hoped, as the movement led by the oldest son of the Seer Joseph Smith, and a religious

movement characterized by an open canon of scripture and modern-day revelation, the Reorganized Church was quickly tagged by outsiders with polygamy, celestial marriage, and human exaltation to godhood.³ This confusion arose as the result of the last years of Smith's life, and questions about whether or not the Seer could actually have been involved in what these early church members believed to be "theological heresies" became one of the major focuses of this new group.

As spokesperson for the New Organization, Joseph Smith III—called "Young Joseph" by those who knew his father—faced a personal and professional dilemma. That a son should be protective of his father's name was perfectly understandable, but how could he do this when many key church leaders around him had other perceptions?⁴ At best, Joseph III was in a precarious position—and the epicenter for his and his church's struggles lay in the drained swamplands of the western Illinois community of Nauvoo.

VIEW OF NAUVOO DURING THE ERA OF REORGANIZATION

Evolving consensus, but choosing words carefully

WE CAN GAIN valuable insights into perceptions of Nauvoo by examining the published histories of the Independence Church during its second era—the era of Reorganization. The need for a historical account of the newly emerging denomination was felt right from the start, and Jason W. Briggs attempted an early version but never completed the project.⁵ On 1 May 1896, a Board of Publication selected Joseph Smith III and Apostle Heman C. Smith (no relation) to prepare a history.⁶ Heman Smith became the primary author and eventually produced four volumes identified as the Reorganized Church's "official history." Through the first half of the twentieth century, four more volumes were added to make the eight-volume set the only comprehensive history of the church from the Reorganized Church's view.⁷

Actually, Heman Smith's history has very little narrative. Instead, Smith carefully selected segments from diaries, newspapers, personal papers, council meeting minutes, and other historical documents to construct the story line. His interpretation of the church story came through his selection of sources. Not surprisingly, Smith's work challenged the validity of the Utah church at every turn. For example, on the sensitive question of whether or not the Nauvoo Temple had ever been finished, the RLDS historian gave the predictable response suggesting Brigham's group had been condemned by the Lord because they had not really completed construction on the temple before fleeing the city. (See D&C 124, especially verse 48, which warns the Saints that if they did not finish that

work: ". . . ye, by your own works, bring cursings, wrath, indignation, and judgments upon your own heads.") Using all capital letters, Heman Smith headlined a section of his history: "TEMPLE AT NAUVOO NOT FINISHED."⁸ That the RLDS historian's generation eventually canonized the revelation with its strongly worded warning about finishing the temple as Section 107 of the Reorganized Church's Book of Doctrine and Covenants, implied that members of this era clearly did not embrace the Nauvoo church—a significant admission.⁹ This subtle assertion by Heman Smith also implied that the Reorganized church membership, along with their dead, had not been rejected.

On the issue of polygamy, Heman Smith was led by Joseph

III's inclination to exonerate his father, Joseph Smith, Jr., and uncle, Hyrum Smith. To accomplish this, the Reorganized Church accepted only public statements from the prophet and others as supporting evidence. Smith's history also used the public statements of other church leaders that denounced polygamy. Still, Heman Smith conceded, "if Joseph and Hyrum Smith, or either of them, were implicated in the practice of polygamy or in telling falsehoods regarding it, we have no disposition to shield them; but in justice to them we further contend that neither of these crimes shall be fastened upon them without competent evidence. . . ." ¹⁰ At that moment, the church historian had determined that no credible evidence implicated either the Seer or his brother in the practice of polygamy. Instead, Joseph III and Heman Smith chose to perpetuate the long-standing tradition of blaming polygamy on others, and they referred specifically to John Taylor's *Times and Seasons* article which named Mormon pariah John Cook Bennett as the culprit.¹¹

