

Josh Mangelson 0:17

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

Karin Peter 0:33

Welcome, this is Project Zion podcast and I'm your host today Karin Peter. In our episode we are visiting with Kent Thompson who is with us via technology from Tucson, Arizona. And today we're talking with Kent about postmodernism and faith. So Kent and I met last year I think, or maybe it was two years ago at sunstone symposium in Salt Lake City where he had presented on postmodernism and the restoration traditions. And we had, well, I invaded a conversation that Kent was having with somebody else. But it was so fascinating. And it took a while for us to get him on the podcast because he's a parent, a teacher and a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona in Tucson. So he's a busy guy. So Kent, first, welcome to Project Zion.

Kent Thompson 1:26

Thank you so much really, really glad to be here.

Karin Peter 1:29

So as we begin our conversation about postmodernism and faith, can you tell us a little bit on why this topic is of interest to you?

Kent Thompson 1:38

Absolutely. So just quick background, I am a history teacher by trade. I was that for six years. And then I transitioned to the dark side and actually went into administration and became a principal, high school principal, and was doing that until three years ago, almost four years ago now, when I had transition to become a full time doctoral student. My goal eventually is to become an educational professor at a college somewhere. And for me, being a history teacher, that everything that I've done everything that I want to do has a root in history, and concepts and ideas, themes in history are something that have always been important to me and myself, former former Mormon transitioned away from that tradition about five years ago now. And that led me down a lot of paths of learning that opened up ideas and concepts and things that I had never fully explored before. My dissertation research is on, people who are brand new to principling and how their identities are changed through the process of becoming socialized into the position, and in doing so, become steeped in literature on sociological identity theory. And that was very easy to transition into concepts and ideas about religious identity and so Sunstone for last year, they had put out a call for papers to present. And so I said, Hey, you know, I really want to study more about this, outside of what I had been doing for my own dissertation research, a little bit to the chagrin of my advisor, who wants to be focused on my dissertation research, but so I did a deep dive into religious identity and in doing so, came across the concepts and ideas of modernism and postmodernism, and their effects on especially United States religious traditions, and of course, with my background in Mormonism,

then, I dove pretty deeply into concepts and ideas surrounding religious or restorationist traditions. So that that really led me then to my presentation, and where we are today to be able to talk about this.

Karin Peter 3:48

So we need a little refresher for some of our listeners in probably for me. So to understand postmodernism, it helps to first have a basic understanding of modernism and your views Both of those terms. So can you define for us? modernism in some short, brief way,

Kent Thompson 4:06

I will do my best. I always preface any deep conversation by starting with a college professor of mine, a history college professor who said he could not answer any question without saying, well, in 2015, when the Magna Carta was signed, and then he would go, you know, take it from there, I won't do that. It'd be that Thank you. But the history teacher, it does come out a little bit. And so with modernism, modernism is a term used to express the ideas that were before that influenced and we're during the Enlightenment period of time. This is importantly to the idea of modernism is to a shift from dogmatic faith based realities. And I'll use some fancy words here in a moment explain what they mean, into a new scientific reason, logic based reality, Ways of Knowing ways of being. There's two words that I'll be using some, probably throughout the interview, and those are ontology and epistemology. They're fancy words and there's lots of nuance there. But ontology basically is questions of our existence or reality. Why are we here? What's the purpose of life? Those are ontological questions. Epistemology is how do we know things? How do we go about gaining knowledge, that's epistemology. And so the shift the ontological and epistemological shift from faith and dogma, into reason and logic, had seismic effects on humanity, social structure, on all kinds of things. And so modernism really represented a throwing off of thousands of years of ideas and things that that set the standard for society and blow it up specifically to modernism one of the things That's interesting as before the Enlightenment before that era, knowledge, the ability, the power of knowledge was really hidden behind two spheres. And one of them was the church, in western traditions, mostly then in the Roman Catholic Church, and it was hidden behind the Latin language. And so if you wanted to know anything about what God will do for you, you have to go to a priest, who then could consult this book, and this book was written in Latin, and then they could interpret it for you and tell you what was going on. The rituals and things like that were just the mystery, right? And so knowledge about being able to how we exist with God and our existence with each other was all determined, determined by the church. The other half of that then is the power that is hidden, or that was hidden away from the the regular people from the governance, generally monarchies and things like that. And the Enlightenment, there's various ways that that effective government specific to Western democracies, the two big ones that are our England Great Britain, and France and England, Great Britain was more of a gradual change. And then in France, it was the French Revolution very bloody, which threw off absolute monarchy. Whereas Great Britain, England tried a little bit more of a gradual to where we are now in the effects of those. So, modernism really, then again, just to recap, is a shift, a massive shift, societal shift from dogma and faith being the reason, reason for everything, why are we here, the way that we can know everything shifts into this idea of logic and reason. We could

talk more about the logic and reason here in a moment, but I again, I think that's just super important to understand is that shift that occurred during the enlightenment.

