

# Cuppa Joe|Theo-History|Israel A. and the Auditorium

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Israel A. Smith, church, orthodoxy, theology, Zion, conference, Fred M. Smith, Joseph Smith, F. Henry Edwards, retrenchment, connected

## SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Josh Mangelson, Lach Mackay, Karin Peter

### **Josh Mangelson** 00:17

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

### **Karin Peter** 00:34

Welcome to *Project Zion Podcast*. This is “Cuppa Joe”, where we explore Restoration history, and I'm your host, Karin Peter. Our discussion today is part of a series of conversations about the historical and theological journey of Community of Christ. Our panel members are Lach Mackay and Tony Chvala-Smith. Lach is an historian, the Director of Community of Christ Historic Sites, and he serves on the Council of Twelve Apostles. Tony is a theologian who teaches scripture and theology at Community of Christ Seminary and Graceland University. Both Lach and Tony are familiar to *Project Zion* listeners, familiar to “Cuppa Joe” listeners, if this is your series of choice as well. So, we're following the development of the early Church, the Reorganization, and our continued journey as Community of Christ, and we're looking at important Church events in their historical and cultural context, as well as corresponding theological developments and their impact on the Church. So, we've been talking, as we've gone along, about different president-prophets of the Church and today we're going to talk about Israel A. Smith, who I have to admit, it was my least known leader of the Church. It would be like talking about presidents and having to talk about Coolidge. Wasn't he one? I don't know. He was one, but I couldn't really tell you anything about him. I feel kind of that way about it today. But we are going to talk about Israel A. Smith, hopefully with a little bit more respectfulness than that, and that period of time in which the Auditorium came to fruition. And then we're going to talk a little bit more about the theological developments of that time period. So, we're gonna start with Lach. Lach, what can you tell us about Israel A. Smith?

### **Lach Mackay** 02:18

I want to start with a little bit on the Auditorium, which played an important role, of course, in Israel's life, but start there and then move into Israel. And the Auditorium is, in some ways, rooted in our 1920 General Conference. It was the conference in which we recognized what we understood to be the centennial of the “first vision” and that there were a lot of people there, so many that we spilled out into

multiple locations, and it became abundantly clear that we needed a larger space in which to conduct Church business. So, following six years of planning and preparation, ground was broken for the Auditorium on February 1 of 1926. The work moved surprisingly quickly, and they held, for the very first time, a conference session in the unfinished basement of the building in 1927. Fred M. Smith, then Church president commented, "The accommodations will not, of course, be what they will when the basement is finished. They will likely be much better than those of a tent," a reference to the temporary spaces we sometimes previously utilized. Donations to drive the work forward included not just dollars and cents, but turquoise, pearl and diamond jewelry, donated by members uncomfortable at wearing such treasures when the needs of the church were so great. At the 1927 conference session, there was quote, "No glass placed to enclose the building. The doors were just rough boards, salvaged from form work. The large openings were closed with nothing but canvas. The heating plant was made up of four Independence furnaces placed in four widely separated quarters of the room, a box of soft coal in close proximity to each furnace. The tables were rough boards covered with plasterboard. The rough cement floor was covered with shavings from the planing mill. But the saints who wished to get together in one room at a general conference were all there. And what were these trifles to men and women who wanted to be present at the opening meeting?" end quote. They were all together for the first time in years, one in Christ. It was for the October 1928 conference that we met in the conference chamber upstairs for the first time. In another first, we joined together for the intricately coordinated communion service, which would become a long-standing Sunday morning conference tradition. The building was apparently still not quite completely enclosed. Elbert A. Smith, then in the First Presidency, commented that 12 sparrows had come to the service, nibbling at the communion bread before being brushed away. Work slowed on the Auditorium with the onset of the Great Economic Depression in 1929, and then stopped completely by January of 1931, as it became clear that the financial situation of the Church was critical. Many, many church appointees were released, Presiding Bishopric was reorganized, a major debt reduction plan was put in place, and a very conservative financial policy was implemented, including spending only what was brought in and liquidating assets not directly required for the pursuit of mission. Commenting on the causes of the problem, Fred M. Smith said, "Our expansion has perhaps been too rapid to properly absorb and then assimilate. Not all the causes for the conditions, now existing within the Church, can be traced to outside influences or forces. Some of the troubles are of our own doing. The whole debt of the Church was not a matter of sudden development. Its growth covered a period of a decade or more, and crept steadily upon us because we had a false sense of security, and that our credit remained good. Curtailment of expenses should really have begun 10 years ago. The Church came together like never before. Women and men, girls and boys, members and leaders, and over the next 11 years made the necessary sacrifices to return the Church to solid financial footing." With the delays of the Depression, Church financial crisis, and second world war, Fred M. didn't live to see the Auditorium completed prior to his death in 1946. Work continued off and on through the 1950s, and the building was finally completed and dedicated in 1962, 42 years after the dream was first envisioned. A little bit on the Auditorium.