This history also addressed other Nauvoo heresies such as celestial marriage and plural gods in its discussion of Joseph Smith Jr.'s funeral sermon for his close friend, King Follett, given during the young church's April 1844 General Conference. In his discussion of the sermon, Heman Smith did not want to repeat these heretical beliefs, so he simply referred readers to the August 1844 *Times and Seasons* synopsis of the sermon and justified his rejection of the Nauvoo heresies with four reasons. First, he acknowledged that the Seer's sermon was very lengthy while the *Times and Seasons* summary was only five pages.¹² Because of this, he concluded that such a brief review could not present accurately the prophet's teachings. Second, he argued that since the Follett sermon had not been printed until after the prophet's death, it could not receive the Seer's review for accuracy nor his endorsement for publication. Third, Smith claimed that because the sermon's style differed from other speeches and writings of the prophet, its authenticity could be doubted. Finally, he questioned the memory of those who recorded the prophet's sermon.¹³

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The Temple, Community of Christ, Independence, Missouri, was dedicated 17 April 1994 to “peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit.”

Because of the difficulty the church had in accepting these beliefs, which it deemed “heresies,” during the early years of the Reorganization, baptism for the dead was the only Nauvoo Temple ritual retained. Alexander Hale Smith, younger brother of Joseph III, joined the Reorganization in May 1861 with the satisfaction of knowing that proxy baptism would be available for his beloved, deceased brother, Frederick Granger Williams Smith.¹⁴ And in November 1864, church leaders staunchly defended the ritual in the church’s official journal, the *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald*.¹⁵ However, the actual practice of baptism for the dead enjoyed only a brief lifespan. In 1865, Joseph Smith III echoed his father’s decision that proxy baptism was “necessary . . . in order to show completeness of the plan of salvation, but wisdom dictates that the way should be prepared by the preaching of the First principles.”¹⁶ However, by 1874, he declared, “Baptism for the dead is not commanded in the gospel. . . [and] there is but little of direct scriptural proof that can be adduced in support of the doctrine. . . .”¹⁷ By 1886, Smith’s position had evolved further: “The elders of the church are not authorized to preach [baptism for the dead].”¹⁸ By 1893, the “Nauvoo generation” had passed on and Joseph Smith III felt he could halt the practice. In the *Herald*, he admonished “the eldership. . . to let it [baptism for the dead] alone in their public ministrations, for it is at best present only a matter of speculation with the majority; and none may speak authoritatively about it.”¹⁹

IN 1934, Inez Smith Davis published *The Story of the Church*, a history that provided the church membership a single volume summary of what her father, Heman C. Smith, had provided for his generation. Following in her father’s footsteps, Davis authored a sanitized interpretation of the Reorganization’s history while adroitly ignoring some of the more controversial aspects of the Nauvoo experience such as proxy baptism and plurality of gods.²⁰

Unable to avoid the issue of polygamy, Davis provided a short chapter titled “The Fight Against Polygamy.”²¹ Differing

from her father’s interpretation, which had blamed polygamy on John C. Bennett, Davis placed responsibility for the aberrant marital practice at Brigham Young’s feet. In her treatment of the subject, Davis also dismissed the *Nauvoo Expositor* as a “scurrilous sheet” and, like her father, denied the existence of the polygamy revelation by allowing only the public statements of Joseph and Hyrum Smith to count as evidences of its divine sanction: “Polygamy was never put forth as a belief of the church until announced by Brigham Young eight years after Joseph Smith’s death.” She admitted that polygamy was practiced during the Nauvoo period, but wrote: “Whatever its origin, the Reorganized Church has taken a firm position against it. . . .”²² Concluding her discussion of polygamy, Davis encouraged members to focus more on “the two great affirmative objectives of the church, the redemption of Zion and the evangelization of the world, beside which all else pales to insignificance.”²³

IN NOVEMBER 1965, Robert Bruce Flanders, a Reorganized Church member, published his University of Wisconsin doctoral dissertation as *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*. Flanders succeeded in writing the first account of the Nauvoo experience based on scholarly inquiry and professional historical methodology. Far from writing an institutional apologia, Flanders steered clear of approaching Joseph Smith Jr. only as a prophet or great religious figure in American history. Instead, Flanders described Smith as “a man of affairs—planner, promoter, architect, entrepreneur, executive, and law-giver—matters of which he was sometimes less sure than he was those of the spirit.”²⁴ Flanders explored the political, social, and economic culture of Nauvoo and identified the Mississippi River community as the pinnacle of achievement in historical Latter Day Saintism.

