

Josh Mangelson 00:22

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Carla Long 00:54

Hello, everyone and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast with the series Percolating on Faith. I'm here again with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Hey, guys.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:02

Hello!

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:03

Hi there.

Carla Long 01:04

And we are talking about a subject that is important to talk about. Today we're going to be talking about the Book of Mormon. And I know that both Tony and I have been a little bit nervous about this podcast, although Charmaine is ready to go every single time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:23

Bla bla bla, bla, bla, bla, I can talk anytime!

Carla Long 01:27

I know that I've been feeling a little bit nervous about talking about the Book of Mormon, only because I've been around the church for a long time, and I've traveled extensively in the church. And I know that there are enormous differences in how people in Community of Christ, at least, view the Book of Mormon. There are people who view it as absolute scripture, that it is the word of God. And there are people who, well I'm just gonna say it, that view it as an anchor that pulls us down, that pulls us down and away from things that we could be doing, and people that we could be reaching. That see it as something that is untrue, something that it doesn't help us all in our faith and understanding God. So, and there are people, of course, all along that spectrum. And I would wager to say that no two people and Community of Christ view the Book of Mormon in exactly the same way. And so that's what makes it really difficult to talk about on a podcast, because we don't want to alienate anybody who believes anywhere along that spectrum, right? Is that what you guys were thinking?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:30

Absolutely!

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:31

That is correct.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:32

And yet, we want to help to describe what the situation is, and why it is what it is. And I think that might be helpful to everybody.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:42

And in the Community of Christ, going all the way back to Joseph Smith III, we've created this ethos in the church, which turns the church into a large umbrella under which people from all parts of the spectrum can stand reasonably together. So we want to be faithful to that tradition. At the same time, we want to not shy away from the difficult questions the Book of Mormon raises for us.

Carla Long 03:07

That's right. I mean, in order to have that unity in diversity, which is one of our Enduring Principles, we have to talk about those hard issues. If we don't talk about those issues that are difficult for us to talk about, then they just continue to be pushed down until they become a really big issue later. That's how I feel at least.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:26

Yeah, and I think this is one of those areas where learning to accept where each other is, is perhaps the most important thing we can learn, to not judge each other on our view of the Book of Mormon as being closer or further away from God, or more or less faithful to the church, or to, you know, the movement of where the church is headed. And so I think, you know, learning how to accept each other wherever we are on this topic, is going to be - and has been - a really important task for us, interpersonally.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:09

I think as so often happens when the church has to deal with issues, that it's very easy to forget that the issue is not the issue at hand, but how we treat each other over the issues. That's really important, and Community of Christ has had to learn that over the last 50, 60 years, in some very difficult circumstances.

Carla Long 04:28

That's true. And that leads me to another of our Enduring Principles, the worth of all persons. So we believe in the worth of all persons, therefore we should probably believe in the worth of

their views as well, which is definitely part of the whole person. So this conversation today envelops at least two of our Enduring Principles. So I guess Tony and I will just have to breathe through it and Charmaine will just keep heading on, and we'll just have to keep trying to catch her.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:54

Very good. Let's do it!

Carla Long 04:57

Alright, so I'm just going to go ahead and do something I don't normally do I'm going to hand over a bit of a control to Tony and Charmaine, which is so terrifying to me. And just ask you two: where do you want to start with this?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:10

Well, we've thought about this a lot. And we decided that a really productive way to start would be to talk about "What is scripture?" And I think we talked about this in one of our earlier podcasts. But I think this is a good place to bring that up again. And the definition that we tend to use as just a starting definition for all of our scriptures, is: "writings that over time, have become authoritative or sacred to a particular group of people." And when we start with that as our beginning place, we can look at all of scripture. So all of scripture are writings that individuals did, and that over time a group of people found valuable, and became a place where they could let God speak to them. And each part of our scriptures has been canonized by a different, a particular group. So the Old Testament by the ancient Jewish people in its three segments have been canonized over a long time, in its three segments. The New Testament, canonized by the third and fourth century Christians, as they found some writings rising above others, as connecting them with God and teaching them how to follow Christ fast. And one of the ways of looking at the Book of Mormon I think very accurately is to see it as a book that was canonized, I would even say pre-canonized, by those who became the moving force for this movement. And so the canonization process... Well, in some ways, those who came into the church in those very earliest years accept as they came in. They were accepting of the Book of Mormon is already being canon, as already being scripture. But it was upheld, you know, by those who started the church, but then affirmed as scripture. And so when we look at the Book of Mormon, and how it became scripture, and that it became scripture, authorized by the earliest members of the Church, that can help us to see that just as the Old Testament and the New Testament are scriptures that we have inherited, that we were not the canonizers of, but that we have been gifted with. I think it's a way of looking at the Book of Mormon too, that it is like the Old Testament and the New Testament: it has been gifted to us as part of our scripture. And that it's been canonized by another group. But as with the Old and New Testament, we get to determine how we will use it, and the ways in which it can help us know who God is, who Jesus is, and who the Holy Spirit is.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:25

