

**Josh Mangelson 00:16**

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts the restoration offers for today's world. We aim to feature a variety of guests with roots in the restoration tradition from Community of Christ and our friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The music has been provided by Ben Hillington. You can find his music at Mormon guitar.com.

**Carla Long 01:08**

Hi, my name is Carla Long and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm here with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. And we will be discussing scripture today under our new series, Percolating on Faith. If you're interested in knowing who Tony and Charmaine are, you can check out their introduction interview at projectzionpodcast.org. Welcome Tony and Charmaine, thanks for being here and talking with us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 01:33**

It's our pleasure.

**Carla Long 01:35**

Now, scripture has always been an important part of who we are as members of Community of Christ. Just in the last 10 years we have approved a section in our Doctrine and Covenants that speaks directly to some of our beliefs in Scripture. To be perfectly honest, it's a pretty strong statement. In Section 163, verse seven, the Doctrine and Covenants says, "Scripture is not to be worshiped or idolized. Only God, the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies, is worthy of worship. God's nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, provides the ultimate standard by which any portion of Scripture should be interpreted and applied. It is not pleasing to God, when any passage of scripture is used to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings. Much physical and emotional violence has been done to some of God's beloved children through the misuse of scripture." So that's a pretty strong statement that one of our books of Scripture has to say. And so, my first question for you two has to do with that section. We've heard that scripture can be used in a very damaging way. It can be used to oppress people, make them feel less than. People use scripture to justify violence against their neighbors. And yet, I've heard both of you say, that you find scripture to be liberating. Tell me more about that. How can scripture liberate someone?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:12**

Well, one of the things that I think is paramount, as we start talking about scripture, is our definition of what Scripture is, because that determines how it is understood and how it's going to get used. And typically, in Community of Christ, and definitely in our formal statements, we would acknowledge scripture as a record of people's encounter and understanding of God. And so, when we can do that, when we can say, alright, you know there are elements of the Old Testament that are, that were people's understanding of who God was, and how God encounters us and what God wants. It's

shaped by the cultural governance, images of that day. What does a strong God look like? What does a weak God look like? All of that is at play in their understanding of who God is. It doesn't mean that, because that's not our situation, those things can't be important to us. It does help us to say, what was their context? What was it that their world was telling them about what gods look like or who this God is? For me, being able to start there, is liberating. Here are people just like us, who are trying in the ways that they best know, to communicate who this God is. And if we listened to what they're attempting to point to, we look that direction, and we listened to where it's touched them in their lives, I think that's it. That's the place where we can begin to see and sense and feel. This is the same God, and the things that they know about God can influence, impact us, teach us, today. I was just thinking this morning about a friend who's a scientist, who has some fairly weighty and very valid questions about religion and about scripture. And I think sometimes particularly suspicious of organized religion. But, as we were doing some spiritual practices together, and he began writing about what he knows about God, which he would see as those times when connections happen between people, or when people feel connected to the bigger world, or the cosmos. When he started writing like about that, and expressing that, it sounded just like the psalmist in the Old Testament. And so, there's some things that are consistent throughout Scripture, about who God is and what God is about. That's what's liberating. It's not a static God stuck on pages, where there's just particular ways you must see God. There's this vital relationship throughout time with God. And scripture can help point us to aspects of that but making them into a god or making them so rigid that we try to pick them off the page and apply them to situations or smack people with them is when it gets abusive. Just the start, anyhow.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 06:48**

I guess one way I could approach that is historically, and just say that, in the history of Christianity, there are many moments when an idea or passage or concept from the Bible has been really liberating for people. A classic example is Martin Luther, in the 1500s, struggling with the issue of sin and guilt, and his own constant sense of distance from God, discovering in, especially in, the reading of Galatians, and Romans, about how grace, God's grace bridges the distance. We don't have to bridge the distance, God bridges the distance for us, and how liberating that was for him. I mean, the history of Christianity is full of stories like that, where a particular idea or phrase or concept was personally or communally, liberating for people. It's interesting that in an American religious history, slave owners use scripture, to justify the horrible institution of slavery. And yet, slaves themselves found parts of Scripture liberating, like the exodus narratives and stories of liberation from the Bible. And so, it's an example of how the same collection of texts can be used in bad ways and can be used in good ways. It depends on the reader and on the situation, I suppose. An analogy from our personal lives would be if you think about relationships with good friends. Good friends say all kinds of things all the time, once in a while, they might say something to us, that strikes us as, as really on target. The Bible is this massive collection of things that have been written and said, you know. Once in a while, in the right circumstance, we find something that is right on target, and it speaks directly to our situation and sets us free. I think maybe I would say that, theologically speaking, it's God who uses scripture, to liberate us. Scripture can be used for good or ill by human beings. But when a moment of liberation comes through Scripture, it's probably some kind of divine action at work, using the text in our situation to help us find freedom.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:05**

I really liked that, too, it made me think of another aspect of that. I work with spiritual practices and various groups at different times. One of my favorite things to do is Lectio Divina, or divine reading, and using scripture for meditation and for people to become open to hearing God. That's another aspect of this. From my perspective, God isn't captured by scripture, that does not define who God is. But scripture is a place where God often meets us. And in those moments, the Holy Spirit has room to move in our lives and to bring light, bring peace, bring forgiveness, bring hope. So, scripture is one of those places that is time tested, where we can trust that if we're open, God can meet us there.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 10:10**

So, I just remembered one of my favorite sayings from Thomas Aquinas, which is that a thing is not good or evil in itself, but in the manner of its use. And so, what really is an issue here is, you know, how do we use scripture? What are the principles or rules that guide us in our use of the text? And what do we assume about the text that we're using? Those things matter a lot. And I can guarantee you that behind what I would see as misuses of Scripture, our particular assumptions about what scripture is, that may not be helpful, and following that, particular ways of using that may turn out to be unethical.

