

406 | Historic Sites Foundation Spring Lecture Series | Storm Clouds on the Horizon: The Competing Theological Visions of Elbert A. Smith and Roy Cheville

Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome. This is Cuppa' Joe where we explore restoration history and I'm your host, Karin Peter. Our guest today is a well known Project Zion contributor, lecturer, participant, reluctant or not, either way, usually with, uh, with Charmaine, but today we just have Tony Chvala-Smith. I shouldn't say just have. That sounds diminutive. I didn't mean that, Tony. I mean, we're lucky to have Tony Chvala-Smith. He is an associate professor and the Paul E. Morden Seminary Chair of Religion at Community of Christ Seminary and Graceland University. Tony also serves as a scripture and theology consultant for Community of Christ and chairs the Theology Formation Team. In addition, he represents Community of Christ on the Faith and Order Convening Table of the National Council of Churches. And Tony and his partner Charmaine regularly work together in their many varied roles for Community of Christ Seminary, Graceland University, and the church, including Project Zion. So, we're very happy to welcome him today. He is one of the featured presenters in the Historic Sites Foundation's Spring Lecture Series. His lecture is titled Storm Clouds on the Horizon: The Competing Theologies of Elbert, Elbert A. Smith and Roy A. Cheville. All of these lectures have long and complicated titles, sometimes hard to get through. So anyway, hi, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:11

Hi, Karin. How are you today?

Karin Peter 02:13

I'm pretty good. I viewed your lecture. I really enjoyed it. So, I'm looking forward to this conversation.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:19

Thanks. Looking forward to the conversation, too.

Karin Peter 02:22

Your lecture discusses the divergent theological perspectives of these two church leaders and, to use a word that's popular now with social media, influencers. So, Roy Cheville and Elbert Smith, and before we kind of delve into what the perspectives were and how they impacted the church, I think our listening audience might appreciate kind of hearing a bit about each of these two people who they were and what were some of their important contributions to the life of the church?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:54

Sure. Well, I'll start with Elbert A. Smith, who was, you know, approximately 20 some years older than Roy Cheville. Elbert A. was born in 1871 and died in 1959. And Elbert A. was the son of David, David Hiram Smith. So, I guess if you want to think of it this way, Elbert A. Smith was a blood heir of the, of

the founding dynasty of the restoration movement. And he served in many important roles in the Reorganization, including counselor to his, the partial brother, Fred M. Smith, in the First Presidency. And Elbert A. went into the role of Presiding Evangelist, at that time it was more likely called Presiding Patriarch, uh, oh, around 18, let's see, it was around 1938 I think he went in, and he stayed in the role for 20 years, and was succeeded by Roy Cheville in that office. So Elbert A. then died in 1959. Roy Cheville had been, became, became Presiding Evangelist in 19, 1958 as W. Wallace Smith's presidency began. So, that's a little bit about Elbert A. Elbert A. was, was articulate, thoughtful, a great writer, not formally educated, but very, extremely thoughtful, articulate person, very much shaped by in representing the old Reorganization theology. I'll say more about that a little later. And Elbert A. had a lot of what you'd call street cred in the church of his, of his day. Very, very popular and much beloved minister in the church. And then Roy Cheville, Roy Cheville was a teenage convert to the church. So, I mentioned, uh, Roy Cheville, had, maybe I didn't mention yet, Roy Cheville was born in 1897 and died in 1986. In fact, Charmaine and I were at the World Conference of 1986. When the presidency came in, I think it was an afternoon session, and announced that brother Cheville had passed away on April 6, if you can believe that he somehow

Karin Peter 05:22

Oh, how loyal of him.

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:25

He somehow, somehow managed to, to, to hold on until April 6. So, Roy Cheville, as I mentioned, was a teenage convert to the church who did not have a family history in it. And he came in with a sort of pragmatic outlook of, well, If, if, if this pans out, I'll stay with it. If, if I think it's not all that good, I won't stay with it. But he obviously did stay with it. And in his day was perhaps the single most educated person in the church, perhaps, on par with Fred M. Smith. Fred M. Smith, of course, had a master's and a PhD. And Roy Cheville did Master's and PhD work at University of Chicago, in the, in the famed divinity school there. So, as far as I know, Roy Cheville was probably the first person in the church, as a church member, to go get formal theological training outside. That, that marks him is quite unique in that era because in that era of the church, um, theological training was what those ministers who had no authority got in churches that were, as the, as they said, that the churches of men and not the, not the true church. So, that was quite remarkable for him to have done that. But he did that because he was encouraged by the then president of Graceland College, We need to, we need to do a religion program here and we need somebody to get some training, and we'd like for you to go to Chicago, that's the place to go. And so that's what Cheville did. And it took him a long time to finish his, his degrees. He did summer, a lot of summer sessions, but finally finished his PhD. I can't remember the exact date, but it was sometime in the 1940s, I think, when he finally finished it.

