

320 | Percolating on Faith | The Versions of the First Vision  
Project Zion Podcast

**Josh Mangelson** 00:18

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** 00:34

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and I am back with you on Percolating on Faith, a place where we talk about whatever we want to and you have to listen! Thanks for listening. I'd like to introduce our wonderful guests. They're back again, I cannot believe they keep coming back. But they do. Maybe they're glutton for punishment, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith, welcome back.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:00

Thank you. We're glad to be here.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 01:02

We really are fun. It's our gluttonous pleasure to come back.

**Carla Long** 01:09

Oh, goody. Well, I'm glad that we can satisfy that one of the seven original sins for you. So sorry, I brought that up. Today, we're gonna be talking about the vision, the first vision from Joseph Smith Jr. and I have been calling this this whole time I've been calling it the versions of the vision because some people think there might just be one version of that first vision. But friends, let me tell you, there is way more than that. So we're going to talk a little bit about that. There are differences, what that vision means to Community of Christ. And I hope that we enjoyed the conversation. So let's kind of jump into it. So first of all, how many versions of the vision are there?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:54

Well, if you're talking about about full descriptions of the vision, there's really probably just three that capture the whole story. And there's really only two of the, the, the five that we'll be looking at, or the, yeah, the six documents that we'll be referring to, that are really Joseph's own telling kind of from beginning to end of this experience, there's, there are a few other places where parts of that vision were either dictated by Joseph or where he may have been interviewed, or where he may have narrated part of it. And then there's a couple that are other people telling Joseph's story, we assume having talked to him, and maybe even checking it, putting it running it past him before they published something. So they aren't all his own, you know, kind of, from beginning to end, giving a narrative, that's what he's trying to say is, they're not all narratives from him as to this experience. But it is so fascinating to see all of these changes, not necessarily, I think more change of emphasis, as well as some details changing. So just fascinating. So we're kind of anxious to get into it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 03:33

So the documents like cover a 10 year period, they go from 1832 to 1842. And yeah, the the differences of emphasis are remarkable, really, I think it's also important to say that, that, you know, for ages and ages in Community of Christ, we always treated the vision as kind of the starting point of the movement. And more recently, historians have said, you know, actually the, the Book of Mormon and its publication was more like the founding of the movement. And a lot of church members didn't even know about the vision until, you know, until the late 1830s. Until, until it started being, you know, publicized a little bit more. So, um, I think it's still fair to say it's a founding it's a founding event, a root experience of our movement. But the question then arises, well, which which account is, you know, which one is? Is there one that is the root root experience of the movement? And what can we make of the fact that there are all these differences?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 04:40

Right and it also kind of gives us a little bit of a look into Joseph's own psychology. You know, what's happening in Joseph, as he's over time as he's sharing these different things as well.

**Carla Long** 04:56

And you said this, did you say the first one was from 1832 Probably november of 1832. And when in when was his, when he supposedly had this event? It was like 1820, right? or?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 05:09

20ish depends because because in the different account, his age changes.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 05:15

It could be in his 14th year, his 15th year or his 16th. year, so depending, yeah, on which of them that you're reading, so.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 05:24

And you know, Carla, that that period of time from age 14 to almost 17. What do we remember?

**Carla Long** 05:32

I just remember being embarrassed most of the time.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 05:37

Well, and depending again, on which of them you focus on, there's very much this sense that he is, you know, a 16 year old, hormonally driven like most 16 year olds in whatever era. So there's a little sense of that there as well.

**Carla Long** 05:54

So now I'm excited. Let's jump in. Let's hear it! This is good!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:00

Maybe another place to that we will be important to start is that, for ages and ages and Community of Christ tradition, we tended to we sort of like, revered what turns out to be the last account, right at the

final 1842 account, which is that big, full one. And we used to publish a tract called Joseph Smith tells his own story, which was that one. And there, there was always the sense that I know, when I became an active member of the church in the 1970s, there was the sense among lots of members that somehow nobody had had a vision since the biblical period, and that all of a sudden, Joseph has a vision, and nobody believes him. But it's a real thing.

**Carla Long** 06:42

Isn't it amazing?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:43

Yeah and vision, visions, and these kinds of experiences have been absent for for literally millennia, which turns out to be untrue. So first of all, there's a deep, just ignorance of medieval theology there and the importance for certainly the mystical tradition of visionary experiences. But also what's what I think is so cool, is that historians increasingly are able to set any of these different accounts that just that we get, you know, out of Joseph's experience, in a context in which lots of revivalist figures were having visionary experiences and conversion experiences that included seeing things and, and, you know, hearing things and so on. And so instead of the, instead of seeing Joseph's vision, as the Latin phrase would be "sui generis" of its own kind, a one only,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 07:39

Unique.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 07:39

Yeah, totally unique, one off incident, no, it's not, it's very, very much part of the landscape, especially the Second Great Awakening that our movement comes out of. So I think that's, that's quite important too. And, we know, we can we can learn from, we can learn a lot about our origins by by seeing Joseph's initial experience, whatever it was, as like other experiences, and not unlike them.

