

**Josh Mangelson** 00:22

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**Carla Long** 00:53

Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. My name is Carla Long, and I'm your host for Percolating on Faith, a series where we explore Community of Christ topics with two of my favorite people in the universe: Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Welcome back to the show, Tony and Charmaine!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:11

Hi Carla!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 01:11

Hi Carla, happy to be back.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:13

Our favorite interviewer in the whole wide world.

**Carla Long** 01:16

I'm blushing. If only you could see, gentle listeners. I'm not really, but thank you.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:21

Maybe in the cosmos?

**Carla Long** 01:25

Oh, wow. Thank you. Well, today's topic is something that I learned about a long time ago actually from Tony and Charmaine in their Community of Christ theology class that they taught me in seminary. And I was thinking about it the other day, and I thought how good it would be for people out here and in the podcast world to hear about it and hear about kind of like how Community of Christ theology has developed over the last 160 years?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:55

ish.

**Carla Long 01:56**

Right, something like that. So I'm going to let them kind of take it away. I know that they think this is an important topic, too. So I'm going to go ahead and let Charmaine talk about why it's an important topic for us. And then I'm going to let Tony explain to you what we're going to be talking about.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:11**

Cool. So one of the questions that we get asked within the church a lot is, "Why has our theology changed so much?" And particularly for people who are our age and older, there's this... But there's the question of why is..., why do we talk about different things and not believe the same things that I learned when I was growing up? And there's just the sense that there has been these shifts and changes over time, and people are curious about what happened and why that happened. And I think also sometimes underneath it, there's the concern that if we've made changes, how do we know that we're still being faithful to God's call for us in the world? And so being a bit of a puzzler, I like to have questions like that, to try and then figure out how can we describe what is happening. And so one of the things that we came up with was looking at the church's theology in three eras. Now, one of the other things that precipitated this is that there are people from outside of the denomination, too, who have raised this question for us and got our minds working about it. We had a student a number of years ago, who came to the seminary, who came from a Mormon background, and had learned some things about us. And he was just curious, he said, "How could two groups that came from the same roots, from the same beginning and experiences have such different theologies?" And this was during a week, a three week focus session in the seminary, and he had to leave because of some family emergency. So he was only able to stay for the first four days actually of the first week. But already by that time, he had he'd gotten his answer about why are you..., why are we so different theologically. So that was really helpful for us to, again, to put some perspective on this question of why has our theology changed so much, and how can we understand those developments or those shifts, and name them and describe them.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 04:48**

So, what we've done over the years is, as we've studied Community of Christ theology, researched it, in order to teach it, we've come up with a little pattern that helps us kind of [to] understand the development. Basically, as we look at the church's development since around 1830, what we came to see was that you could clump the theology of the church under three headings. The first heading, roughly from the period 1830 to 1880, we refer to as Joseph-centered theology. Now, of course, Joseph was murdered in 1844. And what we meant by that was that first period of our denomination's history, the focus was on who is the true prophet. And so, when the major divisions took place, after 1844, even though Joseph Smith Jr. was dead, the question was, who's the right successor, of course who's the right successor. And so, when we say Joseph-centered, we could title it 'prophet-center' too, but of course, Joseph was..., Joseph had come to be seen by the Nauvoo period as sort of a living Oracle. And so that seems to work very well. If you look at early Reorganization theology, there's a heavy focus on trying to prove that Joseph Smith III is the right successor. So then the second period we came up with, from roughly 1880 to 1960, we've termed church-centered theology. So we moved roughly from a kind of

Joseph-centered theology to a theology that focused on the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as the one true church. The focus of the literature, the focus of missionary work, the focus of, you know, hymnody, and scripture study, everything focused in that period on proving somehow that we were the true first, the true successor of the original church started by Joseph Jr. But also, the true and one and only authorized Christian church. And that period, you know, from roughly 1880 to 1960, when you think about it, that's almost 100 years. That theology had a..., got really deeply embedded in the Reorganization's psyche, and it's still kind of there, shimmering in the background of Community of Christ theology, even as we move farther away from it. So then the third period, the period that the church entered into in around 1960, and that we are still in, Charmain and I termed Christ-centered. And if you begin to look at church publications and literature, especially the official literature, from the 1960s, what you see is that the focus is moving away from both Joseph Smith Jr. and from being the one to church, to who is Jesus Christ? What is he about? What is his mission in the world? And how do we align with it? And that's the period we are still in. So one thing we should say is that this is kind of a construct, and theologians and historians like to create little historical constructs like this, because it helps organize data. It's not like magically, in 1879, the church was Joseph-centered, and then all of a sudden in 1880, it became church-centered. It's not quite like that. These periods bleed into each other. It's more like as we looked at official church literature and publications, you can see the focus changing. And if you follow that change, you get a real sense of the development of Community of Christ theology. If you want to get the big picture of our development, you look at Doctrine and Covenants 1. Doctrine and Covenants 1, at least Section 1 for us, has that phrase, "The only true and living church upon the face of the earth with which I the Lord am well pleased." That's the starting point. If you jump all the way ahead, to oh, what is it, around the year 2000, and the 161st section of our Doctrine and Covenants, you find the statement, "Claim your unique and sacred place within the circle of those who call upon Jesus Christ." So when Charmaine and I teach classes on Community of Christ theology, we usually put those two texts up, one from I don't know what is it, 1831 or 1832, [and] one from 2000. And basically, you can see the whole trajectory there. How did we get from a church that was..., that claimed to be started by a prophet who was restoring the real true Christian church to earth and nothing else really counts? How do we get from there to a church which says: A) we've got a unique story, but we're one of the larger circle of people who call upon Jesus Christ. That's if you understand that development, how we got from one place to the other over that long period, then you kind of understand who we are and who we are becoming.