So if we start with what scripture is, we then can also say that texts did not become scripture, because they were all viewed as one genre, like all viewed as history. That's really important. The Hebrew Bible has mythology, has legends, has poetry, has short stories, you know, novellas, which are short works of fiction, like the book of Ruth and Jonah, most scholars would say. And it was not because the texts somehow were imagined to be all-giving, you know, pure history, that they became scripture. They became scripture, because - to use later Christian language - because they became a means of grace to people, a means by which people remembered who they were before God, remembered who God was, and through which God was calling and transforming people. That's what makes scripture scripture. And if we start there, then the real serious historical questions that come up with the Book of Mormon I think don't have to be quite as determinative of what we should do with the text. I think it's really important to go there. Plus, if we start there, we can make sense of the very kinds of experiences people have with the Book of Mormon. Charmaine and I each know lots of people for whom the Book of Mormon has been in their journey, a way that they made real contact with God, and whatever they may think about the text in its origins themselves, we would simply not deny that people encounter the divine very regularly by working through this text.

Carla Long 10:06

Well, that sounds like a really good place to start about what makes scripture scripture, and how we've used scripture from the far past up to now. So the Community of Christ has viewed the Book of Mormon as scripture since the 1800s. Have we been talking about it the whole time? Or is there anything that in the near past that we've said about the Book of Mormon, you know recently, about what we believe about it?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:31

Yeah. The World Conferences, several of the last World conferences, well, several conferences in the last 20 years, let's put it that way, have had resolutions that have come forward, as far as how shall we see the Book of Mormon, and what should be our official statement about it. And so the most recent is from the 2007 World Conference, and there was a resolution that came from the Central Mission Center. And that basically said, you know, 'whereas there is some confusion about how the church sees the Book of Mormon, be it resolved that we, the Community of Christ, reaffirm the Book of Mormon as a divinely inspired record.' And during the conversation about that, it was clear that those who were bringing it, were wanting to affirm that it was a historical record. And that turned up a fair bit of discussion on the floor, but also among people, and it did up to conference. But this one was ruled out of order. And I thought that what the Presidency wrote, explaining why it was ruled out of order, was really helpful, and kind of describes that ambiguity that surrounds the Book of Mormon, they are very clear about affirming it as scripture, but also describing kind of this..., clarifying

how we see it in some kind of unofficial way. So I'm going to just read a little bit of it. They first note that a similar resolution was brought in 1986. And the World Conference was ruled out of order in that year as well. The World Conference supported the decision of the chair. In the statement that accompanied the ruling, President Wallace B. Smith indicated that to adopt such a resolution would be to make a belief about the Book of Mormon dogma, something the church has avoided over the years. And I think that's a good place to begin, that what can be believed, what has been believed, and the wide variety that you were describing earlier, Carla, that that's the reality, and to legislate a particular dogma is something that church leaders, and I think, in many parts of the church, has been avoided over the years. So I'll continue on: In light of the significant interest in this topic, the Presidency would like to make some additional comments. World Conference resolutions 215 and 222 address the status of the Book of Mormon in the life of the church. The Book of Mormon is one component of the standard of authority of the church, along with the Holy Scriptures and the Doctrine and Covenants, including any counsel added to the Doctrine and Covenants by future action of the World Conference. And this was in 2007. I'm just noting that additionally, it says, the First Presidency recently released an official statement, titled "Scripture in Community of Christ," that clearly affirms the Book of Mormon scripture. And just as a side note, that it can be found in *Sharing in Community of Christ*. And it actually came out originally in 2003, and then was re-released in 2007, 2006 Tony said, as kind of a more official statement. And then I'll continue on: The First Presidency wants to take this opportunity to affirm our belief that the central testimony of the Book of Mormon is true, that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God manifesting himself to all nations. We also recognize that the reality in the worldwide church today is that our members hold very diverse views concerning their understanding and use of the Book of Mormon. In some places, it is used frequently, and in other places, it is used very little, if at all. In some nations, the mere mention of the Book of Mormon would bring serious social and legal repercussions that would put the mission, legal organization, and members of the church in serious jeopardy. While the church affirms the Book of Mormon as scripture, and makes it available for study and use in various language, we do not attempt to mandate the degree of belief or use. This position is in keeping with our long-standing tradition, that belief in the Book of Mormon is not to be used as a test of fellowship or membership in the church. And then it ends with: therefore G-2 is ruled out of order. So I think that's really a helpful statement, because it's describing the reality we see around us, but is also affirming actions of previous presidents, as well as previous conferences, collections of church members, in our discussion about how to keep our views and use of the Book of Mormon open and varied in the body.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:57