Karin Peter 07:27

So this is interesting. You, you said that Elbert A. Smith had a lot of street cred in the church and here we, we contrast that with Roy Cheville who had the academic credentials. (Yeah.) That, that right off the bat sets up a very divergent picture of two individuals.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:46

It, it certainly, certainly does. And, you know, we're going to, we're going to follow this track here in a bit because ratios, theological framework, obviously, is going to be very, very different from Elbert A.'s and from a lot of, a lot of active church members' theological frameworks. In the time, though, oh, what Roy, Roy Cheville's particular theological framework did not find him directly criticizing the origins or the history, or the, the theological underpinnings of the church in that day. Where Cheville would become critical would be, he would, he'd be critical of what I would call kind of magical views of religion or views of, views of Christianity that sort of disempowered individuals from, from improving themselves, from doing, you know, from doing, doing their own work on stuff, uh, you know. But, so that's kind of where, I'll say more about his framework here in a bit, but yeah, that's, that's where he's going to be a critic.

Karin Peter 08:53

Okay. So, rather trying to interpret things for a new age without really looking at what they are on the bottom. It reminds me either of the Pharisees or the Sadducees, I'm so glad I'm not in your class anymore so you can't say anything about the fact that can't remember. But one of them simply tried to interpret things so that people could live into them as opposed to really, really criticizing them.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:17

Yeah, yeah. So let me back up to Elbert A. So, Elbert A. wrote lots of books, was a frequent, frequent author in the Herald, was an editor of the Herald, um, you know, spoke widely in the church in the United States. He wrote a book in 1945 called Restoration: A Study in Prophecy. And the title probably tells you where this is going. You, you've heard us, and I'm sure many of our listeners have heard Charmaine and me talk about the old RLDS preaching charts of which there are many different kinds, but perhaps the most famous is the, the, we call the 1912 Jeff Weston preaching chart, which essentially, essentially lays out in a, I don't know, it's probably 12 foot at least long canvas chart, the whole theology of the Reorganization, from creation to consummation, from beginning of things to end of things. And it has a large section that talks about God's various covenants through the ages and the fallings away after those covenants. And essentially it, that chart is a systematic theology of old Reorganization theology.

Karin Peter 10:40

So for our, our LDS perspective folks, it looks a lot like the plan of salvation only with way more detail and what kinda looks to me is the game Chutes and Ladders where this will take you up and this will take you down.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:56

Okay. Yes, the, the upward path is the path towards celestial glory. The downward path is the path towards first of all the pit or the prison house and then you start, you see all kinds of chutes and ladders at that point. And the far, depending, I mean, these, these charts were created for right or left handed people, the one I've got in my head is for a right handed person, so at the far, if you're facing the chart, the far left end of the chart is the three glories and the lake of fire. (All righty.) So, um, yeah, so, uh, Elbert A. Smith's, we, we don't have a text for what the missionaries said when they, when they presented that chart, but we have sources that allow us to reconstruct. So, the first time I saw one of those charts was long after I'd become a member of the Reorganization which, I became a member in

1975 as a, as a college freshman. Um, and there was a long time in the Reorganization when the missionary tool was called the Go Ye and Teach slide series. And depending on which missionary or seventy used or tweaked the series, there were anywhere from five to seven sets of slides that you would watch over a series of nights that were your introduction to the church, and it included, you know, who was Jesus and what kind of church did he start and how did the church fall away? And, and how did Joseph Smith restore it and what, what does it have in it? And then all the way to, you know, end, endtime stuff, right? So, by the time that you got to the end of the slide series when you were, if, if you agreed to be baptized, when you were baptized into the old Reorganization, you had a, a fairly clear idea of what the church believed on a lot of things. But this was, most of this was done orally. Right? But Community of Christ church culture is highly oral, even though we find lots of written texts, of course, but, but lots of things we do are very oral. And so we don't have a full script that went with the old chart. However, if you read Elbert A. Smith's book, Restoration: A Study in Prophecy, that's the closest thing we have to what that chart had on it and what it was about. So, um, basically, the theory of the book is that the restoration was predicted in biblical prophecy. Elbert A., of course, knew nothing about the critical in, critical interpretation of the Bible or the Hebrew prophets, none of that. Very literalistic. Very simple. He had minimal to no understanding of ancient or medieval church history. He he works with, uh, works with that old, that, that favorite old, old saw in the Reorganization that, that the book of Revelation when it talks about the church, the woman going into the wilderness for 1260 days, that actually means years. And that tells us that the original church went into apostasy in 570 AD, is how they would say it. And that it was restored in 1830. He walks through all that stuff. By the way, that little particular thing came from a Reorganization apologist named Daniel McGregor from the late 18, early 1900s. (So, we can thank him for that gem.) Yeah, yeah. So, very literalistic. Very, very simple and even simplistic in its theology. Um, it, it has minimal to no critical historical knowledge of the, of the, you know, the restoration movement. There's obviously no awareness that there's multiple versions of Joseph's first vision. So, on the chart, there are two percentages depicted unlike what should be one, which is the earliest version of Joseph's experience. So, you know, Elbert A. walks through this kind of stuff. And that, that book, because it now has the Smith imprimatur on it, has a lot of authority among church people. That's 1945. And then it goes through re printings, of course. Um, I mentioned in the lecture that as, as recently as the early 1990s, Charmaine and I were visiting a small RLDS at the time, but Community of Christ congregation in a, in a galaxy far, far away (A perfect way to share that information, yes.) where they were still studying Elbert A. Smith's Restoration: A Study in Prophecy. So, this, this old RLDS theology had a long half life. (Oh, my gosh. Yeah. . . . years later.) Yeah. And, and two and a half decades after the radical theological shifts that the Reorganization went through. Excuse me. There's still people talking about, you know, 18, you know, 570 AD and 1830, and the 1260 years, right? So, so that's kind of Elbert A.'s theological framework. He's, he's an apologist for late 19th century, early 20th century, Reorganization faith. That's his framework. I refer to (. . .) the lecture using a phrase from, that Paul Edwards uses for the difference be, Paul Edwards in, in his little one volume history of the Church says, Kind of a difference between Joseph III and Fred M. is that Joseph III was an old world man and Fred M. was a new world man, right? It's the difference between, in a sense, almost the difference between pre-modernity and modernity in the church in the space of, of a father and a son. And Elbert A. Smith is an old world man, right? Even though he lives till almost 1960, uh, he, he still, he still thinks in, and, and why wouldn't you still, I'm just gonna say he still thinks in old, kind of literal, simple theological categories that were part of the Reorganization's apologetic. We're not Mormons, we're not Protestants, we're the one true church, we're going to prove it to you (. . .) a