Karin Peter 7:51

So for people that have studied maybe a little bit about this in the past and picked up pieces of this, this would then be the period of time where the Church was not willing to accept the enlightenment. Right? And they pushed back hard.

Kent Thompson 8:07

Exactly.

Karin Peter 8:08

Against science and reason.

Kent Thompson 8:10

Yeah, and there's lots and there's. So history isn't linear. We're, it's easy for us to think that it is. It's easy for us to fall into those, like ways of looking at history as a linear project. It really isn't. So, you have early examples and late examples of things that shouldn't really be there. You have contradictions all over the place. One of my favorites is Sir Isaac Newton, incredible mathematician, just an amazing enlightenment man. But he was also incredibly devoutly Christian. And he spent an enormous amount of time studying the Bible and the earliest manuscripts that he could get his hands on to find out the mathematical computations that went into Solomon's Temple because he believed that those measurements if he could extract the formula, and then figure it out that he could actually predict the end of the world. And so here's an enlightenment man who's all about reason and scientific method, who is also at the same time, deeply steeped in a very archaic system of trying to predict the end of the world using modern tools with anyway, it's it's an interesting,

Karin Peter 9:28

yeah, yeah. Great example. Thank you.

Kent Thompson 9:32

Yeah.

Karin Peter 9:33

So we have this kind of short history. We won't start with the Magna Carta. So thank you, we have a short history of the rise of modernism and why it's important. And so through this period, you talked about these fears, that knowledge was hidden behind and they become too they start breaking down these barriers, right. Okay. So then, how did as those barriers dissolved? How did modernism affect religion then or transform religion? I think the term you use as a rational faith. So what what happened, right?

Kent Thompson 10:16

Yeah, so we, so we have a shift as barriers are broken down, as, for example, as the Bible is able to be translated, that one of the very first translations out of Latin was known as the vulgate. And that that word, the root vole is vulgar. It's actually English was considered a vulgar language, and so to have the vulgate and then the Bibles that came after it was massive, it was huge. And so that had that very quick effect of people suddenly saying, Well, I can read my own Bible now and I can interpret my Bible. And I think that that priest that's been telling me this stuff for years was wrong. And in fact, here's my interpretation. And I feel called of God to go forth and do this. So there's an explosion of anti Catholic anti establishment religion groups who come up and beyond the scope of what we are talking about today. There's so many different groups that do this. You know, you have Luther, who, you know, he doesn't find any of those things that the Catholic Church is espousing, especially with various indulgences and things like that in the Bible, and he has his 95 theses and famously, were, whether it actually happened or not, but nailed the 95 theses to the door and things like that gets excommunicated. There's many, many, many, many, many aspects of this that come out of it. So it's a very basic level. We have this concept an idea where people then can become religious themselves. They don't need the institution. So this decoupling starts to occur, where a person doesn't have to have a religion to do that. But because they're so socialized into having a religion, they tend to still have religion, they just create their own and they claim some authority or they claim some ideas that then give them give them the basis by which to practice those new beliefs. And they become the subject of significant amounts of strife, politically. It leads to issues of people, you know, coming to the United States eventually, with, with the pilgrims, which are themselves in a sect, an offshoot of different things, which creates all kinds of problems. And anyway, that's, again, beyond the scope here. But there are at the basic level, we have this idea of people now can interpret for themselves and they can set their own paths. And that is huge, and they create these new religions that then do that in the beginning of the modern era. As the modern era continues, it starts to show And we'll talk about that more when we get to postmodernism.

Karin Peter 13:03

Okay, it does begin to shift and religion as we understand it from the I'm in my early 60s. So when I was a kid that would be like the epitome of modernism in religion from the 1950s, that image that we have of that, that era and such. So how did we get there to where that became the norm?