**Carla Long 10:56**

Well, what are some good guidelines that we could think about and use when we are reading scripture or talking about scripture? How do we not use it as a weapon? What are some things that we can do?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 11:11**

The first rule of all theology, as far as I see, it is context, context, context. You've heard that before in class.

**Carla Long 11:25**

Oh! Indeed, I have. I have.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 11:28**

So, context is complicated. It's what was the context in which something was written when first received? What is a particular statement's context within a book, like what came before and after? And then what is our context as reader? So, paying attention to context is, is a really important thing, I think. And another important thing is to remember that in Scripture to quote one of our friends and colleagues, Bunda Chibwe, "you have to always try to separate the letter from the envelope." In other words, what is the culturally conditioned wrapping that a particular thing comes in? And what's the thing itself, what's the message being communicated? I think a lot of misuse of Scripture could be dealt with if that were paid attention to. For example, in the New Testament, when a New Testament author says something that would be affirming of slavery, or at least not condemning of it, or that would reflect the first century's, ways of imagining gender and male/female roles, you have to understand that whatever they're saying, almost anybody else in the first century would have said to, that can't be the real message of Scripture. That's part of their own cultural conditioning. So, separating, I love Bunda idea of separating the letter from the envelope.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:57**

As far as things that can help us read scripture more responsibly, there's a couple things. The first one, I think, is that we need to read any particular scripture in light of the whole message of all of our scripture, and this is very simplified, but I would say the whole message of our scriptures is that God is a loving, forgiving, redeeming God, who more than anything else wants to be in relationship with us. It's very, very pared down, but I think it's the heart of the whole thing. And so, we need to read scripture in light of that. And since these are writings from people from different times, with different visions of God, those things that don't fit in that, you know, description, we should be very wary of, and very careful with how we use them. And, you know, lots and lots and lots can be said about that, but I'm just gonna let that one stand as an introduction to that topic. The second is, and this has just been really helpful to me when explaining, particularly to undergrads about how can we use scripture today, and that is to say, within scripture, there are things that are timeless, and there are things that are time bound. When we're reading a passage, we need to do our work to see which of these it is. So, there's a passage in Second Peter, "Tony?", women are the weaker sex.

**Tony Chvala-Smith**

First Peter.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith**

Thank you. You're very handy to have around.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 14:42**

I'm so glad you think so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:43**

My pocket Bible geek.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 14:50**

I wear it proudly.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:52**

So, First Peter, women are the weaker sex. Well, what's that about? Is that timeless or is that time bound? And, then as we look into that time period, and we start looking at what is the Roman gender ideology, well, then we begin to see that it's about a cultural understanding of a physiology difference between men and women. Their way of seeing things is that the male form is the perfect form. Anything different from that is a malformation or a weak form of it. So, the female form was then seen as a malformed male, and so was seen as though a weaker sex. And is that timeless? No, we have much better understanding of biology, thank goodness, today. I keep wanting to say that whoever wrote First Peter had never given birth if they were gonna say that the female is the weaker sex. So then, what is timeless, what are the things that are timeless? And I think those are easy to find, too, that Jesus is about, in his lifetime, in his ministry, and today, special care for those who've been told by the society, that they don't have worth, that they're invisible. He was so intentional about lifting them up and letting everybody around know, that God loved them and knew them and healed them and cared about them. And that's a timeless thing. So, time bound? Timeless? If you don't know, don't use it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 16:45**

That passage from Doctrine and Covenants 163, that you started us off with is so important. Scripture is not divine. And it says that God's nature, as revealed in Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, is the ultimate standard. Right. So, in other words, that's the key for reading and interpreting scripture. Any use of Scripture that does not correspond to what God has shown us of the Divine Self, in Christ, and by the Spirit is likely to be a poor use of Scripture. So, God has shown Godself to be not just just, but lovingly, merciful, embracing the whole creation. Jesus had an Open Table, he always invited people to eat with him, he didn't care if they got themselves cleaned up first or not. Jesus reached out to everybody; this is God's nature. And so, that's, for us in Community of Christ, that's the hardest scripture. Our use of Scripture needs to be measured by that. In theology, we call that a material norm. And I think a lot of problems in use of Scripture, at least in American religious culture, people confuse the difference between a formal authority and a material authority. Formal authority is the place you go to find something. The material authority, though, is the thing within what you're looking at, that gives you the real, the real kind of North Star, the real compass reading. In Community of Christ, we talk about the three standard books. We talk about the Bible, Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants as the standard of authority. This goes back. This was first articulated fairly clearly in around 1879, in our church. So, what happened was, first, the church said, here's our formal authority, the three standard books, and then people pushed back a little bit. Some very courageous people, in the time, pushed back a little bit and said, Yeah, but the three standard books, especially the Doctrine, Covenants, are things that most of us would say, I don't think so. So, are we obligated to believe in everything that's there in the three standard books? And so then, what happened was a little revision, and the revision stated that, we've got this formal authority, Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, but what matters most in it, are in the way they phrased it in that time, the six principles of the gospel: faith, repentance, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment. That's the heart of the gospel. So, in other words, that's the material norm, you measure the value of the rest of it by the centerpiece. And that's been very helpful to us as a church. That way you don't get sidetracked on stuff in Scripture that's interesting or intriguing, but really does not help us navigate up the main channel. I think that's a very important aspect.

