

Project ZION Podcast: Episode 79
Percolating on Faith
Guests: Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith
Interviewer: Carla Long

(Music)

Narrator: Thanks for listening to another episode of Project Zion. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theology gifts the restoration offers for today's world. Project Zion is sponsored by the Latter-Day-Seekers team from the Community of Christ.

(Music)

Carla: Hello. Welcome to the Project Zion podcast. My name is Carla Long, and I'm your host for the series "Percolating on Faith," a series designed to discuss topics related to faith. Our guests for the podcast are always two of my favorites, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith! Yayyy! Welcome back, you two. Thank you so much for continually showing up, and I've actually been speaking to my boss and we're going to start doubling what we pay you!

Tony (laughing): We can hardly wait to get that check!

Carla: With that and \$1.12 you can get your yourself a hamburger, right? Well, not at any place good, (laughing) but you can probably get a hamburger somewhere. Today's` topic, from what I hear, is that we're going to be discussing this idea of "the one true church," an idea that Community of Christ had in the past, although that has kind of, no, that has definitely gone away; but I can even remember in **my** childhood that people were still talking about the one true church and how Community of Christ, then RLDS, **was** the one true church. That was in the early 80s or so. And while it takes a while for things to trickle into Kansas, when, how did this idea get started and how did the Community of Christ kind of move away from that?

Tony: Those are really great questions. And there's like a historical side to them, and a theological side, and personal sides as well.

Charmaine: Experiential. Yeah.

Carla: Yeah.

Tony: So, I...

Charmaine: Scriptural, too.

Tony: Yeah, oh that's right. Yeah, Biblical. Definitely, definitely Biblical side to it. So maybe a place to start is to start with the origins of the movement that Joseph Smith, Jr. began and its context.

Carla: Yeah.

Charmaine: You know, as we look at the area where Joseph's family was, all the talk about what's sometimes called "the burned over district," an area that had a lot of religious activity over the space of a decade or so where there's a lot of competition between various both denominations and groups, some that are not identifiable yet as denominations. But there's a lot of preaching that's going on and the reason I'm calling it competitive is that in some ways preachers would have seen this as a, as a field ready for harvest as many people had left behind, whether as they immigrated or as they moved across the country, left behind more predictable religious life and ties to particular denominations and there's all this ferment of new ideas and new ways of understanding God in the sense of a nation creating itself and therefore that comes over into views of religion and new movements everywhere that are trying to reimagine and live in new ways this primary story of Jesus, of the kingdom, so it's a great place with a lot of potential and a lots of people who are both distancing themselves from organized religions and also longing for connection. And so this, this, several sweeps of groups coming through with tent meetings and their promises of salvation and highly often highly emotionalized experiences and worship which both served as entertainment and as warning to get saved before they died of some deadly disease, which were pretty common in that time, so there's this, that's part of the context is these many difference denominations, many different people trying to prove that their view is the most accurate, their view is the one that leads to salvation, the kind of experience they can provide is the one that can assure that you are good with God and that your eternity is established in some way. So that's a whole atmosphere of dialogue and debate between different religious mostly here Christian, different Christian voices and so proving who was the best and the truest to the original story was a sport in the time.

Tony: What Charmaine is describing is the period in American religious history called the Second Great Awakening. And it is typically dated from about 1790 until roughly 1850 or so. And it's this period of like really vigorous revival activity that starts in the period following the American Revolution. And one historian I like a lot, Nathan Hatch, wrote a book called The Democratization of American Christianity. And so in this culture shaped by the American Revolution and the Constitution and all of that there's this new sense that the individual, individual is free to figure it out for themselves and needs to be free from the remnants of old religious tradition that are now viewed as kind of binding people down and so that's part of the context. Another part of the context as you look back into that era, all of these Protestant revivalists, and this includes the people connected with the origins of the Restoration movement, they all had a working assumption; an assumption, by the way, that turns out not to have been right, but it was their working assumption and we have to understand it for what it was. They're working assumption is that there must have been an original

Christianity, like, the original real thing, the original recipe we'll call it. And, that, you wanted to recover this original recipe. One of the problems with this assumption is that the Bible they all turned to didn't support that idea very well because you could argue a Presbyterian model of church organization or a Methodist model of church organization, or a Baptist model, or even a Roman Catholic model. You could argue all these models of church organization from the Bible, but that didn't seem to faze people. They all assumed there must be an original, and you have to have the original to be, in some sense, right with God, to have the right blueprint means that you then have the right and true church. So that was one of their working assumptions that there's this one true thing that Christianity started off with and that you have to get back to it and that the Protestant Reformation didn't do a good enough job getting back to it.

Charmaine: And this was often called 'Primitivism', and I think we've talked about that a bit before, trying to comb through the New Testament and create a picture of what the church looked like and probably in our movement we would have said "what the church that Jesus established looked like." Of course, again, Jesus didn't establish a church; the church grew up around those who believed that his life and death and resurrection were something special and it didn't get separated out from Judaism for another 40 to 50 years. So, but, they didn't know that, and so they're looking for this "what is the truest representation" of what it means to follow Jesus; and if we can do it like the first century followers of Jesus, then we've got it right.