series of Bible proof texts to show that we have what the early church had. You know, he, he wouldn't have had access to any other kind of knowledge anyway. But that's, that was his framework. Alright, so that's him. Well, along comes Cheville and now, the thing about, thing about Cheville, well, there's lots of things about Cheville. He, he, you, you could, you could literally do a whole university graduate course on Cheville. He wrote so much. But his theological framework is fairly straightforward to tie down. And like, lots of, I will say, like lots of brilliant people, one of the things he wants to always say is, I thought this all up by myself. But oh, no, no, no. When you read Cheville, if you know anything about the history of Christian thought, especially modern Christian thought, you can, you can easily, you can easily place Cheville as an early 20th century modernist or liberal figure, that is. His, his way of thinking about faith issues is shaped by what we would call Protestant liberalism, a, a movement that begins in the United States, begins roughly in, in the 1800s and goes through very pha, vari, various phases, still exists today. But essentially, the Protestant liberalism that Cheville was formed by and an inheritor of is a, it's, it's progressive in terms of how it sees faith. It's socially progressive, but not socially revolutionary, because liberal Protestant theology was the theology of educated elites who are trying to figure out how to make sense of their Christian beliefs in light of modern science, modern economics, modern psychology. How do we do that? And so Cheville shares many traits with that movement. And it's at University of Chicago, oh, he studied with, he studied with really important, uh, figures in, in the liberal tradition. So, yeah, he's, he's, the University of Chicago was the flagship theological school representing early modern liberal theology in the United States. So, that means the adoption of basic biblical criticism, right? So, they were teaching at Chicago that the Pentateuch has multiple sources and multiple authorship. They're connected to European scholarship and so they're raising questions, legitimate questions about the, uh, authorship of Isaiah. They, they were very much into social gospel thinking and that somehow Christianity should impact the society positively. They were shaped by pragmatist and functionalist philosophies. Cheville is very much shaped by functionalist and pragmatist philosophies and these philosophies are going to hold that we, we don't have access to the ultimate truth of things. We have, we have access to is how do things function in people's lives. Right? And this, this comes through in Cheville's theology in that, so, Cheville does not ever offer a significant critique of the early restoration movement. He, he tends to bypass things like polygamy and Joseph's theological train wreckage in Nauvoo in, in my view. Um, he, he's more interested in, Do i, how do ideas work in people's lives and do they help produce mature, thoughtful, ethically minded people? As a pragmatist, those are the ideas you want to pursue. You're not going to ask questions about what is the ultimate essence of things. You're going to ask questions about, um, Does this particular idea create a mature healthy person or not? So, this, this is, this is where Cheville's theology is, is tolerable in the church of his day because he's not, he's not gonna, he's not gonna critique anything except shallow, magical uses of the tradition. Right? So, he, he's, he's, he, he's fine with, with not asking serious historical questions in the Book of Mormon. He's more interested in how the narrative might work in people's lives. And so he writes a book called The Book of Mormon Speaks for Itself in which he simply, essentially, in my view, bypasses the critical questions. He doesn't ever go deep on those kinds of critical questions. But for his students at Graceland University, he will push on their religious frameworks and try to help them deconstruct what he considers childish views of religion. Right? He, he's interested in, in the formation of personalities, who are self actualizing, self acting, who want to, you know, who will, who, who, who see themselves as partners with God in creating a different kind of a future. But he doesn't, you know, his, he, Cheville is anti-supernaturalist. He doesn't, he doesn't think of God as outside of things. That's very much within the framework of Protestant liberalism. He's not

