

Episode 86: PoF Watered Down, Liberal, Protestant What?

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SPEAKERS

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Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:31

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and you're listening to a series Percolating on Faith, where we talk about a myriad of different topics with our superstar guests, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Welcome back, guys.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:48

Hi Carla. Thanks. Glad to be back.

Carla Long 00:50

So, today's a pretty important day. We're actually recording this on October 30, 2017. And today, we're going to be talking a little bit about this actual topic. I really want to bring it up. It's a super important day, because tomorrow is the 500th anniversary of when Martin Luther hammered those 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. And I've actually stood in front of those doors. I felt pretty cool doing it. But that's beside the point. The reason I'm mentioning that big moment in Protestantism is because last summer I went to Sunstone here in Salt Lake City and I learned a lot. At one presentation I went to listen to Denver Snuffer. A lot of people might recognize this name as a person who has been excommunicated by the LDS church and is now, I guess, a leader, although he doesn't call himself a leader, of what is now called the remnant movement out of the LDS Church. Now, I'm not here to discuss Mr. Snuffer and his movement, but I was very intrigued by what he said, at the end of what I understood to be a blistering talk about the LDS church. He said something like the largest church to come out of Joseph Smith's legacy is not fulfilling what Joseph called it to. And the second largest group, meaning Community of Christ, although he never mentioned us by name, but the second largest group to come out of the Joseph Smith legacy is a watered-down, liberal, Protestant

movement that has nothing to do with Joseph Smith, Jr. and what Joseph Smith Jr. was trying to do. I was flabbergasted that he said that, in fact, I tried to make a little bit of a joke after it because I was wearing a Community of Christ t-shirt at the time. I had a Community of Christ visor on. I was wearing a Community of Christ bracelet, and everybody was starting to recognize us as Community of Christ. He said this at the very end of his talk, as the pastor of the Salt Lake congregation, Blaire White, and I were walking out. We were actually heading to the church to set up for Sunday morning service the next day. I said really loudly, "Well, Blair, you ready to head to that watered-down, liberal, Protestant church?" and people around us started laughing. One guy approached me said "I wondered what you guys thought about when he said that?" And I'm like, Well, I think a lot about it. And I actually think that a lot of people out here might be curious about that, too. What was Denver Snuffer saying, and is it true? And what do we have to say about that? Are we just a watered-down, liberal, Protestant movement? Absolutely not. Let's talk it. You guys are my experts here. So, what is the relationship between the movement begun by Joseph Smith, Jr. to Protestantism?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:09

That's a great question. And there's a whole lot of places to go with it. But I think probably one of the first is to take some time to look at the historical setting, the context in which Joseph Smith grew up and started forming his views and his ideas about Christianity, and also to take a look at the earliest part of the movement that he started. So Tony, why don't you share a little bit about what's happening in Protestantism at the time that Joseph Smith is coming of age.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:54

I think a way to think about our relationship with Protestantism is to say that Joseph Smith grew up in the Second Great Awakening, which is a period of intense religious revival that runs approximately from 1790 to 1840, or 50. This was primarily a Protestant movement, a popular Protestant movement. In lots and lots of ways, the early restoration movement, that movement that Joseph Smith began, is deeply indebted to the Second Great Awakening, and to lots and lots of Protestant themes. You can't escape your genetics, right? So, Joseph's family was influenced by Presbyterians, Methodists, Campbellites, and Universalists and that language wove its way into Joseph's own experience. The earliest version of his first vision sounds remarkably like the kind of conversion stories you heard the frontier revivalists talk about, how they became a revivalist, how they were called to ministry. Joseph's experience in the grove, at least in the earliest account we have, sounds very much like those. His earliest experience, his earliest account of that experience is one of going into the woods to pray because he's seeking forgiveness for sin. That was the quintessential Protestant experience of Christianity on the American frontier. So, the idea that somehow, we arose completely immune from or disconnected to that Protestant view doesn't make any sense of the earliest movement.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:55

Right, and one of the elements that's happening in the late 18th century and early 19th century is a movement within the mainline product Protestantism of the day called restorationism. And this is marked by several different characteristics. One, the idea that somehow we can go back to the earliest Christian church. And if we can do that, then we can get the message right, that we can be just like the earliest church. There's a lot of different existing groups that are trying to get back to the original beginnings. And then there's new groups that are emerging that are forming around this attempt to go

back to what they think they can establish as the earliest church. And so, we just need to realize that groups like the Campbellites, and that would include . . .