**Carla Long 10:18**

Well, that's a really awesome introduction. I mean, it really..., I mean, just using those two scriptures really shows, as you said, like where we are and where we are now. Where we used to be and where we are now. So let's kind of dive into it if you guys are okay with that. I mean, let's get into what exactly you mean by the Joseph-centered era? I mean, what does that look like? And my second question will be, and you might want to add this in, is what moved us away from there?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:46**

Mm hmm. Yeah, that's a really good..., good places to go. So I think, when we talk about it being Joseph-centered, we, at least as we're looking back, so much of the early part of the church was focused around the person, the personality, the spiritual insights, spiritual gifts, leadership ability, charisma, and probably just strength of belief and what he was about, of Joseph Smith, Jr. And what tended to happen, well, I will..., I don't know if we talked about this in other podcasts, but when we talk about theology, we often try to remind people that there are four voices of theology that are a part of each of our theologies. So one part of anyone's theology probably is scripture or sacred texts of some kind. Tradition, those things that have been passed along. Reason, how we think about, analyze, ask questions about our faith, and experience. And experience includes the culture around us, how we understand the world, personal spiritual experience, the experience of others that have been passed on to us, our awareness, our language, all those kinds of things. So, there's those four voices: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. And they're all important in any denomination, or any group's development of theology. But what you can see, as you study our earliest history, is that within the first 10..., well by the end of the first 10 years, the church as a whole was depending on Joseph for all four of those voices. So rather than the body lifting up all of these and using these different four voices to check..., to be a 'checks and balances,' suddenly Joseph was the interpreter and writer of scripture. And the body as a whole was not necessarily the ones who decided whether or not some of his words were scripture, but as he..., the ways in which he put them forward said that they were scripture. And so the body was..., the body of the church was not the determiner of scripture, which is very different from how the Old Testament and New Testament came to us. Joseph becomes the one who determines what is scripture. It's Joseph's interpretation of tradition that determines what are the sacraments that we will have in the church. What aspects of other Christian..., of Christianity that came before him will be part of the earliest theology in the church? And, you know, one of the things that's very evident as you go back into that time period is that Joseph is both influenced by other Christian traditions of the time, and is cherry picking, I guess is a way to say it. He's taking bits and pieces from the kinds of Christianity around him and creating a new collection in the church. And he became the one, the authority that..., through which..., the authority people looked to, to determine what parts of tradition would be carried on from the earlier Christianity and other places. He became the voice in the reason section. He became the voice that determined what would be foundational, orthodox within the group. And when, you know, when others questioned that sometimes, they were no longer in leadership roles. So there wasn't a lot of checks and balances there. And then experience: Joseph's own spiritual experiences, Joseph's interpretations of what was happening to the group then became he..., he became the one who interpreted what those meant for the whole group, and what God was saying or doing in their midst. So, one of the things that was happening is that there really became a dependency on Joseph for all of those different aspects of theological thought. And from our perspective, from..., and I think I can say this for many in Community of Christ who have studied the early periods and tried to understand the theology of that time, we would see ourselves as really part of the dissenters. Being kind of the ones who have received the legacy of the dissenters in the 1840s, those who said, you know, some of the things that Joseph is saying, whether they're considered scripture by others, or whether..., or some of the things that he's

doing, some of the new things that he's instituting, it's particularly true in Nauvoo, we are questioning, we are challenging. People were no longer willing to let Joseph be the only voice that interpreted those four voices of theology. And so, I think Tony wants to jump in.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 17:27**

Yeah, so I mean I think that's a really good summary and analysis of that. I, you know, so I look at that early period, increasingly the community that formed around Joseph Smith Jr. conceded all theological authority to him. That is, instead of theology being the work of the body, in which those four voices are used by the whole body to determine who we are and what we're going to say, what happens is that Joseph, as I mentioned before, Joseph becomes the living Oracle. And he simply is the theological last word. Now that wasn't satisfying for a number of people in the early Restoration movement. But you see, you have to account for why..., how can you go from say, 1830, when as I look at Joseph's statements and sayings, there's a kind of a basic frontier Trinitarianism in them. It's the kind of Trinitarianism you would expect on the American frontier, not terribly theologically sophisticated, but it still fits within larger orthodox parameters. By the time we get to 1840, 41, 42, 43, we're completely out of there. And essentially, Joseph's view of God has switched from a monotheistic view to a kind of polytheistic view. And people are sort of going along with that. And it's like, well, that's to me a sure sign that Joseph had become the center of the church's theological life especially in the Nauvoo period.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:05**