**Carla Long 20:07**

We've been talking about scripture for a few minutes now and it kind of sounds like Community of Christ doesn't take the Bible literally. I think that we'll all agree that's true. Can you talk a little bit more about that and how we do it compared to other churches? How do we look at the Bible compared to other churches?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:32**

Well, I think this is, again, an easy place to start and that is with the definition that we tend to use about what scripture is. This is the one we always use in all of our classes, so anybody who's heard this before, so sorry, you'll get to hear it again. Scripture is those writings that over time have been given authority or become sacred to a particular group of people. That already says in it that we don't feel like these words are directly from God's mouth onto the page, but that these are writings that people wrote and that it was over a long period of time, that they began to have authority or became sacred to a particular group of people, not all people, but to a particular group of people. That helps us keep perspective as to what these writings are and what the long history of Christianity, and Judaism before

it, gave us. These were writings that, among many other writings, better described who God was and what their experience of God was, and over time then became more established as authorities, as trustworthy places to understand who God is. I think that's kind of a good place to start and the thing that usually puts us into perspective for people is to remind us all, that for the most part, particularly in the Bible and I would say in the Book of Mormon, as well, the people who are writing these things are not assuming that they're writing scripture. They are writing their encounter with God so that it can be passed on to the next generations. They don't know that this is going to end up being scripture some way down the line. It's the church or it's the body of believers who test these readings over time.

**Carla Long 22:59**

I appreciate that. Okay, thank you.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 23:01**

First of all, we do not accept the idea of inerrancy or infallibility and in our tradition that goes all the way back to Joseph III, who stated publicly, I forget exactly when it was in the late 1800s, I think it was in the Kirtland Temple case, maybe. He stated this publicly, that we don't believe that anything that has passed through human hands is infallible. So technically, we have always rejected the modern fundamentalist idea that scripture is somehow like a text message from God. I think that's really important for us in that we share that particular view with actually the mainstream of the Christian tradition, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, generally would have a view of scripture similar to that. Even Roman Catholics, who understand scripture to be inspired, but also understand that scripture has context that needs to be explored. We will be much more aligned with them than we would be with any kind of fundamentalist perspective. So, when you say, do we believe in taking scripture literally, now I'm going to be the exegete for a minute here.

**Carla Long 24:26**

Please do.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:28**

So, I would say that you have to be clear what you mean. Do you mean apply it literally? The answer is no. I can't think of many scriptures that we, that anybody applies literally. Even people who say the Bible says you women need to be silent in a church don't apply it literally, because in some of those churches, women vote in business meetings and in some of those churches, women teach Sunday School, so they don't actually apply it literally. I'd say that as an exegete, as an interpreter of Scripture, we always want to start with what is the sense of the text? What was being said to whom? By whom? For what reason? Under what occasion? And so, in a sense, you start with the literal sense of the text. When Paul, for example, says, in First Corinthians 11, women need to keep their heads covered, or their hair up, depending on how you translate it. First of all, I'm reading somebody else's mail, let's get that out on the table. I think I want to start with him. What did Paul mean, in that setting? What was he trying to say? In a straightforward sense, you want to understand the original literal sense of those words. But, then it's a long way from there to what do you do with them? Frankly, there are lots of parts of our scriptures that simply are not applicable to us. We know that; we just are afraid to say it sometimes.

**Carla Long** 26:05

Charmaine, you alluded to how these scriptures, how the books of the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, (the Old Testament) and the New Testament, came into being. I wonder if some people think that, you know, all of a sudden, it was just delivered in book form.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:24

Exactly.

**Carla Long** 26:25

Here, here's your Hebrew Scriptures! Here's your New Testament, clunk. But that's not really how it happened. So, can we get an idea? A shortened idea...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:40

You know I could go on for long, it's okay.

**Carla Long** 26:43

. . . about how these books came into being?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 26:47

Sure. Well, yeah, that's what I grew up with, too, and I don't know that it was ever said, overtly, but there was certainly the sense that the Bible just kind of fell from heaven, complete. If I wanted to know what God thought or said, all I had to do was read it. And opening it up, I would then assume that God spoke Middle English. But yeah, I think for lots of us, that's what we end up as the default. It's kind of there in the culture. I think where it really took on new meaning for me, was that as a young adult, I would hear, well, the reason the Bible is the way it is, is because it was a bunch of old white guys that got to decide what was in it. No wonder it has all these things that oppress women. As a young adult, it's like, well, why should I take the Bible seriously? It's obviously just used as a power tool to keep the status quo. And so, I kind of put it to the side. The same could be said of all our scriptures, that for the most part, it's been white males who are old or young of Middle Eastern descent kind of thing. What was really helpful to me was, when I began hanging around with Tony. I know hate to admit it, but I started learning about how we actually did get scripture. And it was a very, very long process. In the Hebrew Bible, there were stories that were passed on orally for hundreds of years. They really weren't written down until rather late. Probably some of the earliest things that were written down, that are in the Hebrew Scriptures were around 900 to 960, somewhere around there. Most of the Old Testament, in a written form, didn't come to that form until 587 to 538, somewhere in there, during the exile. They needed to have it in a written form because they had been ripped out of the out of their land, out of the place where they had known God was with them. They wanted to be sure to be able to pass on their stories of who God was and how God worked with them.

**Carla Long** 29:30

Now Charmaine, are you talking about 537 and 538 BCE, before the Common Era?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 29:36

Absolutely, thank you for that clarification. So, the Old Testament, that's the really crucial time, when it's coming together. Yes, there's some written things that had been there; but, as a whole, it's taking form during that time, that time of great distress, feeling isolated, feeling, for some, the challenge of saying where God is in this terrible thing that has happened. The writing down of the stories is in some ways a response to that question.