Tony: Um. Yeah.

Charmaine: So, it was a matter of actually several levels. There's a, if we could have the right offices, so, you know, they're again combing through the scriptures to say, "well, there was bishops and there were deacons, well, there were also elders, you know, in some places. So, they're trying to use all these bits and pieces to create the right offices, the right structure for authority. But they're also trying to pick up vestiges of well what does it mean, what are the things you have to believe to be as close to that early church as possible. And so, among the different groups, there were the babbling, I call it the babbling lists. So, you know, you have to believe, you know, in the virgin birth; you have to believe in certain things about who Jesus is and how his death or his resurrection brings salvation. And there would have been, you know, some denominations would have held up some, others would have held up others. And so, there was began to feel and our movement certainly inherited this and carried it on that your status with God was determined by whether or not you had the right list of beliefs.

Tony: Yeah.

(something garbled)

Charmaine: So, what does it look like? Do you have the proper structures? Do you have the proper authority? Then do you have the proper list?

Tony: And so, one thing we can add in here too is the Joseph Smith, Jr. had this experience as a teenage boy in the grove of trees in New York state, and, of course, there are six different accounts, six different versions of this vision, and as you read them from earliest to latest you know he you can notice that he develops the story as it goes. In the latest version of this account, which is the 1842 one, the whole story become a story about restoring the original church. And I think that's the story that lots of Community of Christ people grew up with; I'm sure lots of Mormons grew up with that story, too. The experience in the grove was about getting back to the original church, and that nobody else had it, all their creeds are an abomination to God, etc, etc. what's really interesting is if you look at the earliest account that Joseph wrote. In that earliest account, which is the least affected by like subsequent developments of the movement he started, what he describes is more like a conversion experience....very classic frontier protestant revivalist conversion experience in which he's struggling with personal sin and struggling with the sin he sees around him, and in the earliest account Christ appears to him and it's really about the forgiveness of his sins and some kind of sense of calling. It does not have anything much to do about restoring a church at that point. So that, as, as he, as the church that he begins, unfolds as he develops it and changes it, then in subsequent retellings of the story, the idea of, of, how he's there to restore the original church becomes more and more important to the story. So, I might also add that in what for Community of Christ people is Doctrine and Covenants Section 1, there's this statement that Joseph makes about, about, [garbled might be "listing" or "us being"] the only true and living church on the face of the earth with which I, the Lord, am well pleased. And so this whole [garbled] culture, this whole set of assumptions about getting back to an original, and the, the, there must have been a right, a right, starting point, must have been perfect structure at the beginning that somehow got corrupted and the protestants did not fully recapture, that's, that's where, that's where the "one true church" idea finds its origins.

Carla: So, gosh, what I'm hearing you guys say, well, first of all, let me just say, Charmaine, what I found most surprising in what **you** said is that people used to go to church for entertainment. (laughing). I mean, no, I'm just kidding, it's super fun! Everyone should go to church. That's fun.

Tony (laughing): Kinda hard to believe these days, isn't it?

Carla: Weeelll, noooo. Not Community of Christ, at least. That's just a little plug for Community of Christ. But, you know, it just sounds like what they were trying to do was kind of one-up each other, right? And say, "well, my church is better than your church because..." and "my church is better than your church because..." and so people were kind of vying for followers in some ways.

Charmaine: Absolutely. Absolutely. And if you could have that combination of convincing use of scripture, convincing use of rhetoric, and convincing experience, you had a pretty powerful tool to have people follow your way of thinking or your personality or your denomination if it was, or group at any rate. So yeah, yeah. And it

was entertainment because except for the offering it was free and, you know, you could you could the whole community would often come out when they came around with their tents. And so you might learn some things about your neighbors you didn't otherwise know. So..

Tony: (laughing)

Charmaine: if there was, you know, confessions as part of the service.

Tony: And, and what's not entertaining about regular threats of hell and damnation, Carla?

Carla: Gosh, I can't think of anything better!

(Everyone laughing)

Charmaine: And perhaps a few people being playing in the Spirit, or overcome by the Spirit, so..

Carla: You're right!

Tony: The revivals were like the Worlds of Fun of the frontier, so... I do remember a cynical commentator speaking of the revivals said that, this is a contemporary these revivals, said that sometimes as many souls were created as were saved at revivals. [laughter]

Carla: Wow!

Charmaine: In the fervor.

Tony: Hinting at what else was going on. (laughing)

Carla: How interesting!

Charmaine: [garbled] Yeah.

Carla: Oh, that's so awesome!

Charmaine: Yeah. So this is kind of a, it's almost a bit of a contagion, though, you know, when one person or one group is trying to prove that they are right, the defensiveness of others or the offense, you know, taking the offense for others to then prove that theirs is, you know, more right and which means either tearing down the others' view or providing a more convincing kind of approach. It was all part of it. And when you get caught up into that cycle, then it's hard to disentangle and step back and say, "Well, where might God be in all of this?"