**Karin Peter** 07:02

So, Lach, before you go any further on that, I want to go back to the first-time meeting in the basement, sawdust on the floor, we've all been to reunions that sounded kind of similar, but I'm just comparing that in my mind to our current, when we gather at World Conference expectations with the Church. And maybe we can talk about this when we talk about social and theological developments, maybe towards

the end, but I cannot imagine people being okay with that level of discomfort at a World Conference. I mean, other than horrible chairs in the chamber, that's as much discomfort as we're willing to endure for World Conference. And so, I'm just interested in hearing if there's any thought on why that is with our current population compared to the '20s.

**Lach Mackay 07:49**

So, I'm guessing though, and this is probably not a term I should use, but I don't know better one, it's probably a first world problem, and I'm guessing that, for the majority of our members, that would not be a problem, because that might well be what every Sunday is like for them. Or, you know, maybe that's stretching it a little bit, but in the U.S. and Canada and some other places, that would be very uncomfortable. And I think it's because we are economically and socially not those same people. We're in a very different place with different expectations. I'm guessing that for many, that would not be as uncomfortable as it would be for myself, you and certainly not Tony, but.

**Karin Peter 08:25**

So, it actually might represent a broader perspective of our current Church membership, then people U.S., Canada, maybe Europe are inclined to experience.

**Lach Mackay 08:34**

Yes.

**Karin Peter 08:35**

Good point for all of us to remember going forward, although I could probably endure it for a day. But that would be, I'm totally a first world experimenter of life in the church. When you were explaining it, it's like, oh, first thing I could think of was damp and cold.

**Lach Mackay 08:51**

Yeah, I gotta say, I spend a couple of hours on the metal folding chair, and I'm out for a week with a bad back.

**Karin Peter 08:57**

Yeah, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 09:00**

I might add Karin, that not all that long ago, Charmaine and I preached in a congregation in South America that had dirt floors. The door was opened to the outside, and a roving dog came in in the middle of our sermon to sniff everybody. So that was an unusual, but I think more common experience, in many parts of the world.

**Karin Peter 09:18**

Good point. Thank you, both of you. It's helpful for me. It's helpful for our listeners to put that into context. Okay, so that's about the Auditorium. Let's hear about Israel A. Smith.

**Lach Mackay 09:29**

Israel Alexander Smith, named after Israel Rogers, a good friend of Joseph III's and Presiding Bishop of the Church, and, of course, Alexander Smith, Joseph III's brother. Israel, born in 1876, in Plano, Illinois. He was the third son and fourth child of Joseph Smith III and Bertha Madison Smith. The family moved to the newly named town of Lamoni, Iowa when Israel was five. Israel's passion was baseball and he played first base. His friends called him Dutch. I have no idea why. Joseph III's oldest surviving son, David Carlos, was in very poor health from the time of his birth, so the focus was on Fred M. Smith as future president of the Church. Money was very hard to come by and any available funds were directed towards Fred's education. It was clear to Israel that he would be responsible for funding any education he might get beyond high school. Like many children of religious leaders, Israel had something of a rebellious streak while in his late teens and early 20s. A fun letter, Joseph Smith III to Israel A. Smith, 31 March, 1899, he's describing an event that occurred in Lamoni which had caused a lot of discussion. So, here's Joseph III, "Here by wink and nod and whisper, some 14 of the boys including Rob, W. D. Kelly, Otto Kim, Harry Nicholson, W. S. Blair, W. Gillan, Frank Henson, Joe Traxler, Ted Sheen, Joe Danielson and others to the number of 14 gathered. By some means Dusnam and Bishop Kelly got wind of the gathering, and they gathered too. They caught some of the boys and captured some beer." They actually had several kegs of beer. "But the most hid in the garret and one or two in the oven." It must have been an old bakery. "Well, it raised a breeze in the old town. It has made much talk. It may not be such an awful thing to drink a glass of beer now and then, but to obtain the stuff and to gather in such a stuping way and in such company is disgusting. I was glad you were not here. Not that I think you would have been in the proposed carousal, but I had the trouble of tracing down one charge of beer handling embezzling made against you about two years or so ago, and I was glad there was no possibility of this, you're being in it, in this one."

**Karin Peter** 11:59

O, gee.