Kent Thompson 13:31

Absolutely. So, the, I think it's important to talk about there are three tenants of modernism that we can see exemplified in religious traditions. One of the tenants of out of modernism is that there is an absolute truth. If you think about it scientifically, this is the idea of like, the law of gravity is the law of gravity, gravity occurs, it happens it is an absolute. We think of it within return, when we think of it in terms of God and religion This is this idea that there is an absolute truth. There is a god he has rules and laws. And this is how it is. And that pretty much exemplifies most modern religions, like you said in the era that you were talking about there. The second tenet of modernism is that that truth can be discovered through experiments and reason. And I'd like to talk about this a little bit more than we get to the restoration is traditions

because it's specific to early Mormonism, but there is a huge rift in the the Mormon brother in the early 20th century between Joseph F. Smith and and James Talmadge. The the former is the faith based person, dogma based person and the latter is the reason and logic and, well, it although Joseph Smith wins and Talmadge is censored. Damages influence is huge. throughout the rest of the 20th, Early Middle 20th century and late 20th century as well. The third tenet of modernism is that absolute truth can be then dispatched to dispel untruths, Society of wielding truth as against untruths. And, again, we'll talk about a little bit more in the religious context a little bit later.

Karin Peter 15:23

Okay. So, one of the ideas that you talked about in your presentation, your sunstone presentation was the failure of modernism ultimately, and the rise of postmodernism. So, in contrast to modernism, what is postmodernism, we again, need that brief kind of primer, if you will, on postmodern thought. So, go for it.

Kent Thompson 15:54

Absolutely. So again, it's important to note that history is not linear. So it's not like In 1970, modernism ended and postmodernism began, right. So there are philosophers, the che is one of them who very much has postmodern ideas. But he's not considered a postmodernist. So and I just want to be very clear that this is a very complicated, difficult subject, and I am making broad generalizations here. But by and large postmodernism is a reaction to the what is what they consider the failures of modernism. And there's a quote, go ahead and read it here. I think that's very poignant. I'll read it here in a moment, but the the lived realities of modern societies, with its cold application of reason, towards a rationalism, it proved problematic, as it birthed really the horrors of the world wars. In the 20th century, the obviously, incredibly, incredibly terrible wars and these are all done under the pretense of logic and reason. very calculated things Nazi death camps, things like that to rid people that were considered not good for the species and things like that I mean, terrible application of these modernist ideals. And so the quote here, and I give you a list of all of my references here, but this is by presenting Pippin back in 1999 wrote the fact that art intellectual pursuits the development of Natural Sciences flourished in close spatial temporal proximity to massacre and death camps, as raised for many doubts about not only modernity itself assurances, but about of all of Western culture had had and it has raised the issue Why did humanistic traditions and models of conduct prove so fragile a barrier against political bestiality? I think it's really well said it's, it's it's the idea of how how could something that propose to end problems with religions and things like that, create an atmosphere that would allow for all of these things. So, postmodernism then it's a real reaction to that.

Karin Peter 18:01

So one of the ways I've heard modernism described is that it was this idea that, that the more we learn, and we can continue to learn, the better we can make things. And so modernism was the idea will get better and better and better and better until we've eradicated all the problems in the world and the world wars as useless, as you have said here that just blew that sky high.

Kent Thompson 18:24

Correct. Yeah. Because then it became, oh, suddenly, somebody had an idea about what the final modern project needed to look like, Adolph Hitler, and obviously, that didn't jive very well with everybody else in the world, and it created a major problem. Okay, so post modernism. Then, there's a couple of quotes here that I'll read. postmodernism, post modernism itself attacks the very core of the modern project. It questions the existence of any truth, universal or otherwise and the ability of human reason to find it. So again, postmodernism rejects any claim of absolute truth that is an attempt to impose one worldview over others. And further Still, the truth is not out there waiting to be discovered. What human beings take to be truth is something that we ourselves have constructed. So postmodernism, one of the big things about it is this idea of constructs. This idea of our truths being relative to our epistemologies and are on our ontology ontologies. They aren't there isn't one absolute truth that there are many truths, and most importantly, to believe anyway, the healthy aspect of postmodernism is this concept and idea that you can't impose one worldview over another in although there are problems with postmodernism and critiques of it I think this is one of them are the aspects of it that push back against the cold, the cold modernity of the world wars, and definitely opens up more space for more people.

Karin Peter 19:49

So this is really interesting to me. And one of the things that is coming to mind when you describe that is both a visual and a contextual comment is The editors might want to move this and put it somewhere else after we start talking about restoration traditions. But during the 1950s and early 1960s, the LDS church was extremely modern. And it was we are the one and only we are right. We have all the answers. You know, we're, we're fighting communism like everybody else, and we had the truth. And then we went into East India and encountered polygamous tribal people. And polygamy is a big sore spot with Community of Christ. Yeah, we were the it never happened. Joseph never did it. People for many, many years until history and scholarship forced us to look more carefully at what we had been professing and to admit that perhaps we were incorrect, which is very hard for people who have been right as we encountered polygamous tribes. Who wanted to join the LDS church? There became a question what do we do about polygamy? And in that moment, I think is the moment that our LDS Church moved from a modern perspective to a postmodern perspective, because rather than saying they can't join unless they give up all of their extra wives, the church said they can all join, but they can't add any new can't be from here on any additional. That is what I hear you describing. Instead of putting the truth, the view of what the truth was for the church at that time on to another culture. They found a way to navigate that, for the best of everybody involved, and it was our first foray into globalism as a church.