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:09

Well, Sidney Rigdon came out of a group connected to Alexander Campbell. And yeah, these kinds of primitivist groups that wanted to recreate the earliest forms of Christianity.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:18

Primitivism is another term that describes some of the things that they're trying to do, to go back to the primitive church. And so, even that tendency that gets picked up by Joseph and his movement precedes him. It is a movement already within Protestantism. It's an attempt, which can't really be fully accomplished because there wasn't just one early church. There were lots of different expressions of Christianity in the first century. Even though there was an attempt to grasp this idea, to try and create the original church, it was in many ways abandoned, even within some of these groups that started in that way. I think that it's really important to understand that even the impetus for Joseph wanting to create a new church that somehow had the hallmarks of the original church was not a new or unique idea to him, that he's already drawing on the momentum within Protestantism to become relevant in a whole new setting as Protestantism is taking on new shapes in the new world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:53

Another place to look is to see Protestant theological language being used by Joseph in the early period. For example, in the Doctrine and Covenants, he uses the terms justification and sanctification like Methodists would have used it. And you know, the sacramental ideas of the church he began had lots of connections to Protestant sacramental ideas. Oh gracious, the whole idea of trying to create a kingdom of God on earth. This was already being done by Protestant separatist groups. Actually, you can trace those to the radical reformation back in the 16th century. There was simply no way to, as a teacher of mine once said, unless they were asleep during the day, how could they not have been influenced by Protestantism? I think when you take the broad view, the movement begun by Joseph Smith, in its earliest phases is very much at home in frontier, populist Protestantism. That's our rootage. A number of years ago, I and another Community of Christ leader went to an ecumenical gathering in California to represent Community of Christ. We were asked to break into groups according to the Christian traditions our churches most aligned with. And the options were Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, and evangelical, and mainline Protestant. And so, while my own theological predispositions would take me directly in to mainline Protestantism, to be historically accurate, I went and sat with evangelicals, which was not a very pleasant or very comfortable experience. But the reason is, because if you want to understand Joseph Smith in the 1820s and early 30s, you I think, really need to see him in that kind of a setting. By the way, Joseph in his earliest period, talks Trinitarian language. There is Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and these three are one God. And besides the justification and sanctification language, Joseph knows the Apostles Creed. He gives a riff on it in what would be our Doctrine and Covenants Section 70. He's aware of the Apocrypha and he does a very Protestant thing in early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. He basically says, we're not going to use it. So yeah, our origins, we shouldn't be ashamed to claim that our origins are as another kind of frontier Protestant group in the restorationist mode trying to get back as close as we could to the original. The

question later will be well, what do we mean by the original? So that's something that will have to be worked out later. And Community of Christ has been working on that since the 1960s.

Carla Long 13:05

Yeah, I just feel like I want to get this straight. And you tell me if I am understanding this correctly. So, when we say that we are a restoration movement, if someone were to say, what have you been restored to? or what have you been restored from? which I guess is a better question, we might say the early church, but there were a lot of different things happening in the early church. There's no one, as you said in a different podcast, original recipe. Correct?

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:37

Yeah, exactly.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:39

Right. You can tell this in Paul's writings. Paul's writings are happening somewhere between 50 and 68, at the very latest, so in the first 20 to 30 years of Christianity. And here, when he talks about people in different roles, these are not ordained functions yet. These are more like roles that people are taking on. And, you know, in some places, there's a term that's used, that is used for Steven and Phoebe, which is a deacon or someone who serves,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:28

serves the community. It's obvious that in different places of Paul's churches, different names are given for different kinds of leadership.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:42

The idea that there was an original structure, original set of offices, created once upon a time by Jesus and that there was this thing called the early Christian church, that was a monolith, and everybody had all of that, it doesn't make any sense historically, and it's easy to falsify it by a good simple historical view of the New Testament. You see the church actually developing over time. A more structured church starts late in the first century, but that is not the kind of church that there was in Paul's time. So, the question, when you use the term restoration, Community of Christ has learned over the past roughly 60 years, we have to be very, very thoughtful and careful how we mean that because if you say, "Well, yes, we have this original thing that has been magically recreated all you have to do is then go to the New Testament and read it with very simple critical tools and you can see that there was no such thing. So restoration actually, for us has come to mean, in Community of Christ, how do we get back to the original impulses of Jesus, what Jesus taught, what Jesus wanted his disciples to be, Jesus's mission and his own message. That's got to be ground zero for us, where we start. Restoration isn't a constant process of always trying to go back and check who we are against that. Check our current life and action the church. Does it stand up against the model that Jesus portrays for us? That's restorationism for Community of Christ.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:30