You'll notice that in that statement from the Presidency, very true to Community of Christ tradition, we are extremely careful not to have absolute tests of faith about what makes somebody a Community of Christ member. And also, they're being very careful there to say: we cannot, as a church, make historical statements objects of faith. You know, if the church

could say: it is our belief, and you must believe this too, that the Book of Mormon is absolutely ancient American history, then what happens is the discussion is off the table. And faithfulness to the church's message is dictated by a particular historical view. It would be no different from somebody saying, it is our faith that Gen. George Pickett's charge at Gettysburg won, succeeded. It's like you have to believe that in order to be a member of this particular historical site. That's no longer history. That's simply a dogma being propagated. And then what happens is, historians falsify that particular belief by saying, now look, here's all the evidence which says, actually, Pickett's charge was a disaster. So in other words, you have to keep the categories of history and faith somewhat safely. They overlap, but you have to keep them somewhat safe from each other. The other thing is that theologically, going back to Joseph III again, in his time, there were groups of people who wanted Joseph Smith III to make absolute statements that were necessary for membership in the Reorganized Church. Such as, in that particular time people definitely wanted him to declare finally against some of the what we in our tradition see as the exotic things from Nauvoo, that some Reorganized members still held on to it, like baptism for the dead. Joseph III very wisely and cautiously said: you know, I'm going to be careful about that, I don't want to create a Procrustean bed. The myth of Procrustes is that Procrustes had this iron bedstead, and that people were forced to lie on it and whatever didn't fit on the bed was chopped off. And Joseph III was trying to hold together a very diverse group of people. And so he didn't want to use dogma as the way to manage the diversity in the church. And we've as a denomination tried to be faithful to that sense, with greater and lesser degrees of success. So that statement that Charmaine read is really important. It's a highly traditional Community of Christ way to deal with a dispute. We're not going to force a particular historical view to be the view of the church. And you can be Community of Christ and hold virtually any view about the Book of Mormon. It's not a test of fellowship, or faith, or membership.

Carla Long 19:00

Sure, I mean, going back to what we talked about before, and as one of our enduring principles is unity in diversity, I think in Community of Christ, we believe that the diversity actually makes us stronger as an organization rather than weaker. The fact that we talk about things, and disagree and/or agree on different issues makes sure that we're talking about it at least. We're not just sweeping it under the rug and saying: well, everything's fine, when it might not be fine. So, I mean, the talking about it is, as you said before, probably the most important part about it, not 'is it historical or is it not,' but at least we're discussing, at least we're in relationship and community with each other about it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:44

And it creates this deeper level of honesty between us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:47

Yeah, I think it's also important to recognize that the message of Community of Christ is not 'hey, look, we've got books.' The books are not the content of our message. Jesus Christ and the kingdom of justice and mercy and peace that he's calling us to share in creating, that's the message of Community of Christ. Not that we've got this book that came from the 1830s. Now, this particular book may be helpful to many members in guiding them in their relationship with Christ. But it's not the substance of the church's message or reason for existence.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:31

Though, I think we, again, have to be honest in acknowledging that, at certain points in our past, it has been. During the times when how we were different from other Protestant organizations, how we were different from other factions of the Restoration, you know, the Book of Mormon, featured rather largely there, in our sense of our identity, and what it is we brought to the world. But I think, in the last 30 to 40 years, where we really have made Christ, made God, the Spirit, the whole Trinity, the focus, these other things have, necessarily and appropriately, taken a background role rather than the primary role. And so, how we talk about the Book of Mormon has not been as prominent as it once was, where there was a kind of a prescribed way of describing what the history was, how it came to be, what it meant about us as a denomination that we had it, and kind of that favored denomination kind of view that we were closer to God, because we had this book. And so I think as we've moved away from that preoccupation with having the right, and the only ones with the truth, the Book of Mormon has taken up a more balanced purpose within our theology, within our understanding of ourselves. But there was a time when it was pretty much out there as one of the things that made us special. And I think that it would be fair to say that there were some who, I don't know if I would say worshipped the Book of Mormon, but for whom that was the primary thing that we were to declare. Even above who Jesus is.