Kent Thompson 21:59

Absolutely, the That's really well said, What ends up happening with the postmodern turn is you have both a liberalization that occurs of what you described there with the church. And then you have the other one, which is a fundamentalism that occurs, which occurs within the Mormon Church into what I termed the Mormon institutional conservatism. And so there's a

reaction to this. In fact, right now, if you want to we can talk about the the four areas in which there is a postmodern turn and has affected American churches.

Karin Peter 22:31

Sure, let's go there

Kent Thompson 22:32

That work? Okay. One thing I think it's important to talk about the specifics to American religions is America itself is very different from the rest of the world in a lot of ways. And one of them is there's a there's a embedded individualism into American psyche and society that actually has an interesting effect on religious traditions. There's always been a Real, tending towards this idea of it's the individual experience. Not it's not just a collective experience. So, for example, in the early 19th century, you have the itinerant Miss Methodist preachers that are going around, and they don't have to have necessarily a degree from somewhere, they just say, I feel I feel that God has spoken to me and I need to talk about this. And I'm not trying to start a religion, I just need to, I just need to preach I need to preach. And it's a lot of what they were preaching was this idea of individualism and your relationship with God and you don't necessarily need a church and things like that. So that has already kind of been baked into the system, and when we get to this list, so, the liberal developments then on the postmodern movement, there are four areas in which this one particular offer dangerous talks about and that is the For the loss of institutional sailings the cultural uncoupling of spirituality from religion, the loss of institutional control of religious symbols and then the rise of trans denominational ism. So these are really the four areas and you described some of them within your your story there the Community of Christ. So one of the things about the loss of institutional salience is this particular author refers to the individuals as lay liberals, these are individuals who they belong to a specific church, but they aren't necessarily the traditional all in member they are I like the priest, I like to go I like the religious aspects of things. I like the ceremony. I like those things, but I don't like what they teach about this or that and they, they feel like they can go to that church and and do those types of things. So religions that allow that, then those individuals will stay in but religions that don't allow that those individuals then have to find a new home. And so we do see pretty significant shifts in people away from the more conservative small c conservative religions into the more small l liberal religions. And there's different examples of this throughout the last half of the 20th century and early part of the 21st century, specifically with the different Protestant groups that start to allow women into the priesthood, such as Community of Christ, and things like that, that start to make a shift towards those things. So that is, again, the loss of institutional salience. And then we have the cultural uncoupling of spirituality from religion. And this is super important. This is this idea of, again, it's very individualistic, this idea of I can be spiritual, but I don't have to go to church. Small see conservative religions mock those ideas and say, well, you have to have the church because we have the rights and the traditions and things like that. The more liberal side of things says yeah, you need to develop This aspect of yourself and this becomes an really important part of your relationship with a deity or your relationship with the universe or whatever it may be. And this uncoupling, then further erodes the American institution of religion, because people no longer really need an institution to tell them what to do, and they

start to do those things. Three, again, is the loss of control over religious symbols. A good example of this is the cross. The Cross has very specific symbolic reasoning and ideals in it within certain religions. And then you have the generic idea of the cross for a lot of Christians, which is simply to remember Jesus, or just to remind yourself of a higher power and things like that. So it's not in you're not in control of that symbol anymore.

Karin Peter 26:48

So I have a neighbor that wears a cross, but he doesn't have any interest in going to any church.

Kent Thompson 26:56

Absolutely. Is that what that's the kind of thing Yeah, okay. Perfect example. Yeah, I've walked into homes of people who have very ornate crosses in their home and they're not religious at all. They just love the iconography. They think it's beautiful. They love it for the aesthetics of it, rather than the religious meaning behind it. Then finally is trans denominationalism. And you had actually asked, What's the difference between Pali denominationalism and the difference really is in the incident the root word trans meaning to transcend. So trans denominationalism means that, for example, people will attend a mega church and a lot of mega churches. Some mega churches are affiliated with a specific religion, but growing now are non affiliated mega churches. They have a general heading of Christianity, but even that, what does that even mean? They don't really actually tackle it at all. It's just simply let's get together and talk about good things in their opinion, that that then creates a subset of individuals who then can bounce from mega church in person To make a church online to wherever, and they just simply feel this community around them of other like minded people. So it again removes brick and mortar, institutional religion that we've had for thousands of years into more of an esoteric way of worshipping, so to speak, and becoming a part of that spiritual community.