**Carla Long** 08:08

It's really helpful and probably really important for people to, you know, I think part of us, we probably know that in our head. But you know, there's sometimes that mystical stuff that comes up and you're just like, I want to believe this to be true, so I do, you know? But then like the practical side of you, which I have very little, the practical side of me is basically squelched. The practical side of me comes out and says, Come on, Carla, come on.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 08:33

Well, yeah, and I think the whole idea that the the mystical, has been interpreted and embraced in different ways in different areas, and so in, in Joseph's time, in the 1820s, and 30s. And to and before that, to some extent, the, the mystical experiences, the felt presence of the Spirit, those kinds of things, really carried a lot of weight. And, and I think they still do today, but probably in a different way. And so but that was the the commerce in religious, in religious life was to have these kinds of experiences as a validating sense that this was really of God. And so they use the templates of their time to describe their experience, you know, what were the what were the essential pieces that made this a conversion experience, for instance, or a revelatory experience of some kind. So, whereas today, we would use

our own templates on spiritual experiences where we would talk today we might use language about feeling a peace or having, being able to let go of worry, or to find a freedom to express ourselves. In, you know, in speaking or in writing as ways in which the spirit is moving, so or this or touching us in nature, you know, that's another one that is today as well. So, anyhow, just fascinating.

**Carla Long** 10:15

It is, are we ready to jump in?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 10:17

Let's do it. Yeah. All right, so we'll just start and, and what we're using as a reference is an article that was first written by Dick Howard, who's the church historian, back then, and in a book called Restoration Studies One. And it's simply called, "An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith's First Vision, by Richard P. Howard." So he's the one who pulled those together and did some analysis. And it's also there's in

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 10:54

It's also in "Journey of a People".

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 10:56

Mark Scherer's book, most recent church historian his, it's in his book, too. And it lays out the some of the similarities and differences between these varying accounts.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 11:11

Mark's book as a very helpful table in it which he goes through each each version. And then you know, who's on first, who's on second, who's on third, if you want, what's happening, what's what's the content, what's the, what's the theme and so on. And it's, it's like helpful as a as a an overview of the differences among them. Dick's article that was like the groundbreaker in our church back in 1980, I think most church people did not even know that there was more than one account before Dick's articles published. So

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 11:45

And I wanted to, to let you know about both of those so that if you're wanting to pursue this some more that you can go and see all of those laid out. And then some of the analysis that both of these authors do in regard to that, historically, so. So the very first of the, the versions, we were saying earlier, we need to be careful how we're saying this.

**Carla Long** 12:09

Versions of the vision.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 12:11

Not virgins of the visio. Versions of vision,

**Carla Long** 12:14

There you go.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:15**

So the first one was written in probably November of 1832. And is written by Joseph. And what we have here is the remembrance of an experience when Joseph was about 16 years old. And it and in this one, it tells us a little about what's been happening since he's been 12. And get a little of this of the religious context of the day, and how there's arguing between different denominations, when actually, there's some of that, but what's most important here is that there's all of these preachers who have helped him to become aware of his sinful nature, and his and his need for forgiveness. And he's become, I don't know if he uses the term but I think convicted of his sinfulness. And if he's a 16 year old, yeah, there's lots You know, that's going through his mind, I'm sure that need a little forgiving, so. So he's a 16 year old, and he is very aware of how he is he is not purging and sinless.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 13:34**

And that everybody around him is also. Everybody, everybody's falling away, everybody's sinful.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:40**

And the world is a mess. The world is a mess

**Carla Long 13:43**

Amen, Joseph.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:46**

And so he goes, in search of a, he's, he's wanting to pray about this, he feels I think, I would say driven to pray about this. There's a almost an anguish of soul I, it's, I think, a fair way to describe it. And he has this experience in the woods, as he's praying, and he is told, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven." And in this vision, he sees Christ, he sees the Lord who says, "I was crucified for the world." And, and, you know, there's there's kind of also a sense that, you know, yeah, the world is a mess. And there's this idea that there's God's anger is kindling, and I come quickly, those are some of the things that he hears Christ saying. So, if you were to characterize this, you would characterize this one, I think as primarily a conversion experience. A personal sense of being seen, loved and forgiven by God. So this is the that's the the extent of the first one with a sense that the whole world is messed up. And it's not the way God would like it to be. But but it's pretty general.

**Carla Long 15:23**

And again, it was only Christ. Just Christ showed up.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 15:26**

Right. One figure identified as Christ. And it's very interesting this this one, if you start reading conversion stories from this period, that sounds remarkably like them. So I've got one in front of me this is from Lorenzo Dow. Lorenzo Dow who was a, a very fiery preacher who kind of cultivated and Elijah, John the Baptist like image, but this is Lorenzo Dow's conversion, experience His words from it, he says, He put his hands together cried in my heart, Lord, I give up I submit, I yield, if he's struggling over his own sin, and if there's enough mercy to cover it. And he says, as, "as these words flowed from my heart, I saw the mediator Christ stepped in as it were, between the father's justice and my soul. And

these words were applied to my mind with great power. Son thy sins, which are many are forgiven the faith have saved thee. Go in peace, the burden of sin and guilt and the fear of hell vanished from my mind, as perceptibly as an hundred pound weight falling from a man's shoulder, my soul float out and love to God to his ways and to his people, gay into all mankind." So these, these second grade awakening conversion stories, there's a, there's a crisis, right, they kind of follow a pattern. There's, you've been pondering your life and you realize, you just feel like, you know, judged against this extreme bar of divine justice you fail, fail, fail, fail, fail, and you feel like you're being you're gonna fall down into the pit. And in some sense, Christ steps in, in this case, Lorenzo Dow sees more or less sees Christ step in between, and the same area of Christ appears to Joseph in the woods, and the result is forgiveness, and a kind of a fresh start. So the classic conversion experience in fact,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 17:26