And I think especially in the last few decades, that's been easy to see, as we've tried both to align ourselves with the message and ministry of Jesus, especially the idea of the peaceable kingdom of the

kingdom of God as being what God longs for and wants on the earth. And so, the restoration is realigning ourselves with Jesus' message, because if you check the Gospels, what is it that Jesus came preaching? He didn't come preaching just himself, and in fact, very little of that. Mostly, he's preaching the kingdom of God. That's a kind of restoration that is a) both needed and b) biblically, very well grounded.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:27

Yeah. Another aspect of this whole issue, Carla, is that, and I'm glad you mentioned Martin Luther because there are real parallels here between Martin Luther and Community of Christ today. It goes something like this. When you look at the early restoration movement, say from 1820 to 1844, I always want to ask the question, will the real Joseph Smith please stand up? Right, because it's clear when you look at that whole, that whole sweep, that the theology of the Joseph of Nauvoo is not the theology of the Joseph of the earliest period. If someone says, "Well, how much are you guys aligned with Joseph Smith?" One of our answers would be well, which Joseph Smith do you mean? And another answer would be, what really matters is whether we're aligned with Jesus and Jesus' message. Christianity is found in the restoration movement, but not everything in the restoration movement is Christian. Part of the Protestant impulses in Community of Christ are very much like Luther's. Christianity is found in the medieval church, but not everything in the medieval church is Christian. Martin Luther wants to make some critical distinctions and Community of Christ, in that kind of vein has tried to make critical distinctions. What of our early heritage is most substantively Christian, and what is not? And we're under no obligation, moral or theological to uphold principles or practices from the restoration movement that do not really align well with Jesus,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:14

. . . or with the kingdom of God. (Tony: Absolutely.) So, where there isn't movement towards equality, where there isn't movement towards acceptance of each one, then we're not moving towards what Jesus was teaching and what his example was, of what the kingdom of God looks like. The emphasis on justice and on peace is what keeps helping us stay rooted in in the Jesus message.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:44

And I'm glad you mentioned that the justice and peace aspects, Charmaine, because Community of Christ, out of our rootage, is a prophetic movement, too, and so part of our restorationism is to go back, as well, and capture the heart of the message of the Hebrew prophets. The heart of that message is always to call the people of Israel back to the most fundamental claims of justice that God's revelation has brought into the world. Amos is saying, what do you mean by grinding the face of the poor into the dirt, let justice roll down like waters, and integrity, like an ever-flowing stream. For us to be restorationist, this movement is for us to claim Jesus as our center and claim those prophetic impulses to get back to the heart of things that have the absolute essence of what it's all about, justice, love, mercy, peace, inclusion, presence, God's presence for all. Absolutely. Those are some initial responses to your question, Carla.

Carla Long 20:56

Oh, just initial ones. Oh, great. No, just kidding. You know what you made me think of, we are called Community of Christ, right? We're not called Community of Joseph, so what you're saying makes

perfect sense. I'm gonna go and quote Blair White. Again, he's the pastor here in the Salt Lake congregation. I wondered if you guys might respond to this. He and I've been out in Salt Lake for a little over a year now and what we found is that if you put Community of Christ in the middle, and the LDS Church on one side and Protestantism on the other side, if you're on the LDS side, looking at us with the Protestant church in the back, we look incredibly Protestant. And yet, if you're on the other side, if you're on the Protestant side, looking at us with the LDS Church behind us, we look incredibly, well, I'm gonna go and use the term because that's what people know, restorationist. What is it about us that might look Protestant when people are looking at us? What might they look at us and say, they're definitely Protestant. Can you answer? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:11

Yeah. And maybe I can answer that by setting up something else here. Back in the time that the Reorganization is happening, so in the 1850s and 60s and afterwards, once the church coalesced, and becomes a more or less organized group, though never a uniform group. I think that's always important to acknowledge that there was never absolute unanimity or uniformity about beliefs or thoughts. This community grew and developed into its own, first sect, and then a denomination. One of the things it really needed to do to establish its identity and maintain it was to create what we'll call a Mormon boundary and on the other side, to create a Protestant boundary. And both of these boundaries, were ways of saying who we are and are not. We may be related, and we may have taken some things from those two influencing parties, but we are something different. What you're describing is perfect, especially between the 1850s and I would say the 1960s, that was really where a lot of our energy went, identifying ourselves as separate, just like siblings have to define who they are by who they aren't, right?