Karin Peter 28:25

Okay, so listening to these things across my mind is is interpreting them all from a lifetime in Community of Christ starting in reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which became Community of Christ. So, before we kind of go there, because I know that you you have some comments to make about some comparisons. Let's talk a little bit about just across the board Christian denominations, how they've kind of reacted to the postmodern reality these four issues and and see where we go from there before we kind of launch into restoration traditions?

Kent Thompson 29:10

Absolutely. So and I think an important thing to talk about or to state is the liberalization of American churches has led to a significant decrease in the amount of people who belong to specific religions, especially within the liberal wing of religion. Interestingly, then, what has happened is the more fundamentalist religions actually have more people coming to them. Maybe a better way of saying that is they're losing less people than the more liberal wings, which I think is really interesting. So the liberalisation of churches is almost going to well, for those particular groups, as they are saying, believe what you want to believe we want you here we want you part of our our community, and then that tends to open up ideas of like, Well,



why do I even need to come to a church anyway, and so more people are leaving those religions the fundamentalist religions are seeing a race more, almost ever a resurgence. And in fact, back on the postmodernism thing real quick, again, one of the tenants of post modernism is this idea of, there are many truths. And so many religionists now are using postmodern arguments, not all postmodernism, but using postmodern arguments to say, Hey, we have the truth, because our truth is the truth because we can have a truth because there's a lot of truths. But they don't talk a lot about the other truth. And we'll talk about that specifically with the Mormon tradition, but, but it's an interesting argument, and they really push back against this idea of, we can't have an absolute truth because everybody can have a true, but we know the truth truth. It's so it's this mixture of modernism and postmoderns argument. It's kind of interesting. So and again, I think one of the more fundamental religions we're not going to talk about here, but I just pointed out because it's all over the literature that I read here is actually The effect of Islam Islam is a very fundamentalist religion. And they have yet to experience a and how the idea of the Enlightenment, like Western religious traditions have had and so to see how that progresses in the in the history of humanity, so just as an aside

Karin Peter 31:24

So yeah, Christian denomination so they've reacted.

Kent Thompson 31:30

Yeah. So basically, it's one of two things either they have decided to as Community of Christ which is embrace this idea of postmodernism and brace the ideas of opening up community or they have retrenched. So, if you want to know I think it's a good time to talk about the restorationist Absolutely. So one of the things I did my research and everything I only found one restorationist tradition who went On the liberal side and that is the Community of Christ. Every other offshoot from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints established in 1830 has all it there are either defunct or they have gone conservative. And that's been a really interesting thing. Specifically with what I will refer to as mainline Mormonism, and I know Mormonism isn't the proper term anymore, but it's much easier to say than modern church, Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ism. So that's true modern. So just for for brevity, I'll utilize that what what I have seen is what I termed the Mormon institutional conservatism. And this is this idea of the institution itself has a small c conservative, direction, bent, ontology, epistemology, everything that creates this opportunity for it to To resist the the effects of this and we see this throughout all kinds of rhetoric, I think there's, there's one quote that that I pulled from my presentation, but there is there are a lot of different ones. And so this one is from Dallin Oaks who is a member of the Mormon 12 apostles in the mainline mormon church back in 2010. in a, in a talk that ended up in a youth manual. Here's his, here's the quote, he says, I will speak about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as the only true and living church. In doing so I know I speak against the powerful tide of what is called political correctness. The fashionable opinion of this age is that all churches are true truth, the idea that all churches are the same as the doctrine of the Antichrist illustrated by the Book of Mormon account of Korihor. That account was given to teach us a vital lesson in our day. So I picked this quote, because it I think, perfectly illustrates the reaction of conservative churches to the postmodern movement and that is one of fear there. There is a Lot of fear in the statement, fear of change from the