I'll go ahead and read this part of it from Joseph's first writing down of this experience. "I cried on to the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go in to obtain mercy. And the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness. And while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord, in the 16th, year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun that noonday came down from above and rested upon me, and I was filled with the Spirit of God. And the Lord opened the heavens upon me, and I saw the Lord. And he spake unto me saying, Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statues keep my commandments, Behold, I am the Lord of Glory, I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name, may have eternal life, Behold the world life and senate this time, and none do with good." And he goes on to talk about what a mess the world is in. So yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 18:29

And then towards the end of this one, he, he says, Yeah, but then after a while, I kind of fell back into my

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 18:34

Sinful nature.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 18:35

Sinful ways, you know?

**Carla Long** 18:37

Well, it's hard to change.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 18:39

It's, it's it's very

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 18:41

16 goodness gracious.

**Carla Long** 18:44

Let's be realistic. Even if Jesus Christ comes it's really hard to not do the things that are fun.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 18:51

It's interesting to me that the earliest account and the latest account, which are really very different in terms of content and and their emphasis, they both have this rep, have a reference to Joseph will call his backsliding after the experiences.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 19:05

His humaneness. Yeah. Which is refreshing.

**Carla Long** 19:10

It is because he's not normally what people call a humble person. Like normally, so that's actually good to hear.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 19:17

Yeah, in fact, in this one. Yeah. Here's, here's the part that Tony was just referring to. "I pondered these things in my heart. But after many days, I fell into transgression and sinned in many ways, which brought a wound upon my soul. And there were many things which transpired that cannot be written", bla bla bla bla, so.

**Carla Long** 19:38

I wish he would have though.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 19:43

That might have been a whole other set of journals.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 19:46

Yes, that's gonna be for later critical historians to tell us about all that. So. But you know, this the image here in this in this account of the sense of like divine judgment, and It is impending. It's part of the millennialism of the period too, that we're where we must be coming to the end of the age things are changing rapidly and getting so bad. And it must be the judgment is right at the doorstep. And so that that certainly comes out in this first account.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 20:14

And that was part of the whole, the Protestant preaching of the day is, it's the part of the bigger context. Yeah, so it would be very natural that would come up. So the second, then, the second document that gets hold into this discussion, was probably from around 3435. It was written by Oliver Cowdery. It was in the Latter Day Saint messenger and advocate, which was a pretty new publication at the time, this was Volume One, number three. So this would have been very early on in the writing of the Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate. And it appears that this is Oliver writing in can while conferring with Joseph, and this one is really doesn't go much into the actual experience. But just a little bit of the, the context. And this one, the piece that's in both of these works, is just short. And it describes Joseph as being about 15 years old. And that he's been, he's kind of caught in the arguments between the different Protestant denominations, lots of focus on their arguments back and forth. And they're saying these things, but it becomes apparent to young Joseph that the people who are saying these things aren't very pure either, and that they're being quite hypocritical about the things they're saying and not



doing. So and there's a very strong emphasis here, that they don't have absolute answers. Like he's asking different ministers questions and they, some of them are saying, I don't know. And he's taking that as the fact that their faith is incomplete. So that they should know. Absolutely. And so but again, a youth often figures, "Hey, I've been reading the Bible, this is clear to me, how can it not be clear to other people that this is how it should be? And if clerics are saying, I don't know, then obviously, they're not as close to God as as he thinks they're saying they are?" So but there's a strong emphasis on his disillusionment with the fact that they don't have absolute answers. They don't know absolutely. what God thinks about certain things, or what's the right way to do things.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 22:47

So something to keep your eye on and from this point on, if I can just,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 22:50

Yeah, I was just gonna toss one more thing, go ahead. And the other one was, because of these things, he was hesitant to commit to any of the denominations. So that's just a piece of the context that is part of this writing.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 23:04

So essays of these these accounts. You have to you have to track them as the church develops, because they reflect the ongoing development of the church, right? That one that we just did, the first one is, in some respects, it's the most uncolored by the churches, developments. 1832. Right? This 1834 from 1834 on, the focus increasingly becomes on how other churches are messed up. And the focus then begins moving away from Joseph's own personal experience of separation from God and restoration to God, it moves away from that to how all the other churches are wrong. And increasingly, it will go that direction. And I'll say, is, as I read these, as we've, you know, Charmaine and I read them aloud to each other today, which I mean, what else are we going to do today? Right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:00

That's our idea of fun!