So then there becomes this quandary after Joseph's death, and the splintering of various people in groups, and those who were left in Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, who..., the Reorganizing movement. There was for them quite the quandary because on the one hand, they believed that this new movement was initiated by God, by the Spirit of God at work in the world, reminding people of, you know, various things: that God still speaks, that how we live in this world matters, the idea of the Kingdom of God, or Zion. So there were things that they really valued from that first 14, 15 years. But there were also some things that they were disillusioned by. And so that first..., you know, from 1845 to 1860 is a really difficult time for many people who had been part of the movement that was led by Joseph Smith Jr. And they had to figure out how do we say "There's some things that we were uncomfortable with", or "We don't think we were right, but still say that God was the initiator, the originator of this movement through Joseph Smith, Jr." And so even after the official reorganizing of the church, there were many pretty blunt discussions among leaders about Joseph. You know, they were saying what kind of a leader will we want, or will we put up with. We are not going to go back to a leader who monopolizes all the different areas of our theology. And so there was lots of debates and uncertainty and conflict over what kind of leader does Joseph Smith III need to be? And Joseph was a very..., Joseph III was a very wise and gentle and patient person. And he gave room for these debates and discussions about what should the role of the prophet-president be?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 21:57**

So it's interesting in the period Charmain is describing. Like the 1850s, I think we sometimes refer to that as the period of the New Organization. And then, you know, the official reorganization in 1860. If you want to, I mean, if you want to talk about how did we move from Joseph-centered to a church-centered experience, well, part of it was that Nauvoo, the memory of Nauvoo, was a traumatic memory to many people in the Reorganization. And though you don't find a lot of direct criticism of Joseph Smith Jr., what you do find is that as Joseph Smith III is coming back into leadership of the church, people don't... they want to make sure that he's not going to be an autocrat or theocrat. You know, that's an implicit criticism of Joseph Smith Jr. Though, they would never say that outright. They would never say, "We sure not want you to..., we sure want you to be the dictator like your father was," right? They wouldn't say it that way. But they would say: "We really don't want a person who's going to dominate every aspect of our communal and theological life." And so part of this then is a..., part of becoming church-centered in theology is that, well, there's a new leader, Joseph Smith III, who's got all these characteristics Charmaine describes. He's very much a moderate. He wants to have the church as kind of a big tent in which there's varieties of positions. He doesn't like the role..., he hasn't ever liked being put in the role of being autocratic. And then there's also dealing with this trauma of the memory of how Joseph Smith Jr. controlled absolutely everything in Nauvoo, and that was a painful memory for church members. An additional painful memory, for some, was that the theological developments of Nauvoo seemed sub-Christian to lots of people who were in the Reorganization and coming into it. Of course, there were still old timers from Nauvoo, who held to a few of the ideas that Joseph started there. But Joseph Smith III in his very wise and cautious leadership just kind of..., we always say Joseph Smith's strategy, Joseph Smith III's strategy as a leader was to outlive people who had unfortunate theological views left over from earlier periods rather than...

**Carla Long 24:38**

Good strategy!

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:39**

Yeah, really. It's the difference between creating civil war and the difference between kind of evolving in a new direction. So....

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:47**

So one of the things that had to happen was that the focus then could not be on the prophet, the prophet being perfect, or the prophet being the only way that this new group could understand that God was at work in their midst. And so the focus then became on the product, the church itself. And then there's these other dynamics at work. So those who were part of the Reorganization and those who came to it between the 60s and the 80s and beyond, there was this very strong need to say who we weren't, as well as who we were. And so we often use the image that on the one hand, there is the Mormon boundary, where the church is saying: we are something, we are our own thing, we aren't Mormons. On the other side, there was the Protestant boundary, where we're, you know, we're a Restoration movement, we are

not just - and this is a more recent thing - but we're not just like those pabulum Protestants, you know, who are all kind of lukewarm in their faith. So, in some ways this is helpful to think about the church as being kind of in its adolescent years during this church-centered time 1880 to 1960, where it's trying to establish and define its identity, its identity separate from Mormonism, separate from Protestantism. And so those are other factors that made the focus about who are we as a church. And one of the things that came from the earliest parts of the church was the idea that we are the one true church, we are the ones who have the fullness of the gospel, we are the ones who are spoken about in scripture. And so our use of scripture, our study of scripture was almost always for reinforcing our rightness as the one true church. Our understanding of the goal, the kingdom of God was ours to establish and to put forth in the world. It had to be done by the right group of people, the ones with the right set of views. And so when your focus is on having the right set of beliefs, then you have to be part of the group that has, and upholds, and teaches that right set of beliefs. And that was the approach, that was the missionary approach. And that was the Sunday school approach. And that was the preaching theme and approach for much of that time. (This) is recognizing that you had to be in the right church, if you were going to be good with God, whether that meant the glories, whether that meant the kingdom of God or Zion. So being within the right institution that had the right set of beliefs was how you assured that you were good with God. So a lot of importance was placed on being in the right church.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:36**

So that period lasted a very long time. And when Charmaine and I teach classes on this, one of the things we love to do is we love to bring out of storage our 1912 preaching chart. You've seen it before, Carla, right?

