



# Deconstructing the Myth of Apostasy and Restoration: Community of Christ's Recovery of the Story of Restoration in Trinitarian Perspective

MATTHEW J. FRIZZELL

“The question is no longer, ‘What did Joseph do?’  
but rather, ‘Where might Joseph’s dream take us?’”

— W. Grant McMurray<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

HOPE TO ADDRESS a simple question that intersects Restoration history and theology: If Community of Christ rejects the narrative of the Apostasy, what is the Restoration a restoration *of* in Community of Christ perspective? What does the Restoration restore? In other words, what does “restoration” as a central concept of Community of Christ identity and theology mean today? The question is not new, but I think clarifying it is timely.

Over the last half century, Community of Christ is unique among the Joseph Smith movements to question, even reject, the story of Apostasy and Restoration as a narrative of history – a narrative we are better to call a religious mythology. This narrative is a religious myth because it fulfills the characteristics of one. It also assumes and is dependent on the logic of another.

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1. W. Grant McMurray, “A ‘Goodly Heritage’ in a Time of Transformation: History and Identity in the Community of Christ,” *Journal of Mormon History* 30 (Spring 2004)

The story of Apostasy and Restoration is a religious myth because it is a paradigmatic story about the nature and trajectory of history and its actors. It borrows its logic and assumptions from Christianity's prior metanarrative, the Creation's Fall and Redemption, which I will also call salvation history. The Apostasy and Restoration myth inserts itself into the metanarrative of salvation history in all its cosmological proportions. The meaning of "the Restoration," in this context, assumes God's divine purposes in salvation history. The myth of Apostasy and Restoration assumes the purposes of salvation and subsumes history with its universal logic and underlying theology.

For Joseph Smith movements, the story of Apostasy and Restoration recasts the actors of salvation history. Joseph Smith and his restored church become the agents of salvation. What's often forgotten is that the story of Apostasy and Restoration cannot fully supersede, but is always dependent on, the story of salvation history in which it is embedded. Without the biblical metanarrative of Fall and Redemption, Apostasy and Restoration really has little relevance or meaning.

The myth assumes theological assumptions of the nineteenth-century American context in which it is born. There is one God, one savior, one salvation, God's unitary truth and authority, and one true church. The totalizing logic of this myth makes Apostasy and Restoration, like Fall and Redemption, interdependent on each other. Apostasy and Restoration necessitate one another, even constitute each other. For the story to work, Apostasy needs Restoration like the Fall needs a Redemption, and vice versa. The myth holds the historical and theological assumptions together in a singular logic. To undo, disprove, or disbelieve the Apostasy, the meaning of the Restoration also loses its meaning. So long as there is one God, one savior, one salvation, and one authority of the one true church, the logic of Apostasy and Restoration is codependent. They belong to a singular structure as one thread that has the ability to unravel both.

So how do we understand one of Joseph Smith's Restoration movements when it rejects the narrative of Apostasy and the "one true church" theology that follows it, while retaining the significance of "restoration" for its own theology and identity? What meaning of Restoration remains? That's what I want to explore.

## II. Working Assumptions

**A**MONG AMERICAN RESTORATION movements, the logic and meaning of the “Restoration” converges on history and theology. Community of Christ historians like W. Grant McMurray and Dick Howard rightly recognize that this convergence can also be a confusion.<sup>2</sup> When the story of Apostasy and Restoration is considered uncritically as a pure and unmediated theology of history and history of theology, it fulfills the definition of a religious myth. Theology and history are conflated and often confused. This is true of the Joseph Smith movements for which the Apostasy and Restoration narrative dictates their story of origins, claims on religious authority, identity and role in salvation history, and does so in cosmological proportions. When the myth of Apostasy and Restoration conflates history with theology, the ability to do history or theology becomes difficult, if not impossible, because the difference between history and theology becomes unintelligible. The logic of myth subsumes them both.