Because polygamy allegedly had revelatory origins, Flanders carefully explained its circumstances but still left room for those who denied its existence. Rather than arbitrarily placing the blame for polygamy on any one individual,

Flanders suggested that plural marriage emerged from a secretive atmosphere of temple rituals starting with celestial marriage.²⁵ He identified numerous church leaders who resisted “plurality”—some who left the church permanently and others who left but eventually returned.²⁶ Rather than deferring to simplistic interpretations by early historians, Flanders expressed the complexity of the social and theological issues involved in the marital practice.

Few scholarly writings have had the enormous impact of *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*. To appreciate its contribution, one must understand the context of its writing. Flanders’s scholarly approach used the methodology of the “New Mormon History” movement of the 1960s.²⁷ Historian D. Michael Quinn has explained that this approach willingly analyzes controversial topics and deals openly with sensitive or even contradictory evidence; follows that evidence to revisionist interpretations that counter traditional assumptions; avoids the temptation to insult Mormon beliefs; upholds scholarly standards and expectations of the academe; avoids public relations pressures; and finally, resists the temptation “to proselytize for religious conversion or defection.”²⁸ For members of the Reorganized church, the Flanders interpretation of the Nauvoo experience remains the “gold standard” by which Nauvoo scholarship is measured.

THE MOST significant institutionally sponsored historical survey to follow Davis’s *Story of the Church* is the two-volume history, *The Church Through the Years*, authored in the 1990s by then-Reorganized Church Historian Richard P. Howard.²⁹ Following the New Mormon History paradigm, Howard offered a comprehensive account of the church through the late 1980s. Dealing with the difficult issues of Nauvoo, Howard agreed with Flanders’s approach that plural marriage arose as an extension of the Mormon theology of the afterlife. From the testimonies of William Marks and Isaac Sheen, early leaders in the Reorganized Church, Howard acknowledged that “Joseph Smith bore responsibility for the start of Nauvoo polygamy.”³⁰ But he then used the statement of Marks and Sheen that “shortly before his death Joseph saw the error of plural marriage, and tried to end it, to save the church from ruin.”³¹

Like it did during an earlier generation, the church at this time felt the need for a short, concise statement of its history. Paul M. Edwards, then director of Temple School, the church educational arm, responded with *Our Legacy of Faith*.³² Edwards’s approach to Nauvoo was like Howard’s. Regarding polygamy, Edwards measured his words carefully, only suggesting the Seer’s complicity.³³

VIEW OF NAUVOO DURING THE ERA OF COMMUNITY *From Remnant Church to Missional Church*

AFTER A LONG search for identity, the most important recent development impacting the Reorganized Church is the unannounced shift from its claim to be the “true remnant church” of Joseph Smith Jr. to becoming a “missional church” based in the life of Christ.³⁴ No longer did

church leaders aspire to replicate the Nauvoo, Kirtland, Independence, or even Palmyra churches. Instead they shifted their primary emphasis to the church in the world.

It is difficult to determine exactly when decision-makers began viewing the church’s mission through the lenses of the new paradigm. By 1967, evidences of the shift were certainly noticeable when the First Presidency convened the first in a series of seminars for members of the First Presidency, Council of Twelve, and Presiding Bishopric to explore with intensity issues of theology and church history to find honest answers to difficult questions raised by scholars within and without the church. Most members followed the leadership down this new path, but changes did not occur without opposition. For instance, a proposal in the 1970 World Conference sought to purge the Doctrine and Covenants of all evidences of Nauvoo revelation, but delegates settled on a compromise that created a historical appendix that effectively stripped the Nauvoo revelations of scriptural status but allowed them to remain in the back of the book. This accommodation lasted for twenty years until delegates to the 1990 World Conference performed a “scriptural appendectomy,” completely removing the Appendix. Through the years, other conflicts about priesthood, the role of scripture, and even issues relating to dogma have reflected the divergent theological worldviews within the church.