**Carla Long 28:51**

I love that preaching chart.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:55**

So these preaching charts, these were au courant in around 1900. This is how...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:03**

The up-to-date audio visual!

**Carla Long 29:05**

It was a podcast of the early 1900s!

**Tony Chvala-Smith 29:09**

Exactly. And so these old charts, all kinds of denominations used them. These are, you know, 10- to 12- to 15-foot-long Canvas sheets that have, for example, the plan of salvation painted out on them. And one of the most popular ones for Reorganization missionaries in this whole period started at one end with creation and ended at the other end of the chart with the three glories, and it had the different

dispensations on it, and had a very large picture of the two personages in the grove appearing to Joseph in the ninth hour, or in the eleventh hour, sorry. And then the chart shows how there was what was called the latter-day apostasy that went to Utah. And then it shows the straight and narrow way, and the path to celestial glory. And the focus of this chart, the focus of this theology, was on being in the right church and having the right individual path to celestial glory. That message survived for 100 years in the church; it was really...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:34**

And the right ideas.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 30:36**

And the right ideas! Correct Christian faith here was viewed as having the right ideas and being with the right people, and having an all-in kind of a right system of thought. So the question then, the next question would be, well, if that was so successful for so long, what happened, you know, mid-20th century, around 1960? What happened that began changing, that institutionally for what would become Community of Christ? And what happened was a lot of things! You know, even before the early 1960s, you can see in the writings and preaching of important figures in the Reorganized church constant borrowing from other mainstream Protestant theology. Notice that, you know, Fred M. Smith, prophet from, what, 1914 or 15 until 1947, I think? Fred M Smith quotes and uses language from the Protestant social gospel movement as he tries to articulate the church's views of Zion. And great preachers like F. Henry Edwards and Arthur Oakman borrowed constantly from Anglican theology. And so before we even got to around 1960, there was an awareness that we had some things in common with Protestants that emotionally had to do with God, Christ, Holy Spirit. We shared something precious with them. And so these church leaders borrowed - sometimes one wishes they would have footnoted a little bit more - but they did borrow. And then when we get to around the late 1950s, 1960s, some new missionary things happen that are really beginning to change the focus of the church.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:24**

Right! And what Tony's talking about is a kind of a prepping of church leaders and the church for ecumenism, to being in partnership with other Christians. And then what really pushed us into that was after World War II, when we had church members in places where church members hadn't typically been before: in Japan, and in Korea, and in other parts of Asia, and eventually in in parts of Africa. Who were being asked about their faith and who were trying to share their faith in cultures where people didn't care about what was the difference between a member of the RLDS church and a Lutheran - which we were really good at showing how we were different than and better than other Christian denominations. But we had no experience, and telling people who didn't come from a Christian background, didn't even come from a monotheistic background, about who God is and who Jesus is. And so we found ourselves as a church, both church leaders and church members who had these opportunities to tell about the church, to be missionaries, whether intentionally or not. We realized we needed to understand better how to talk about who is Jesus, who is God, to people for whom this was a



whole new language. And so church members and leaders began to ask other Christians “How do you do this? How do you talk about this?” And so rather than being those other Christians who don't know anything, which had been part of our story, we were going and asking questions and learning. And that made possible, I believe, the planting of the church in various countries around the world that we never really, I think as church, imagine being in and so I always say, it's God's fault! God kept pulling us into all of these places that we didn't plan to go. And in the process, we were stretched and challenged to understand who God is in bigger ways, and to trust what God had been doing in other denominations.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 35:10**