Another way to approach the myth and meaning of the “restoration” is to see it as a kind of narrative theology. The difference between narrative theology and religious myth is that narrative theology mediates theological reflection with a disciplined methodology tied to the logical structure of narrative. It distinguishes theology and history with a literary consciousness that suspends without conflating the two.

Narrative theology is distinguished from systematic or dogmatic theology because it draws on narrative structure as an epistemological ground for *doing* a particular kind of theology. Narrative theology recognizes the unique capacity of narrator and story to shape engagement and form identity, compel action, and provide a unique foundation from which to understand the nature of faith and truth. This approach is distinguished from systemic theology and dogmatic theology, which may or may not involve narrative but fixes theology and identity on propositional axioms or dogmatic doctrines as foundations for faith and truth. Narrative theology, in contrast, allows theological foundations to live apart from dogmatic propositions and myths, yet with a profound appreciation for how identity, action, and belief are shaped in story. Narrative theology mediates theology and history by not conflating them with dogmatic interpretation or unitary structure for truth. Rather, it recognizes story provides a dynamic structure from which to refract and illuminate multiple trajectories of meaning and vantage points on that which is true.

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2. Ibid, 70.

The twist in Joseph Smith movements, unlike other forms of Christianity, is that the Bible is neither the sole nor primary narrative of Restoration theology. Rather, the biblical narrative strangely makes-up the background story and supporting material for the primary narrative, which is the Joseph Smith story.<sup>3</sup> Critical historical inquiry has helped show just how much the Joseph Smith movements' Restoration narratives are shaped in nineteenth-century American mythos and theological assumptions. Among them is the myth of Apostasy and Restoration, which in the Joseph Smith Restoration movements the prophet Joseph is its primary narrator.

For the purpose of this presentation, I will define the myth of Apostasy and Restoration from the perspective of the Joseph Smith movements. My definition is not meant to be unique, but a working definition. The myth of Apostasy describes Christianity in a fallen state after Christ. It is marked by belief that:

- (1) the purity and simplicity of the scriptural text was corrupted through alleged mistranslation, mistranscription, and corruption of the text through time since the post-apostolic church.
- (2) uninspired and unrighteous early Christian leaders deviated from the original organization and structure of Christ's church, its commandments, and ordinances
- (3) God withdrew truth (bringing forth a period of darkness), authority (particularly prophetic authority) and spiritual power from the earth as a result of the fall of the church—evident in its infidelity, impurity, pride, and disunity
- (4) God's Kingdom upon the earth was disestablished with no hope of return, given the state of Christianity

The elements of Apostasy follow the myth of the Fall but are a specifically modern myth aimed at the authority and structure of religion. Frankly, it is unthinkable without the Reformation and Enlightenment.

American religion was also to be democratic, morally idealistic, and anti-Catholic. American Restoration movements, like the Anabaptists, identified Christianity's alignment with imperial Rome in the fourth century as proof of

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3. An example of this is an older RLDS pamphlet of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: James S. Menzies, Merle P. Guthrie, and Richard M. Reid, *The Restoration*. (Herald House Publishing, ca 1960). In it, biblical references are cited multiple times as proof text of the Apostasy and Restoration of Joseph Smith Jr. In each case, biblical references are without reference to their historical, literary, or cultural context.

its fall. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints goes further to the post-Apostolic church to identify the point at which Christ's church went apostate and lost authority.<sup>4</sup> Whatever its beginnings, any myth of Apostasy required an account of origins. In the US context, the fall of anything was easy to pair with the evils of imperial power. Hence Catholicism, Rome, and the Papacy were all signs of the fall.

Dispensationalism was also essential for structuring the myth of Apostasy and Restoration. Dispensationalism shaped America's religious imagination with a compressed sense of history. Millennialism sharpened its pregnant sense of time. The Apostasy explained Christianity's need for Reformation. But Restorationists further explained the Reformation's inadequacies. In 1882, an author in *The Saints Herald* wrote

The Reformation at last broke off the iron yoke; and the dim light began to dawn in the east. The scriptures were given to the people to read; but they did not bring the church out of the wilderness; they only preached faith in the Lord Jesus Christ...therefore there was need, and must have been another dispensation of the gospel; or the kingdom of God never could be organized upon the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Apostasy required more than reform; it required a true Restoration of true Christianity.