Carla Long 24:11

Oh, for sure.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:12

You can relate to that. Exactly. That's what we did for almost 100 years. Part of our identity, part of our theology, our hymns, are very Protestant, influenced particularly in the first part of the restoration movement that was led by Joseph Smith Jr. In the earliest church that Joseph started, there was a lot of both Protestant language and Protestant understanding of sacraments, and use of hymnody from Protestantism, that's how we sang about God. The Reorganization, now the Community of Christ, borrowed heavily from that. I would say that probably 80% of the people who came into the Reorganization, decided what group they were going to be in by how much of the Protestant understanding of God and of the church influenced them, in reaction to what they saw happening in Nauvoo. Those who aligned more closely with a classic understanding of Christianity were often the ones who came to the Reorganization and didn't go west. It would be natural that within this community, what eventually becomes Community of Christ, there would be more of that influence because that's where these folks were leaning from the beginning. You think about William Law, and *The Expositor*, the things that he is reacting to and accusing Joseph of that are becoming public, things that don't align with the long history of Christian thought and practice. Many of those who were reacting to where Joseph was leading, or other leaders were leading, are leaning towards their understandings of what the church is to be, who Jesus is, what God's purpose is in the world. It is more of the long,

long story of Christianity that came before, some influenced by Protestantism, but some by Catholicism, as well. It's not any wonder that there's a rich tradition within the Reorganization, eventually, the Community of Christ, that very much values some of those core understandings of what it means to be Christian that comes from the Protestant side. How we understand what we believe is not completely shaped by Joseph but is shaped by the bigger picture of what Christianity is. That's part of the Mormon boundary. We were really good at saying this, this, and this, that Joseph did or what happened in Nauvoo, does not determine who we are. We reject those things. On the Protestant boundary, where we're telling Protestants we have the Book of Mormon, we have a sense of there being modern-day revelation, that God is still speaking, and that we trust the Spirit to speak to us through our prophets or our presidents. We're distinguishing ourselves on the Protestant boundary side of things, as well. I love what Blair is saying there because it describes what we worked so hard to do for a very long time.

I would say, though, that in the 1960s, and beyond, since then, we were able as a denomination, to really take a stand, to start claiming the parts of ourselves that are related to the rest of the ecumenical world. In the 60s and 70s, we unapologetically begin to say it has to be about Jesus Christ. That's the beginning. That's the end. In those ways, in the last few decades, we have been aligning far more with both Protestants and Catholics in ways that point to the unity of Christianity, moving towards things like peace and justice. We have in some ways probably muted some of those things that we had as our distinctives for the previous 100 years, the things that separated us from others. If we think about 1850 to 1960 as our adolescence, that time when we're pushing back against our parents and our siblings to identify who we are, then I would say, in the 1960s, 70s, and beyond, we are no longer having to apologize for who we are or prove ourselves to others. I think we really began to embrace them, who we are within the bigger Christian story. That has allowed us to do things like adopt the common lectionary, the revised common lectionary, as how we will inform ourselves, educate ourselves as a denomination about the whole Bible, how we'll use that in worship, and how we'll let that shape our message for the world. We have unapologetically connected with other groups, like the National Council of Churches, to combine our forces and our voice for good in the world. We haven't had as much preoccupation with how we will be seen. We still get rejected by some Christians, some denominations, but we let that shape us less. On the other side, are we restorationist enough? I think that doesn't matter to us as much because we have sensed God's call to us as a denomination. Not the whole answer. We are not the answer to God's purposes in the world, but we have things to offer to it. And we can offer it within the family of other Christian denominations.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:31

That is Section 161 of our Doctrine and Covenants, to claim your unique and sacred place within the circle of those who call upon Jesus Christ. That's really key to everything that Charmaine's saying. Sure, we are genetically connected to the early restoration movement. Yeah, like, I'm genetically Anglo Saxon. And I'm genetically from the Smith family in Michigan, not the royal family Smith! Those who know my parents, my brothers and sisters, they will see strong family resemblances. And those who get to know my sense of humor, if they got to know my dad's sense of humor, they would see very strong resemblances. But I am not them. And so, yeah, we have a unique and sacred story. And part of that story has brought us into a wider circle. It's a remarkable story. How could a tiny sectarian group who thought it was the whole, the whole thing, come to believe . . . no, actually, we're part of a much bigger thing. We can be good with that. Okay with that. So, claim your unique and sacred place within the