**Carla Long** 30:07

So, the Hebrew scriptures came together more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, is that correct?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 30:15

They started coming together. They weren't what we would call canonized until about 400 BCE, as the Torah, the first five books at that point. They are considered authoritative for all Jews by 400, but the Prophets, second segment of the Hebrew scriptures, that's not considered authoritative scripture, canonized, until 200 BCE. What we call the Writings, which includes things like

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 30:47

Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes and so on, Ruth, Chronicles, Daniel,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 30:52

all of those, it's not until 100 CE that that segment of the Hebrew Scriptures is seen as more or less closed, as canon meaningful for all Jews. That's a really long process.

**Carla Long** 31:15

That's about 638 years. You're saying that final section you were talking about, 100, was closed ish in 100 CE, meaning 100 years after the birth of Jesus Christ. Yep, 100 years and in the Common Era.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:31

Right

**Carla Long** 31:31

So, the Hebrew Scriptures, it took 600 years for the Hebrew scriptures to come together.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 31:37

As canon, yeah.

**Carla Long** 31:41

I think people would be very surprised to hear that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:43

I know it was really it was very, very helpful to me, because then you begin to see that these writings weren't just one or two people deciding this is what we need to have, but this is a whole group of people, generations of people, who are saying these particular writings have more value to us than some of the other stories that have been passed on and we're going to keep them. They're going to



have particular teaching and preaching authority for us. Something similar happens in the New Testament, the earliest writings in the New Testament, that we have, would be, or that became canon, would be Paul's writings. (Around 45 to 50, per Tony.) So good to have him here, your pocket Geek!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 32:42

Exactly, so it's better to be good for something!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:48

So around 50 is Paul's earliest writings which are letters to congregations. He does not know he's writing something that will eventually be scripture. He's trying to put out fires and trying to answer questions for these new Christians who are isolated. There's a tiny group of them. They're trying to figure out how do I live this new way in Christ, in this Roman empire. He's trying to give them the basics on how to do that. So, the earliest writings around 50. The latest writings that are in our present New Testament, written around 121, 130. Second Peter, probably one of the latest of them. Even there, it's not until very late in the second century that some people, well there's some people already by 121, 130, who are saying you know some of the things that Paul wrote that we've been passing around for the last 80 years seem to have the same kind of quality and virtue that the Hebrew Scriptures have. They're already starting. That's about 80 years and they're already saying there's something about those writings that have the same kind of weight as the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, but it's not until 400 that what we have now as the New Testament is solidified as the New Testament canon. Some of those came along quicker, were accepted more easily, some of Paul's writings, the gospels. And there are some of that you know. It's like ehh, don't know, Book of Revelation, in some places was not very well received or was abused, was misused, and so there was a big old question mark for some people about whether or not that should be part of this collection.

**Carla Long** 34:53

Well, it still continues to be misused today. Tony, what did you want to say something about that? Not revelation in general, but about the process, about how the Bible came into being?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 35:05

I think Charmaine covered that really well. It's a long process. And I think the only thing I would add is that until about the third century of our era, the primary way people saw scripture was as individual scrolls. It wasn't until roughly in the third century or so, when a new technology was developed called the Codex, or the bound book. They discovered if you take one 20-foot-long sheet of papyrus that is a scroll that you roll, that if you cut sheets of the same size, and stitch them together, you could have a bound book. And that was both convenient. And a problem. It's convenient, because that way you didn't have to unroll a scroll to find your place in a text. But it started to create the sense of the emerging Bible as being a book, rather than as a collection of books. And so that the problem with that is that people assume things about this Bible that they assume about books - this book came from a single author, or this book says the same thing about everything, when in fact, before the aforementioned Codex, people just kind of knew, there's this scroll and scroll and scroll and scroll. And this one says this, this one says this, this one says this, and interpretation was it was a more intentional skill. So, the invention of the Codex was both good and bad. And so now, people refer to the Bible as a book. Even in our own

tradition, the Book of Mormon is made up of separate writings. It too is a library. And the Doctrine of Covenants for us in Community of Christ is a library, too. There are different kinds of stuff in it.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:07**

And it doesn't all agree.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 37:09**

Right.

**Carla Long 37:10**

So, you're talking about Paul, and how his letters to congregations, at some point, became part of the New Testament. I was just thinking about myself. I've read a ton of emails to congregations. I was wondering, if any of those will ever become scripture. Any ideas about that? Tony? Charmaine? The church of Carla? [per Charmaine] Perhaps, if we ever get that far! We haven't mentioned these, actually, but I was thinking about these other gospels that have come into popular media, like the Gospel of Thomas . . .

**Tony Chvala-Smith 37:49**

Gospel of Judas. Gospel of Mary.

**Carla Long 37:53**

. . . and like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and all these other writings from that time that didn't make the final cut of the Hebrew scriptures or the New Testament, where do we where do we put those in our canon?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:07**

Just thinking about that process, that long process, one of the things that we can already gather is that these writings were not generally accepted by early Christians. That's how Paul's letters, that's how the Gospels got passed along, they rang true for people about their experience with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, and with this new movement that was developing and this understanding of God. So, in lots of ways, the writings that do become the New Testament, are checked against experience, are checked against the God of the Old Testament. There are all these checks. Because they ring true, because they're helpful in church life, they get copied, and they get passed along to other people and other congregations. Then they get copied there. Eventually they become read regularly in worship and used to teach new Christians. So, the fact that some of these writings are being discovered now, we already know that because it has taken so long for these to surface, they weren't spread around throughout the Christian world. They were probably more isolated. Perhaps the writing was just in one area. It may have been popularized in that area, but didn't get beyond that, perhaps because it didn't really match with the rest of the Christian story that was being told. It may have simply been written by one person, in one area, and not actually used in worship, more like a novel, or more like, filling in the blanks. You know, inquiring minds want to know about Jesus' childhood or whatever. I think it's helpful to realize that this process, making the cut, was a 300-year process. Does this ring true in little, tiny, isolated congregations of Christians? Does it help them know how to follow Christ? Does it help them know who the Spirit is and how it works? Who God is in the big picture and what it means to be in relationship with God? Apparently, it didn't. It didn't pass those criteria.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 40:50**