**Lach Mackay** 12:02

So, Joseph III and Israel had, at times, a strained relationship during this period. Israel seems to have developed a bad habit of spending money he didn't have, which meant Joseph III had to cover for him. Israel enrolled at Graceland the year it opened, 1896, but dropped out two weeks before the end of classes. At some point, in order to try and help with his education, Joseph III wrote a letter to his representative asking that Israel be considered for West Point. In the letter, Joseph III said that he didn't think Israel would be, "an embarrassment to the district," which doesn't sound like a rousing endorsement. By 1899 Israel was in West Virginia working with his brother Fred as a telephone linesman. By the end of 1908, though, Israel had fully reconciled with his father, gone to work for Herald House, enrolled in law school via correspondence course, and married Nina Grenawalt. He was elected to the Iowa State House of Representatives as a Republican, and served until 1912, losing in the primary. Also in 1912, he passed the Iowa bar exam and Israel and Nina had their first child, Joseph Perrine, shortly before moving to Independence to help care for Joseph Smith III, now living there. While there, Israel served as scribe for his father as he dictated his memoirs. Following the death of Joseph III in 1914, and his wife Ada soon thereafter, Israel and Nina took in their three young sons, in addition to their, by now, two boys. Israel continued to practice law before being called as a counselor to the Presiding Bishop in 1920. By 1923, the PB and the FP were embroiled in the Supreme Directional Control controversy over who ultimately controlled the purse strings. Israel was firmly on the

side of the bishopric, arguing that his brother's position betrayed everything their father believed in regarding Church governance. Israel believed that Fred M. stood much closer to Joseph Jr. when it came to who was ultimately in charge. The Order of Bishops moved, as the 1925 General Conference opened, to honorably release the Presiding Bishopric. Delegates referred the motion to the prophet who came back to the conference with a revelation, releasing the Presiding Bishopric, so basically, Fred M. firing his brother. At 49 Israel was unemployed with no choice but to try and resurrect his career in law. He faced very significant financial struggles over the next five years. I need to go back and check this letter. I believe it's during this period Israel ends up in Chicago selling space in a mausoleum to try and make a living and he is literally starving. He has nothing to eat. He writes to his brother Fred, not asking for help for himself, but for Nina and the family who are facing utilities being cut off. These are extraordinarily difficult financial times for Israel and his family. He is named as Church secretary in 1930, which allows him to regain some financial stability. Questions regarding Joseph Smith Jr. and polygamy began to be asked and answered within church leadership in the mid 1930s. But concern developed that talking openly about the topic would drive away members during the time of extreme financial fragility for the Church. Israel was pulled into these discussions and chose to defend his grandfather from the charges. This desire to maintain the respectability of the family name stayed with him for the rest of his life. Following the unexpected resignation of one of Fred M.'s counselors, Israel was called into the First Presidency, as First Counselor in 1938. He continued to focus on defending his grandfather against charges that he was a polygamist, although other leaders including Paul Hansen, president of the Council of Twelve, begged him to acknowledge publicly what he believed to be so clear: Joseph did it. Leaders begged Israel to quit writing about Mormonism, but Israel felt his family was under attack and he was going to defend them. Following a heart attack, or circulatory issues, and I need to go back and check, Fred M. Smith died on March 29, 1946. It's the second presidency, the Twelve met and held a vote of confidence in the remaining members of the First Presidency, who continued to oversee day to day operations of the Church until General Conference, which occurred the following month. Council of Twelve committee determined that Fred had not left any written instructions regarding his successor, but several remembered verbal statements from him suggesting Israel should follow him as prophet-president. Many in the Council were concerned though, about Israel's age, he was 70 at the time, and they had questions about his abilities. A few also raised questions about his ethics as it related to his practice of law, and time in the Presiding Bishopric. A vote on Israel as Fred's successor was evenly split. Elbert A. Smith, son of David Hiram Smith and much beloved Presiding Patriarch was asked if he had any revelation or advice. He responded with a written statement of support for his cousin. With that, Israel had enough support in the Council to be nominated as Church president at the opening conference business meeting. Israel's ordination ushered in a period of peace in the church, following the tumultuous decades under Fred M. Although debate among the leading quorums was sometimes contentious under Israel, it was not personal, as it often was with Fred M. Like his father, and unlike his brother, Israel was a peacemaker. He relied heavily on his counselors, particularly Englishmen F. Henry Edwards, who was married to one of Fred M.'s two daughters, and Edward's more progressive and outward looking philosophy, combined with the impact of travel overseas by service men and women in World War II, resulted in the recognition that resources, both financial and printed, needed to be devoted to the Church in Europe, the Pacific and South Pacific, and in other parts of the world. These tentative efforts wouldn't really take off until the 1960s and the 1970s, but we did turn our attention internationally. There was an increasing focus on education during this time for appointee ministers, priesthood and members, and the School of the Restoration was