**Carla Long** 24:01

I do that every day!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:04

I mean, as you listen to them, when I listen to them, I'm thinking of the theological context and the assumptions of the theological setting in which these come out. One of the assumptions that is, is it's an unfortunate theological assumption assumption of this period is that Christianity can only be one thing, right? If it's, if it's true, it must be one thing. And it can't be other things, the idea that there are multiple takes on the same regulatory center. It's just not even. It's not even anybody's framework yet, and I can't, I don't want to take my postmodern view and turn it back on them. But what my postmodern view allows me to see is the limitations within their perspective on what truth is truth. Truth can only be this one thing and so if you don't have absolute truth and absolute certainty about your sets of doctrines, then you're you can't Be right with God, which is, to me it feels very unfortunate. Yeah. But in their setting, that's how they related to these things. So



**Carla Long** 25:07

Sure, I just want to ask a really quick question. So it was in this version, that where he talked about how all the other churches were wrong. That really wasn't in the first one? Because that was that's part of my history. My personal like, church history with the world, like every other church in the world is wrong. Right. You have to make the right church. And it was this version that all Oliver Cowdery's 1834?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 25:33

And actually, it's not even, it's not even that strong to say that they are all wrong. It's just saying it's describing how he's struggling with the fact that what they're saying doesn't necessarily meet their actions or they don't have absolute answers. So it doesn't even say yet at this point, that they're wrong. So the first you're seeing the progression that first one is like we have the world is messed up and, and God wants to write things eventually. And then now we're getting into, you know, he really want to emphasize this, this context of these other churches being led by hypocrites, and,

**Carla Long** 26:18

It's starting to feel like a funnel.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:20

Yes, yes, yes. Yes, exactly. Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 26:23

That it's from this one, the trajectory of what's the vision is about goes in a different direction, right? This this is heading in that direction of all churches are wrong.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:32

So the next one is actually kind of interesting. And this is, this is written them, probably about 1835. And so probably just after the one from Oliver Cowdery that same time period, this is written by Warren Cowdery. And it's narrated by Joseph, in a conversation with Joshua, the Jewish minister. And how Joseph describes this is that he's about 14 years old. And this is really interesting, because what he focuses on this time, is that his main concern is for right knowledge, for the right answers, the right beliefs. And it's not about sin, there's not any reference here to him being concerned about his his personal eternal welfare. But that he needed to have the right knowledge he needed to know the right things. And it's, you know, the quote is information is what I most desired at this time. So it's very much to a head thing, right? Going from that, the first one where it's a heart thing, and it's this internal battle to now wanting the to have the right knowledge, the right information. And in this one, I think this is the only one that has it. While he's trying to pray, he hears footsteps coming towards him. And he thinks it might just be someone in the woods at first, and then it seems to be coming nearer and nearer. And he finally jumps up and looks around, and there's, there's no one there. But there's almost this little bit of sense of dread. And, but then he is able to go back to praying and open up in prayer. And then again, there's that instead of a light descending, there's a pillar of fire, and he feels joy. And there's a percentage that comes. And then there's another percentage who look alike, or does this one say

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 28:55

the percentages aren't identified maybe like the first like there's Okay, sorry.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 29:01

And then, and it tells him his sins are forgiven, and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. So those are the things that he gained from that. There's not a lot there about the churches, except that at the beginning, he wanted, he was coming for the right knowledge. But he was told they sins are forgiven. And in Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Those are the two pieces that came into that in that conversation that he had. So, you know, already we're seeing different emphasis and some different details coming through that. I mean, and it's interesting. If, if Joshua, the Jewish minister, you know, whether he's a rabbi or maybe I don't know if they were messianic Christians in that time or not, but the light from above is now a pillar of fire. Going back to Exodus, you know the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. So he's using language that might fit his hearer. And this is, and now we have the two personages who look alike.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 30:18

The text is interesting though here and the percentages are not directly identified, it says, a percentage appeared in the midst of this pillar flame, which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed. Another percentage, soon appeared like under the first he said unto me, my sins are forgiven me, he testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. So it's not it's not clear that this person is God, or Christ, but it's testifying. And then the next thing he says is, I saw many angels in this vision. So it's,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 30:49

So these might be angels who are testifying to these details.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 30:55

Yeah, I mean, it's quite different in that respect. He's not directly identifying the the person who just with any person of the Trinity or anything like that, so.

**Carla Long** 31:08

So maybe he's starting to realize get some emotional intelligence be like, if I don't say what they are, people will imagine.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:18

Yeah, yes.

**Carla Long** 31:19

That's really interesting.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:21

It is. Yeah. And, and but again, here, we have some elements that are saying, the light, the sins are forgiven, and an emphasis on Jesus. So, again, that's 1835. So the next one is from 1840. And it's written by Orson Pratt, who was writing a tract. This is this is not a little trifold tract, however. This is a 31 page tract on on the church, and it's presumably, based on be the bit by Oliver Cowdery with the

thing about the current his context of the churches fighting, and in conversation with Joseph. So it's presumed that that Orson chatted with Joseph before he published this,