Carla Long 22:42

Okay, well, that was an excellent start to our topic of the Book of Mormon. I really appreciate what we were talking about so far, and what the First Presidency has said. But let's get back into maybe Community of Christ, and talk about how and maybe why the Book of Mormon, the views of the Book of Mormon in Community of Christ, changed over time. Like, where do we start? And where are we now? And how did we get there?

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:10

You know, I think that's a very helpful place to go. And it may be helpful for listeners to understand that it wasn't like there was one use of the Book of Mormon until recently, and then all of a sudden that changed. Throughout Community of Christ's history, there have been changing uses of the Book of Mormon. So for example, Charmaine referenced earlier the very kind of founding events of the church back in the late 1820s, and around 1830. And yeah,

initially the Book of Mormon was really important and central to the church's identity as it was getting off the ground, way more important, by the way, then the story of Joseph's vision in the grove. That becomes important later. But for those first, I don't know, during the 1830s, the Book of Mormon typically was more important to the church's identity and message than it was later. By the time you get to Nauvoo, Joseph himself is moving away from the Book of Mormon. And really does not himself rely on it as a norm and a guide anymore. That would be my perspective. I think historians generally would back that up. Theologically speaking, the content of the Book of Mormon becomes less important to Joseph Smith than the story that he and his family told about its origins. Going into the period after Nauvoo in the early Reorganization, I mean, one of the primary theological issues there was succession: who is the true prophet. And when the Reorganization formalized itself around Joseph Smith III, that issue was resolved for that part of the Restoration movement. When you look at early Reorganization missionary theology though, like 1870s, 80s and 90s, the content of the church's message, as it tried to persuade Protestants and in some cases Mormons, that they were wrong and we were right, was the Bible. They use the Bible very significantly as a debating tool. Books were written to prove, or to make collections of proofs that showed that we were the Restored church and had the rightness and the right there. The Book of Mormon was mentioned in those. And the missionaries themselves certainly believed the traditional story about the Book of Mormon and knew the story itself. But for example, if you read John Cornish's autobiography, he's a great early Reorganization missionary, he virtually never cites the Book of Mormon, his main debating tool was the Bible. In the history of the church then, going into the 20th century, it's not really until the time of Israel A. Smith that there's a, I'll say, a return to emphasizing the importance of the Book of Mormon and the traditional view's story. And that makes a radical change as we enter the 1960s.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:17

And though, as Tony has said, the missionaries in the early part of the Reorganization didn't use the Book of Mormon a lot, it was used in congregational life a lot. And that, as he also indicated, kind of had a renewal right about 1920s, 30s, 40s, in that era, a reemphasizing of the Book of Mormon, and how it shapes our identity and study of it in congregational life, and use of it as far as new members, learning what our identity was, and what our purpose was. And but then, in the 1960s, and 70s, there are several things that are at work that cause people to step back from the insistence that the Book of Mormon is the answer to who we are, and to what our goals are in the world. And one of them was the church being drawn into other parts of the world, where what we needed to be able to do is to describe who Jesus was, and what it meant to follow Jesus. And not do all the showing how we're different from other Christian churches. So that was one thing. We needed to learn how to talk about who's Jesus, and God, and the Holy Spirit. And why would you want to believe in Jesus at all, to people for whom a Christian background was not where they were coming from. And so the Book of Mormon had to take a way far back seat, because it's really a secondary text to the Bible, and

to the story of God's work through who God is, and God's interaction with people throughout time. So that was one thing. Another was a new kind of history, that though it had been out there and used in academic circles, was starting to be applied within other institutions as well. And church leaders, and people who were well trained in history, began to say, we need to use these historical tools to look more honestly at our own history. And that meant that many of the historical records that did not necessarily agree with the story that we'd always told about the Book of Mormon, how it came to Joseph, how it was translated, all of those things, came under a different kind of scrutiny as we let more of the entire historical record come to light and have some weight. And so, some of the simple things that became quite evident is that there were many different descriptions of how the plates were translated. Were the plates even there, were they covered, was Joseph actually looking at the plates when he was dictating and others were writing down? Then there were all of these very different descriptions of this process. And that caused people to say, oh, it's not so simple. There are different ways of understanding what happened and what it means. And to give church leaders and church members a lot of credit, many people were willing to look at these difficult, kind of faith shaking, discoveries. And some of the questions that have not ever been raised, because we'd wanted to pass on the story unaltered and had equated it somehow with being faithful. And so courageous people started helping the historical record, and the broader historical record be available to people. And there became groups of people who wanted to talk about that, and to write papers, and to help church members in a more general way, begin to understand.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:55