So, you know, in that world missionary movement that was happening after World War II in Korea, and as church leaders had to start reflecting on that, one of the things that they were discovering was that missionaries would try to use the old preaching chart, you know, somewhere in Asia, or the Orient, or wherever, and it would just be baffling to people. And so the ‘tried and true method,’ and the ‘tried and true message’ did not ring true with anybody in those settings. And so it became clear to church leaders, especially as we got into the early 1960s, that we had to learn how to distinguish what was essential in our message from what was peripheral, or just simply culturally dictated. You know, if the church had only stayed in a few places in the northern hemisphere in the Western world, maybe we could have stayed with that old message a long time, a longer time. But, we weren't in those places anymore. We were now being invited into places in Africa and the Orient, and Latin America. And the preaching chart theology just began to fail as a missionary tool, and it forced church leaders to say, “What really are we about?” And so what began to start bubbling to the top is that holy cow, what this is really about is this is about Jesus Christ, it's about helping people in Christian community have vital experience with Christ. And it's about us, creating change in the world based around that. So the name Community of Christ, which doesn't emerge for decades yet, was already a theme in the early 1960s. And if I think... You know, there's a story that we like to share, that happened late in 1967 or early in 1968, that I think really, perfectly summarizes what it means to think about the church moving to a Christ-centered identity and message. And so basically what was going on is in the 1960s, as church leaders were getting to figure out that as a denomination first of all, we needed to enter fully into the modern age, and also we needed to do some significant theological rethinking if we were going to respond to the mission. They began inviting..., or church leaders sought some help from St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. It was a Methodist seminary. And one of the theologians that they asked to help them was a philosophical theologian by the name of W. Paul Jones. And Paul Jones was a Methodist theologian, and he was well known at the time and he is now a Trappist monk and Catholic priest in southern Missouri. That's another whole story. But anyway, Paul Jones in a letter describes the first meeting of the RLDS Joint Council, with three members of the theology faculty from St. Paul School of Theology, and it was like late in 1967 or early 1968. And Paul Jones says that they did introductions, and they were getting to know each other. These three theologians were getting to know the Joint Council, you know, Presidency, Bishopric, Presiding evangelist and Council of Twelve. And then, Paul Jones says, there was this point. He says, “I needed to ask W Wallace Smith a question, which would determine how we should proceed from that point on in our study together,” and this was going to be over a couple of

years. He says, “so I put this question to W Wallace Smith pretty pointedly.” He says, “I asked him if in our mutual studies of, you know, Christian theology and New Testament and the development of Christian doctrine and so on, and your own movement, if we were to discover that there's a discrepancy between something that Joseph Smith Jr. said, and something that Jesus said, who would you go with?” And Paul Jones in his letter says, when he asked that it became really, really quiet in the room. And he says that all the eyes of the members of the Joint Council turned to W Wallace Smith. Right? And here he is, he's the grandson of Joseph Smith Jr. And so Jones says in this letter that W Wallace Smith, with poise took a long breath, and said very straightforwardly, “We would have to go with Jesus.” And I think that little moment, in a meeting of the Joint Council with three theologians from a Methodist Theological Seminary, is a watershed moment in the church's history. That's the moment at which we could say, you know what, whatever Joseph Smith Jr. did or said, this church is about Jesus, and we're going to go with him. And if that means sometimes we have to say no to Joseph Smith, Jr., or if it means we have to say no to Joseph Smith, Jr. a lot, that's going to be okay. Because what matters is responding to the call of Jesus. That's what we mean by becoming a Christ-centered church.

#### **Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:57**

Another aspect of that, too, that contributed to this new reliance, not on our own identity, not on our church's history, was the introduction, the embracing by some of the new critical history, or the new Mormon history. And this started with historians in the church who had learned historical critical methods in university and looking at scripture, at the Bible, looking at different aspects of history. And who, with great integrity and honesty said “we need to use these tools, these methods to also look honestly at our church's history.” And this was a very difficult thing. Some people wanted to have nothing to do with it, and were very suspicious of those who would question our history, question Joseph Smith, Jr., question, how the Book of Mormon came about. And yet, that was a really important element in this timeframe as well, 1950s, 60s and 70s, of church leaders and historians within the church being willing to look with integrity and openness at multiple sources about our church's history, and about Joseph Smith. This, again, was something that loosened our grip on the idea that somehow we were the one true church, and that our founder had to be the one true prophet, and that we had to have a pristine picture of our past. And the way it helped us to loosen our chokehold on that idea was that we realized, I think, as a denomination and as individuals, that in the big picture it's about God. It's about what God is doing in the world; it's about what Jesus has and is doing in individual lives and in communities and in the world. It's about what the Spirit wants to do and is nudging us toward constantly. And that is where our source should be. That is where we should be drawing from, for the life of the church, not from our own story. So, again, in a way it's like coming out of adolescence, where we begin to see how we fit in with the rest of the population, where we are no longer the only ones who see the world accurately, but that we can begin to trust the bigger work in this case of what God is doing in the world. So that's another element that happened right about that same time.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 44:23**