interested in questions like virgin birth and he's more interested in a Jesus you can actually follow and what Jesus taught some on. That's very characteristic of the liberal tradition. And, um, then he wants to see how things will, will, will function in people's lives. So, the problem is that he is willing to ask some critical questions. And he is willing to push on things that an old line restoration thinker shaped by Elbert A. would have trouble with. I'll give you an example. So, this is an example I use in the lecture. So, there, there was this old Reorganization tradition, I'll call it an eschatological, an end time tradition, that before the church could build Zion, there would have to come the supernatural experience that the old timers called the endowment. Now, in Reorganization thought the endowment was not something you got when you ordained. It was something that was going to happen to the whole church in the future. And their image for it came out of their memories and mythology going back to Kirt, the Kirtland Temple. So, this, there was this widespread tradition in the Reorganization that there was going to be a future event, uh, kind of like, you know, the, the, the Pent, like the day of Pentecost, but way pumped up. And it was going to, it was going to just sort of like give Community of Christ, Reorganization people, there's going to be like this giant spiritual energy drink that just made the church finish the task of Zion. It would, it would turn people with no particular medical training into healers who wouldn't need medical training anymore. It was, you know, it was, it was pure magic in one sense. Right? So, this was a widespread tradition in the Reorganization, this thing you hoped for. Uh, people anticipated that someday we would build a temple and it would happen that the endowment would happen there and then all of a sudden, the whole world would be able to recognize that we were the true church. It was all, that's what endowment theology was. And Elbert A. would have, you know, his, his theology would have aligned with that kind of supernaturalist thinking. Well, Cheville, right around 1970 or so writes a book called Expectations for Endowed Living. Cheville is very skeptical of this traditional kind of thinking. Cheville believes that human personality doesn't work that way, and that human personality works by stages, by growth, these very, you know, psychologically, sociologically attune. Human personality grows. We make choices. We learn things. God, we need to think of God as our, our, our partner as we do this work together. And endow, he, he would rather think of endowed living, live, living that, that is for a greater purpose. And that's been deepened and heightened by further education, rather than a sort of supernatural divine outburst that just turns us all into miracle workers. He's not into that. Right? So, so that's, that sets up kind of the difference between a Cheville kind of thinker and an old Elbert A. kind of thinker.

Karin Peter 26:54

So, I see a, I see an automatic issue here. (Uh-huh.) If I'm looking at this from outside and I see these two conflicting ideas of the church, one, one of these is a, is a person in a role of, at that time, Presiding Patriarch, which is a very kind of spiritual blessing, leadership and the other is influencing the minds of young people. (Right.) This can be a problem.

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:26

Yeah, well, and you know, Cheville is highly trained in, then, modern educational theory and sociological theory and psychology. I mean, when you look at the number of titles of books, Cheville wrote, I mean, Cheville wrote on marriage, for goodness sakes, and he wrote on spirituality, and he wrote on theology, and he wrote on the Book of Mormon, very, he wrote a lot of stuff. (Uh-huh.) All with this very highly, uh, progressive, functionalist, pragmat, pragmatist sort of framework in it. And, uh, yeah, you can, you can see tensions here, but let me set, let me set up one of the other tensions. One

of the other tensions was that, um, people can read Mark Scherer's, I believe this would be in his third volume of Mark Scherer's history. So, apparently, Israel A. Smith, uh, had somehow promised Elbert A. that Elbert A.'s son, I think his name was Lynn, would be going into the Presiding Evangelist role. Then Is, Israel A. dies in a car wreck. W. Wallace becomes the new president of the church. W. Wallace changes that to Roy Cheville. So, that creates certain tensions, some of the restorationist sects today look at that as the beginning of apostasy, right, that somehow there was not a Smith in that role. Now Cheville would have seen that as magical thinking, too, um, as kind of a, kind of a weird supernaturalism that somehow the, the role had to go with a Smith name. He, he would have thought that was kind of not very helpful. He would have asked, What does that actually do for you? How does that, how does it impact your spirituality? Right? How does that make you become a better person? Right? So, but there was that, there was a little bit of tension around that. I think that tension came out more later than in, in Cheville's own time. But, but here's the thing, so Cheville as a pragmatist, functionalist, kind of RLDS modernist, he's okay with people using the Book of Mormon and referring to Joseph and Emma because what he's interested in is, How do those ideas work to create a community that has a vision, vision of the world? How do those ideas work in people's lives to create people who are open to growing with God, that's kind of his sort of language? How do those ideas work to create enthusiastic people who want to, want to, you know, to help create a different kind of, of social order. Um, as long as the ideas did that, Cheville can work with them. But the difference is that an Elbert A. person would have seen doctrines like literal verbal expressions, as truths, as, as truths that could not be changed. Whereas a Cheville-ist would say, That's not what these, that's not what these are about. These are not about giving us eternal information. The question is, does the verbiage help us function better as human beings? And if it doesn't, we change the verbiage. Right? So, endowment for Cheville and no longer is this, this supernatural wow thing that's supposed to happen in the future that keeps us disempowered until it happens, right? We can't do anything until the endowment comes. You know, for Cheville endowment has to become a, an active functional category about human improvement and advancement. Right? That's, that's where the term endowment then becomes meaningful. But you can see the tension between those two points of view, right? Those two points of view, one of the things I'm arguing in the lecture is that already in the 1940s and 50s with these two different kinds of points of view, you see what's going, there's going to be a collision, or, or I refer to it as a storm, but we'll use the collision image. It's going to be a collision between these simple literal ideas that, that think the 1912 preaching chart was the last best thing God said. And a functionalist like Cheville, is like, We need to do some updating. You know, we need to find some new ways to phrase things and we need to see if our conceptualities actually work.

Karin Peter 32:04

What happened? What was the collision?