The Restoration, therefore, logically complements Apostasy. For the Joseph Smith movements, Restoration is a prophetic theme. As an RLDS pamphlet states it, "the vindication of the prophet is the fulfillment of his prophecy. We now have a story to tell which comes as a remarkable vindication of the prophets...[and] comes as a marvelous fulfillment of the expectations of the great reformers."<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith's restoration addresses the Apostasy with:

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4. Anabaptists commonly refer to the "Constantinian Shift" following the Edict of Milan as the turning point in Christianity's fall and turn to Christendom. An unknown author in *The Saints Herald* interprets Justinian's declaration as the bishop of Rome as Pope and dominion over the empire as when "the dragon gave [the beast] power" (cf Revelations 13:1-2). See "The Restoration of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God," *The Saints Herald* 29:37. Likewise, LDS.org under "The Great Apostasy" reads, "The Apostles were killed, and priesthood authority—including the keys to direct and receive revelation for the Church—was taken from the earth. Because the Church was no longer led by priesthood authority, error crept into Church teachings. Good people and much truth remained, but the gospel as established by Jesus Christ was lost." See <https://www.lds.org/manual/the-restoration/the-great-apostasy?lang=eng>. Accessed September 15, 2018.

5. "The Restoration of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God," *The Saints Herald* 29:37.

6. Menzies, *The Restoration*.

- (1) Restoration of the “fullness of the Gospel” demonstrated in Joseph Smith Jr.’s “translation” of the Book of Mormon and revision of the King James Bible<sup>7</sup>
- (2) Restoration of the church through its organization in the orders of Aaronic and Melchisedec priesthood<sup>8</sup>
- (3) Restoration of the power of God in form of prophetic and priesthood authority demonstrated in the gift and power to translate,<sup>9</sup> keys to the mysteries of God,<sup>10</sup> and authority of divine ordinances,<sup>11</sup> and
- (4) Establishment of the cause of Zion<sup>12</sup>

Establishing the cause of Zion stands out to me among the essential elements of Joseph Smith’s Restoration; because of these elements, the cause of Zion theologically most resists the closed and totalizing logic of the myth of Apostasy and Restoration. The meaning of Zion, like the Restoration, converges on the intersection of theology and history. But Zion, neither in its meaning nor its purpose, is a distinctly Restoration concept. In fact, its meaning belongs to multiple mythologies and theologies, including Christian and Jewish understandings of Fall and Redemption. Because the meaning of Zion is scripturally multivalent, it forces a decision with regard to its meaning in the Restoration. If the cause of Zion is now established, who exactly restores Zion? Yahweh? Jesus? Joseph Smith Jr.? The Restored Church? The answer depends on which religious mythology or narrative theology you choose.

Consider just the Hebrew bible. Zion refers to Jerusalem, the City of David and City of God. A word that means “fortification,” Zion evokes imagery of a

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7. “Translation” is in quotation to indicate the multivalent meaning of this term in Restoration theology and scripture. While modern meaning of “translation” denotes the rendering of text or speech from one language into another, the Joseph Smith movements understand translation as spiritual process through which knowledge of a text and a text’s true meaning is understood and restored or revealed. See use of “translation” in Community of Christ Doctrine & Covenants 3 (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 10).