So one other thing that happened in this period was, as Charmaine's mentioned, the rise of the use of modern historical methods. And in 1968, a book was published by the Reorganized Church that was for use at our summer church camps, reunions. And it was called *The Body of Christ*. And this book was written by a young adult named Harold Schneebeck. He was a church member and he had gone through the religion program at Graceland University, and then he had enrolled in Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was doing a kind of summer internship or a yearlong internship, I can't remember which, for the religious education department at the church's headquarters, and he wrote this book called *Body of Christ*. And one of the things that this book did very clearly was it showed that we could no longer treat the New Testament as a collection of little proof texts to show that there was an original Christian church that looked just like us. Using the New Testament in a very, I think, responsible, historical manner, what Schneebeck showed is that the church in the New Testament was a moving target. And it took different shapes and forms in different places, in different contexts. And so, after 1968, it was really no longer possible in the church to pull out the preaching chart and say, look, the early church had all of these offices and all of these particular gifts and all of this and all of that, and see, we've got that too. That became an unconvincing model after that point. And so instead, what Schneebeck was able to show is how, in different times and places in early New Testament, in early Christian communities in the New Testament, the importance, the centrality of Christ, and centrality of community, and the pursuit of what he called shalom, God's desire for wellbeing for the world, that remained really central to the early Christian church. And lo and behold, many years later, Community of Christ gets the name *Community of Christ*. And one of our important faux sides of church is on establishing God's Shalom in the world. I think it's really interesting that a church that for 100 years had been trying to use the New Testament to prove it was the right church discovered that that just doesn't work so well anymore. We can't really use the New Testament that way. And instead, let's pay attention to what its deeper message is. And then that's kind of how our identity and message began to develop.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:12**

But I think it's worth noting that people didn't like it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:17**

True!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:20**

People were not happy with those reunion materials, because they didn't do what we'd always done, which is to reinforce our uniqueness, our rightness, and the rightness of our message. So it was very disturbing to many people. And the second year, the next year, the reunion material was called *For What Purpose Assembled*. And that was Don Landon and Robert Smith. And talking about what is the purpose of the church, what is it that we do when we meet together. And it didn't say that what we did is we reinforce that we're the right church. It had a much bigger view of what is the role of the church. But that

was also not a very popular reunion material, and a lot of controversy. And where is that message that we longed to hear, which is that we are the right church?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 48:27**

Let's just say that people don't usually like their framework to be shaken up. And this period in the church from, say, 1966 almost to 1986 was a period of great, great upheaval. And that may be the topic for another time. But you know, a lot of people were not happy with the shifting of traditional views. But church leaders were committed to it. And I think in retrospect, we can be...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:00**

...perfectly open.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 49:01**

Absolutely! We can be really grateful for the I think truly spiritually prophetic and courageous leadership of church leaders in that period, to help us move from a paradigm that was simply..., that can no longer be seen as credible or true into a paradigm that really captured the deeper things about who we felt we were called to be.

**Carla Long 49:22**

Well, no wonder people didn't really like it. I mean, that makes sense to me. When you are the one true church, when you have all of the authority and all of the knowledge and all of the power, you can feel comfortable with where you're at. And when you draw a line in the sand, you know that you're on the right side of it. But when that line gets kind of like moved or shaken up or said, hey, it's not really a line at all, it's kind of more of a trapezoid? No, I have no idea. And everybody can be included. That of course would shake somebody up. So I kind of understand that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:59**

Yeah, it was a really pivotal moment for the church and church members to become less self-conscious about what the church is about and to let God, let Christ, let the Spirit be what the church is about, rather than us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 50:22**

You know that this reminds me of if you ask the question what makes a community truly prophetic? I think of the theologian Paul Tillich, who in one of his books refers to the Spirit of the prophetic, or being prophetic, as the capacity for self-criticism. And so our community in the 1960s institutionally went through a long period of being theologically and historically self-critical. And from Tillich's perspective nothing can be more prophetic than that. That's what the ancient Israelite prophets did. They were critics of the status quo. And critics of the way things were being done and said, and they said, "No, this does not live up to who the living God is." So I look back on the Spirit, even though it was really difficult for

our ancestors in Community of Christ. Very difficult time. And yet, if you want to be a prophetic church, why wouldn't there be difficult times?

**Carla Long 51:27**

Yeah, I mean, if we are called to be a prophetic people, then we always have to, like, look through our own lens and our own experience and reason and tradition and scripture, like Charmaine mentioned earlier, and we may come out in a different place. But as a people, we need to move forward together, and try and understand. So that is painful at times. What is the *Doctrine and Covenants* scripture, “Building sacred community can be arduous,” or something like that? Let me just tell you it is. It's true.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 51:58**

Yeah, very much.

**Carla Long 52:00**

So you guys have talked about how we have progressed as a church, and I would say move forward as a church, from being Joseph-centered, where we had all dependency on Joseph Smith, Jr. We looked to him for all of the answers to all of our questions to moving to a church- or institution-centered organization where, you know, that kind of makes sense to me too. It was time to start doing some actual building of some actual churches, and spreading out and letting people know who we were and that we were around. And then moving into, of course, through that painful time as a Christ-centered church, which just thrills me to no end. So how has moving through these eras made us a different church?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:51**