**Carla Long** 32:16

I would hope so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:18

Well, we don't we don't know these things for sure through but because they just were doing what they do. And, and so yeah, so in this one, he's 14 or 15. He is seeking for correct understanding. And he's needing assurance for his eternal well being. There's very much the sense that if I don't believe the right things, or if I'm not part of the right church, my eternal status is in danger. And that Joseph as this young person was not willing to trust that the folks he was listening to, could give him what he needed for eternal assurance. Very much so looking for the one doctrine is what he was doing when he went into the woods to pray, and to disk into determine, which is the church of Christ. So among all of these churches, he was seeking to know which is the church of Christ. James 1:5, comes up as it does error is referenced in several of these was, which promises that you know, if you ask, God will give you answers without without degrading you with without making you feel bad for asking, basically. And so he, so he's saying, okay, nobody else can help me because I can't figure out what to do as far as which church. And so he figured this is his key to get direct answers about doctrine, and which is the right church. And in this one, he's tempted by a power of darkness as he tries to pray. As he's pouring out his his soul for answers, so there's this sense of this darkness comes and then again, the light descends, this time, it's very much more described as resting around the tops of the trees and then descending down. So it looks like things could be a blaze, but nothing is being consumed and then it envelops Joseph. And as it does, he has a heavenly vision. And he sees two personages, both alike, that look alike, and it and there are three things that come in this one. The first is that his sins are forgiven. Second is that all denominations believe that incorrectly, and to not go after any of them. And then the third that he will receive true doctrine in the future. It's not necessarily the sense that only he will or that he will be, you know, the one who will be sharing it with other people. But in the future, there will be he will receive true doctrine.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 35:22

So that the focus, again is shifting, the focus is shifting to his role, right to how he sees himself. And this is 1840. And so we're now in Nabu. And the church is highly developed, and it's now from my Community of Christ perspective, it's now beginning to derail theologically, but the focus is quite the focus is increasingly shifting to him and his role as quote, "restorer". And we've gone from the kind of, from 1830, to where the experiences and in many respects it's relational. It gets focused on the individual's relationship with God. And now it's, it's it's shifted to doctrinal ideas to concepts to what's the right way to set things up quite quite different than from where we started.

**Carla Long** 36:19

Oh, yeah. And how to keep my believers believing, you know, I'm sure that was all I mean, I know I'm not wanting to criticize, like, I'm not the leader or starter of a church. But I mean, I'm, I feel like Joseph had to continually make things exciting for people and be like this, this is it. This is the truth, this a pillar of fire came down, you know? How can you not believe that?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 36:42

Right. Yeah. So kind of validating kind of ways of validating his leadership because of these special experiences with God.

**Carla Long** 36:52

And the funnel keeps going, because now we're hearing other churches are incorrect. So they are neither joined or not trusted.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 37:00

Exactly. So the next one is from 1842. And this one's written by Joseph to, it looks like to the editor of the Chicago, the paper, the Chicago Democrat. So he's John Wentworth. He's sending this letter to John Wentworth, who is looking for an article about the history of this emerging church. So he can send it to a Mr. Barstow, who's doing a history of New Hampshire. So he's wanting an article, short shortish article that he can then send on to Mr. Barstow. So it's quite condensed the piece about Joseph's experience. And so that, but this was written by Joseph, he's 14 years old, he's confused by the claims of the different churches, he goes to the grove, he's in wrapped in a heavenly vision, he has to see two people, two images exactly alike. So this, they're exactly like, there's the whole light piece. And he's told, basically two things. All denominations are incorrect, go after none of them. And then to that the fullness of the gospel would be made known to him. So those were the two things.

**Carla Long** 38:34

So nothing about his sins being forgiven.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 38:36

Nothing in this one about his sins being forgiven.

**Carla Long** 38:40

He's perfect now.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 38:44

Well 42, maybe, to some, maybe, to some. So that's just kind of interesting that, you know, there's this further development, the dropping away of that idea of that personal experience with God or with Christ, much more about the denominational rightness of one or another, and being told to not go after them. And and that whole idea of this, this phrase, which would become very important, as the church moves from this point. And I think it was common, but I think this really nailed it into the vocabulary is the fullness of the gospel was made known to him, and would be made known to him. And that's, you know, when you think about that fullness of the gospel, that's saying a whole lot. It's a completeness, the wholeness of these kinds of pieces, so, yeah, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 39:51

So if you know, comparing against the earliest one, so in 1832 account, you could have that experience and legitimately become a candlelight, Presbyterian and Methodist Baptist. But by now, you, you, whatever the experience was, it prohibits you from that you can only you're following me just good, the

funnel is getting tighter and tighter here. And now, the experience is totally about the church and about Joseph himself. And that's, that's definitely going to come out in the final one, which is the longest comprehensive, and it's the most. It's the most different from the earliest one, I would say too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 40:33

Yeah, so this last one, how do you go ahead and do this one, this is 1842 as well, which is also the one that that he had the little piece in that he sent to John Wentworth, but, but this time, he's writing for The Times and Seasons, which is the main publication of the church at that point, and where he's promising to make this more comprehensive than in fact, it is several pages long. And he begins here with there's conflict and competition during his 15th year, so that that kind of gives him that leeway is is was he 15? Was he 16 you know, right in there somewhere. But there's this conflict in this competition among churches as he remembers back and how confusing that was and how it's after this initial time of harmony that people had had where, you know, the gospel have been preached in their area, you know, they've been preaching in the area, people were of one mind more or less, and then they divided these factions and they were backbiting and competing and trying to get so so he's

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 41:42

Baptist against Presbyterians against Methodists against Universalist, you know, becomes a, you know, becomes a giant, like religious food fight. So this this one is this one is highly anti-denominations, right? It's very much the whole focus of it is the wrongness of other churches, their Creed's are an abomination to me.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:07

That's the first time that language comes up, sorry.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:09