circle. There's nothing to be gained by saying we are the circle. And it's simply also not true. So yeah, another thing, I love what Blair notes because, for both of us having been involved in various kinds of ecumenical things over the years, we can see that played out. But you know, things about us that are Protestant, that I think Protestants coming into our church would know are, we practice the ministry of all members. Now, yeah, we do have a priesthood structure. That's pretty much the one that started us off, if you can say it started off, it's certainly evolved. We have deacons, teachers, priests, elders and seventy, and so on. We have all those offices. But in reality, we try to practice a form of ministry in which the whole body is engaged in ministry. That's very, very Protestant. That's connected to some of Martin Luther, his deepest impulses about the nature of the church and the priesthood of all believers. We sing *Amazing Grace*. We are deeply indebted to the social gospel movement of the 1870s to the 1920s. Fred M. Smith, I think we've mentioned this in other podcasts, on one of our presidents, Fred M. Smith, was very much influenced by the Baptist social gospel theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch. When we get involved in ecumenical groups, we find ourselves very comfortable with mainline Protestants, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, United Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ, and also increasingly, we find ourselves very at home with more mainstream Catholics. That's because of the things Charmaine mentioned. We are willing to say, look, there's an ecumenical consensus in Christianity that's 2000 years old, maybe not 2000 years old, but it certainly goes back to the fourth century, about who God is and we are going to walk with our brothers and sisters and other Christian churches with that consensus. We're going to always test ourselves against that. That's very Protestant to say. There are core things we're always going to test who we are against those core things. That's Martin Luther.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:30

I think one of the things that we have been willing to do as a group, too, as a denomination, is to not jettison our past, to hang on to it, but to perhaps rename it, reframe it. In the time period from the 1850s to the 1960s, we would have seen as one of our identifiers, one of those things that told us who we were, our use of the Book of Mormon and our use of the Doctrine and Covenants. I think today we still claim those as scripture and have been willing to engage in and struggle with how we use those scriptures responsibly with our other scriptures, with the Old and New Testament. And how do we talk about our beginnings? We haven't jettisoned Joseph Smith Jr, but we've also not made him the focus of what we're about. There has been this ongoing maturity, I guess is a good word, to take the things that we gained, just like as children we inherit, as Tony was talking about DNA, we inherit certain family predispositions. We don't deny those or toss them out, but we don't let them be all of who we are. We let them be there to support us but want to be open to God's call to us in the future and in the present. That means opening ourselves to the possibilities before us in celebrating and proclaiming the fact that for us, it's what God is about. It's what Jesus is about. It's about what the Spirit is about and what aspects of the kingdom are calling us to make them real. That's what we are. We're no longer determined by those things that just make us different from Protestants or different from Mormons. We have blessings from both sides, but neither of those define who we are. They are the tools that God gives us to move forward towards the kingdom that Christ proclaimed and is trying to make real in our presence.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:19

I think going back to Martin Luther for a second. Part of the genius of his theological breakthrough was a recognition that tradition can be healthy and vital and important, but tradition cannot define us going into the future. That's part of the deep instinct of Protestantism and of the Reformation, which the Community of Christ is very much an inheritor of. Sometimes tradition, which may have been meaningful at one particular part of time, in new circumstances becomes a blockage, it blocks our movement into the future in the same way that some event from our past that was not that big a deal when you're seven or eight, all of a sudden can later in life become a sort of hindrance to moving forward. The Protestant principle, as Paul Tillich refers to it, is this principle of always being willing to critique ourselves in light of our best sense for what the good news of Jesus is about. Here's an example. Kirtland is still deeply important to Community of Christ and the Kirtland experiences in the 1830s are still very formative in the story of Community of Christ theology, yet things that people believed about themselves in Kirtland are not necessarily things we would believe about ourselves today, and yet we don't just jettison Kirtland because we may disagree with our ancestors about certain things they held to. In fact, we reclaimed Kirtland by building a whole new spiritual formation center there and this spiritual formation center is not sectarian in any way. It's a place where people from all traditions can come and find ways to connect deeply with God. I think it's fascinating we value our heritage, but we refuse to be blocked by it as God calls us into the future and that's a really deep Protestant instinct. But also, since I'm a historical theologian, I would say in the Catholic tradition, that's also present, to take some different shape, but that's also present. There, too, is a deep ecumenical Christian instinct to love tradition, but not to let it stall you out as you move forward responding to God.

Carla Long 42:14

Gosh, I have so many thoughts. You reminded me, both you and Charmaine reminded me, that we have this pamphlet called *Church History Principles*. It was written by President Veazey in 2008 and the second principle that is described says history informs but does not dictate our faith and beliefs. (Charmaine: Perfect!) There's a little paragraph after part of it says the foundation and continuing source for our faith is God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Studying history is not about proving or disproving mystical, spiritual, or religious experiences that birth or transform religious movements. Sound history informs faith and healthy faith leads to insights about history. I think that's what you guys are saying, so that reminded me of the church history principles. Tony, you mentioned there's an ecumenical consensus in Christianity and what that took me back to was our discussion on this series, Percolating on Faith, about the one true church and how if you say you're the one true church, it's impossible, or the exact opposite of being a prophetic people. A prophetic people understands that there is truth in all denominations and all movements. A one true church would not understand that. I feel like we're opening it up to that as well. Does that make sense?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:44

Yeah, I love that. That really helps to expand on what our understanding of what God is doing. It really helps to show that that's far bigger than us and it was always meant to be far bigger than us

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:01

It's interesting. I'm thinking about the prophet, Amos, again.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:09

Partly because we're teaching the Hebrew scriptures, Old Testament, in our class at Graceland. So, we're (Tony: This is undergraduate, yeah.) we're into the prophets right now.