established in 1956, a forerunner of the Temple School. We also took halting steps towards dismantling the segregation that had developed in the church. Israel experienced the Church overseas firsthand as he traveled to Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, and French Polynesia in 1950, and Europe in 1952. Resources began to be published by Herald House, recognizing the need to understand scripture in historical context. While taking steps to redirect our focus outward and towards the future, Israel couldn't help but to continue looking back as well, particularly when it came to questions of his grandfather, Joseph Smith Jr., his connection to polygamy, and our connection to things Mormon. His close ties to cousins in Utah and to LDS church leaders sometimes caused consternation among RLDS members. On one occasion, he and President Hanson of the Council of Twelve, headed to Salt Lake for some conferences, but Israel's cousin, George Albert Smith, died as they were in route. And so, of course, Israel was invited to the funeral. He was good friends with a man named Wilford Wood, a Utah furrier, who ended up buying many, many, many historic sites for the LDS church, and Wood picked Israel up at the train station, which was a little confusing to Russell Ralston, who had also showed up to pick Israel up from the train station. So, there's an RLDS delegation watching as Israel and Hansen are ushered out by an LDS delegation, not an official church one, but still it was a little puzzling to the membership there. And then to make things worse, Israel and Hanson were invited to attend a session where David O. McKay was being sustained as the new LDS president. I think Israel had a good relationship with McKay and as kind of a sign of respect and friendship, both Israel and Hanson stood to sustain McKay in his new role. LDS missionaries began using that against us, and Israel spent at least a good part of a summer and maybe a good part of a year responding to letters from angry RLDS members about that misstep. Israel always relied heavily on his counselors. This was especially true during the last years of his life, of F. Henry Edwards, power behind the throne, and Israel as the much beloved "gentle monarch", as his biographer, Norma Hiles, tagged him. Israel did find the energy in the mid 1950s to actively work for the removal of Joseph Smith Jr.'s *Doctrine and Covenants* 'sections related to baptism for the dead. But Edwards and others thought this step could be disruptive to the general membership, and it wouldn't happen for another 15 years. Significant discussions also took place in the 1950s about ordaining self-sustaining 70s, and focused efforts went into building new meeting houses, and repairing old ones. Ignoring the objections of his family, Israel chose to drive himself from Independence to Lamoni for a stake conference on 14 June, 1958. During a driving rainstorm, Israel was involved in a head on collision that occurred in his northbound lane. He died in the hospital a few hours later, having regained consciousness only long enough to ask staff to call his family. The loving and pastoral nature of Israel, combined with the very gifted administrative abilities of F. Henry Edwards and others, resulted in a period of peace and growing prosperity for the church during Israel's tenure. It feels to me that the church under Israel had one foot in the past and one foot in the future. With increasing international engagement, or reengagement in some cases, following World War II, the growing desire to educate appointees and leaders, internal pushback by some leaders against the traditional telling of our origin story, and our recognition that there were social issues that we needed to be engaged in. For folks more interested in Israel, I would encourage them to read Norma Hiles', *Gentle Monarch*, as well as Paul Edwards' one volume *Church History* on Israel, and Dick Howard's two volumes, Israel's kind of mixed in, and Mark Scherer does a really nice job of capturing life under Israel's tenure, as well.

**Karin Peter** 23:43

As you were sharing some of that, and I'm thinking about that time period in the life of the church, I can't help but think about resources that were developed that still sometimes haunt us, that come from that tension between LDS and RLDS. So, I'm looking forward to hearing what Tony has to share on our theological developments in this encapsulated time period. So, Tony?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:07

So, this is going to be a kind of a shotgun approach, that is, I'm going to spray lead everywhere, but...

**Karin Peter** 24:14

In a peaceful kind of way, right?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:16

It's peaceful lead actually. I want to go back to that first gathering in the basement of what would be the Auditorium and that quote, "It will likely be better." I think, you know, in our Church seal, we should take out the word "peace" and put it in small print, "It will likely be better," with, with the right inflection on the word "likely", like, maybe, could be. So, I just find that really, really hilariously true to our Church's story and identity. So, in the history of theology there's a phenomenon you can note, and my wife and partner, Charmaine, is the one who first put a lens on this, and she would say, "Of things past and also things present, that every theology is either a reaction or a response to the theologies that went before it." And so, I think this really bears itself out in Israel A.'s tenure. That is, the Fred M. Smith era is riotous, in lots of ways, some radical moments there. Fred M. had dipped into social gospel theology. If it hadn't been for his own personal, kind of, I'll say rabid American nationalism, we could have become quite a reformist movement, maybe, out of that. But we had those radical moments, but then also, all the upheaval surrounding him and then the Great Depression, and then his presidency is bookended by two world wars, a really difficult period. And so, it then comes as no surprise that the presidency of Israel A. Smith is a period of, well, retrenchment, theologically, reaction of smoothing the waters. And the way I came to understand this was actually experientially, and that is, I joined the Reorganized Church as an 18 year-old back in the mid 1970s, and the missionary who birthed me into the church, and a lot of the people he was associated with, were people who had come of age in the church during the time of Israel A. Smith. And as I look back on them, they held a fairly rigid RLDS kind of orthodoxy, connected to something akin to the preaching chart. And I don't think it's accidental that they developed that theological framework during the time that Israel A. was the president, because certain features of his person and his presidency, really, kind of, stabilize everything. Let's all be on the same page here, let's not argue about stuff, let's preach the *Book of Mormon*, let's preach the "first vision", let's preach the basic stuff we've always taught. There's a kind of a sense that we've got to get back to these Restoration basics, as they would have been called, and not a lot of room in that for asking deep, tough questions, though people were, as Lach pointed out, people were asking them, but there's not a theological framework there for dealing with them yet. So, there was a German philosopher named Hans-Georg Gadamer, who wrote a book on interpretation theory, and he coined this term, "wirkungsgeschichte", which is history of effects effect history. You really only know a thing by its subsequent effects. And so, in some respects, one could say that Israel A. Smith is best known by his later effects in the creation of almost rigid kind of RLDS theology that subsequently became part of what is now Restorationist movements, breakaway movements, could not sustain theological critique. Challenge did not have a framework for trying to rethink itself. What else can I say here? Israel A., he