So that same type of modern critical history that we all rely on, if you take a history class at university on the history of the colonial era of the United States or the history of Russia since 1917, whatever the type of historiography that's used there was then in the 1960s, for the first time, really being applied to Latter Day Saint origins, and eventually the Book of Mormon. And I think it's quite interesting to note that the scholarly critical approach to the Bible, which had been evolving since the 1700s in Europe, was not really being applied to the Book of Mormon in our church until the 1960s. So the same way of trying to understand texts in light of their origins and context that we would use for, I don't know, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or the book of Isaiah or whatever, all of a sudden in the 1960s, church members are like: what happens when we use those methods for reading the Book of Mormon? And lo and behold, some major questions emerge, right? They start to notice, first of all, that the Book of Mormon is a large collection of biblical texts mostly from the King James Version. And they noticed things like the Book of Mormon's storyline presumes a completely finished Torah in about 600 BCE, which a good historical study of the rise of the Hebrew Bible would say no, no, no, the Torah as a complete collection of five books didn't even really exist until late in the Babylonian exile. And it's not even viewed as scripture as a whole until around 400 BCE. So that, and then the Book of Mormon quotes large sections from the book of Isaiah, which modern scholarship would say is a composite text. Many of the sections of the Book of Mormon quotes, from

Isaiah, would have been written long after its characters had left Palestine. So it's this kind of thing that begins to raise questions. These are the same sorts of questions, though, that had been applied to the Bible, you know, helpfully and successfully, for a couple of 100 years. So that's a really radical sort of change. It creates a kind of conundrum for people in the 1960s in our church.

Carla Long 33:26

And so given all of those historical critical issues, and looking at the Book of Mormon in a new way, it is very difficult for people. And yet, I find myself proud of Community of Christ and where we've been, and where we're going, and being able to accept this new, in quotes, since the 1960s, idea that the Book of Mormon might not be exactly the history that some people had thought it was. So I find myself proud that we can continue to look critically at this book and continue to use it in a way that is helpful for us in our lives. So maybe that's where we need to go now. To a more personal look at the Book of Mormon. Do you, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, have some sort of (I can't believe I'm using this word) a testimony about the Book of Mormon that is meaningful to you?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:24

Yeah. And I'm really glad you're going there. Because I think what happened, you know, as Tony was describing, Christians [are] being faced with historical things about the Bible. And for those who have wanted to keep the Bible as this inerrant, infallible thing, that is a really difficult problem for them, and that's what we're facing then with the Book of Mormon in the 1960s. But I think the necessary balance that was helpful in all of this was the fact - and this is what Christians dealing with the historical problems of the Bible also discovered - is that first and foremost, this is about who is God. How does God keep encountering us, and wanting to invite us deeper into relationship. And so I think that that's really been a place where within our movement too, that's the balance that we need to find. We have a friend who has really ambiguous feelings, well I might even say negative feelings, about the Book of Mormon, and maybe was more on the end of what you were talking about with the anchor, that's pulling us down, and he would probably find himself on that end. But what he would always say in discussions of the Book of Mormon is to say that it has been a means of grace within the church, and with his own father was the place where his father made a real connection with God and with Christ. And I think that's important for us all, wherever we find ourselves on the spectrum, to say that, as with all scripture, part of the reason it has authority or is given authority in a group is because it has proved itself to be able to help us connect with God. And, you know, there are hundreds of thousands of people who have come to know God better because of the Book of Mormon. For myself, personally, that happened when I was a youth. And, you know, I was probably maybe late junior high, beginning of high school. And I had tried reading the Bible, and the version of the Bible I was looking at was King James, you know, and it was almost impenetrable to me. I could not understand it, I would get lost very

quickly. And a seventy in the area suggested that I start reading the Book of Mormon. And here was something that was easy to read, and it had a storyline. And it talked about God and Jesus in ways that I could begin to imagine. And that was scripture I could actually read and get something from, and there are several places that I still go to in the Book of Mormon, that have been guides for me through my life. The part in – and Tony's gonna remember where it is better than I will - but where it talks about praying over every aspect of your life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:42

Oh, it's somewhere in Alma, like everything is somewhere in Alma!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:47