Carla Long 44:20

Yeah, I think about Amos all the time. I don't! Continue, Tony, please.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:26

Actually, if I may say, Carla, you need to get out just a little bit more. (Carla: Amen.) The thing I'm thinking about is that in the Book of Amos, this Judean prophet who God calls and sends north to Israel to critique their social life, to critique their reliance on the formalities of religion when they are just luxuriating in the injustice towards the poor. One of the things that Amos talks about, and this is in chapter three and in chapter nine, I think, of Amos, Amos pushes back on the idea that because the people of Israel have a tradition about being the chosen people, that somehow being chosen means they're more special than anybody else. There's this line in Amos 3, where the prophet announces that God's message is, you only of all the nations of the world have I known, therefore, I will punish you for your injustices. And then later in that . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:39

have this extra level of responsibility.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:41

Exactly. And then later in Amos, Amos remarkably pushes back on the idea that somehow God is only involved in Israelite history. Didn't I bring the Syrians up from this, the Egyptians from our, I forget how it goes, then didn't I bring the Syrians up from here, look at and see the exact wording. The idea there is that Amos is announcing that God is involved in the lives of other people too, that's a prophetic moment. And, you know, nothing could be more truly restorationist than for us to recapture a prophetic moment in which we realize we're not the only kid on God's block, right. So yeah, yeah, that's really important for us.

Carla Long 46:31

So, Tony and Charmaine, what it sounds like, and Tony, I'm gonna use your words here, it sounds like we can be distinctive because of our roots in the restoration movement, and we can also be aligned with mainstream, modern Christian thought. It doesn't have to be either/or, it can be both/and. I've really appreciated what you've had to say. I've learned a lot again, as usual. I wanted to go back to what Denver Snuffer said about us one more time. He called us a watered-down, liberal, Protestant movement, or something like that. And he said it with this nasty sneer on his face, liberal, like we were the worst things in the world. Are we a liberal church? What does it mean to be liberal? And why would he call us that?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:26

Oh, I'm so glad you brought that up, because that's one of the words that just drives me nuts. People bring all these words together and try to make them synonymous, you know. It's like trying to make synonymous, washed-out Protestant, as though that all obviously goes together. It's usually based on a

lack of understanding of Protestantism, and the depth that's there, spiritually and theologically. The whole liberal term has been used as a bad word, hasn't it? In our culture nobody ever explains what that word means, though as they use it, they just assume that everybody knows it's a bad word. So, I think it's a marvelous word because liberal in its foundational meaning is about open handedness, to open yourself, to give generously, to be liberal in your giving. Quite often that's used with organizations or in denominations that are more open. I suspect he's probably referring to some of our stances on what has been called social issues, things like trying to work towards equality for women within the church. So, with the ordination of women, but also as an organization, trying to understand those hidden structures, where patriarchy and hierarchy often dismiss the equality of all people. Those are other places where there's work towards being more open handed. I suspect he's also referring to the churches' work and movement towards more openness to the whole range of gender identities with the LGBTQ+, recognizing that and also trying to find ways of beginning conversations that acknowledge and respect and give room in the church for the "Gifts of All." Some people take that as an insult, but I think in its most basic meaning, liberal can be a compliment. It means a generosity of heart and Spirit.

Carla Long 50:24

I'm pretty sure that Denver Snuffer meant it as a compliment when he said it!

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:29

Yeah, I totally agree with Charmaine. It is really unfortunate because part of the elevator music that's playing there when somebody says that is political reactionary kind of stuff from American culture where since the 1980s, liberal has been used as a slur by conservatives towards the other side. It doesn't allow you to understand much of anything about the people who align with those kinds of values, right? Also, when somebody says that group x is just a liberal Protestant group, my basic inner theologian wants to say, how much do you actually know about the history of Christian theology? Do you actually know anything about 19th century Protestant liberalism in Europe? Have you ever read Adolf von Harnack? Have you ever read Albrecht Ritschl? Do you know any of these people? And so, a lot of times it functions like a dirty word. And it's used in ignorance and based on no knowledge of the history of the Christian tradition. So, it's sometimes hard for me to want to take that kind of stuff seriously. But I know that in American culture, both politically and religiously, quick, easy handles and labels have a kind of, sadly, a long shelf life. But yeah, we are a Christian community that has deep roots in the ecumenical Christian tradition. We are Trinitarian. We center everything around Jesus Christ, who is for us, fully divine and fully human. By the way, if you knew something about liberalism, 19th century liberalism, you'd know that actually isn't a belief of 19th century liberalism. And here's a here's a weird one . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:29

What is it the belief is about?