If you look at these often-called apocryphal gospels, if you look at them carefully, I think the majority of scholarship today would say that they're later. Many of them come from the mid, the mid second century on. They're generations removed from what became the canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you look at them carefully, they typically share a kind of philosophy that the ancient church figured out in the second century was quite antithetical to the Hebrew Scriptures and to the emerging Christian tradition. The philosophy was called Gnosticism. Gnosticism was basically an extreme form of dualism, Spirit good, matter bad. When you read these apocryphal gospels, lots of times, the way they depict Jesus is as if he were less than fully human. Or, as if his humanity were kind of stage play. They share this gnostic view of the world in which the creation is some sort of cosmic mistake. People in small congregations, and leaders in these congregations, in the second century, in third century, they figured out right away that, a gospel of Judas, had a view of God and the world and Christ that really did not square with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the traditions from the apostles. And so, you can understand why they wouldn't use it. I don't think there's any kind of conspiracy about this, I think it's that these texts just reflected a worldview that was quite different from the Hebrew Bible, and from the earliest Christian traditions. So, they didn't make the cut. The cut never happened on a single day, but over this long process that Charmaine described. It became clear that that their view of the world and of creation, just did not square at all with a God who created a good world, who sent Christ as God's incarnation to redeem the world. I think that's part of the process going on there. You mentioned the Dead Sea Scrolls. Well, the Dead Sea scrolls, these are Jewish texts. A large chunk of the Dead Sea Scrolls actually turned out to be our now oldest Hebrew manuscripts of pretty much every book of the Hebrew Bible, except maybe Esther, and there might be one other that's not there. So, a big chunk of the Dead Sea Scrolls was, we'll say scripture. But then there's all these other writings of the of the Dead Sea community, like the rule of the community, the Damascus rule, and so on. This was their own particular interpretation of Scripture and their own way of organizing community of life. They were sort of like Jewish Puritans, living out in the desert. They thought they were the one true Judaism. Does that ring a bell? Yeah, their interpretations are quite a bit of the other material found there. But the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that were found, they were very valuable because they pushed back the date of our oldest actual manuscripts of the Hebrew text, like by hundreds of years from what we'd had before this discovery of them.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:26**

Yeah, I think that's another part about scripture, understanding where it came from, that's really helpful and to realize that we don't have any original manuscripts of Old or New Testament. What we have now, we have some parts of manuscripts that date back as far as the New Testament. They date back to, I think, the latter part of the second century, but we don't have any of the originals. We have copies of copies of copies of copies. The one that's in the second century might simply be a copy of a copy. But we don't know exactly what the original manuscripts look like. And that's helpful when we start realizing that there are different ways of translating from the oldest manuscripts that there are some changes, usually minor changes in the text and that the process of copying and copying and copying is how we have the manuscripts that we have. Sometimes I think people think, oh, well, we can just go back to the originals, and we'll know exactly what the author said, but it's not quite that simple. But the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of the manuscripts there date back to 250 BCE. If these were just becoming

canon, at around 530 ish, well, canon for everybody at 400, that's only 150 years, between when the first five books of the Old Testament become canon and these manuscripts. It's kind of cool, because it does verify that actually the passing on of the manuscripts has been pretty, what's the word, faithful and that there haven't been that many big changes from the earliest manuscripts we have of both of the Old Testament and New Testament. So, we probably have the best Bible, now, when we use good, scholarly, researched, and translated Bibles than we've ever had.

**Carla Long** 46:58

Yeah, I wanted to ask that question. Community of Christ does have what we call the Inspired Version or the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible. As a whole, does Community of Christ use that Bible in their worship services or in classes? Or what Bible do you prefer to use in your classes or in worship?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 47:21

There are places in Community of Christ, primarily in the English-speaking world, where some people use it. It's popularly called the Inspired Version. I prefer what scholars currently call it, which is the Joseph Smith biblical revision. I think that's a more accurate term for what it is. Some people still use that, but generally, in the English-speaking world, more and more people are using the New Revised Standard Version because it's a really reliable, fairly easy to use and read, modern English translation. It's based on excellent scholarship, on ecumenical scholarship. The people who were part of the NRSV editorial committee did not have to sign some theological statement, they are there because they're competent Bible scholars. There's no perfect translation, but it's a really good one. It's widely used, and in our material, we quote the NRSV. And it's used by the Revised Common Lectionary, which Community of Christ also follows for our weekly scripture reading. It's pretty darn good. Not perfect, but there's no perfect translation.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 48:35