I can never remember the chapter and verse, but I can usually find it in my Book of Mormon. The idea that all parts of our lives are ... God invites us to bring all parts of them, to pray over them, to make room for God in them. That has been, you know, back as a senior higher, trying to figure out what is my purpose in life, that was something I could really hang on to. And since God inviting me to let all parts of my life be places where God's love and purpose could be at work, even the mundane, you know, the working in the garden, the weeding, the taking the cattle out to the shelter, to the pasture late at night. All of those things were places where prayer was appropriate. So, you know, I think it's those very real places where scripture does what scripture does, which is help us connect to a real and loving God, a God who knows us and loves us, and invites us to be part of God's work in the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:59

And then for me, there's a passage in Moroni 7, in which we read that we are to pray to the Father with all the energy of heart for this love, which the text calls charity. It's obviously a riff on 1 Corinthians 13. It's a riff and further interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13. "And pray to the Father with all the energy of heart for this love." At a particular time in my life, when I was a young adult, I was having difficulty believing that I could be a loving person. That text spoke very, very directly to me. And then much, much, much later, when Charmaine and I had begun working for Community of Christ, I was using that text for kind of Lectio Divina, kind of praying the text, I guess we'll say. And I was doing a prayer walk with that text in the auditorium on the fifth floor where you can walk around the dome basically. Around the gallery. And I had a most remarkable kind of moment of clarity about how important that theme really is. That the church really, truly has to practice the art of loving. It's not a feeling, it's a practice. That became very clear to me in that particular moment. Now, look, I'm saying this, the text of the Book of Mormon has helped me at the same time that I also believe that the book is fully and completely a product of the 19th century. Right? It's for me as a historical theologian, on every page, when I read in the Book of Mormon, I can tell I'm in the Second Great Awakening. The language and concepts and assumptions are all there. And yet, at the same time, holding that this book, in some creative way, came out of Joseph's imagination. And look, I'm speaking for

myself here. This has also been a means of grace for me too. Now, its status as scripture is, you know, a surety in Community of Christ, but people are free to view it in whatever way they want to within the church. I tend to see it as less important than the Bible and less important than the Doctrine and Covenants. That's my personal take. But, you know, in the same way I could say I've had life transforming experiences from the 15th century text called "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a Kempis in very similar way. So, to me this book has spiritual value, independent of its origins, and independent of the theological problems that it can sometimes create for readers.

Carla Long 41:48

Tony, I actually really appreciate what you said, because it reminded me of the Community of Christ Statement on Scripture, which our listeners can find at cofchrist.org, and just type in "Statement on Scripture." Our affirmation three in that statement says, "Scripture is a library of books that speaks in many voices. These books were written in diverse times and places and reflect the language, culture and conditions under which they were written. God's revelation through scripture does not come to us apart from the humanity of the writers, but in and through that humanity. In the earthen vessels of scripture, we have been given the treasure of divine love and grace." So even our statement on scripture says something about, you know, scripture is not exactly God's word. It's given through the writer. So Tony, I feel like that's part of what you were saying, in what you just said about some of the issues that you have with the Book of Mormon.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:50

Sure.

Carla Long 42:51

Yeah, so I just wanted to bring that up and reroute our listeners to the Statement on Scripture, if they're interested in that. Let's move on to kind of a different topic. There's still some challenges that people see with the Book of Mormon. Do we want to talk about some of those challenges that people have with it, or problems that they have?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:13

Sure, and I think that will be helpful. And actually, what you just read from the Scripture Statement is a really good lead in, because as people today read the Book of Mormon, it's really quite clear that there are things in it that would be sexist, and racist, and that these create some barriers for people as well. And, you know, if we see scripture as being the writings of people in their time, trying to describe as best they can, how they sense God at work around them or within their communities, that these are not words directly from God's mouth, but from people's experience of God. As they're trying to describe that, then it's much easier to say, you know, whether it's the New Testament, you know, written in the first century,

or the early second century, or whether the Old Testament, which all both have the same issues of being sexist and racist, read through our eyes today. It's important to realize that, and whether the Book of Mormon was from ancient times or from the 19th century, I think it's important to realize that there will be those kinds of things within the writings. Because it's where the people who are writing them are, it's the things that surround them. It's the ideas that surround them. The idea of sexism isn't even something that really came into focus until the last century, to be identified as a problem that had a name. So, you know, some of the things that we find in scripture, whatever scripture it is, I think it really is another one of those places that reminds us that these writings are, first of all, from people living in their time, shaped by their culture. And that God is part of their lives, and they're trying to describe that, rather than scripture being words directly from God's mouth or God's mind. And so I think the problems that we find in any of the scriptures do not have to recognizing that they come from these cultures in these times, may help us to still be able to hear who God is, or who Jesus is, and what God's calling us to. But yeah, any scripture used as a direct application on our lives today, that can be dangerous. So that was one of the things I just wanted to lift up is that, you know, there are things in scripture, whether it's the Bible or the Book of Mormon, that are not conducive to equality, and to recognizing that God can use all people and has.