Yeah. And the that's interesting, because at 42, Joseph has written a creed right called the Epitome of Faith. But that's a topic for another time, I guess. But um, and now the focus is exceedingly on him as the Prophet as the restorer and his understanding of Divinity now as separate personages separate Gods is coming out in this one. And so we've, we've come along a long, different way, from Christ from from Christophany. from Christ appearing, I am the Lord of Glory, I was crucified for the sins of world go your way, your faith has made, you know, that's the first one and now it's to two different beings who are alike in everything, but it's, it's quite different, but and this one goes into significant detail that about how, after the experience when he's talking about it, he becomes the object of ridicule from Methodist and then subsequently persecution. You know, a great difficulty with this particular account, in my view is that you cannot now separate his description of the experience from what's actually happening in the church's life at the time, right? So and the focus on his role as the prophet and restorer is is quite heavy in this one.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 43:44

So I'll just go ahead and read this,

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 43:47

Sure. Yeah,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 43:48

Part about the vision itself. "After I'd retired into the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me and finding myself alone, I kneel down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God, I'd scarcely done so when immediately I was seized upon by some power, which entirely overcome me. And having such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue slit could not speak, thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to be to me for a time as if I were doing to sudden destruction, but exerting all my powers, to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy, which had seized upon me in its very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had such marvelous powers I'd never before felt in any being. Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared that I found myself delivered from the enemy which helped me bound. When the light rested upon me, I saw to personages whose brightness and glory defy all descriptions standing above me in the air, one of them spake unto to me calling me by name, and said pointing to the other. This is my beloved Son here him. The my object and going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right. And I asked the percentages, which of all the sect was right," I'm just skipping through bits and pieces here. "For this time, it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong". And this is,

**Carla Long** 45:38

Oh,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 45:40

"and also asking which I should join, I was answered that I must join, none of them must join none of them, for they were all wrong. And the person who addressed me, who addressed me said that all of their crates were an abomination in sight." Again, first time that this has been said that those professors were all corrupt. They draw near me with their lips, but their hearts are from far from me. They teach doctrines and commandments of men. He forbade me to join with any of them. And many other things he did he say to me, I cannot write at this time. Yeah, so so and and there isn't anywhere here, the sense that there this was about forgiveness. This, this one doesn't have any of that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 46:34

But when you get to the witnesses very low, and you get to the very end of it. Yeah. talks about how he later messed up and,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 46:39

Right, how he had this great feeling afterwards. But it didn't. Yeah, when I came to my, yeah. When it came to myself, I found myself lying on my back looking up into heaven. And then he goes on to talk about how he shared this with others, and all the problems that that caused, but

**Carla Long** 47:02

I just want to be super, super clear, though. Maybe it's your lovely Canadian accent Charmaine. But when you say which sects is right. You mean? S-E-C-T-S I just want to be clear, I just want to be clear. I just, I just want to be clear. Which sect is right, yes,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 47:20

S E C T S. Which was a term that was used a lot in that time, sometimes more than the idea of denomination, because there were so many small groups that weren't full fledged denominations, but were little beginnings of movements and so

**Carla Long** 47:24

Right.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 47:44

Some of the revivalist preachers didn't even identify particularly with the denomination but so yeah, it's just, there's, there's, there's something there's something of a tragedy in this whole story, if I may put it that way. And that is that these these groups on the American frontier in 1820s, and 30s, no precious little Christian tradition. And what they know is the Protestant groups, they're all all Protestant groups, they, what they know is post reformation polemics against Catholicism, and then post reformation polemics against each individual reformation church. And so they've inherited all that, and that they have a theological conundrum, they've got this book called The Bible, which they all believe it's kind of an oracle dropped from heaven. And yet, in this democratized environment, where you don't rely on tradition, but everybody's interpreting for himself, and a few herself here, too, there's a couple of women revival of this whole period to everybody's interpreting for themselves. And they're coming up with all kinds of different systems. And you're stuck because you think Christianity must be a single right system. And we know we already assume the book is right, but everybody's getting their system from the book. And so what do we do? It's, it's, it's really, it's really a tragic story in lots of ways. And so then whatever competition that was among denominations was over things that turn out to be nowadays and ecumenical circles, we'd see a lot of the things that they're fighting over is inconsequential, right, that they have nothing really to do with the substance of the faith, which mode of baptism or so on, you know, so that kind of stuff. But it's, it's it's so interesting when you read this last one to see that the focus that this theme of this theme of darkness increasingly becomes a way to say Satan was against the origins of this church, right? The powers of darkness didn't want this to happen. But that itself is a sort of try attempt to sort of validate Joseph,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 49:56

Well by his power and his will But that, that he keeps that away long enough until the light descends. Yeah,

**Carla Long** 50:06

Yeah and manipulaiton and in some ways a little bit like he's manipulating that the system, it's like, Satan didn't want it to happen. So now look how, look at us look at how amazing we are all that stuff.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:17



Right. I mean, it's still used today, that whole idea that when bad things are happening to somebody who's doing something good, it must be the evil one who is trying to stop it which is just more evidence that this is really what God wants. So

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:34

The implication of that too, is that these other churches which by this time are you know, opposing stuff they're picking up it out of the Mormon movement that they're they're in league with with powers of evil too.