One thing I think that it's really made a huge difference is in transparency. And that might sound kind of strange. But in going through that difficult self-awareness, as we looked at our history, we could no longer have the ‘pretty picture history’ that we had told ourselves for a long time. And though that was uncomfortable, it was important to say, well, I really think it drew us to a place where our recognition for the need for the grace of God became very much more our focus, that it's not about us doing it all right and being the perfect people, because we weren't. And so that required that we have a level of honesty and openness about Joseph, about our own history, and about our continued need to grow. And so leaders became, I would say over the last 40 to 50, well, especially the last 30 to 40 years, have themselves been more transparent in how the church works. And things that come to mind right away for me are the ways in which at least the last three and maybe the last four president-prophets of the church have been very intentional with letting the church know what their process is, as far as bringing insight from God to the church. And some of the struggle that is related to that and some of the times of saying, “Is this me, or is this you God? How do we understand this? How do we put words to this?” And they made that process much more transparent. And every day, in a way, that we could really begin to sense that this is not some zapping of God, you know, God zapping the prophet and taking over their larynx and making them say certain things, or their hand to write certain things. But this is a long

process that takes self-awareness on the part of the person, as well as prayerfulness and openness. So those kinds of things, I think, have been big changes.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 55:55**

It's also made us a more internationally sensitive church. Now we do everything in three languages, right? Until 1960, gracious, English was the major language of the church and Charmaine, when we're doing this as a seminar with church folks, likes to put up a map of the world. And, you know, from 1830 to 1960 showed that we were in basically 10 countries or so, right? And then from 1960 to today, we've exponentially increased the number of countries we are in. So how does that change us? What changes our processes at World Conference? We have simultaneous translation. We have, because people can't get visas from some countries to come to the US for World Conference, we do proportional voting, so that the voting is fair. I mean, there's all kinds of ways that this shift to Christ as center has required of us an openness to the world, an openness to others, that wasn't there before. And also, I would say, you know what, if Christ is really becoming your center, it's a lot easier to deal with the skeletons in your own closet, because it's no longer really about you. And so, it's not quite so easy to shock church people nowadays about stuff that Joseph Smith Jr. might have done, said, who he might have done it with. It's like, you know, we can accept that he was human, he made mistakes. In some ways, theologically, he derailed the train. And yet, Christ is the center, and we have moved on. And it's not frankly about him, we don't have to somehow preserve an image of who he was, which is not historically possible anyway, in order for us to be content with who we are becoming, because Christ is our center.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:01**

And something you mentioned, Carla, really is another one of those things, and that has been changing and growing in our midst theologically. And it's also spiritual. And that is the idea that as a people, our job is to hear the Spirit, discern together, and respond together as a prophetic people, rather than simply a people with a prophet. And that has produced all kinds of amazing fruit in our midst. As far as the sense that we need to depend and trust each other in this process, that we need to hear each other, that each person's experience is valuable, and that each of us can be open to God and have things to contribute to where it is we move forward in the world. And that's been particularly important, because another thing that has happened theologically, is that there has been more openness to, rather than setting down rules, about what behaviors must be of trying to be more open to the real lives of people and the ethical questions that people face. And so that has required that we listen to each other, that we acknowledge that some countries have some issues they need to deal with, and other countries have other issues that need to be dealt with. So that peace, equality, worth of all persons can grow. And so there's been more of a willingness to deal with some difficult social and political areas of attention.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:05**

I think it's also fair to say that this journey has left us with challenges. I think one challenge, certainly in the United States and Canada, is that a lot of Community of Christ congregations were established in the church-centered era. And so the theological leftovers, or shadows from the church-centered era, are still

part of those congregations' identity. And you can't just force that out. That's part of who you've been. But I think we have some struggles and challenges with congregations, you know, intentionally moving more completely into the Christ-centered era. Where you see that happening, what you typically see is a church becoming really, really open to its community, and working in its community for the welfare of others. That would be an example of Christ-centered service. But that's a challenge. The institution has moved, but individual congregations are in, you know, in different stages of that movement.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:21**

Another huge thing is that we moved from thinking of ourselves as being the originators and the ones that would make the kingdom come through our righteousness and our, you know, all our good works, to recognizing that the kingdom of God is first and foremost centered in Christ, in Christ past, present and ever before us. And to recognize the other places in the world where God is at work, and to lend our voice to some of those places, as well as be the initiating voice in some other places, but inviting other groups' nominations to uphold issues of peace and justice. And so there's been a much bigger sense that the kingdom of God is God's work, rather than ours, our accomplishment. And I think that's really important, for a lot of reasons. So that's another big shift theologically.