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:31

Traditional liberal Protestantism does not believe in the full divinity of Jesus. Right? And yet here, here's Community of Christ who aligns with the ecumenical consensus. And we say, yeah, Jesus is fully God and fully human. So that's, that's actually not a classical liberal doctrine. So, this is an interesting thing that happened to me when I was a new church member back in the 1970s. The church

I had joined, of course, was the old RLDS church. I had learned all this stuff about building the kingdom of God on earth and I'm just getting to know one of my religion professors at Central Michigan University. He was a Princeton-Yale trained biblical scholar who's Presbyterian and he was very influential on me. I went to talk to him. I wanted to schedule a meeting with him to talk about my growing desire to go on to seminary after I finished undergraduate. He was wonderful, very gracious. He asked me to talk a little bit about my own religious tradition. I told him about the RLDS church and who we weren't and who we were, and all of that. And much to my surprise, I actually discovered he knew about us because he a previous RLDS student in one of his classes, and he really liked the student. So, he asked me to talk a little bit about our church's faith and I start going into stuff about building the kingdom of God on earth. He said, well, that's really interesting. I didn't know anybody held that old liberal Protestant idea anymore. The more I learned about the history of Christian thought, and the development of Christian theology, the more I realized, only in the 19th century, would you find anybody talking about building the kingdom of God on earth. And well, you know, groups like ours, on the US side of the Atlantic, we're talking about it. On the European side of the Atlantic, the main people who talked about building the kingdom of God on earth were classic Protestant liberals. Isn't that interesting?

Carla Long 54:41

That is interesting.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:42

So, this when somebody uses terms like that, it cues me in right away to the fact that they really don't know anything about the history of Christian theology and are just looking for a convenient way to dismiss a group out of ignorance. For goodness sakes, we believe in the worth of all human beings. If that makes us liberal, amen. I'm all on board. I would rather say we are a church with openness, generosity, like Charmaine said, and progressive values. And we are open to where God is leading us next. If that makes us liberal, then I'll, I'll put a capital L on it and say, Yep, that works well.

Carla Long 55:32

Well, thank you for that. That was really interesting, a look back at what the word liberal came from. And, you know, and in a lot of ways, he was right. We are a liberal movement. So dang it. But you know, just a really good history, really good history lesson.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:53

Let's name it and claim it and be who we are.

Carla Long 55:56

Yeah, that's right. And not in the present political sense of the word liberal, right? in the bigger Christian history sense of the word liberal.

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:06

Right. In the sense that, yeah, we believe that we approach scripture in light of its context, and its original setting and meanings. We want to understand scripture in those terms. Yeah, that idea arose in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was first propounded by people like Friedrich Schleiermacher,

and others, who are, in the history of Christian thought, are considered early examples of liberal theology. Great, who doesn't want to read scripture without context nowadays? Certainly not Community of Christ. And so yeah, there's all kinds of things about who we are.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:46

Oh, Carla, we might have gotten him started . . .

Carla Long 56:49

Yeah, okay. Well, then I'll ask another question.

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:53

You hold the crank starter.

Carla Long 56:57

So, you know, we've talked a lot about Community of Christ, and some Protestant parts of us, some, I'm gonna go and use the word restoration parts of us, and what that word liberal might actually mean. But let's look forward. My last question for you two would be, how does Community of Christ hold on to its past? And its present? And it's calling into the future? How do we take all of that information in and still be who we are called to be into the future?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:37

I think one of the ways is to invite people to come join us, come and see, come walk with us. I think it's about where we are going together. It's about an openness to what are the needs and the realities around us. I know it's not a direct answer to your question, but it made me think about Bunda Chibwe, our apostle to Africa. When he was first trying to open up opportunities for some of our ministers there to go to local seminaries, he was having some problems because people assumed they knew who we were and assumed that there would be no place for us in their organizations. He went with a couple of the ministers who are applying to go to one of the seminaries. The administrators of that seminary said we understand that you see as your Father, Joseph Smith. They had lots of questions for him. He said to them I have no need to defend Joseph Smith, or that part of my history. It's part of the beginnings of our church. But what you most need to know is who we are now, and what God is calling to us to be. So come and see. Come and see how we worship. Come and see what we preach. I just thought, what a wonderful way to not be defensive, to not defend, to not get into that negative place, but to say, come with us, see where God is calling us and together, but move into that space that the Spirit is leading us into.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:59

I think another way we do the thing you're describing, Carla, is we have wonderful practices in Community of Christ like going to reunion and going to church camp. We have a really neat theology of place: Kirtland, Independence, campgrounds, sacred places where we don't want to worship the place, and yet those places tie us to our past. We can be open to God doing new things with us in those places. That's a way in which past, present, and future can all come together in a very, I think, concrete way. So yeah, there's that. Look at our new hymnal, which is a marvelous mixture of past present and future, all the dimensions of who we are, who we want to become, who we have been.