Charmaine: And that never happened for a while.

Tony: And, and nobody is really aware of or asking questions about the assumptions everybody holds in this particular context.

Charmaine: About scripture?

Tony: About scripture, about the original recipe, about what Christianity is and isn't. These are frontier protestants, and I include the Joseph Smith family there, too, these are frontier protestants and they share a widespread set of assumptions about, about the Bible, about religion, about, they all pretty much agree that Catholicism is evil and that somehow it doesn't represent true Christianity, and, and, they also share this assumption about getting back to the original. Plus, in this democratized environment in the United States, say, circa 1800 to 1830, they, they share a belief that the individual is able on their own to figure all this out; and, I think, for better or worse, that that turns out to have been an assumption that's, that's very deeply written into American religion. I call it the "roll your own" approach to Christianity.

[Everybody laughs]

Carla: Tony (dragged out).

Tony: And they all, they, they all assume that the individual is able to do that, able and competent to do that.

Charmaine: And kind of back to the, to the groups trying to convince individuals that, that theirs was the best, you start out with, you know, where we have the structures, or we have the offices that would have been in the earliest church and, you know, here throwing scriptures back and forth to show that you have the proper structures. And then within our movement there was the next step of proving that you have the one true authority and so Joseph, not receiving his authority from anybody from his time, but receiving it from, from, people from the past, basically..

Tony: John the Baptist story,

Charmaine: Yeah. Well and same with, with, yeah. So, so here's a newly established source of authority that is unquestionable, in a way. And so, for our movement, that sense of we have then it's we're the only ones who have priesthood authority because it comes from an unquestionable source, from not this time, but from a past time.

Tony: So the idea there was to do an end run around thousands, thousands, 1500 years of tradition, and that that somehow would get you back to the original way better. So...

Charmaine: So, yeah, so then, then you have to conclude that we are the **only** ones who have proper authority, our priesthood are the only ones who have authority to

baptize in a way that brings salvation or that brings effective connection with God. Our priesthoods are the only ones who are authorized to ordain the next generation of priesthood. And so, that, then, is like the ultimate argument against other denominations because their their very ministers are not authorized, or not properly authorized.

Carla: So other churches have it wrong from the start?

Tony: That that became very quickly the assumption of the early Latter Day Saint movement that this was a whole new thing that was getting back the original that nobody had been able to recover because it needed to be recovered somehow, I'll say magically, by divine revelation.

Charmaine: Right.

Tony: That was the only way it could be recovered.

Charmaine: And, and either that, other denominations, what authority they had, it was either perverted or diluted. Perverted over time because of abuses of priesthood in, you know, whatever age they wanted to point to, or diluted of its rightness over time. And so this was, like, a new infusion of authority that nobody else had.

Tony: So let me back the clock up historically just a little bit to say that a lot of what we're describing is also [alcoholic?] leftover business from the Protestant Reformation.

Carla: Um hum.

Charmaine: Right.

Tony: And I think that these frontier Protestants in this democratized environment, they, they really did not know a lot of what we call church history, meaning the history of Christianity. They knew, they knew their traditions; they knew their Bibles well; they knew their current experience; and they knew this and that about Martin Luther and other reformers; but they really did not know the history of Christianity. And so, as you, as you back this clock up to around 1500, you see that once the Protestant Reformation got started, the quesh, the questions of where do you find authentic Christianity had been on the table for, you know, 300 years before Joseph Smith's time. Thus, there's a proliferation of denominations in groups each trying to articulate what they see as authentic Christianity, so the people on the American frontier inherited this, this, long tradition of trying to get back to authentic Christianity, and, did so in an environment where they didn't really know anything about the development or evolution of the Christian faith from the early second century on. That's an important piece to the puzzle.

Carla: I was actually thinking that. I have stood at the door the castle church in Wittenberg and thought about Martin Luther hammering those 95 theses up; and, you know, I was thinking about that that and how new it was in 1790 when the, when the second great awakening started, Protestantism was only, it was less than 300 years old. And so, I mean, that sounds like a long time but it's not a very long time when it comes to religions, right? The Catholic church, like if you were Christian, you're going to be Catholic and it had been around for what...1300 years? A long time, a long time to get all those right, and also the Protestants were rebels, right? So like, they're always trying to question authority and figure out things, and, and in some ways, the Second Great Awakening might have been like a, another rebellion against Protestantism, or did I overstate that? I don't know if I did.

Tony: I think, I think it's, I think it's just a further, a further, (laughs) a further rebellion? A further revolution?

Charmaine: An? echo...

Tony: umm hmmm.

Charmaine: ..almost. And almost an echo of the Reformation.

Tony: But, again, done, done with a set of assumptions that eventually will turn out to have been not, not very helpful assumptions. And so, you know, that will, in our discussion, we'll get eventually here to how did Community of Christ find its way out of this whole one true church paradigm. You know, the problem with this one true church paradigm was that everybody was saying that theirs was the one true, and they had no framework within which to see Christianity as something more than a collection of the right beliefs and structures. It was very, very hard to see Christianity as something larger than their own particular version of it. It'll take a while for that to happen.