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:08

Well, collision happened in the 1960s and 70s when in the Reorganization for lots of reasons we've, I think we've talked about these in other podcasts and others have, too, but you know, when, when, when in the early 1960s for a variety of reasons--the church is trying to spread into Asia, but realizing that the preaching chart just doesn't work. Right? The old RLDS theology has no relevance or credibility anywhere else. So, what do we do? And so, we start engaging with other Christians rather than trying to talk them down, rather than trying to berate them as less thans, we start learning from other Christian

groups, we, we start making space for critical historiography. Right? Nauvoo Kingdom on the Mississippi and raising new questions about our history. We start taking a whole new look at the New Testament and asking appropriate literary and interpretive questions, Does the New Testament actually teach that there's one original church? Well, no, actually, it doesn't teach that. Right? So, uh, all these cultural, theological, educational, mental shifts that began happening in the 60s, that's the collision. But my argument is that if you look, if you look at Elbert A. Smith's theology and Roy Cheville's theology as far back as the 1940s, what you see is, you, you can, you can see that, that those trains are going to collide eventually, even if they don't in the person of Elbert A. and Roy Cheville. And they don't. (Right.) These are two very gracious, loving individuals. They, their, their, their theologies, as far as I know, do not collide in any kind of public way in their lifetimes.

Karin Peter 33:58

But it was a very ugly collision in the life of the church when it did happen. When the theologies did finally start to interact with one another. It was a very painful time.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:08

Yes, it was the 60s and 70s. I mean, that whole period from say, I'd say 1960 to 1986. That's, that's the whole shaking of the church's, right down to its foundations. Um, and what begins to emerge out of that is Community of Christ, on the one hand, right, Community of Christ, but then restorationist groups were still holding on to kind of like a, an Elbert A. Smith vision of the church at that point. So, yeah, but I think, I think it's a mistake to believe that somehow mystically in the 1960s external forces, external evil forces somehow reshaped the church. Now, it wasn't evil forces. It was different frameworks. These frameworks were already present. The period from 1930 to 1960, you find lots of church leaders beginning to draw on the theologies of primarily Protestant theologians, and you find computers beginning to ask questions and beginning to wonder about the relevance of RLDS ideas. And they don't yet have, uh, a theological canopy in which to fra, frame that very well. But they're asking those kinds of questions, right? So, if Fred M. Smith, using but not attributing the Walter Rauschenbusch social gospel theology, and you have F. Henry, F. Henry Edwards and Arthur Oakman, freely using various kinds of mid-20th century Anglican theology. So,

Karin Peter 35:54

Dare we say the name William Temple? Yes?

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:56

Yes, we can say, to me, he's St. William Temple. I, I love the theology of Archbishop William Temple. But yeah, right, William Temple, Charles Gore, another great Anglican theologian, 20th century Anglican theologian.

Karin Peter 36:10

Harry Fosdick, a very popular preacher of the day.

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:14

Right. So, I, I do not believe the Reorganization was somehow, uh, magically insulated from other theological visions or influences, and that's, and that, and that through faithlessness leaders let that

down in the 60s. I think that's, I think that's a, a false narrative. So, that was kind of one of the, one of the fun things to work through Elbert A. and, and Roy Cheville and, and see, see already in, in their work, where the collision is going to happen. Way down, you know, 30, 40 years down the road.

Karin Peter 36:51

Embedded in a culture that was radically shook up and changing in the 1960s and early 1970s, civil rights, the women's movement, all kinds of different things. Um, some people would say that the church is wrong to be influenced by culture. What would you say to that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:08

I'd, I'd like to see a church that's not influenced by culture. They, they don't exist. So, you, you are either, you're either critically aware of the culture you are influenced by, or you're naively not aware of it. And so when one could, one could say that the, the, the church, you know, the Reorganization of the 1950s was critically unaware of being part of the Donna Reed culture, right? And it's kind of like, you know, uh, this, this is that post World War II return to patriarchy and the church just kind of, most churches just kind of sucked right back into that. And so, so, yeah, you, you, there is no such thing as a Christianity that has no, is not connected to culture. The question is of critical awareness and how you, how you choose to engage with the culture. So.

Karin Peter 38:07

So what does this experience of, uh, really the, the transition period of being, as you said, an old world looking perspective faith community, to being a, uh, future oriented, a discipleship oriented? We could use that word when you talk about this very practical, very pragmatic, functional way of, that Cheville saw faith. What does that have to say to us about how we experience diverse theological perspectives in leadership today, or even in congregational life today?