A couple of the things I really like about the NRSV is, first of all, that if the manuscripts—they're looking at all the oldest, closest to the originals that they can find—that where those are unclear or where it's uncertain, they don't try to smooth that out. They let those difficult places still be difficult. They don't interpret it for you. And the other part is that where it is clear that the intent was speaking to both men and women, whereas in like the King James and older versions that would have said, brothers or man, it's now brothers and sisters. So, it's using more inclusive language where that was what was intended. It's one of those translation things where it was translated into the masculine form, rather than into the neutral gender or "you all" kind of language. Those are a couple things I really appreciate about the NRSV. In our earlier tradition, at least when I was growing up, we learned that the reason that we had the Inspired Version is because so many plain and simple truths had been taken out of the Bible, whether intentionally or by mishap, and that the Inspired Version was the rewriting of what had originally been there. And since about the 1960s and 70s, within the church, especially as we became more open to the good biblical scholarship that is out there and could begin to understand what the earliest manuscripts look like, and that, really, there's not that much that has changed. Then, I think our church leaders quite courageously started becoming more open to this better understanding of the history of the Bible and what scholarship showed about the earliest manuscripts. When we teach Community of Christ theology, we usually try to say that what we see in the Inspired Version as being Joseph Smith, Jr's attempt to do a commentary on passages, trying to harmonize things that are in the

Old Testament with the New Testament. And so, seeing those places where additions have been made, or changes have been made, is kind of his ongoing thinking about and trying to figure out how does this passage in the Old Testament relate to this passage in the New Testament and trying to bring some resolution, often, to it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 51:41**

I think, this is just my own personal opinion, is that the Joseph Smith biblical revision tells us more about Joseph Smith and his thinking than it tells us about the Bible. If you think about it, 90 some percent of it is still the King James Version. And it's interesting and fascinating to see what were Joseph's assumptions as he was working on the Bible, and as Charmaine mentioned harmonizing. It's kind of interesting to me that in the early 1800s, people typically did not have a way to think, to understand how the Bible could disagree with itself because they were working with an assumption of Scripture is sort of a text message from God. Of course, that's anachronistic. But you know what I mean. And so, if it were a text message from God, how could it disagree with itself? And that assumption is behind Joseph trying to harmonize stuff? In terms of spiritual formation, Charmaine and I will both say, use the Bible that helps you connect to God, but don't make high claims for it. So, if the Inspired Version is the Bible you like to use in your personal devotional life, use it, but understand that it's not infallible, it's not perfect. And also, understand that it probably is not going to get you closer to the original text. So that's, that's kind of our standard way of approaching it.

**Carla Long 53:17**

Just to close out the section on the Bible and where it came from, and how it became a book, I remember, about 10 years ago, when the Dead Sea Scrolls, were touring the country. I remember my parents and I went to see the Dead Sea Scrolls. In my mind, I expected to see just a huge scroll with perfectly legible written words, so that you could go back to the original manuscript, and you could say, well, this is really what God actually said. I remember looking at the Dead Sea Scrolls, and I think my mother probably said it best when she said, "Dead Sea Scrolls, these are more like dead sea scraps." Yep (per Tony). Because they were just tiny, in many cases, tiny scraps of paper that you know, are more than 2000 years old, and they're very difficult to work with and very difficult to read. When you say go back to the originals, it's just completely impossible.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 54:22**

Yeah, lots of manuscript evidence comes in the form of scraps. Charmaine alluded to this a few minutes ago that the oldest fragment of a New Testament book that we have is a little piece of papyrus, about the size of a three by five note card. It's called papyrus number 52. Not to be confused with the B 52s from the 80s. P 52 has a little bit of John, Chapter 18 on it, and scholars who focus on ancient handwriting, on ancient materials, dated it to the first half of the second century. That is really, really old. That's really close to the time of the actual writing of the Gospel of John. That could be a second-generation fragment. Basically, we don't just have scraps, we have scraps, we have whole books, we have collections of books. In what's called the text criticism of the New Testament, let me define text criticism as the art and science of trying to reconstruct an approximate original from the available manuscripts, pieces, and scraps. Thank you, Helen. With the New Testament, we have over 5000 collections, books, manuscripts, fragments, scraps. Nowadays this stuff is all done by computer, but in the old days, the correlation was done by hand. It was very slow and laborious. It's fascinating. I

helped a former professor of mine for several months on a text critical project that wasn't related to the Bible. It was related to a second century Greek orator, pagan orator, named Polomo. We had, I think, 18 manuscripts to work with of particular orator's most famous speech. The reason the professor was doing this project was because the last time these texts had been collated was in roughly 1900. In the meantime, the number of manuscripts that had been discovered for this particular speech had doubled. We now had 18. So, we spent months of me sitting across the table from him, and we drank a lot of coffee. It was slow work. We went manuscript by manuscript. We had a master that we kept notes on, and we would read through the manuscript word by word, each taking turns and marking differences, manuscript D differs from the standard readings here and here and here and so on. Sometimes when you're reading these manuscripts you could see that the scribe who was copying this was like. I want to go out. I want to do something; I want to see a movie. Their handwriting would sort of trail off and they would get sloppy. Other scribes were OCD on how carefully they wrote. They are easier to read but the scribes that were missing, the scribes who I'm guessing were probably 21 years old. The 21-year-old scribes were doing this late. They sort of got bored and you could tell in their handwriting. That's the old way to do it. The purpose of doing this was to come up with what's called a new critical text. There was an old critical text. A critical text is the text that has been created by the careful correlation of manuscripts. A critical text is your best educated guess at what the original approximately read. So, when new manuscripts are discovered, you have to go through the process again. I can do it. My interests are much more theological. I did the work on this project in the early 90s. Since then, all this kind of stuff, you could scan them and just computerize it now. It'd be so much easier to do. You wouldn't drink as much coffee, which is also its own problem. I haven't been drinking that much coffee since with Dr. Reeder, but anyway, that's the old way to do it.

**Carla Long** 58:43

Sounds pretty tedious. That sounds like a lot of work.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 58:46

Something you probably would not like to do, Carla?