8. Cf Community of Christ Doctrine & Covenants 17 , Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 107.

9. Cf Doctrine & Covenants 1:5d; see also Oliver Cowdery’s experience with the gift and power to translate as Joseph in Doctrine & Covenants 6, 8-9 (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 1:29; 6, 8-9)

10. Cf Doctrine & Covenants 6:5a-e; 27:2a-d (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 6:10-14; 27:2-7)

11. Cf Doctrine & Covenants 1:3a-e; 83:3a-c (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 1:11-16; 84:18-22)

12. Cf Doctrine & Covenants 6:3a; 10:3a; 11:3b; 12:3a (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Doctrine & Covenants 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6)

refuge for the faithful. It is a city of righteousness where the commandments of God are kept. In the prophet Isaiah, it is a place of justice and righteousness, especially for the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the prophets and Psalms, Mount Zion denotes a divine high place where the righteousness of God dwells and will be reckoned.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of prophecies concerning Zion.<sup>14</sup> If Zion is the name given for where God reigns and righteousness is reckoned, Jesus embodies this drama in the Gospels especially as he enters Jerusalem for the last time. In Revelation, the “New Jerusalem” and “Mount Zion” name metaphoric places where God’s reign are fulfilled and ultimately restored. Jesus, again, is the center of these apocalyptic prophecies.<sup>15</sup>

The meanings of Zion in the biblical narrative, therefore, certainly fit the dispensationalism and millennial expectation of the time. But the theological question begs to be asked again. Who not merely establishes but fulfills the cause of Zion? Yahweh? Jesus? Joseph Smith, Jr? The Restored Church? We can even add, Enoch? The answer depends on which story you choose for epistemological foundation. Even dogmatic theological answers to this question rest epistemologically on the story chosen. The story determines our understanding of history and theology, and which religious mythology is dominant

The only way the cause of Zion becomes the sectarian project of the “one true Joseph Smith movement” is to entrap it in the myth of Apostasy and Restoration. Doing so, the theological meaning and historical fulfillment of Zion is determined in the singular logic of universal Apostasy and the rather particular Restoration myth. Nevermind that multiple Joseph Smith movements claim to be the one true church of the Restoration in form and authority. Never mind that the fractured condition of Christ’s church is a sign of Apostasy that Joseph Smith’s Restoration was supposed to address. Ignoring this contradiction threatens the logic of myth. Because the meanings of Apostasy and Restoration are dependent on one another, one cannot claim to be the true church of the Restoration without all others being Apostate.

Will the one true Restored church please stand up?

In sum, the theological and historical meaning of both Zion and the Restoration all depend on what story the Joseph Smith movements claim. Like most Restoration movements, their belief and identity are epistemologically

13. Cf Isaiah 1:27 and 33:5 and 60:14 NRSV

14. Cf Matthew 21:5; John 12:15; Romans 11:26 NRSV

15. Cf Revelation 14:1; 21:1-2 NRSV

dependent on story. Whether it's the story of the New Testament church, an account of Christianity's Fall or Apostasy, the testimony of a founder, or the millennialist narrative of God's imminent return, the theology and identity of Anabaptists, Latter Day Saint movements, and Adventists are all deeply dependent on story.

### III. Demythologizing the Restoration

**A**BOUT FIFTY YEARS AGO, the RLDS began a process of demythologizing (thank you W. Paul Jones<sup>16</sup>). This meant the RLDS began broadening its knowledge of faith and truth beyond a singular or dominant myth. International expansion exposed just how dependent the RLDS story, identity, and theology were on nineteenth-century assumptions and the greater Christian metanarrative. RLDS theologians, historians, and ecclesial leaders began to recognize the confusion of theology and history that followed the dogmatic hold on the myth of Apostasy and Restoration. Consciously and unconsciously, the RLDS did not dispense with its story. Rather, it began engaging more deeply in narrative theology, whereby RLDS theology and identity drew epistemologically from other foundational and authoritative sacred stories in its own tradition, especially the greater Christian tradition. It embraced the bible as central and salvation history—the primary story on which the meaning of the Restoration is dependent. Demythologizing affirmed the church's tradition of avoiding official positions on history, or of dogmatically confining history to mythical terms. The church constructed (and continues to construct) a theological – not solely mythological or cosmological – foundation. Its character and tradition as a story-formed community didn't change. Rather, the RLDS gained historical consciousness of itself and its place in the greater Christian tradition and developed deeper theological reflection with a new appreciation for stories upon which the meaning of the Restoration rests. Like the meaning of Zion, the meaning of Restoration was intertextual in the broadest sense. It emerged at an intersection of Jewish, Christian, ancient, modern, and contemporary stories and embraced those influences.