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:46

Yeah, well, um, I think I probably should say that, you know, philosophically I'm, I am not a pragmatist like Cheville was, and I, I think, uh, the idea that something, the idea that something, uh, that functions well in human lives is functionally true, is problematic to me, because one could say that in white, in white supremacist cultures, racism functions well on people's lives. And it's like, No, I don't think we want to say that. I think we need, I think we need some other way to assess phenomena and Cheville, Cheville's very much embedded in the early, early 20th century American philosophy and so he's not, he doesn't have the tools to go there. Or the willingness to go there. I'm not sure it could be a little of both. (It had to be left to others that came after.) Right. Right. Um, now I, I should, I should say, by the way, I, Charmaine and I use some of Cheville's World Conference sermons from towards the end of his ministry with our Community of Christ theology classes and, boy, his, his World Conference sermons when he was Presiding Evangelist, they're, they're quite aggressive and powerful, uh, and you can, you can watch him slapping literalists right in the face. You know, he, he, he will, he will publicly from the pulpit in the Auditorium during World Conference, criticize the idea that Zion is a, that Zion, we should view Zion as a kind of a city of refuge where we can be all safe and secure while the world around us goes to hell. He'll just lambaste that idea right from the pulpit. Or, or the idea that somehow we, we shouldn't be trying in other places besides Jackson County, Missouri to build, we would call today, signal communities. Yeah, he'll, he, he will mince no words with, with stuff like that. He's, uh, I, I would

say in, I have not heard church leaders of his stature in my day, be that publicly critical of theologies held by, by, by many members as Cheville was. He could get away with it. (Uh huh.) But he could get away with it because he spent a lot of time, uh, not just at Graceland teaching, but out in congregations and out in districts which we had at the time, districts and stakes. He was always out doing stuff and he traveled some internationally, too. So, he, he loved being with church people. He's, he's kind, he strikes me, I didn't know him, but he strikes me as a kind of the mothership extrovert. They just absolutely loved being in the limelight and being with people. And, and when he was he was, all he was, he was going to be, he was going to be, to use the astrophysical phenomena, he's going to be like a, like a black hole and the, all energy and matter within his sphere was going to be sucked into him. He was going to be pretty central in those, in those, those events, so, but my, my point is that he, he was, he could also be, he, he had built that kind of credibility with church people and was, could be extremely pastoral and very thoughtful with individuals in, in pastoral situations. That's something he shared with Elbert A. Smith. So, he spent, he spends decades building up that kind of credibility. And then he is able then publicly to critique, critique views that church members held that are, that he would view as not theologically very sound or substantial or not very helpful. So, but I kind of went off a different direction there. Pull me back to your question, Karin.

Karin Peter 42:46

What I asked is, we went through this experience as a community where two diverse theological perspectives came up against each other. In it, with leadership, we heard we transitioned in this way. So what does that say to how we handle that now diverse theological perspectives in leadership and even in congregational life?

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:09

Yeah, well, first of all, we need to, one, one thing we can learn from Elbert A. and from Roy Cheville is that different theological paradigms exist within the community already. And so, uh, not ignoring that, or pretending that isn't true will not help us at all. So you have to, you have to accept what is, right?, and what is, is that there's different theological paradigms? One, one of the great and amazing surprises for me in doing this work was we still sing, we still sing an Elbert A. hymn in our, in, in our hymnal, and we still have a few, I think four Roy Cheville hymns in our hymnal. And I took a look at the one Elbert A. hymn, which is Silvery Star, it's a Christmas hymn. It's an absolutely gorgeous Christmas hymn. And when you, when you read the lyrics what's interesting is that there's, to me, there's no trace of the old Reorganization preaching chart, there's no trace of the apostasy and the falling away, and Joseph is the true prophet, and we are the true church. There's none of that. What comes into the foreground in that hymn is Christ and the disciples' journey. That's, that's in the foreground of the Silery Star. And then if you go to Roy Cheville's great hymn, uh, Send Forth Your Light O Zion, which we still sing, it's the same thing. In other words, when you, when you, when you step outside of them articulating their theologies and go to poetry, go to hymnody, you see this, all of a sudden you have this amazing confluence. And one of the great discoveries for me is that, I guess it was a, I'll call it a rediscovery, but I didn't kind of expect to see it here. But I did. And that is that these two figures with such different frameworks and frameworks that were going to collide eventually in the church and lead to, to break up, uh, and a complete re-formation of the church. These two figures, when they're singing about Jesus, and discipleship, and Zion, they were singing kind of about the same stuff. (Uh huh.) In other words, so that, so that, uh, speaking out of my framework, Chris, Christology becomes the way to transcend the

differences, right? In other words, if you can, if you can stay focused on Jesus, you, this is kind of simplistic, really, but if you can stay focused on the figure of Jesus, and on the, the demands of following him, you have, you have a way that transcends the differences. Doesn't get rid of the differences, doesn't mean there won't be arguments and disputes, but it, it transcends the differences in, uh, a, a helpful way. And I think that's what they were able to do. And as I said, as far as I know, these two figures never publicly critiqued each other. And, in fact, there's a, one of, uh, Roy Cheville's, uh, conference sermons and one of those on Zion where he's being very critical, he actually quotes Elbert A. on the topic of Zion in a really wonderful, wonderful way. I think I may reference that in the, in the lecture if people want to pay attention that or, or in the question and answer that was after it, but, but um, so these, these two men seemingly valued each other's ministries even with their differences. Um, as far as I know, did not take their differences public, right? Did not, did not try to say, you know, talk the other, you talk down about the other or anything like that. Um

Karin Peter 47:11

No trash talking.

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:12

No, that's the word I want. No trash talking of the other. If they had disagreements, or I, I, I've got, I've got to be sure that Elbert A. heard Roy Cheville say things, sometimes publicly, that just made him shiver inside? And I can't imagine not, but and probably vice versa. But they didn't, they didn't run with that. They stayed focused on the Jesus story and on the following. And I think there's a lot to learn from that for us today. Yeah.