has some very interesting theological things for us to learn from. He's the one who said, in one of his sections of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, right around 1947, that basically equated Zion with spiritual condition. So it wasn't that he disbelieved in Zion as place, it's that Fred M., with his social gospel theology, really wanted to build stuff, and that had become untenable for financial reasons, and because people just don't really get along very well. So that attempt to have a literal, physical, kind of Zonic community didn't work all that great. So, Israel A. did not give up on gathered communities, but by refocusing on the idea that Zion is a spiritual condition, and it's no further away, nor any nearer than the spiritual condition of God's people. That is a whole new twist on the idea of Zion in our movement. And it's really important for later because it allows us ultimately, to think of Zion as not just, or only Independence, Missouri, and living in this state of Missouri, I would say, there is no Zion anywhere in the state. But, but, you know, I mean, the whole gathering idea. Israel's idea that Zion as a spiritual condition allowed us later to rethink that concept, so that Zion becomes more like leaven in the place where you live. It becomes spiritual condition in the place where you live. It makes it possible to imagine the kingdom of God in other places than Jackson County, Missouri. And it's not that Jackson County, Missouri doesn't need to have the kingdom of God, it's just that that very literalistic idea that the kingdom of God is a thing we were going to build in one little county in, not a Midwestern state, but a mid-south state called Missouri, that that idea was just not going to be tenable long term for the church. So, Israel A. can be credited, I think, for pointing a way ahead towards spiritual development, spirituality, spiritual condition, as a kind of synonym for the growth of Zion. He had surrounded himself with theologically abled people like F. Henry Edwards and Arthur Oakman, and Roy Cheville. Edwards and Oakman, more akin theologically in some ways, Cheville, a kind of very avant garde Reorganization modernist, with significant theological training. These are big names in the Church during the '40s and '50s. But my sense with Israel A. is that he did not have a deep theological way of thinking about things. And the case in point is this whole thing that Lach laid out about his constant dalliance with Mormons. I mean, for Israel A., blood was thicker than good theology, and so getting off the train and being whisked away by Mormon dignitaries, and then supporting a Mormon president, he doesn't seem to have the theological lens to say, oh, no, no, no, no, no. We are something utterly, completely different from this. For him it's more like, no, these are family. I'm going to support him. It's like, well, church members, I think, had a legitimate reason to say, excuse me, Mr. President, we ain't that. So, but you see, that's because he's highly relational, highly institutional, but he's not deeply theological about that. So that, I think, created some subsequent problems, because the church that went around teaching the preaching chart in the form of class slides and subsequently Polaroid slides, in retrospect, they thought they were being theological, but they were really repeating a kind of old RLDS preaching chart theology that had been around for well over 100 years, and if you raised critical questions about it, there wasn't room for it. So, there's a sort of, kind of orthodoxizing of the old Reorganization theology that you would connect to John Cornish, and people back in the late 1800s, during Israel A.'s time. Another thing too, is that, I would have to ask the historians to do a little more work on this, but it seems to me that during Israel A.'s tenure, there was a new emphasis on the *Book of Mormon* as a historical document connected to ancient American peoples, and Roy Cheville was one person in that period who might be able to raise a few questions about that, though, the theological, philosophical framework he used didn't let him go very far into critiquing that. But the people who birthed me into the church were absolutely committed that Mayan ruins in Guatemala and other places, Honduras, Mexico, that these were Nephite and Lamanite ruins. And that kind of stuff was not discouraged at all during Israel A.'s tenure. He would obviously connect that to we've got to keep telling