They're all present in that hymnal. So, let's sing about our past, sing about our present, and sing about our future.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:11

I think another thing that we're being pointed to as an organization is to identify what some of the blind spots are that we have had. I think at different times churches discover that there's a whole part of the population that they have been blind to, or not recognized the full worth of. For us, that was a real eye-opening time in the 70s and 80s as far as beginning to name and change the role of women in the church and that's certainly been a situation in the church in the last couple of decades as we've seen how gender and orientation have been ways of discriminating against and marginalizing people. I think we are open to God helping us see what some of our other blind spots are and in the present political situation certain, other inequalities are becoming more obvious. I hear them being talked about more openly in the church and outside of the church. I think these are our new places, where we can be more involved in making change in society. I'm thinking here of issues of racism and institutionalized poverty that need to be addressed, that are intentionally oppressing people in the world right around us. I sense that God is asking us to weigh in on this and to make sure that our preaching of the message of Jesus Christ helps us and those who hear to be able to recognize the ways in which we are demeaning and diminishing each other. Another area that's becoming more evident is how those who are incarcerated are treated during and after incarceration and the ways in which we are blind to whole segments of our population who have become part of that system. I think there's a lot of things that as we try to be open, our minds and our hearts are becoming aware of other places where Christ's healing power wants to move and where the Spirit is saying if you believe in the worth of all persons, here's the place where that is needed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:20

It's interesting how you phrase it, Carla, because for some reason it takes me back to the final scene of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* when Ebenezer Scrooge comes to Christmas morning and realizes where he's been and what's happened and realizes that he's now committed to a change of life. He says the spirits of past, present, future, he'll let all three strive within him. I think it's a marvelous image. Yes, we'll let all three strive within us, but most importantly, keeping our selves open to the future God calls us into, here and now. I'm doing a new thing, says the, the anonymous Prophet of the exile whose words are in the Book of Isaiah. Here now I'm doing a new thing, God says that, and it won't be like the old thing, but then partly it will be like the old thing, but it will be a new thing. So, letting the spirits of all three strive within us, the Spirit of the early restoration movement, the Spirit of our journey as a church into the wide circle, and then the call to become the kind of church Charmaine just described, a church devoted to justice and peacemaking. We'll let all three things strive within us and see what the Holy Spirit will do with us as we respond to that.

Carla Long 1:06:03

Absolutely, and then continually use Jesus Christ as our theological yardstick, continuing to try to measure up to what Jesus taught and what Jesus did over and over again,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:06:19

And let Jesus be the lens through which we see others, whoever our society says the other should be, but to let that lens of Christ see the other as sister and brother.

Carla Long 1:06:39

Amen. Well, I just want to give you guys a chance to say anything more that you think we might have missed in this conversation about who Community of Christ is and who we are, who other people think that we are. Is there anything that you missed and that you want to say before we sign off?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:07:02

I don't think so. I think we certainly would be open to doing a second round on this topic. If people have questions or comments or want to pursue things further with us, we'd be happy to do that.

Carla Long 1:07:14

Well, if you do have questions and comments, please feel free to visit our Facebook page at Project Zion Podcast and you can write in those questions. Or you can go to our webpage at www.projectzionpodcast.org and type in those questions. Thank you, Tony and Charmaine, for being with us today. Thank you for sharing, again, your knowledge about all of this stuff that I really didn't have a clue about beforehand, but now I feel like I'm an expert in.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:40

Well, you are. I'm sure you are, already. Now, I really appreciated your input and sharing some of your experience and your insights because I'm afraid people are gonna get tired hearing our voices. You have so much to bring, too, because your perceptions are enriched by a lot of experience in the church. I'm so glad that you shared more of yourself this time, as well. Thank you.

Carla Long 1:08:10

I appreciate you, Charmaine. Thank you, Tony. Thank you, Charmaine.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:08:13

Thank you, Carla.

Josh Mangelson 1:08:17

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Carla Long 1:09:25

Okay, cool, great work team!