**Carla Long 1:02:33**

Right? What I'm hearing you say is that in those cases, and the cases with W Wallace Smith saying that we would have to go with Jesus, and with congregations opening up when they become Christ-centered, it seems like a lot of vulnerability comes along with that as well. A vulnerability that says maybe we don't know everything, maybe you can help us learn more about who Christ is for you. And that might change who Christ is for us. But we're willing to walk that journey with you. And it's scary. It's scary to say maybe we don't know everything. But I mean I really think that's where we are called to be, because when you walk with people on their journey, then they are much more willing to walk with you, and to try and understand you as you understand them. It's just a much more beautiful journey that you're on together.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:29**

Mm hmm. Yeah,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:30**

It really is, and it also broadens one's view of what salvation means. Because back in the church-centered era, it meant being in the right church. And I think I can safely say that for us as a church today, salvation comes in many ways, and it comes to individuals in a variety of ways. But it also comes to communities and all of creation. And that salvation, again, is God's work in our midst, and that we have much to learn from each other in that walk. Just as you said, Carla.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:15**

You know, you use the word vulnerable, Carla. It's a great word. I think being Christ-centered is exciting, but also terrifying. If you really think about it, Christ is the one who, according to Philipians, emptied himself, right? For the sake of others. And thinking in Trinitarian terms, Christ is the embodiment of God's vulnerability to creation. And so if we're going to go with Jesus, which we said we're going to do, then why wouldn't we become vulnerable, a vulnerable church, a church that is willing to empty itself for the sake of others? That's surely the sign of being Christ-centered, is that your communal life corresponds to who he is and what he has done. So, but it's terrifying, because nobody really wants to do that on their own, do they?

**Carla Long 1:05:07**

No! It also requires a huge amount of patience. And we can't force things to happen anymore like we used to want to do it. Like, "Well no, I'm pretty sure we have to do it this way." Well, I'm pretty sure we don't! Let's wait and see where God is talking to us at this point. So, gosh, there's just so much. There really is a lot to consider when you have Christ as your focus and Christ as your lens. And Christ is your center. There's, it can be really frustrating, but also rewarding as we know.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:40**

Absolutely.

**Carla Long 1:05:41**

So we're coming close to the end of our time together. And I have to tell you guys, I'm a little bit disappointed in you. Well, on the preaching chart, you never mentioned my very, very favorite part!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:54**

Oh, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:05:55**

Yes. On the preaching chart.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:57**

The place on the path that is about at 12 years of age where the narrow path goes steadily, inexorably upwards towards celestial glory, and the broad path ...

**Carla Long 1:06:14**

Well let's just call it the fun path.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:06:20**

Yes! The fun path.



**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:06:21

And on the particular chart that we use the most, at that point it says “Girls say no.”

**Carla Long** 1:06:26

And then at this point, Charmaine puts her hands on her hips and says, “Boys shouldn't ask!”

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:06:31

That's right! I think it should say “Boys don't ask!”

**Carla Long** 1:06:36

Yes, that broad path is full of gambling, and dancing.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:06:45

Dancing, and revelry!

**Carla Long** 1:06:46

Oh, all types of revelry! Well, thank you so much for mentioning that part of the preaching chart. That is by far my favorite,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:06:52

Very subtle hint, Carla!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:06:53

Yes, we obviously needed a prompt. And people need to see the chart sometime when we're actually using it in teaching a class and a visual eye-ful from that.

**Carla Long** 1:07:06

Maybe if you could send us a picture of it, we could put it up with this podcast?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:07:09

Well, we have an electronic photo of it, a digital photo of it, of one that's like the one we use, which I can send to you, you can post it.

**Carla Long** 1:07:20

Yeah, that'd be great. Well, we'll post it with this podcast.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:07:21

With this caveat: Don't use this in church!

**Carla Long** 1:07:27

Never use this in church! So, well thank you so much for talking to us about it. Is there any last thoughts that you have before we sign off?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:07:39

I think just that God is gracious, and is patient with us, and meets us where we are. I mean, I think that's one of the things we always try to say when we're going through these three stages. And we remind people that there are quite a few people, particularly of certain generations, who may still be in the church-centered era. And to not, you know, not diminish them, to not mock them or anything like that, because God has shown that God is very capable of meeting us wherever we are, if our hearts are open, and if we are seeking. And that, even though we moved past the church-centered time, God met us there too, and deepened who we were individually and as a body. And God is doing that now. And that if we are open, undoubtedly, there'll be some other eras in the future that we can see and name and identify, where God has called us to some new things, and to not be afraid of that, but also to trust that God, that the Spirit will continue to challenge us, and continue to call us to be involved in the world.

**Carla Long** 1:09:05

I already have my fingers crossed for a potluck era.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:09:11

Oh, Carla!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 1:09:12

I think, you know, all I can add to that is that, you know, when Jesus says in John's Gospel in response to the disciples, he says, "I am the way," I think he was trying to say to the disciples, you guys need to get in your head that the journey is your home.

**Carla Long** 1:09:31

Oh, shoot. Well, no, that's good! That's ... Oh, man. You stopped me in my tracks. Tony. It is rare that I don't have anything to say but 'The journey is your home,' that's really great! And what a great place to close off. Well, thank you so much for being on the podcast and, gentle listeners, I hope that you continue to journey with us as we delve into Community of Christ theology and so many other items that I'm sure you've learned on this podcast. So, Tony, Charmaine, thank you so much for being here.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:10:28

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**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:11:01**

I smell Wonder Bread on your breath!