**Carla Long** 58:49

It sounds exactly like that! I'm going to switch it up a little bit. I want to talk a little bit about the Community of Christ statement on scripture. How many years ago did we come up with this? In 2003. Gentle listeners, if you're interested in reading our scripture statement you can go to our church's website at [cofchrist.org](http://cofchrist.org) and just type in "statement on scripture" in the search bar and you will see that we have nine affirmations on scripture and how Community of Christ views scripture. Now my question for you, Tony, and Charmaine, is how did Community of Christ come up with these? What did we do in order to have these nine affirmations on scripture?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 59:38

In 2002 the church created the Theology Task Force. Now this is not the first time the Theology Task Force had been created in the church. One was created in the early 1960s and that one was very instrumental in helping the church through some massive theological transitions then. It was time to do a new one, to have a new theology task force because the early 2000s are not the 1960s and all kinds of new issues had emerged since then.

**Carla Long** 1:00:11

That's right. And that's when the church changed its name from RLDS to Community of Christ.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:00:15

Right. Correct. So, this would have happened a couple years after that. The Presidency convened this Task force and Charmaine, and I were both on it. Peter Judd was a member of the presidency at the time, and he chaired it. We had a fairly good size group of people. Our primary task was to begin reflecting on the church's theology today. Where are places we need clarification? Where are places we need help or places we need statements? We determined right away that before we could do any other work, we needed to have a new fresh statement on scripture because of the way scripture was being used, in not only American culture, popularly, but you now have Community of Christ as a worldwide church. We needed to have a sort of benchmark or a baseline statement, what is scripture for Community of Christ, before we could do any other theological work. That's how it began. We spent the whole first year, I mean, 2002, where all the meetings were about scripture. Then we created the statement that came out in June of 2003.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:01:26

I think one of the observations that is borne out among all the members of the Committee, but also for anybody who has worked in the church and different parts of the church, different places in the church, is that we tended to take on the view of Scripture, and sometimes aspects of theology, that were most prominent or loudest, in the places where we lived. And so, in southeastern parts of the US, understanding of Scripture was very, very different from how it was in the northwest part of the US, shaped by the different religious and non-religious cultures. I could see that part of that was because, as a church, we had not in a very long time spent a lot of attention on describing, how is it that we have tended to see and use scripture over our time as a denomination. It was really crucial because you could see this at World Conference, probably still can, that many of the heated, most heated battles, were over interpretation of Scripture. Not having a common understanding, or encouraged to see scripture in a certain way, was creating conflict within the body. Because we're most influenced by where we happen to be in the church, rather than what the church's view on scripture was.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:03:09

I think that's really helpful to know about and also think it's helpful to know that these kinds of statements in Community of Christ are meant to guide the institution, they're not coerced. That is our formal public statement on scripture. And it's likely that in any local jurisdiction of Community of Christ, individuals, may or may not use it, but it is still our formal public statement. We have a long history going back to Joseph III of trying not to coerce belief on particular doctrines or ideas.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:03:47

No one has to check off their belief in any or all of these. But it is a really good description of how, as a church, we have tended to see scripture and to be more articulate about it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:04:01

I think, a very simple way to understand the scripture statement is that it's an attempt on the part of the church to say, in the 21st century, for now, what would a responsible Community of Christ interpretation of Scripture look like? The key word there is responsible interpretation. That's what it tries to do.

**Carla Long** 1:04:22

In looking over the affirmations, the nine affirmations here in front of me, we've already talked about many of them, even in this last conversation that we've been having. For instance, Affirmation Three, the very first sentence is scripture is a library of books that speaks in many voices. It's not that one book, right? A lot of people think that it is. We find the Living Word in Scripture, so on and so forth. Which one of these speaks most to you? Or which one do you find to be very important in your discipleship?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:04:56

Well, I can speak to two of them that are really important to me. You just used the phrase Living Word. Technically, in formal Community of Christ theology, we do not use the term Word of God for scripture, we use it for Jesus Christ, and so the Living Word is not texts, or books. It's a person. To me that is so important because, if at the center of one's spirituality, faith, theology, mission, identity, and religion is a person, that tends to personalize and humanize what you do. And it's not our job in Community of Christ to make a bunch of people conform to a particular interpretation of an idea, or to a particular favorite passage of scripture. It's about a relationship with a person, a relationship with a person is a living thing. And so, to me, that's just so important. So many abuses of Scripture, so many ecclesiastical abuses of persons across denominations, I think could be mitigated if we constantly remembered that at the center of Christianity is a person, not an idea. And the other one that's really important to me is [Affirmation] four, the one about authority. You know, proper Christian Bibles are authority, authority, authority, authority. You will respect my authority! [laughing] That's right. It's like, what do you mean by authority? And what we say here is that your model of authority guides how you use things. So, we say, scripture's authority is derived from the model of Christ, who came to be a servant. In other words, just as Jesus did not come to oppress, dominate, control, manipulate, subject people, any use of Scripture that tries to do that does not then correspond to Jesus' own way. I mean, in the gospels, people say, of Jesus, no, this man speaks with authority. They encounter something entirely different. The authority that they encounter is not a legal authority. It's not a compulsion type authority. It's not, it's not brute force. It's the authority of boundless love. And so, this affirmation is trying to say, when we say scriptures are authority, we have to always keep in mind how did Jesus live out his authority? And I think that can potentially keep the church and incarnations from abusing people with Scripture.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:07:41

Tony stole one of mine, but I'll pick another one, Six, I really like Affirmation Six, six talks about faith, experience, tradition, and scholarship, each have something to contribute to our understanding of Scripture. In wrestling to hear and respond to the witness of scripture, the church must value the light that each of these sources may offer. And I think that it's really crucial that we not rely on just any one of those four things, faith experience, tradition and scholarship, but that we use them all. Then we have a self-correcting system for how we both read, understand, and then also how we apply scripture when we use and value all of those. Then the other one that is really important to me, is Eight. And it says



disciples are called to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the scriptures, so that they may ever increase in love for God, neighbor, and self, uphold the dignity and worth of all persons and faithfully follow the way of Jesus Christ. I love that one because it doesn't say, well, they should grow in their knowledge and understanding of scriptures so that they can beat someone else in an argument about what's the right way to interpret it so that you can use it to smack somebody down. But it's for God's love to have freedom to move and that people might know their worth, their value before God. I think if we can let that one come to the fore, then scripture is really powerful and life changing and transforming and can plant the seeds of people knowing that Christ is with them, that the Spirit can use them, and help change the world in amazing ways. So, I like that.