Carla: Well, yeah, let's, let's move on to that conversation, not necessarily the Community of Christ part now, but what does it mean to be the one true church and I'm just going to go ahead and show my bias here and I'm going to ask the same, a question of "How is this idea damaging?" So what does it mean to be the one true church, like, what do churches who believe they are the one true church believe, or, your know what I'm asking and...

Charmaine: Right.

Carla: ...and how is this idea hurtful?

Tony: Well, let's, let me just, let me do, let me back the historical clock up even farther on that one. So, the idea of truth in Christianity, of course, is important right from the start, but the, if you go back to the second century, third century, and fourth century of Christianity, you'll discover that Christian communities had to

identify over against alternatives: over against Judaism, over against Greco-Roman traditional religions, over against a phenomenon called Gnosticism, and so they developed ways to say, to talk about themselves as the holy universal church. And then, when you get to the fourth century to the Nicene Creed, into the Creed is written the statement that the church is "one holy catholic/universal and apostolic church." In other words, what makes the church Christian is all of these things, and the primary thing that they are trying to articulate there is that the church has to stay anchored in the Jesus story as it was passed on by apostolic tradition through scripture and through liturgy. And so, the idea that there is a true form of Christianity versus aberrant forms, was there from the second, third, and fourth centuries on. So, it's a very old idea, and, you know, in the in the timeframe it was, it was a very useful idea because, for example, forms of this, this, this religious movement called Gnosticism, really had a view of the created world which said it was a mistake, it did not come from God, it came from a inferior Deity, that the body was bad, the materiality was bad, that Jesus was not incarnate, but, but was wearing a human physical disguise and that everybody who believed, who could believe this particular version of the story was "in the know" and everybody else was ignorant. That's Gnosticism, and the church said that's not really the Jesus story, and so that was okay in its context, but the idea of being the one true as it develops through history does, does have some other side effects and that refers to what you're calling damaging side effects.

Charmaine: Well, I think one, [garbled] kind of obvious, but, it would be that if you're spending all your time trying to prove that you are the one true church or the one true way of thinking, what becomes the focus is yourself and your group. And so it's pretty easy then for the the actions, the sacraments, the liturgy, the beliefs of the church to become the primary focus. What you preach about, what people spend time talking about, and it's really easy to forget that it's about God, it's about Christ, it's about the Holy Spirit, it's about the Kingdom of God, it's about God's desire for all of creation, not just for us who believe this one way, who think that we're righter than everybody else. So it becomes very focused on self or on the denomination or a sect. And so, that's, I think, spiritually and emotionally a huge danger because we be--can individually become very egotistical. We're part of the one true church. Everybody else is stupid, and nobody else can have a valid relationship with God unless they are part of this particular group as well. It demeans what God is doing in other people who are in other places, other places denominationally or culturally, and it lifts us up, it lifts the individual or the group up above others. And so arrogance rather than tenderness, demanding respect rather than serving others. It, it does....all of these things that are contrary to the example and the teachings and the meanings of Jesus life, death, and resurrection that everyone purports to believe in. But they get pushed to the background, and our own individuality or uniqueness as a group goes to the fore.

Tony: There's a, there's a great story in the, in the Synoptic Gospels where the disciples come to Jesus and they say, "Teacher, we, we saw some other people, you

know, casting out demons in your name and we told them to stop it." And Jesus is like, "What?! Seriously?!" (laughter) This is my paraphrase, by the way.

Carla: Right.

Tony: And, just like, nobody nobody who who who does something in my name is going to speak against me, you know. It's a very interesting story that was e---has always been easy to forget if you're working within a framework of having to be the one right structure. It is that the the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Risen Christ is not owned by a church. If it could be owned by a church, then it would be an idol and it would not be worth worshipping at all.

Carla: And that's the---one of the other dangers is that it can easily become, let's see, what's the word, not spoken out loud, but kind of---

Tony: Implied?

Carla: Implied, thank you. It quickly can become an implication that in order to be okay with God, however you see that or the only to to have salvation is to be part of this one true whatever it is. And so, then in some ways, you are holding God's action hostage by basically saying, "God can only act through this body. What God wants is only what we want." And so it really does become a worship of, of ourselves or our structure, and assuming that we alone, because we are so right or true or whatever, are the ones with those words or actions or beliefs that bring salvation.

Tony: Yeah. I think these strong theological systems do kind of form strong communities that have this very carefully protected sense of identity. And, I mean, someone could argue that's a good thing. The problem is that then the system that humans have created out of bits and pieces of scripture and tradition and experience and so on, the system becomes the worship object. And any way you slice that, certainly from Biblical terms, that's, that's the description of an idol. So, it's, it's possible to say instead what what I want to want to do is I want to be as faithful to the Jesus story as I can be, and that I recognize the st---this Jesus story has a large relational component to it; it's not about just a bunch of ideas, and so there's a relational side, there's a communal side to it, and there's my desire to live as faithfully as I can by that story. That's different from saying "I have the one true system. If you're not, if not buying my system, somehow you are outside the pale.