I do not want to suggest that Nauvoo has no role to play in today’s church, the Community of Christ. We are fortunate to maintain and interpret the south half of the historic village of Nauvoo, which includes the Smith family burial plot, the Mansion House, the Nauvoo House, and the Red Brick Store. During an average year, ninety-eight thousand people visit our historic site. We estimate that 70 percent are LDS Mormon, 5 percent are Community of Christ members, and the remaining 25 percent are not affiliated with the Restoration movement. This presence makes our historic sites program the single most popular method to introduce the Community of Christ in North America. We do so very thoughtfully. Our tour guides speak openly and forthrightly about events that happened there, and we anticipate visitor numbers to at least triple in the coming years due to the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. In this regard, we believe the reconstruction project is a positive development and wish the Utah church well.

But today, Restorationist positivism, expressed in incontestable claims to be “the only true church,” has been replaced by a theological ecumenism that values all religions, believing each to be of inestimable worth. The adoption of the new name, “Community of Christ,” symbolizes the movement away from the apocalypticism implied in Latter Day Saintism to a new challenge to live in Christian fellowship for today. Our search for community is an important tie with our past, but the Nauvoo of Joseph Smith does not model the community we seek. This leads some to conclude that we are not the church of Joseph Smith, Jr., and I agree with that assessment. More accurately, I believe the Community of Christ reflects the best qualities of Emma Hale Smith—courage, perseverance, commitment, peacemaking, and non-judgmental compassion. We are “Emma’s church.”³⁵

Finally, today's focus in the Community of Christ is not so much on Nauvoo as on Nairobi and Nepal; not so much on Independence, Missouri, as on Ikot Oku Mfang, in Southeastern Nigeria; not so much on Palmyra as on Papeete, Tahiti, and Peru; not so much on Far West as on the Federal Republic of Germany and France; and not even so much on Kirtland as on Kinshasa, Kenya, and the Ukraine. Today's Community of Christ is in fact a world church. On any given Sunday, more people—members and non-members alike—worship with us in French than in English. The church has had enormous success in Haiti and among French-speaking populations of Africa. In these settings, the name Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon scriptures have little relevance and are mostly unknown.³⁶

Although Community of Christ missionaries have proven their ability to communicate church beliefs effectively throughout these lands, those who listen discover that we are not much like our Utah cousins. Nor does our face look familiar to the traditional Mormon community. For this reason, as I respond to Sunstone's queries about the way most members and leaders of the Community of Christ view Nauvoo, I feel rather strange. For in doing so, I have really been answering questions no longer asked. ☞

NOTES

1. Philip Barlow, "Transformation in Context: Mormonism, the Community of Christ, and Religion in America," keynote address, John Whitmer Historical Association, spring banquet, 6 Apr. 2002, Independence, Mo.

2. The years between 1844 and 1852 are not included in this periodization because very little of historical significance to the church's evolution occurred during this time.

3. See Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1959), 486. This source, although antiquated in interpretation today, represents the early frustration of Reorganized Church members about their association with the Salt Lake church. A more in-depth survey of Davis's work appears later in this paper.

4. Historian Roger Launius suggests Joseph III responded in several ways to accusations that his father was the author and practitioner of the aberrant marital practice of polygamy. These ranged from rationalizing that the charges were not based on eyewitness accounts, to questioning the character of the person bearing "false witness," to simply ignoring the issue, to admitting uncertainty about the details of the accusation. As a last resort, the young Smith would concede the point if it served to benefit the church. See Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 206–209.

5. After Briggs's death, 11 Jan. 1899, his family (presumably) submitted the manuscript to Herald Publishing Company, the publishing arm of the Reorganized Church, located in Lamoni, Iowa, but it was destroyed in the Herald House fire of 1907. There are no extant copies of the Briggs manuscript.

6. President William W. Blair, William H. Kelley, and Charles Derry were to provide final review. Blair died suddenly, 18 Apr. 1896, on a train trip returning from Kirtland, Ohio, to his home in Lamoni, Iowa. Kelley and Derry performed only limited service in the project due to other assignments. This left Heman C. Smith to focus his full attention to writing the history.

7. Smith, Joseph III and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1805–1890* (Lamoni, Iowa: Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1897–1922), 2:562–63. Volume one covers events from 1805–1835; volume two from 1836–1844; volume three from 1844–1872; and volume four from 1873–1890. The history was continued by F. Henry Edwards, and vols. 5–8 were published in 1977. Hereinafter referred to as *History of the Reorganized Church*.