the "first vision" story, i.e., the 1842 account. I doubt he knew there were other accounts. That knowledge wasn't widely available yet. Protecting the old story of the Church's origins and protecting Joseph Jr.'s credibility from, from polygamy, etc., this is all part of his theological way of thinking. In 1950, when he was in French Polynesia, he gave a local revelation to a congregation at Taravao, and that revelation, you can still find copies of and read, and essentially, it does two things at once. It basically says, you're all to be commended for your faithfulness, and French Polynesia is not a single Island, it's hundreds of islands spread out over 1000 miles of Pacific Ocean, basically, and he got a sense for how scattered church members were there. And so, in that revelation he says, basically, there should be provision made for gathering to islands where there's business centers and so on, like gathering to the population centers. So, there's the gathering idea, but note, it's in French Polynesia. It's not in Independence, Missouri. And so, he has two things going at once there. Zion can be an actual gathered community in French Polynesia. It doesn't have to be only a gathered community in Missouri. I find that really fascinating, and that congregation still exists and people still remember. There's still a memory there of Israel A. being there in 1950. It's a very deep memory. So those are some things I can observe about Israel A. Let me say something about Reorganization orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is a complicated word. Literally, in Greek, it means "correct opinion". Orthodoxy is a right opinion about something. But in the history of theology, of course, it comes to mean true faith as opposed to heresy, false faith. Orthodoxy in the Reorganization forms rather quickly in the Joseph III era, and it forms not so much around him as around a whole variety of very charismatic public missionary figures, like Joseph Luffs, and John Cornish, and a whole variety of them. And one of the things they did was they found themselves constantly arguing with different Protestant groups about things like: were there prophets in the early church? And, was prophecy supposed to continue after the New Testament period? These are the arguments. Was there an original church with certain offices? Are miracles still possible? Which is the right day for the Sabbath? These are the things that were debated in town halls and Grange Halls in America in the 1880s, '90s, 1900s. And if you read John Cornish's autobiography, you will realize that at least he seemed to win all of his debates. Now, it would be quite interesting to know, from the other side, if there were debates that he actually lost. But in any case, these guys, and they were pretty much all guys, one exception, Marietta Walker, created a whole genre of books called doctrinal reference books. The doctrinal reference books, basically, were modeled after old Protestant doctrinal reference books where you have a doctrinal heading: Christ is divine. And then you have scripture references that prove it, cherry picked scripture references that prove this, this and this, prophets in the early church, and then there are lists of scriptures. And these books came out of the missionary experience, but they were designed to help church members defend their faith against the challenges of their Protestant neighbors, who often were their Protestant enemies. So, what happened, in this whole period, is that this use of scripture, and this use of doctrine, which was itself an aftermath thing from the Protestant Reformation, very much came to stamp Reorganization identity. And there was this growing sense, after 1900 of, on the ground out in the Church, here's the things that Reorganized Latter Day Saints believe, and here's the things we don't, very strong boundaries inside, outside. And so that kind of doctrinal orthodoxy was present, even during the Fred M. Smith era. I'm sure Fred M. Smith believed a lot of that, it just wasn't the center of his focus, right. But in Israel A.'s time, it seems to me that that sort of thing came into full flower once again, and it became kind of the litmus test theology of what it meant to be Reorganized Latter Day Saint. And so, in the 1960s, when there's going to be a radical shake up and shake down, and a real deep dive into who are we? What are we? What do we really want to say? That theology is going to take a beating. It's also going to push

back very hard. And in some places, it's still with us. It's still out there. It was a very solid framework for lots of people, and yet, so much of it was easy to falsify with different tools from what they had, but nevertheless, that framework gets a sort of presidential seal of approval, whether officially or unofficially, in the Israel A. era. There were possibilities in the Israel A. era to maybe raise a few questions about the so called Inspired Version, but no, it was pushed ahead too. We don't want to rock the theological boat. He'd had too much of that in the 1920s. And so, what happens is that there's a mix going on there. There's some new possibilities, and yet this, I call it retrenchment, theological retrenchment, it's going to make the 1960s and '70s harder than the hard they were already going to be. So those are some reflections on Israel A.

**Karin Peter 37:41**

I wanted to see if we can make some connections. When we're talking about this period, this retrenchment period, this is the 1950s, and America, the nation American, which Israel A. lived, or most of his constituents that he would speak to were, that was happening in our community life. It was the fight against communism, where your neighbor could be your communist enemy and, and book burnings and some real retrenchment into ideology that was extremely conservative. Did that not foster some of this same perspective in the church? We live in the midst of that, each of us in our culture now. We live in the midst of our culture and context. What I remember and studied about that period, it was all about being right. Democracy was right and communism was wrong. When you talk about the Church, it sounds like we're having the same conversation. Can you connect that, either one of you to historical context in that period?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 38:36**