Charmaine: Yeah You don't have access to God.

Carla: But that idea is so intoxicating, though, isn't it? I actually remember when I was a child growing up in Kansas, our pastor was an older gentleman, and I remember him in a sermon sharing about a dream that he had. It was about airplanes and all of these airplanes were flying at this really low altitude, except for the RLDS church, which was flying at this greater altitude, a much higher altitude, and the idea that, you know, because we were flying higher, we knew more, we were better than, and

I'm going to quote my friend Monica in, here in Salt Lake congregation who likes to quote Nadia Boltz-Weber who says, you know, "every time you draw a line in the sand, Jesus is on the other side of it." (laughter) And so, (laughter), which is a great quote, you know, but once you draw that line in the sand, right, it's like we're better, we're over here, then that's when Jesus steps over, right? (laughter)

Charmaine: Right.

Tony: Yeah, exactly.

Carla: So, I mean, it just, it just sounds like when you think you know everything, that's when you realize you actually don't know anything.

Charmaine: Right. And, this---one of the problems for our denomination of becoming so one---so focused on being the one true church is that it's---it forced us to have to focus on and defend Joseph Smith, Jr. Because, if we were the one true, then every part of our story had to be immaculate, it had to be perfect. And so we could only look at one way of describing our beginnings, we could only look at one way of understanding who Joseph was and what he did. Otherwise, it would cause everything to crumble, because the one true had to have the perfect beginning.

Tony: Um hm.

Carla: (garbled)

Charmaine: And so it was---it's a trap, as well, when you are the one true, you have to defend everything. And you can't (laugh) you can't be a group of sinners following Jesus. You have to be---you have to have it all right.

Tony: And you have to then protect what you see a an original vision, right, and that anything that moves away from "the original vision" must be wrong, even if it's, even if it's a, a more appropriate unfolding of that. So, that's a real trap. You mention, Carla, the idea of the one true church, or the one true something, as an intoxicating idea. That's a great imagine, I think. And let me, let me push back my historical clock even way farther now and say that, this is something I learned from New Testament scholar Luke Johnson. The idea that there's this one singular ultimate absolute truth is actually not a Biblical idea at all. It's a Greek idea. It's a Greek philosophical idea. And Christians have, like, for centuries constantly taken this philosophical idea and overlaid it on Christianity, when, in fact, if you a---all you have to do is say "gee, why do we have four Gospels and not one?" (ha ha) and "why are there two creation stories in Genesis 1, 2, and 3 and not one creation story?" The Biblical authors were, were far more comfortable with multiplicity and plurality of meaning than the Greek philosophical tradition was, and yet THAT tradition has been used to interpret Christianity for centuries in a way that then creates this idea that there's a one true original that you have to hold back to and protect when, in fact, it,

it's, there's so many dangers tied up with it and it's not even a very Biblical idea to start with. It's kind of interesting when you think about it.

Carla: It is interesting. So, I mean, you guys are kinda both alluding to moving into kind of a Community of Christ part of this podcast. So let's, let's talk about it. When and how did Community of Christ let this idea go? I mean, I mean it was, it was hard and it was painful and so, I think, part of it has to do with us taking our blinders off when it came to Joseph Smith, Jr., but what else had to happen in order for us to decide that there was truth, there's a lot of truth.

Charmaine: Well, I think that some of it was out of necessity. We talked a little bit in the one about the three eras, of how the church was being pulled into new areas, we didn't know how to talk about Christ, how to bring Christianity to people who didn't have an idea of a single God, and how our church members and our leaders were learning from other Christians. And in---we had been so good about creating boundaries of fear for our members, you know, you didn't want to go to another church, another denomination because your faith might be weakened; you didn't want to marry somebody outside of the faith because you'd be unequally yoked and your faith would be weakened. So there was all these things that we created fear about interacting with other Christians. And and yet in this situation in different, different countries in Japan and Korea, we're learning from other ministers and experience shows us, tells us, and the Spirit bears witness that these are people whose sense of call is as real as our own, that God is at work in them, and that some of the things that we have, have come to know about God or about Jesus or about the Spirit is deeply rooted in them as well and we ca---and no longer can we say, you know, we're the only ones who have some kind of authority. So that's one of the things is exposure and interaction and, maybe newly opened eyes to what God is doing in the world.

Tony: So another thing that happened, and this was in the 1960s, is that the church--RLDS church leaders became aware of these various issues and problems and started seeking guidance from other Christians here in the United States, and, so, in 1967-68 there was a series of meetings call the Joint Council Seminars, in which RLDS leaders invited three theologians from a Methodist seminary to come, and in, in our church's words "help us enter the Twentieth Century." Now this is 1967, by the way.