individual and instilling of fear in an individual of change. Political correctness is a term that is used quite a bit by conservative churches to push back against the idea of more than one way to be a human being, whether it's religiously or whatever. And the by equating this idea of there is truth in every church, all churches can be true, to then suddenly flip and say that is the doctrine of the Antichrist, right? Is this instilling fear in people that's like, Oh my gosh, if I think about this, I am like Korihor is in the in the Book of Mormon is a character who is very much an enlightenment man. Obviously, several, like 1700 years before the Enlightenment, he is a person who's a rational thinker, a logistician, and basically says don't believe that there's a God I can't prove that there is a God you can't prove to me that there is a God, I need a sign. And so he goes in front of the chief judge and there's this big thing. And basically, he asked for a sign and then God gives them a sign by striking him dumb, right? He can't speak. And this happens, and then he is forced to recant and then he you know, I'm so sorry, you know, kind of a thing like that. But he's tries to make penance but in the end, he is trampled to death, trying to find food. And okay, horror, horror, right. So, so, so to mainly Mormon audiences, this this particular story is incredibly poignant. As core horror is one of those evil men in the Book of Mormon who not only does he tempt God, but he is absolutely his end is terrible. So it's not like he was able to go off and join his own community and create this wonderful existence and then live out his life. So yeah, so that that that's that's Korihor.

So the more of an institutional conservatism is rooted in this focus, voice of authority of correlated doctrines and messaging that really came out of the various correlation committees that were under the direction of the quorum of the 12 apostles in the mainline mormon church since 1972. There was a huge shift before 1972. He was doctrinally is kind of the Wild West, you had all kinds of different authorities making all kinds of different statements about things very modernist, as far as a lot of logic into why for example, blacks couldn't have the priesthood you had some pretty atrocious things said about the curse of Cain and that these were they were not that blacks in existence were not as as good so that's why they have this curse on them and all these horrible things that before 1972 were just floating out there said by some pretty high up authorities after 1972 you really don't see a lot of those things. Well, you see it still but it is It's a huge clamping down. It's this again, institutional conservatism. It's trying to bring it back down to where, for example, when I was first married, this was in the early 2000s. I, the gospel doctrine classes that I attended are very different from my last gospel doctrine class that I taught in 2016. In just 16 years, I saw a big difference between you still had the old guard who would sit there and espouse these weird theories from early Mormon leaders, to where we had been correlated to the point where it was a very tight, non controversial as much as possible message that just simply repeated things rather than speculated about things so that there's a among among mainline Mormons, there's a real shift and people I'm 41 people about my age, probably, if they look back can can see that happen in their own home wards, and different things like that. And again, as you pointed out, when the Community of Christ started making their own changes towards the liberalisation side You see the same effects in my research and obviously you're the expert here so you can,

Karin Peter 38:06

No I'm not the expert I just have little stories.

Kent Thompson 38:09

Sounds good. So but the the shifts and the changes that you have some of the old guard in the old reorganized Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints who aren't ready to accept more people and aren't ready to have women have the priesthood and aren't ready for this and there's a schism and there's problematic problems there. So in each tree restoration is tradition there. There is a tremendous upheaval that occurs as a result of postmodernism one is you have people like me who end up leaving the mainline Mormon church because it's it's not liberally liberalizing. It's not taking into account LGBTQ issues. It's not taking into account these things. In fact, it's doubling down and making, in my opinion, some pretty harmful statements. And then you got the same thing but opposite the Community of Christ where things are a lot more open and things are are changing in that way. But then it's also leaving behind a subset of people who want That's small see conservative religious tradition experience in restorations, traditions, so So I think there's a good juxtaposition between the two.

Karin Peter 39:10

So when I look at your comments about Community of Christ, you've said that you found it to be the only real example of any kind of progressive movement from the various restorationist traditions that you looked at. So what did you find?

Kent Thompson 39:25

With regard to Community of Christ? Yeah, so Community of Christ, again, I've talked about a few of them briefly, but the idea of, of women being able to have the priesthood, that is that there's a huge liberalisation movement within the restoration tradition, the patriarchy, the power of the priesthood and the keys was so ingrained with men that to open it up to women as well. For me as a mainline Mormon at the time, I remember, you know, I, I always had proclivities towards like, yeah, I can't We do this but then it was like, but God has said that we can't do this.

So, so to me, the women in the priesthood is huge. I think, I think Community of Christ is incredibly well embodied in John Hamer with who he is as an individual. And just a beautiful man, wonderful man, being able to be the leader of a congregation and be gay, and to be able to talk about things however he wants to I just think it's such a refreshing thing, again, from being within the mainland Mormon religion. There isn't an outlet for members of the church to speak openly about things without fear, real fear of being removed from the church excommunicated, or I don't know what the new terminology is they just released but it's basically an indication. So being able to speak and be who you are without fear of losing your community is that's huge. That's absolutely huge. And again, within the restoration is tradition, then you can cling on to, like you yourself, are not a Book of Mormon person, but I know people who are members of the Community of Christ who are still very rooted in Book of Mormon ideals. And that's a big part of who they are. But again, it's a pick and choose, they don't have to say, Well, I love that part where it talks about how the skin got darker when they sinned. Like that. They can say, it's not a historical document, but there are some things in there that are

powerful for us to learn from. And again, that has restorations tradition, that's huge. And that also,

Karin Peter 41:25

We took that part out can't just FYI,

Kent Thompson 41:28

Yeah, that part was removed. Yeah, yeah. Right.