Karin Peter 47:46

So when you, uh, when you began to kind of, uh, unpack this and form your lecture and go forward, what did you see that you could identify as maybe some pieces of their influences in the theology and practice of Community of Christ today?

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:03

Yeah, um, well, a number of things that are gonna come across as kind of practical. I mean, both men had deep pastoral instincts. And that continues to be very important in the role of Presiding Evangelist in the church. There is, in lots of ways, the Presiding Evangelist is the pastor to the whole church. And you can see that in both Cheville and in Elbert A. Um, I think, you know, in some ways this is a difficult question to answer because contributions that people make, sometimes the ones that count the most, are the ones that are invisible, and the historians would never pick up on. (Uh-huh.) So, we, we don't, we don't have access to all of the ways that both of these figures offered a, a well placed word, um, a, a, a kindly half hour listening to someone who was struggling and somehow that lifted that member to some new level in their, in their journey. We don't have access to that. And those are the things that count. Those are, they, they count a lot, but the historians don't know that, don't know about those, usually, unless somebody, you know, recounts it in the diary. Um, I've mentioned hymnody. I think they're, they're hymnody, we're still singing some of their hymns. I'm not typically a fan of Cheville's hymns. But, but Send Forth Thy Light O Zion is a great one. And I, and I truly, truly love that. Um, I think Cheville's influence is very strong still in terms of, you know, theological education matters. And preparation of any kind for ministry matters. And that, that ministry, ministry is, it's, it's both divine grace

and human preparation working side by side. I say Graceland still matters. That's definitely a, you know, a Cheville inheritance Um, Zion still matters, and that's from both of them, even though, uh, we might, we might think of Zion in, in even more global terms and certainly in more social justice terms than either of these figures would have thought, it still matters in Community of Christ thought. So, um, those are some things I can think of right off where their influence is still present. Like I say, the influence of church leaders is, is, I mean, sorry for the hackneyed expression, it's more like leaven. It's, it's, it's often invisible. And it's often in terms of the personal relationships that they have created, fostered, nurtured, and where they've, you know, where, where a church leader has, in a conversation helped someone just, you know, find their way to a new level of creativity and faithfulness in terms of church life. So, those are hard to track.

Karin Peter 50:59

So, as you did your research and prepared, did you gain, did YOU gain any new insight or discover something that was previously unknown to you at least? Was there any, like, epiphany that you get, that you received?

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:14

I sort of hinted at this, but there's still, there's still among church members who, I will say, who are my age and older who have, who have existential connections still to the older Reorganization. There's still a sense that somehow, before the 19, late 1960s, the church was living in a golden age where we were just constantly baptizing new members. Never mind that, that, that our baptismal rate followed the national birth rate, just saying. There's some other kind of (, , ,) going on there. But so, there's this, this kind of false image that the, that somehow the church before, before the leaders messed it up in the 1960s, (Right.) was in a golden age where everything was good and right and calm and undisturbed and there's perfect unity. And it's like, No, no. That ignores, that ignores, first of all, that ignores something like the great struggle around supreme directional control in the 1920s. I mean, that, that literally split off a bunch of members. But also ignores the fact that there were different theological frameworks already in the church. Right? And, and so what, however, unity was expressed, it was not uniformity of thought. Right? So, that was a really important discovery. But here's one of the cool things that happened out of the lecture. So, uh, it was a day or so after the lecture, uh, got a, got a call on my cell phone out of the blue from a number I didn't recognize. Uh, I, I don't know how the person got my cell phone number, but it was Roy Cheville's daughter, right? Charlotte. And we had the most wonderful phone conversation. It was so cool. So, uh, Charlotte would be my parents age, like in the, in her 80s. And she said, she said, I just want to let you know, the family was listening in last night. And, and, and we had th most wonderful chat. And it, it turns out that, that she and her husband and Charmaine and I are going to meet up in October in person and have some coffee together and talk. But she, she affirmed a number of things that I'd shared about, about her dad, and, and, uh, she, she seems a fascinating, interesting individual in her own right who was able to, kind of, go head to head with her dad. Uh, you know

Karin Peter 54:06

He was a pretty forceful guy.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:07

Oh, my gosh, yeah. Yeah. And, and she said, told me this one little story where she, where she said back to him, basically, Hey, you taught me to think for myself.

Karin Peter 54:19

He taught a, a number of Graceland students to think for themselves as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:24

Right. And when your own kids start thinking for themselves it, that (Yeah.) But so, yeah, so that was fascinating, (What a wonderful thing to have happen.) Oh, my gosh, yeah. Yeah. It also reminds you that Community of Christ, uh, as Charmaine likes to say, does not have a family tree, we have a family shrub, and, like, all the branches and roots are kind of like, maybe it's a family hedge. I don't know. It's like all the branches and routes are intertwined and, and, uh, you, you have to be careful who you're talking about.

Karin Peter 54:56

Just a heads up to all our listeners.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:01

That, that was a great experience that came out of this. And I'm, I'm really looking forward to a chance to talk to Charlotte in person. And, you know, find, get the other, the other perspectives, others', you know, family members' perspectives on their, on their dad. So, yeah, cool. That was cool.