(laughter)

Tony: And, and, learn, learn Christian history, not from this narrow apologetic framework that we'd had, and learn New Testament not from this narrow apologetic framework, but what can scholarship tell us about these. And so, I'll take you to the year 1968 when the Reunion material, Reunions are our adult like family church camps, 1968 this book was used for Reunions called *Body of Christ* written by a young adult who had some seminary training. His name was Harold Schneebeck. And in this book, Harold Schneebeck argues that, he very clearly lays out that we cannot look to the New Testament for a model of how the church eternally is supposed to be because if you look at the New Testament historically what you see is that there

never was an original church. There was early Christian communities connected to Jesus, and these communities evolved---their, their---

Charmaine: They were different from each other.

Tony: Yeah. Their, their structures and forms differed; they changed through time; the church's form and structure changed to meet new contexts, new cultural settings and so on. And so that book made it impossible for us to say, "Oh, we have elders, deacons, teachers, priest. See, I can proof text this from the New Testament and the early Christian church had these, too" because "no" (laugh) there was no such thing as an early Christian church that had all of these offices and structures. They, they evolved and changed as Christians met new cultural settings, so that book was really revolutionary and raised a lot of questions then for church members about well "Gee, if our structure is not the original structure, what, what does it mean for us to be a Christian church, maybe we need to look elsewhere."

Charmaine: Another, another thing that was happening in that same time period is that there's a lot of changes socially, so one of the other temptations, dangers, maybe of the one true church is that yes there is this sense that we are the only ones with authority, the proper authority; we're the only ones who have the proper sacraments; we're the only ones with the proper set of beliefs, and then you start adding other things on to that too. You start adding on: we're the only ones who are living appropriately and so there was a lot of rules about social kinds of things. And so I think back to the old preaching charts from like the 1920s and earlier that, you know, explicitly say no card playing, no dancing, no revelry all of these things---

Carla: Bor-ing!

(laughter)

Charmaine: And, and so, that was one of those temptations is that you not only say you have the right beliefs, but now you're going to tell everybody what is the right way to live their lives, all aspects of their lives. And that really started being challenged in the 60s with a whole generation who is questioning the structures around them. And they're saying, "why can't we dance? What--how is that evil?" And, and challenging some of the social laws about racial relationships and questioning why there is poverty and why there is such inequity and how can that be justified by church bodies. So there's, there's all of that happening, too, and you, you begin to see within the church, and even at Graceland, oh my, dances and even---

Carla: What?

Charmaine: Yeah, I know. And in the church! And maybe even Bingo. That was another one of those things. You don't play Bingo because that is what the Catholics do and so that--it's very close to gambling, and, you know, it--I mean---

Carla: Yeah, but Catholics know how to have fun!

(laughter)

Tony: I--so, so, you know, when, when, when, when Pink sings, what part of party don't you understand? For about 120 years, we didn't understand any part of that.

(laughter)

Carla: It sounds like it. I mean, and let's be honest. Like the second that a church starts saying "this is what you can do; this is what you can't do" is the second that they're already outdated because somebody else has already thought about something else that they probably shouldn't be doing. So, the, man, people are very creative.

Tony: Right. That's about--that turns religion into behavior control rather than keeping it grounded as first and foremost a relationship built on grace and love. And that's, that's another thing that was helping Community of Christ/RLDS move away from the one true church pattern is that we increasingly began to understand grace and that God's relationship to us is always prior to our best thoughts and actions. God has sought us out, claimed us, before we could even respond to that. That's God's goodness and grace at work.

Charmaine: So we can't earn God's reward. We can't earn God's love. We can't earn God's acceptance, because those are the gifts that God already has given and that bias by thinking that even---well, being the one true church is, in a way, is a kind of works righteousness, right? You're doing everything right; you're part of the one true. And so in some ways you are undervaluing the gifts that God has given us in Jesus, in Jesus' life, in Jesus' teachings, in His life, in his resurrection. So, you know, I think there was a growing awareness that there was more, there could be a whole lot more, in our relationship to God besides being a good member of the church and that there were whole new depths emotionally, intellectually, spiritually that were there that we could begin to accept and access. And they were unconnected with whether or not we were the one true church.

Carla: Right. So it sounds like it's not only damaging to think that you're the one true church that holds all truth, so on and so forth, but it actually holds you back from---

Charmaine: It limits.

Tony: Um hm.

Carla: Yeah, it limits your discipleship.

Tony: Um hm. Yeah.

Charmaine: It really does, because you think you've already arrived, right? And so there's no need to go deeper and more sincerely into your relationship with God, because you've already achieved what needs to be achieved.

Tony: Yeah. And you're not able---you're not able to do self-criticism inside of that framework, you know---

Charmaine: That's true.

Tony: It's like, I, I, in some ways being a "one true church" and being a prophetic church are oxymorons; they don't fit together because a, a prophetic people will always be looking for new and better ways to respond to God's call in the world and will also be unafraid to be critical of where they've been, but if you're the one true and are protecting an original idea or model, you, you, you can't say, "you know, we were totally out to lunch on this particular thing." So, but I, I think I, we should both add here that once this deconstruction started in the 1960s, it was gonna put Community of Christ/RLDS into a kind of wilderness zone for, for (laughing).