I can take a dive and then I'd be interested to hear Lach's reflections too. As we always say, theology is always connected to its context, right? It's in a kind of symbiotic, and yet possibly tense relationship with this cultural context. And yeah, in the 1950s, in the United States, it's the "Leave It to Beaver" era, right, and June Cleaver has to put on a dress and not work in the factories anymore. And so, there's a sense of propriety, I'll call it white propriety, white middle class and white working class propriety. The full flowering of the GI Bill had not yet hit the church. That is, it's going to take a while for a lot of Church members to get university education, and so, your local culture, local religiosity, is going to shape your inner theological landscape a lot. So, it's a socially conservative period. It's a breather after two world wars and a great depression and now a Cold War. And this sense of good versus evil, west versus east, is heightened by McCarthyism. Interestingly, F. Henry Edwards delivered a World Conference sermon, oh gosh, right around 1950, '52, somewhere in there, titled, "Freedom Under God", in which he gives a very interesting, and I think worth listening to, reflection on what it means to be free, the difference between freedom from and freedom for, that kind of perspective, a very articulate and thoughtful sermon. But notice when it's given. It's given during the Korean War, the McCarthy era. So yeah, I should say that all kinds of American denominations experienced growth in the 1950s. This is the baby boom era. Was it growth from missionary work? Or was it growth because families were getting bigger, right? And there are more kids being born. And so, I got to get him in the Sunday school and get them into church, so they have this and that, and values and so on. I've heard some church members say, "Oh, we were growing so fast back then." And it's like, well, yeah, we were having a lot more kids too. And so, yeah, there was missionary work going on. But in other words, it was a cultural phenomenon that was connected to every denomination's growth. Lots of denominations were building

church buildings in the 1950s and early '60s. And it was connected to this cultural phenomenon of the baby boom. So, this was just a few reflections. We tended to reflect that era, to some extent.

**Karin Peter** 40:56

Okay. Lach, did you have anything to contribute to that historical context?

**Lach Mackay** 41:00

Sure. Yeah, I'd say in addition to that larger context, I'll drill down into the RLDS context. This is something I picked up on and would love to do more work on. I was looking at the role of the "first vision" in the church and how it rises and falls. It became clear to me, and again, I want to do more work on this, that Fawn Brodie really gets credit for why Tony learned so much about the "first vision" as a new convert. So, she publishes, in 1945, her *No Man Knows My History*, and Israel was not a fan. I think in some ways, he felt tricked because I believe that we had been helpful to Fawn as she worked in our archives, thinking she was going to publish something that we liked. And so, I think a lot of what is happening is a reaction against that book. We publish in '49, I believe for the first time, an RLDS version of *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story*. And then by 1951, it is what appears to be our first tracts published in Spanish. So clearly, this is important to us by that time. So, we went from: nobody knew about the "first vision" early on to, yeah, we talked about it 1920, but really, it was just kind of a few mentions here and there. But I think that Fawn publishes, and Israel reacts, and a lot of that retrenchment, when it comes to the reengagement with questions about things Mormon, is related to that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:35

I think that's very, very helpful. And it's also fair to say that this is where the theologian who is also historian wants to be careful not to be critical of things that one shouldn't be critical of. My great grandparents could not have understood texting on a cell phone, right? They did not have the experience or the framework to understand that. And so, one cannot fault Great Grandma and Grandpa Loomis, for their lack of knowledge about how to use a cell phone. It hadn't even been invented yet. And so Israeli A. has to work with what he's got. And while there are pieces developing, that will help develop a whole new kind of theological framework for us as a church, they're just not in place yet. He doesn't have those. He has to work with what he's got. He has a deep pastoral sense. He loves the church, loves its people, and he wants a little bit of peace and quiet. And so that's what he has to work with. And, and so we can look at the long history of effects and say, well, I wished we had more to work with there. But on the other hand, we have to say, this is who he was. This is what he did. And this is the setting in which he did what he could. And so, I'm just wanting to be fair to him, even at the same time, where when you take the long view, one thinks that the 1950s, they may have caused us more pain than the pain we were going to have in the 1960s and '70s, just because of that retrenchment.

**Karin Peter** 43:53

So, when we started this, I said I didn't know a lot about Israel A. Smith. The scripture you quoted, though, I think it's section 147 in the Community of Christ *Doctrine and Covenants* about Zion, though, is one of my favorite scriptures. I paraphrase it. I very seldom quote scripture accurately. Sorry, Tony. Zion is neither as near or far away as a spiritual condition of God's people, that whole idea. That leads us into what I would think is more of our current Community of Christ identity or orthodoxy, if you will,

which is this idea of spiritual formation and God's Spirit everywhere, for all people, almost a universalism but not quite. So how would you contrast current Community of Christ understanding with the orthodoxy of the 1950s? Do we have an orthodoxy in the 2020s? 'Cause we bump up against a little bit of it all the time. I'm just wondering, do we have one?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 44:48

Is there a text in this class?