8. Members of the early Reorganized Church rejected Brigham Young's hasty dedication of the Nauvoo temple as the Saints were leaving Nauvoo for

Winter Quarters, considering it a matter of expediency designed to avoid the Lord's condemnation and not a sign that the Saints had successfully met the Lord's requirement that they build an acceptable house.

9. Book of Doctrine and Covenants 107: 10–11. Hereinafter referred to as Doctrine and Covenants. All references hereafter taken from the Community of Christ version.

10. *History of the Reorganized Church*, 2:735.

11. *Times and Seasons*, 1 Apr. 1844, 5:490.

12. *Ibid.*, 5:612–17.

13. *History of the Reorganized Church* 2:735–36. Smith claims there is "no evidence that a *verbatim* report was made when delivered" [italics in the original].

14. Vida E. Smith, "Biography of Patriarch A. H. Smith," *Journal of History*, 4 (Jan. 1911): 13–14.

15. "As the dead can not [sic] be baptized for themselves, and as they can not [sic] enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water, and as the Lord said that the gospel was preached to the spirits in prison that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, therefore substitutes in the flesh must be baptized for them, and these substitutes are saints." "Baptism for the Dead," *The True Latter Day Saints Herald* 6 (1 Nov. 1864): 130. In the next year, Joseph III assumed editorial responsibilities of the *Herald*. Slowly, affirmations of baptism for the dead disappeared.

16. "Council of Twelve Minutes," Book A (2 May 1865): 13, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Mo. Presumably Joseph III gave priority to such "first principles" as faith, hope, repentance, forgiveness, laying on of hands, and eternal judgment.

17. *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, 21 (15 July 1874): 435.

18. *Saints' Herald*, 33 (18 Dec. 1886): 787.

19. *Saints' Herald*, 40 (25 Feb. 1893): 115.

20. Davis raised these issues only tangentially in reference to the production of a proposed pamphlet during December 1859 discussions about the possible merger of a church group led by Granville Hedrick and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. See Davis, 433–434.

21. *Ibid.*, 486–490.

22. *Ibid.*, 489.

23. *Ibid.*, 490.

24. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1965), vi.

25. *Ibid.*, 268.

26. *Ibid.*, 267. The term "plurality" was a later Mormon reference to polygamy.

27. The term, "New Mormon History," was coined by Jewish historian and observer of Mormonism, Moses Rischin in Moses Rischin, "The New Mormon History," *The American West* 6 (Mar. 1969): 49.

28. D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), viii.

29. Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, 2 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992–1994).

30. *Ibid.*, 1: 293.

31. "Epistle of William Marks . . ." in *Zion's Harbinger and Baneemy's Organ* (July, 1853): 53; Sheen's admission came in his statement in the 9 Oct. 1852 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was reprinted for church consumption later in the *True Latter Day Saints Herald*, 1 (Jan. 1860): 24. Howard's analysis stems from his landmark "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy: A Preliminary Analysis," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, 3 (1983): 14–29.

32. Paul M. Edwards, *Our Legacy of Faith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1991). *Our Legacy* is worth mentioning because of its overall popularity with readers.

33. For example, Edwards wrote: "The doctrine [polygamy] was kept as secret as possible, and what was known of Joseph's involvement caused considerable unrest." *Ibid.*, 109; and "There can be little doubt that Joseph Smith, Jr., was aware of the existence and practice of polygamy in Nauvoo," *Ibid.*, 110.

34. Church Historian Richard Howard first observed this in 1995 and wrote about it in the context of the church's search for identity. See Richard P. Howard, "The Church's Name: A Historical Survey of a Missional Church in Quest of a Name," *Saints' Herald*, 142 (Feb. 1995): 65.

35. For an expanded discussion of this thesis, see my articles in the *Saints' Herald* 146 (Feb. 1999): 61–62 and 146 (Mar. 1999): 111–12.

36. Harry Fielding to Mark Scherer, Interview, Independence, Mo., 16 Apr. 2002. Harry Fielding is a Community of Christ missionary and supervisory administrator to the French-speaking Caribbean region.