Charmaine: about 40 years.

Tony: about 40 years in the wilderness. I mean, like you said, Carla, if you've been intoxicated by the idea that you're the one true, and then, through a variety of ways, you learn--actually, no! That is not--that is based on wrong assumptions, it's not helpful spiritually, it's not good theologically, we cannot be the one true, then you have to answer the next question, "So why should we be at all?" And so, it has taken us a while as a community to come up with really viable answers to that, and I'm I'm excited by the answers we have come up with to that, which will someday be deconstructed in favor of other ones.

Carla: Oh, I'm sure that the--later on there'll be a podcast about maybe this podcast. It'd be like, "oh my gosh, those people were idiots!"

(laughing)

Charmaine: Exactly!

Tony: Yes. Yes. We anticipate---

Carla : I kinda wanna---oh, go ahead.

Tony: No. I say we anticipate that, but we also anticipate we'll be dead by then, so..

(laughing)

Carla: Well, thank goodness. I kinda wanna move on to a different type of topic that definitely relates to this. We all know our---maybe our listeners don't know, but I'm a

Kansas girl moved to Utah. And Utah's a a different kind of animal completely is what I've learned. And since I've been out here, a Community of Christ Bishop here in Utah, I have heard the word "apostate" more in the last 8 months than I've ever heard it in my entire life. And so, I mean, can we talk a little bit about the word "apostate" or "apostasy" like, why would somebody call me that? for instance? And what's the point of doing that?

Charmaine: Well, from my experience growing up in the church that you were describing at the beginning as what you remembered growing up as far as spending so much time identifying how others aren't what we are and how we are something more complete. Often the quickest way to make someone not a threat was to call them apostate, was to say you are outside of the realm of, of my one true truth. And that way makes you not a danger to the individual if you're called an....you know, if someone's calling you an apostate, then you're, then it's their way of saying you are so far outside of the realm of the truth that I don't have to see you as a threat, I don't have to take you seriously. That's not the original meaning of apostate, but it became kind of a working, a useful tool, at least within within RLDS circles. When you---

Carla: So you're saying I shouldn't wear it as a a badge of honor out here in Utah?

(laughter)

Charmaine: Well, maybe. Nooooo. It's it's really an interesting thing, but it is made, it's something to distance, it's something to dismiss, it's a tool to say you are outside of the realm of my rightness, to to make to, yeah, to diffuse who you are and what you may say.

Tony: Yeah, it's kinda like a, it's like a boundary market, you know. I, I don't know if this is true in LDS circles, but certainly in RLDS circles for ages and ages, our missionaries taught about an event they called "The Apostasy." And this was all in the one true church paradigm. They believed the true church was restored to earth in 1830 and so, when did the original church disappear? And, they used the term "the apostasy" to describe the time when they believed the original started by Jesus disappeared from the earth. And in old RLDS theology, that was identified with the year 570, that that 5, 570, after the year 570 there was no longer any vestiges of the original church and it wouldn't be dis---it wouldn't be restored until the 1260 days, which they got from the book of Revelation, and they interpreted those to mean years, so 1260 added on to 570, would mean that the church was restored in 1830. So they, they took their belief that they were the one true original church restored, which means then that everybody else is wrong, and they historicized it into a story about when the original church disappeared. And so, I'm not sure that was going around in Joseph Smith, Jr.'s time at all, but certainly the idea that other Christians were connected to an apostate---

Charmaine: (garbled)

Tony: Yeah, apostate churches or apostate forms of the church. That's, that has some early restoration roots, so that's part of where it comes from in the tradition, but, you know, it it's it was typically used like Charmaine was describing it as a way to say "I'm inside; you're standing outside." I think the word "apostasia" in Greek literally means standing away from. So, so you have, you stand away from because you've walked away from the truth is kinda what's behind the word. Some---

Carla: That is soooo interesting. I, you know I'm all for math in religion. I am 1000% behind that. But, why in the world did they come up with a number 570? Is it just because 570 plus 1260 equaled 1830, or was there some event?

Charmaine: It's really, it's really, it's the other way around. It's because 1830 minus 1260 equals 570.

Tony: Yeah, that's good.

Carla: Huh.

Charmaine: So, if the the church their assumption was that the church was restored in 1830 and this number from Revelation said, you know, that the the woman was taken up, the church--

Tony: Taken into the wilderness for---

Charmaine: into the wilderness and then would be gone for 1260 so. So, yeah, it's starting backwards actually, and it's subtracting that, and so then there must have been something that happened in 570 that was so terrible that the the chur---, you know, the that the church as it should have been just was totally distorted.

Carla: How interesting! I mean, do you think the people who lived in the year 570 are like, "listen here, people, do not blame this on us. It's your math, not ours."

Tony: I think this is funky math actually, is what it is.

Charmaine: Well, and the thing, the funny thing is is that when you go back and you look at 570, there's not some great terrible thing that happened within Christianity at that point. So you'd have a hard time proving it. I mean, there are some people who will pick out one, one, you know, one item that happened in that time period and say "well then that must have been it, that must have been it," but it's, yeah, it's 570 is really, it just happens to be your, what you get when you subtract.