Karin Peter 41:31

Because we don't just go Oh, we don't talk about it. We like oh, let's excise that.

Kent Thompson 41:35

Right. If it is what we believe it is, then we just move it around.

Karin Peter 41:40

Yeah. So there are there are some things that that I recognize in the Community of Christ tradition that are reacting to post, the reality of postmodern thought, in religion. For example. The church is has recognized and is reacting to the lessening of social significance. I think you called it the last loss of institutional salience. But that's what it is. I mean, the institution itself, it's like wait a minute in, in society today, even in religious society, what is the role of institution? And so we've been processing that and pondering that and making and making that part of our community conversation, but also the focus on individual spirituality and corporate spirituality. Is that at this juncture of our existence completely separate from religion, or is there a way to bridge religious traditions of sacrament and you know, rites and practices and ideas is the way to bridge that effect effectively. And, and if so, what symbols and rites and practices have to be reinterpreted. So for example, we're all online right now, because we are talking in the midst of the pandemic of 2020. And in our reality in Community of Christ before that pandemic, the First Presidency made provision for us to have the sacrament of communion online. And that was a huge step for us.

After the pandemic, the First Presidency came out with a policy changed so that we could also offer the prayer for the sick, the laying on the hands for the sick online. So we are reiterating what those symbols and practices mean in community when you're not together there and, and how do we continue to do that and the final one that I see Is that in the midst of all of this, as we encounter more and more people who are reacting to the fundamentalism from their own traditions, and coming to Community of Christ? How we understand membership comes into question. Because is membership and official something that happens? Or is membership when I align myself with a group of people, even if I have not followed the institutional process of joining? So, what are your thoughts in, in light of that?

Kent Thompson 44:38

Yeah, that's fascinating. So, in each of those examples you gave, I can see the thread of, of the postmodern right, this idea of, Okay, we have this tradition, we have this policy, we have these

things, how can we open it up more, how can we make it more accessible, right? I those, again, are rooted in the idea of the liberalization movement, this idea of how can we give more how can we be a part of this more, and it again me as a former mainline Mormon, and still very clued into the Mormon, all my children are still Mormon, my ex wife is Mormon, my whole family's Mormon things like that. They just had their general conference last weekend. So I'm still very steeped in what's going on there still send there still tends to be the opposite of what you're describing, which is, how can we make sure we protect the institution? How can we protect these rights? How can we do these things, for example, the sacrament being given in homes along the policy currently in the church is that you cannot do that on your own unless you have permission of your bishop. And that is under extraordinary circumstances. And each it's up to each bishop to determine whether this is okay or not. And that being on Facebook, I know that the particular ward that my that where I'm currently living right now, the bishop has given permission for people to do that, to do those things, which I think is appropriate and great. So that they can do it on their own. And they don't have to congregate. But I've read online from other people. They're like, Yeah, no, this is not what's going on in my home ward. We cannot do this, like, the bishop is no, like, you don't have permission to do this. Again, I asked, Why is that? And so again, to me, it just goes back to the idea of, well, there's a lot of confusion and definitely with the pandemic going on. But there is a tendency towards How can we protect the tradition protects the institution over creating things that really work more for more people. And what you're describing is the opposite of that. So I think it's a really good juxtaposition, then again, of the two, two ways of doing restoration traditions.

Karin Peter 46:40

So just to throw more complexity into the midst of the discussion. Some sociologists would say that we're moving past postmodernism, and into yet another social construct or perspective, which is postmodernism, what does that look like? And how do you see that impacting religious traditions as we experienced that new reality?

Kent Thompson 47:15

That's a great question. So one of the problems with any kind of construct modernism as a construct postmodernism as a construct, postmodernism as a construct is when we are living through a specific construct that is being made while we were flying in it. It's hard to really be able to take a 30,000 foot view and really say, Well, this is what the tenants are about post modernism is easier in 2020, to talk about because it started in the 1970s as a real intellectual way of thinking it's still relatively new, but but basically, it's this idea of okay, but we need to critique postmodernism, and all modernism isn't inherently bad. So what can we bring in from modernism and postmodernism to create a new reality? A new construct. So it definitely takes the idea of the constructs. But it also looks back at modernity and says, you know, although we're postmodernism can really lead you down the path of there are no truths ever at all. modernism, if you bring a little bit of that in, it's like, well, maybe there is something going on, that we can tap into, where we can create a lot of a lot of it is a philosophical issue. So it's an idea around morals and ethics and this idea of, well, if they're, if everything's right, then how can anything be wrong? And if nothing is wrong, how can we create laws and things like that, that then punish people for doing things? It obviously is very messy, like you preface this

question with Yeah, so post postmodernism really is about how do we take the messiness of post modernism and make it a little bit less messy to be able to move society forward in a way that they're it recognizes the rationality issues as well of modernism being something that is good. And so yeah, it's just trying to figure out how We move forward with that.