**Carla Long** 1:09:39

That was an incredible segue to what is probably our final question, okay. We're running short on time. If studying the Bible can increase one's discipleship and love of other and love of God, how can just an average person, one who doesn't have a degree in theology, or one who's never even maybe taken a class on scripture, how does an average person study the Bible in a responsible way?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:10:07

I would say the first thing one should do is get oneself a good study bible, for example, a New Oxford Annotated NRSV that has good footnotes, good introductions, so that you can get a little background behind particular passages or words or ideas. That's always helpful. I think another thing is to do it with a group, a group in which you've got some basic rules of respect and you know we're not going to try and convert or dominate each other. Here we're going to try and be open. I think individuals going off on their own with scripture sometimes yields good results and sometimes not, be the corrective of a group, that's always very helpful. Charmaine, what do you think?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:11:02

I would agree with those two things, but I'd also say it would be probably really helpful to get a commentary so that you're using the resources that good scholars have pulled together. Let them do some of the work. Just know that there's all kinds of scholarship out there. Some of it is more agenda ridden than others, so you want to find some good scholarship that is most intent on giving us the clearest understanding of what the text says, rather than promoting a particular interpretation or use of those scriptures. A single commentary that we really like and is pretty easy to use and read is *The People's New Testament Commentary* and also *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentaries* are really good. That's a series that I think any church would be very pleased to have available for people to use either for Bible study or for preaching. Then the other is the *Interpretation Bible Studies*. We've just found them to be a very accessible. What they do is they use the best available materials for understanding where the texts came from, when they were written, what the situation of the author is. They use all of that and make it really understandable. I'm always amazed at how they do this in a pretty brief description of a passage and then there's usually some questions for discussion afterwards, so it's a good way to learn about that book. These *Interpretation Bible Studies* are just on a single book and they have maybe seven to 10 lessons in them, and you just learn a whole lot. Some of them have really good questions, too, but I would encourage you then to make some spiritual formation kinds of questions, too, that help us look at our own discipleship through the struggles and the challenges of the writers of scripture.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:13:35**

I'm not sure, I think it might still be on the church website. Charmaine and I have put on the website a list of reliable resources for serious scripture study. I think it's still there.

**Carla Long 1:13:48**

So maybe they go to the search bar and type in scripture study.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:13:51**

They might try that and see if it's there. It should be.

**Carla Long 1:13:57**

If I remember correctly, you two have recently put out a class on the introduction to scripture and they could buy that from Herald House at Herald house.org. If they wanted to, it's a USB or it's a USB-stick and it's a video class. Is that right?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:14:15**

It's a video class, but it also has a text that comes with it, so there's some things that are in the text that aren't on the video and some things that are on the video that aren't in the text, but yet set up as eight, hour and a half long sessions. We even are trying to teach some exegetical steps, some ways of going deeper into where does scripture come from and how can we use it in the life of the church.

**Carla Long 1:14:46**

And you could do that on an individual basis or a congregational basis, taking eight classes and do those?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:14:51**

Yeah, it's set up to be done as a small group

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:14:56**

and required for ordination, one of the classes that's required for ordination.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:15:02**

So, it's that could be a tool for folks to use.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:15:06**

Probably not good for Sunday School, because usually Sunday School times are 45 minutes or less. And it does kind of require a commitment on the part of those who are involved in it, so that they do the readings or listening to things ahead. Otherwise, they'll only get to hear us. They won't have anything to discuss among themselves.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:15:34**

In response to the question, what can the average person do, another thing I would say is that whenever you're reading or studying scripture, keep reminding yourself who Jesus is, right? Because

you will read things in this giant library of texts called scripture that are really conducive to a vital relationship with God. And you will read things in there that are not ready for primetime. Right? I quote this a lot. This is a little statement. I think it comes from the British poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, back in the 19th century. He is reputed to have said something like, "Christianity is found in the Bible. But not everything in the Bible is Christian." My suggestion for the average reader is, before you do anything else, try to get a sense for who Jesus is. Because if you stay focused on that, then you won't go too far astray on the weird stuff, the violent stuff, and the downright nasty stuff that's in Scripture. I mean, there's all of that. Scriptures like the old movie, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," there's all three in there. It takes a lot of takes prayer and discernment and a community and some training and skills, and a real desire to come to know who the God revealed in Christ is, to make your way through the good, the bad and the ugly and do some sorting.

**Carla Long** 1:17:08

Well, thank you. That sounds like an excellent wrap up to me. Tony, Charmaine, thank you so much for your wisdom and your guidance. And, you know, just the idea that there's so much more out there than what we can even just read and decide on our own, that we do need all those different aspects to understand what Scripture is and to understand who Christ and God are through those scriptures. So, thank you so much.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:17:33

Thank you.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:17:34

Thank you. Our pleasure.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:18:04

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