Karin Peter 55:21

So, Tony one of the reasons, um, I appreciate these episodes on Cuppa Joe that deal with church history is not just a love of history, but also because I think that exploring our history helps us understand more about our own journey of discipleship. (Uh-huh.) So, this question is more about you in the sense that what from each of these men's lives has influenced you the most? Or maybe another way to say it is, what is most meaningful to you in your discipleship? (Uh-huh.)

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:55

Yeah. That's a, that's a very rich question. Um

Karin Peter 56:02

Is that a nice way to say you don't want to answer?

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:04

No, it's not. I'm thinking (Okay.) on. So, I think I could say that the RLDS missionary who introduced me to the church and taught me the Go Ye and Teach slides back in 1974 and 5 was a kind of an interesting combination of Roy Cheville openness to the new and Elbert A. Smith doctrinal distinctiveness. And he reflected, this, this Community of Christ missionary, self-sustaining missionary in Michigan, who is one of my first mentors, he, he reflected in his own person, these two sides, right, the Elbert A. Smith, Go Ye and Teach, uh, we have the one true gospel blah, blah, blah, that side. And then the Roy Cheville, Let's see if we can put that in some better categories and, and avoid some of the

false supernaturalisms and, and see if we can steer that in a more personally, ethically, health, healthy way. Both of those things were present in my men, in my first mentor. So, those things were and are present in me. But in my theological journey, I've had to learn how to critique both things. And move, move into some territory far beyond where I was then. And that created stresses with my mentor while he was still alive. For example, he was a big proponent of the Book of Mormon. I am not, right? I think the Book of Mormon is fraught with all kinds of issues. That can be the topic for another time. Um, I do not, I do not see the first 14 years of our church history as kind of anything, anything like a golden age. I see, I tend to see it as, like a science experiment that went really wrong and ended in a theological debacle. And that, I'll use the word miraculously, coming out of that a group of people in the 1850s formed what would become a Reorganization that would be on a totally different trajectory from that experience that would lead to what is a, a progressive, socially transforming international group called Community of Christ today, that, that I'm very pleased to belong to. Right? Very pleased to serve in. So, yeah, so those are, those are things that have come out of this experience. I think, uh, I see, because, because there's still a little bit of both the Elbert A. and the Roy Cheville in me from my mentor, I still like things like prayer services, which we don't do much anymore, but I still like things like prayer services. And, um, I still use terms like Zion. And, uh, I still like the idea of endowment in a more of a Roy Cheville kind of way. And, uh, I still think of Zion in terms of spiritual condition. But unlike both of them, I, I also want to speak of Zion in terms of social transformation. So, I don't know, so those, those are things that, you know, kind of float around in me from that. But yeah, I, I represent Community of Christ as it is today. That's where my home is. That's what I represent, uh, formally and officially and, and personally, but I'm also very much at home with people like William Temple and Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, and a whole host of others. So, yeah.

Karin Peter 1:00:12

So as we bring our conversation to a close, Tony, I want to ask you, you titled this Storm Clouds on the Horizon. Do we have some storm clouds on the horizon that you can identify at this point in our journey?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:24

Yes, we do. Um, the, the main storm cloud is connected to the problem of nationalism. Right? And that's not just an American problem. It's a problem in lots of places. Are we going to knee-jerk back to nationalist identities and protecting our own in the face of a rapidly changing world? Or is the church and, and is that going to happen then in the church? (Um-hmm.) Or is the church going to try and be, uh, a forerunner of a different kind of being? Right? Different kind of communal being? That's, that's a, that's going to be a struggle. That's right, right in front of us. Will the church be a place where we can deal with the absolutely ab, abysmal problem of racism? Right? Which is not just American, though we have a horrible history of denial. But it's also Canadian. It's, you can find it pretty much anywhere. Right? Will, will the church be a place where, uh, in Christ, there's neither Jew nor Greek, etc., right? where, where we will, we will learn to practice openness to all people and, and put an end to the practice of racism. Um, so, there, there's in the United States, of course, there's the problem of political polarization that, that affects the church. And how, can the church, can the church be non-political? Actually, no. Jesus' gospel is political. You talk about the reign of God, when you talk about, you know, good news for the poor, and so on. Um, when you, when you say that Christ is God incarnate, he represents every person, then that's going to set you against fascism, nationalism, any kind of

xenophobia or hatred of the foreigner or the other. But that plants us smack dab in the middle of political controversies, certainly in the United States, but elsewhere, too. So, those are some of the storm clouds we're facing. They're there. And they're, they're actually not on the horizon. They're kind of, this, this storm is already, it's already thundering and lightning, so

Karin Peter 1:02:59

Swirling about us a bit.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:01

It is. (Yeah.) So how will we follow Jesus into that storm and remain a community?

Karin Peter 1:03:10

Well, Tony, I want to thank you for joining us today here at Cuppa Joe and I want to point our listeners to your lecture on the [historicsitesfoundation.org](https://www.historicsitesfoundation.org) website where along with the lecture, you can also hear Tony's responses to the multiple questions that were asked after the lecture. And before the lecture, you can hear the two hymns that Tony referenced. One written by Roy Cheville and one written by Elbert A. Smith, and take part in that as well. So again, this is Cuppa Joe which is part of the Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karin Peter. Thanks so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:59

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