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:22

So when we talk about various kinds of issues the Book of Mormon raises in Community of Christ, I think you can lump them under three general categories. There's historical issues, there's theological issues, and then there are missional issues. What Charmaine just referred to a few moments ago, in terms of racist texts and sexist assumptions in the Book of Mormon, that fits under theological issues. The historical issues are still very much a part of the difficulty of reading this book. If you assume that all texts have a historical setting or context they come out of, then the question immediately comes, you know, if I'm quoting Moroni 7 or whatever, what is the historical context of the words I've just read? And so there remain differences in Community of Christ on that. There are some folks who, like myself say, I think the context of all the words of this book is the 19th century. And then there are other members of the church who say, no, I really do think this is an ancient American text, and that's the context. So that's an ongoing conflict within the church, and how we relate to each other in the midst of that disagreement is really, really important. So those are historical issues. Where this text comes from, and what's its setting.

Theological issues: I think another one that I would add to the one Charmaine added is that the Book of Mormon, when you read through it, has a kind of rhetorical stance, which wants to settle once and for all doctrinal issues. So for example on infant baptism. As you're reading the text, it wants to close off further argument and discussion about different kinds of theological issues in a way that actually the Bible doesn't. And I think that's theologically problematic. If you want to use the Book of Mormon doctrinally, then it kind of wants to end discussion on things. It's very prescriptive. And I think that for me, it reflects Joseph Smith's context in which

the religious debates of the frontier seem to put to the test an assumption everybody held that somehow the Bible, a collection of written texts, could once and for all settle doctrinal disputes. Well, obviously, it wasn't doing that. So the Book of Mormon says, you know, says basically, here I am, I'm a book that will once and for all settle disputes. So I think that's theologically problematic.

And there are missional issues for Community of Christ. We have very dear church member friends in other parts of the world who have read the book and said, you know, it's not so much the message that's a problem to me, it's that when I read this, I can tell it's a very American book. That's missionally problematic. Furthermore from that, I think that Community of Christ's trajectory since 1844 has moved us away from the Latter Day Saints, from the Mormon church. And yet the Book of Mormon is the trademark book of the Mormon church. So if you use it missionally, how do you continue to differentiate yourself from another church that you share some origins with? So those are some of the issues we face with the Book of Mormon.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:44

I can say a little bit more about the missional problems. When Tony was talking about a church member from another part of the world, Canadians... (as a Canadian I can say this), Canadians too have sensed that this book was very much a book of the United States, a book that holds up one nation as being somehow privileged and closer to God than other nations. And though that's, you know, part of the time in which the Book of Mormon came forward, and likely then to be somewhere communicated in it, that is one of the things that can be a turnoff for people of other nations. And, you know, I think, perhaps because the church was so concentrated within the US for so long, that we may not recognize, that may not see that that can be a problem issue as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:53

So those are issues we face. And I can suggest a couple of books that people might be interested in reading, or at least a book and an article. The article is by Andrew Bolton, who was a member of our Council of Twelve. Andrew Bolton wrote an article, it's in the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal, around 1999, I think. And it's titled "Book of Mormon: Asset or Liability for a Peace Church." It's a really, I think, helpful way of getting at a part of the positive message of the Book of Mormon that's often been neglected in typical uses of it. And Andrew's approach represents what I would call a post critical approach to the Book of Mormon. Andrew can speak for himself, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying that he's not interested in whether the text is ancient American history. He's interested in more in what the text can call us to today. And Andrew is very convinced that the Book of Mormon can be a real asset to us as a peace church. And recently, Dale Luffman published a book called "The Book of Mormon's Witness to its First Readers." Those first people who joined with the movement Joseph Smith began. When they read the Book of Mormon, what was the witness they picked up from it? How did it speak to them in their context? And that book was published just a few

years ago, and it's a helpful way to get at a 19th century context reading of it. A number of years ago, I wrote an article titled "Prayer in the Book of Mormon," trying to treat the text, again, not as ancient history, but as a spiritual formation text, a text one can use to guide one's life of prayer. So those are some things that people could look at. Also, Charmaine's reminded me of an article that I wrote but I disagree with now.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:54

That's why I wanted you to mention it!