**Karin Peter** 44:51

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 44:52

Right. Here's a important distinction to make in Community of Christ theology, and it applies across denominations, too. There's always a difference between local theology and institutional public theology, right. The Church's institutional public theology is what you read on the webpage and what you read in *Sharing in Community of Christ*. You read it in various statements. It comes out, it's embodied in recent *Doctrine and Covenants* sections, and in pronouncements and so on. That's the public theology of the denomination. And it's really important for a denomination to have a public institutional theology. It's just that in our church, going all the way back to Joseph III, the public theology was the big umbrella, and there were certainly doctrines and beliefs holding the umbrella up. But the idea was, we want everybody under the umbrella, so get as close to the center of the umbrella as you can. And so local theology in Community of Christ can be extremely varied. And that's as it should be, I think. One could say that's the incarnational principle at work. And also, we have the right of dissent in the Church, faithful disagreement. So actually, that's part of our public theology, is that there's such a thing as the possibility of faithful disagreement. But locally, you can have stuff that sounds more like the local fundamentalist Protestant theology in some places. In other places, it sounds kind of Unitarian Universalist. There's a certain difference from place to place. So, there's those difference. That's important to know. We do have a Community of Christ public theology, represented in official documents and statements of the Church. And going back to 1879, we have a rule which says that people who publicly represent the church, even locally, are responsible, at least for not decrying and declaiming against those public statements. Doesn't mean you made me believe everything in them, but you can't just use your position locally to say, I believe nothing this church teaches, which is a conflict of interest, actually. So, is there an orthodoxy? The term is hard to use for the Church today. It's hard using almost any church today in the postmodern era, at least in the northern hemisphere. And that is because the question of what is true, what is the meaning of truth, has become a slipperier philosophical question than perhaps it ever has in the history of humankind. It is good to have a kind of same page we're all looking at, whether or not we're all on the same page is a different question. I hope you'll bring that up in subsequent episodes, Karin, because it's going to change in little ways here and there. I think I could say is that Jesus is pretty darn central to Communion of Christ's theology today, that trying to make a transforming difference in the world where you live is pretty important, that being spiritually engaged, trying to somehow grow in one's spiritual life, however one envisions that, is pretty important, and trying to live in ways that support the life of the whole community and not just your own local congregation is pretty central to us. Those are a few little markers, a few little lights on the not so straight runway.

**Karin Peter** 47:58

I appreciate that. I wanted to, Lach, give you the same question. However historically the “first vision” was RLDS orthodoxy for a long time, is there an historical orthodoxy in the life of the church currently?

**Lach Mackay** 48:10

I do not see it if it's there. I think we are all over the place, even more diverse than theologically, I think. In this case, I'd say, there's not even an official historical orthodoxy for the institution, because we have said, there's not just one telling of the story. Our history principles make it clear that there's not and I'm okay with that, because, you know, evolve, and new sources turn up and I'm good with fluidity there.

**Karin Peter** 48:41

So along with, “It might be better”, we also have, “I'm okay with that”, which are interesting kind of concepts to look at our theological and historical perspective. Before we bring this to a close, Lach, you often have an anecdote about our time period, or a certain individual. Do you have anything from this period that you want to close with?

**Lach Mackay** 49:01

I used all that I wanted to use during my earlier discussion. But like you, I knew very little about Israel before I dove into this, and I've really appreciated learning a little bit more about the man.

**Karin Peter** 49:13

Absolutely. Tony, any last comments from you?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:17

I think being pastorally caring towards church people, in whatever era we're in, is never a lose. It's always a win. I think this was a gentle and devoted person, who, in the time of his life when most of us would anticipate retiring and fishing or doing something less onerous, he's driving his car to Lamoni to be in a stake conference when he shouldn't be. And it's part an act of devotion for him. So, there are things to learn from his example and his persona.

**Karin Peter** 49:47

I want to thank both of you for being with us again today to talk about our theological and historical journey in Community of Christ. Our next episode will be episode eight, which we're going to talk about how the Church becomes more international in a very intentional way, and some of the things that happened, expected and unexpected, with that. We're also going to talk about W. Wallace Smith as leader of the church and his groundbreaking choice to retire at the 1978 World Conference, which has put us in a different trajectory in the life of the Church. But I also am hoping that we have a little bit of discussion about what happens when that baby boom we talked about today, hits Graceland, and what that was like and what the fallout from some of that was in the 1970s. So, we'll see where that discussion goes. In the meantime, be sure to catch up on all the topics *Project Zion Podcast* covers, and there are many that coordinate with this particular time period in the Church. So, I encourage listeners to go check out *Project Zion Podcast* website, [projectzionpodcast.org](https://projectzionpodcast.org). And again, I thank you for being with us. I'm Karin Peter. We'll see you next time.

**Josh Mangelson** 51:15

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