**Carla Long** 50:47

Yeah. Oh, yeah. That's so true. So yeah, that line has been drawn, your interests are side or the evil side right?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:56

You're with us or you are against us right, so.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:59

When I was a sent my last year of seminary, I took a class on psychology of religion taught by Donald Capps. He was a really well known person. He taught pastoral theology, pastoral counseling, psychology of religion and so on. Fascinating classes psychology, and, and I actually wrote a paper for him on on divisions. And he said, Oh, my gosh, this, these different accounts are a perfect illustration of what in the psychology of religion is called role taking theory. That is, as Joseph increasingly takes the role of Prophet, his story about the originating experience increasingly tracks with the role he's taking, right.

**Carla Long** 51:51

Interesting.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 51:51

That's very, very interesting. Dr. Capps wanted me to turn that into a paper for publication, but I had other things on my mind at the time. So that was a long time ago. So

**Carla Long** 52:01

Do you still have that paper? Oh,

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:06

It's probably in boxes in Michigan somewhere, I'm guessing.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 52:10

This was before computers.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:11

Yeah, it was it was back Carla, we used to write papers by lamplight!

**Carla Long** 52:17

On stone!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:18

We walk 10 miles up hill to borrow somebody's lamps. And I'm gonna write that paper with ink we had made you know ourselves so

**Carla Long** 52:26

That you squeeze from the squid.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:31

Well, not Michigan would have squids there. But we have poisonous berries, we use the poisonous berries to make ink.

**Carla Long** 52:38

Well, you know what's really interesting about that, I just, this might not make any sense at all. But there's a meme going around on Facebook or whatever that says, describe a time in your life that shows exactly who you are now. And, and so people are like describing this, you know, something that happened in third grade that it perfectly lines up to who they are now. And like you can kind of take any narrative and make it into who you are. Now, if you really want to, I think I could be wrong about that, but it does seem like that's kind of comparable to what's happening here. And in a way, it's like, take what has happened before, and move it into this place that's really going to help you along, that's really going to describe who you are. Now I'm a prophet, I talk to Jesus, I am the leader of a church. Jesus said, don't join any other church. I am that, so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 53:26

Right. And it and it's increasingly creating what he was, was saying he most wanted, you know, back in that second or third one, which was absolute answers, knowing that this is exactly what God says, what God wants. And he, you know, there's a striving for what he didn't see. And some of the ministers when he was 16 year old years old, where some of them said, I don't know, which I would say was an honest reply, and gave room for God to be God. But for him, it was disillusioning, and, and showed lack of faith. And so he's almost caught in a way I would say, by that desire or need to think that Pure religion if you're using those kinds of biblical terms, Pure religion, means you know, the exact exactly what God wants or exactly how to live, and you will you have the answers for every one. But, but then he kind of gets caught by that. And so, yeah, it's just interesting to see that I did a little contrast, you know, he goes from, in this whole movement of these different versions. He goes from spiritual experience, to absolute knowledge. So that's from the beginning to the end. He goes from forgiveness. In this have sins to being righter than others, which is kind of interesting.

55:07

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 55:09

He goes from knowledge of Christ. And in the first one, this experience of seeing Christ, the one who was crucified for all the world, to focusing on being in the right church, and that the fullness of the gospel is yet to be received, which implies that Jesus is not the fullness of the gospel, of course, and I've not thought about that until I'm working on this today. And it's like, oh, my goodness, there's an implication that the message about who Jesus is, is not enough.

55:46

Wow,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 55:47

yeah, that there's more that's needed. So and that plays out, of course, in, in further development of the theology of the early movement, where it's not a Jesus kind of gets left behind, actually, as, especially as more delving into the Old Testament and taking on vestiges of Old Testament, thought, as interpreted in their time, took them in all kinds of interesting places, like multiple gods and plural marriages and things like that. And Jesus kind of gets left behind as not being enough of the fullness of the gospel,

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 56:32

and I might have missed a second. He also goes from, we're all messed up to, you're all messed up.

**Carla Long** 56:40

That's what I was gonna say. Yeah. Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 56:44

I mean, the, that last count, had an unfortunately long time to shake Community of Christ. identity, we treated it almost as a kind of sacred, that canonical text for way too long. And so we don't anymore. And in my view, at least in our public theology, we don't look at it that way anymore. In instead, we tend to look at the first vision experience as that that it illustrates a principle that's still battle valid in the church, which is, see, ask, God is loving and forgiving. God, God yearns for us to be in relationship with God, no matter what we've done. God can be encountered God, God can even be chatty with us at times, too. And those are sort of principles that it illustrates, but the idea that somehow the last account describing other churches as wrong and Joseph is right. We don't we just don't go there anymore. We have rejected that as the meaning of that experience, whatever the experience was.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 57:53

You know, and in some ways is my last of these progressions kind of fits that well, and that is going from relationship with God, to concerns about eternal destination, to assuring others and self that, that we have the right church. So, you know, I'm not sure if I'm just thinking about the progression is, is there a need for this obsession about what our eternal destination is, in order for? Does that lead us into this thinking that we have to have the right church here? And, and where does it leave that beginning place, which is relationship with God? And and I think in some ways, in the church today, especially with our focus on spiritual formation, and on Christ, we're kind of going back to that whole relationship with God piece, as being foundational, but not just about me and my salvation, but the God of all the God who was crucified for all of the world. And I would say, all of creation. So in some ways,

we've we've backtracked through the having to have the right church, backtrack through the obsession with our eternal destination, to Who is this God? And what what about this God is inviting us to, to reveal who we are to reveal our our anguish, our uncertainty, our need to be assured that we have worth and are forgivable and are loved.