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:56

That's why you wanted to mention it, yes. I disagree with myself back then. In the same volume of the John Whitmer journal, there is an article I wrote. It's titled "The Spirit, the Book, and the City." And it was my attempt at the time (1998, 1999) to try and do a postcritical reading of some of our traditions, including the Book of Mormon. So if people find that and read it, just know that they can ask me, they can email me and say, do you agree with yourself now? And I will say, no, and here's why. But people might find it useful.

Carla Long 53:33

Oh, I am very interested in reading this article. Now I want to hear Tony versus Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:40

And I think it's really important to... Tony's making faces at for bringing this up! But I really think it's important to realize that none of us are obligated to be where we were, or where we are now in the future. So I think if we're open to the Spirit, and that is one of the hallmarks, one of those identifying things in our movement, to be open to the Spirit, to being open to growth, to being open to God being bigger than our ideas, or our beliefs. That we are going to change. We are going to be in different places at different times in our lives, and we're going to be in different places from each other. And so Tony and I are in different places on this. I would probably be more in a place that says it doesn't matter where it came from. It has been a tool that has helped to point to who God is and Christ's nearness, and that's what matters most. Because, you know, as with other scriptures, whether they're history or not doesn't matter, who wrote them doesn't matter. They were preserved and passed on because they help people connect to a real and loving God who wants to encounter us. And so I tend to say the historical issues are important and interesting. But they do not determine whether or not this is a valuable text.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:18

And I would come towards that position by saying, look, in the end it's about the Lord Jesus, it's about the Kingdom of justice and peace. It's about loving and open community. And

whatever helps us to get there, I'm more than willing to let God use it. God will use it whether I'm willing to let God or not. So I think that's where our positions overlap and touch.

Carla Long 55:47

Well, I think that's a wonderful place to close off our discussion of the Book of Mormon, and unless you have thought of something else that you really want to say, that you meant to say and didn't, are there any final closing thoughts from either of you?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:02

Just that I looked it up while we were talking and that passage is from Alma, Alma 16.

Carla Long 56:11

Well done!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:13

And I had it marked and it starts around [verse] 219 of Alma 16.

Carla Long 56:18

Well, thanks for doing that. That's good to know. I was thinking about what you were just talking about, about the article that Tony wrote that now he no longer agrees with, and it's very Community of Christ of you, Tony, actually. Because it seems like Community of Christ is never static. We're always changing. We're always developing. There are moments when I just want to say, can't we stop and breathe for a second in where we are now. But God doesn't usually allow that, since we are always discerning and looking and hopefully being vulnerable to new ideas and new places to go. We can't just point to one moment in time and say, "This is exactly who we are." We're always becoming something new. And so I really appreciate your willingness to be vulnerable, or Charmaine's willingness for you to be vulnerable, in bringing up an article that you no longer necessarily agree with, because who knows what that might bring up for someone else? And what questions and answers it might help someone get to. So anyway, I appreciate that. And I think that's very much in alignment with who we are as a movement in Community of Christ.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:32

I think that's a lovely way to think about us as a community. We are in flux. Nothing the side of the reign of God has reached its Omega point yet. And so therefore, we are always in transition, always in flux. And even Tony can change. In fact, it was pointed out to Tony, also by Charmaine this summer, that lots of guys were no longer tucking their shirts in and I could untuck my shirts if I wanted to. And I find that very liberating now.

Carla Long 58:03

Well, please don't go too far, please! Well, Tony and Charmaine as always, it's been a pleasure. And, as usual, I've learned something, which is exciting for me and given me a lot to think about. Listeners, if you have any questions, please feel free to ask them on the ProjectZionPodcast.org website and we can do our best to answer them or, you know, you can contact us at any time to ask us questions. And we'll do our best to answer, right Tony and Charmaine?

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:34

Right, Charmaine will be happy to answer your questions!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:38

Yes, Carla, you'll be happy to answer!

Carla Long 58:39

Well, anyway, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for your openness and your vulnerability, Tony and Charmaine, for sharing even your personal testimonies about how you view the Book of Mormon. And I appreciate your work, and I appreciate your research. And I think you're great.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:54

Well, we hope that this will be helpful in some way. And even though we kind of spun around in different directions, you know. As I was looking back at notes of things we might have wanted to say, it's like, oh, my notes say it so much better than I did. But hopefully, we've given at least a little sampling of some of the different ways of understanding and using the Book of Mormon within Community of Christ's context in our world today for the sake of God's purposes. So thank you, Carla.

Carla Long 59:24

Well, thank you, and thank you listeners. This has been a Project Zion Podcast series, Percolating on Faith, discussing the Book of Mormon. See you later.

Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:33

Bye bye.

Josh Mangelson 59:36

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