Tony: But, but notice again the assumption behind this, as if there was an original, perfect blueprint and that people messed it up and that Joseph Smith got it right. And this, this is an assumption that Community of Christ rejects. This is not a, this isn't, this assumption has no historical basis; it's bad theology, too. And so, we

don't, we just simply don't hold to it anymore. We say that our ancestors taught what they knew, and they knew, thought they knew that, but we're, we (laughing) we---

Charmaine: We're willing to be a bit more humble.

Tony: Yah. And we just simply can't can't can't ---

Charmaine: Claim it.

Tony: --claim that particular view any more. That's---

Carla: No, I've already had bad dreams about like someone going back to the year 1977 and saying that's when the apostasy, the second apostasy started, because Carla Long was born, or something like this, like this is what I'm feeling's going to happen very soon.

(laughing)

Tony: So, add 1260 on the 1977, come up with (laughing)

Carla: Oh, man. We're in trouble! Well, this has been an excellent conversation. I have really appreciated hearing more about this because, I mean, it really was something that was kind of out as I was growing up and and, you know, like in my formative years, I didn't really hear that much about it. And I do hear more about it nowadays, so I really appreciate these ideas that you discussed, and I can't wait to talk to more people about it.

Carla: So, are there any closing thoughts you have about the one true church or apostates or anything like that?

Tony: Yeah, I think, I have one, one other thought, and that is to say the the question may be for Community of Christ today is what does it mean for us to be faithful to the message of Jesus. That's more important than whether we represent an original blueprint or not, except that the message of Jesus would be as close as we could get to anything like the original. What, what was Jesus about and what does it mean for us to be faithful to that? And, you know, we have picked, our community has picked up again and again on Jesus' inaugural sermon according to Luke in the 4th chapter of Luke, you know, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, and recovery of sight to the blind." The message of of spreading the peace of Christ, the justice of God, and of the Kingdom of God, I mean, that that being faithful to that is is our mission, not trying to to you know, recreate some mythical thing from the first century.

Charmaine: Right. In other words, if we can let go of the focus of being the one true church, then we can clear the decks so that we can live out Christ's life instead of being self, you know, self-focused and preoccupied about our rightness, but can be

honest about our our weakness and yet our deep desire to follow Christ and to to with Christ's help and the Spirit's presence do the things that Christ did in the world, that what God's will in the world is might have more room instead of our own image ourselves taking up all that space.

Tony: That that can allow us to be good partners with our ecumenical friends, with our Roman Catholic friends, our Lutheran friends, our Presbyterian friends, our Methodist friends, and even in interfaith contexts, working with people from other world religions to create a different kind of world. So, we, it really, it's, it's really important for us to claim what Charmaine's describing there.

Carla: Yeah, it doesn't separate us from people, it connects us and unites us with others.

Tony: Yeah, absolutely.

Charmaine: Both in our, our common rootedness in the Christian tradition, ecumenically, but also in our belief that God is about something for the whole world, and and we're not the only ones that have pieces to that. That God's at work in all kinds of ways.

Tony: So, I, I think if people wanted to read more, at least from a historical point of view, the third volume of Mark Scherer's three-volume history *A Journey of a People* can describe in more detail some of the things that Community of Christ went through in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s that has helped helped re, reform us, recreate us, as a different kind of church. That's a place historically you can go.

Charmaine: Did you talk about the democratization [garbled]?

Tony: I mentioned that. Nathan Hatch's book *The Democratization of American Christianity* is a wonderful study of the second great awakening, and he he also includes in that his own analysis of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon within that context which I think is a, a lovely, a lovely, very context based analysis. You know, as with all historical books, it's got its own issues and flaws, but it's a really fine, a really fine book to understand the milieu out of which the restoration movement came. So those are a couple of other places people can go for reading.

Carla: That's very helpful. Thank you again, Tony and Charmaine, for being part of this podcast. I always, I say this every time, I think, but I always learn so much from you guys. And, again, you know, I don't really care if the listener learns anything, I've learned a lot, so I appreciate your time and your efforts in this and your words and your thoughts. I just really am glad that there's a place that we can go to learn more about this kind of stuff. So thank you again.

Charmaine: Well, we thank you, and thank you for your your really good searching questions and relevant questions to to what people are wondering and experiencing.

Your whole question about being called apostate is, that's a very relevant question because of what it does to us to the speaker and to the one who's receiving that. It's, that's, to be able to put it, let it go is gonna be really important.

Tony: Yeah. Yeah. Well, we appreciate the chance to share and look forward to another time.

Carla: Absolutely.

(Music)

Narrator: The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter Day Seekers team or of Community of Christ. The music has been provided by Ben Howington. You can find his music at mormonguitar.com.

(Music)

Carla: Charmaine, you used the words "unequally yoked" and I almost made a joke about an unfair breakfast.

(laughter)

Tony: Lovely.

Carla: I believe I've been unequally yoked here.