**Carla Long** 59:47

I love that. I love that. I love that idea that, you know, we come back to relationship it's always about relationship. And like you're talking about the salvation, it's a horizontal salvation. It's not Vertical salvation. It's never been a vertical salvation. It's a horizontal one for all of us, not just for me. I think that that is exactly I love that. Oh, sorry. I do

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:00:13

Good!

**Carla Long** 1:00:14

That makes a lot of sense to me. And I hope that that's where we can end up, you know, in the spiritual formation that we've been practicing, and speedy Christ for the last however long. Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:00:26

Wow. You know, our, our Community of Christ Temple has a bunch of vision symbolism in it. And I want to heighten the use of the word symbol here. So the Joseph's experience 1820, whenever it was, has become a symbol for us. It's not a rule, it's not a law. It's not canon, it's a symbol. In other words, as a symbol, it points us into the infinite that God is. And so in our, in our Temple, you, when you walk into the foyer, the the entrance to the sit to the sanctuary is that etched glass of the sacred grove. And then when you look through the door, what you see there is a piece of art that symbolizes the burning bush, right? And so for us, Joseph's vision is a symbol of divine human encounter. And then as you start up the worshipers path, the first thing you see is that beautiful etched piece of the the prodigal child with the loving father. And how fitting is that because the the earliest account was about the prodigal child experiencing forgiveness. And then as you as you walk further up the path, the next thing you encounter is the cross. And so in lots of ways. The first four things you encounters you walk into our our temple, are connected to the symbolism of the earliest account of the vision, I think that's really quite quite important for us to keep in mind.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:01:59

So I have another one. So even before you go up the worshipers path, when you come in to your left, or the little chapel is there's a great big cross that's made out of pieces of wood from all over the world. And it juxtaposes what used to be our approach, which was that our focus was on Joseph's experience in the woods, to taking woods from all over the earth. A point to who Jesus is not to who we are. Yeah, and I just beautiful. I've never thought about that before. So that's kind of cool.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:02:36

So me up. So obviously, this the sprightly experience of Joseph is still provocative for us today. But we cannot let the protect that last account particular become the determiner determinator of meaning, and we have to understand it as a evolving, you know, an evolving account connected to that particular part

of his life and journey. And that we have, because the bushes still burning, we have moved on from there.

**Carla Long** 1:03:07

Yeah, I mean, and just to be honest, if I were gonna write about something that happened me 20 years ago, I make myself look good, too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:03:16

Well, and this is, this is the, this is how we tell our stories, you know, like you were talking about earlier, there's, there's experiences in our lives that at the time, we're just life. And later on, we say, Oh, my that planted something in me that lit a fire in me, led me in a certain direction, I would not have otherwise gone. And look how it has shaped, you know what I am now, though, at the time, you could never have guessed that. And so we, we all reinterpret our experience in the moment in which we are now and

**Carla Long** 1:03:56

During the pandemic of 2020. I never knew that I would become the so and so and whatever. I'm gonna become later.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:04:03

Right, right.

**Carla Long** 1:04:04

The best podcaster in the world.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:04:08

Or have had the best sourdough starter that anyone's ever tasted.

**Carla Long** 1:04:12

That would actually be bigger than the best podcast in the world. Well, this has been a fascinating conversation to tell you the truth. I was not very excited about this conversation, because like, Joseph Smith, always kind of I feel iffy about Joseph Smith, to be honest, like, I mean, I have a hard difficult time with him, he and I fight a lot. And so so talking about the versions of the vision did not thrill me at all. But now I can see like it helps me to see that it was it was a progression. It was Joseph's progression. It was the churches progression. And Charmaine I really loved what you had to say about going back to that beginning that first one and having it be about relationship, which is what Community of Christ is we are a relationship church. And if that's all that we can do, then we've done enough if we can help people have relationship with themselves each other and God, we're good to go.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:05:08

That's an amazing calling to have. And, you know, the Spirit has been equipping us for that, both in ways of humbling. Which not always the most comfortable thing. But also in ways of showing us what restores us, what gives us energy. What helps us see God at work, in our words, actions. And our own vision is to see people connecting with the world around them with their own life, and with God, with God, with Christ, with the Spirit. And that's a pretty amazing thing. Yeah, I think we've, for a long time,

we took that for granted as Oh, yeah, yeah. relationship with God, we pray, or we have experiences or whatever.

**Carla Long** 1:06:08

It's fine, right?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:06:10

It's good. It's essential. Everybody's got it. Well, now we're saying, Well, no, actually. It's deep and rich, and it is the source of meaningful life. So yeah.

**Carla Long** 1:06:22

Well, thank you so much, Tony, do you have anything to add before we head on out?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:06:27

Nope. Just what she said.

**Carla Long** 1:06:29

Well, thank you so much. This has been a wonderful conversation. I so appreciate it. And thanks again. You guys are great.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:06:36

Thank you. Thank you.

**Carla Long** 1:06:37

Bye.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:06:48

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