Karin Peter 49:01

So I had a conversation with someone who had left the LDS tradition, and was exploring a little bit what the Community of Christ might mean. If this person became kind of a friend and was willing to travel a little bit with Community of Christ, they weren't, they weren't sure yet. But the way they described where they were, to me is kind of this postmodernism. They said, they left the LDS tradition, and they threw the baby out with the bathwater. And now they were recognizing that they still wanted to play with the baby. And I found that to be a really interesting example, as I began to hear about postmodernism because it kind of feels like that's what happened.

Kent Thompson 49:54

That's a great way to put it. And I think that's a just an excellent, succinct way to talk about it. It's idea of post modernism really does throw modernism completely out as much as possible. And now it's like, Okay, well, there, maybe there were some good things about it. But it's like, again, it's like anything else, whether it's our own individual journeys, or it's a societal journey, we're all on a journey, things are happening, things are constantly bombarding us and changing us. And although we didn't get into the identity theory piece that I'm doing for my dissertation, a lot of it really does come around this idea of Alright, well, what is important to all of the institutions that we belong to, right? So just because we're not maybe belong to a specific religion, we still belong to a family and we still belong to a country and we still belong to a political party, maybe or we belong to a club, and all of these things influence us and they change us. And sometimes when we jettison one, we do go, Oh, now I understand what it was bringing to me and I can live with it and be a part of it, but not have to wholly accept every part of it. And that becomes an important part of individuals with identity. is being able to be in charge of who we are as much as possible, rather than just let everything affect us as being able to really understand what these things do to us and for us so that we can utilize them in more healthy ways.

Karin Peter 51:12

So I'm thinking that's a future podcast for us.

Kent Thompson 51:17

Perfect.

Karin Peter 51:19

Yeah, it would be interesting. It'll in a lot of ways as as we explore identity, especially if you are in a conservative institution and trying to navigate that. Or if you've left that, and you're trying to find some signposts for navigation, right. Yeah. both perspectives. Okay. So, yeah, that will

make make a great next podcast when we have our next conversation. So any last thoughts that we didn't get to that you want to share on this topic before we close today?

Kent Thompson 51:59

Yeah, I do. Just think, for me the importance of understanding, post modernism and light that, you know, I talked to a lot of people, up until the pandemic, my site, while my full time job as a student, was a Lyft driver and I would speak to people all day long as they got in and out of my car. And it was fascinating to talk to so many people. And for me, one of the important things was, there's a lot of people who have a lot of questions. And for whatever reason, when people would get into my car, they felt like it was time to open up and we can have these really cool salient conversations. And I missed that terribly. By the way. Being an extrovert holed up in a home during the pandemic is definitely my own personal help, that's okay. But being able to work with people and talk to people and see how much people are really wondering what they need, where they are in the world, what their places in the world and their concerns and ideals. These ideas of post modernism and modernism really pervade all people's thoughts and beliefs and ideas. And when we understand them a little bit more, I believe that gives us those tools to, as I mentioned, just a couple minutes ago, but it gives us the tools to take more control of ourselves and instead of letting things just happen to us, and we react to them, that we can start to take a little bit of control back in our lives and live in my opinion, live much more healthfully and be and our well being being something that is paramount and something that we can be just just much more happy and and productive members of families and societies and things like that. And I just, I think that although you can get lost in a lot of the weeds in these particular things, I think it's important to understand a lot of these things in order to just take back control of who we are as individuals and be able to be the best versions of ourselves.

Karin Peter 53:46

Well, that it allows us when we are aware of what's in flowing in us, it allows us to not just process the awareness but also process then our intentional behavior. Do things out of reaction. I'm not reactionary any longer. I'm intentional in what I'm absolutely what I'm doing insane. Yeah, thank you for that comment. And thank you for being with us today from Tucson, Arizona. And we appreciate it very much. And we look forward to our next conversation with you here on projects on podcast. And so if you are listening today, thank you very much. I'm Karin Peter, and thanks for listening.

Josh Mangelson 54:37

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