Today, I suggest that the meaning of the term “Restoration” in Community of Christ has two essential meanings, neither of which are logically dependent on the meaning of the Apostasy.

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16. Cf W. Paul Jones, “Demythologizing and Symbolizing the RLDS Tradition,” in *Restoration Studies V: A Collection of Essays About the History, Beliefs, and Practices of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, edited by Darlene Caswell (Independence: Herald House, 1993)

Historically, the “Restoration” refers to that greater movement of American Christianities that emerged during the Second Great Awakening, of which the Latter Day Saint movements are a part. What these Restoration movements have in common is a post-Reformation view that Christianity, itself, was in a fallen state and required a vision to re-establish Christianity on the text and testimony of the New Testament church.

Theologically, the “Restoration” refers to the restoration of the reign of God in history and creation. In Community of Christ, this redefinition of Restoration beyond the mythology of Apostasy and Restoration emerges at the intersection of two biblical themes: the Kingdom of God and Shalom. While Joseph Smith’s prophetic ministry shapes RLDS tradition and points Community of Christ to this understanding of Restoration, it foundationally rests in salvation history and the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity.

Clear evidence of the above definition is found in the first pages of *In Pursuit of Peace: Community of Christ’s Journey*.<sup>17</sup> On p10, it states, “Community of Christ is sometimes called a Restoration movement. Restoration is a renewal work of the Holy Spirit to bring people back to the real Jesus of Justice, peace, and grace. This work of the Holy Spirit has been evident many times in history.”<sup>18</sup> The authors are quick to note how we share our story with the monastics, Anabaptists, Quakers, and Baptists.

The Trinitarian foundation for the above definition is further evident in Community of Christ Doctrine & Covenants 163: 2a. It states “Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace.... Follow Christ in the way that leads to God’s peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation.” All the dimensions of salvation point to an alternative understanding of the fullness of the gospel, which is not measured in the number or thickness of our scriptures but in the full impact of the gospel on all the dimensions of this life, not just the next. Restoration begins when we meet God in this world and join its ongoing movement.

Some may note it appears I’ve contradicted myself. After arguing that Community of Christ’s understanding of Restoration is founded on story, I state that Trinitarian theology is the foundation of the Restoration. This is not a contradiction, but the final point I want to make.

Trinitarian theology is, itself, a narrative theology. It is a theological doctrine based on the biblical narrative of salvation history: The story of the

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17. Andrew Bolton, John Hamer, David Howlett, Lachlan Mackay, and Barbara Waldon, *In Pursuit of Peace: Community of Christ’s Journey* (Independence: Herald House, 2016)

18. Ibid.

Creator who created at the beginning, the Son who saved and who saves, and Spirit who speaks and sustains; all are one. While I don't have the time or space to fully defend my theological argument here, suffice it to say that even orthodox theologians acknowledge that Trinitarian theology is a theological invention. It is an orthodox teaching based in theological reflection, which emerged in the second and third centuries. Those who interpret Trinitarian theology's concept of persons literally or interpret its underlying myth of Creation, Fall and Redemption literally (as Creationists do) miss its point almost completely. The Trinity tells the story of God's creative activity in and through the world. It tells the story of God's reconciliation with creation, God's reconciliation with humankind, and universal presence in history. Demythologized and theologically understood, that story is the heart of Restoration theology and its view of history.

In closing, to separate the meaning of Restoration from the Great Apostasy for some is unthinkable and makes little to any sense. For some Latter Day Saints, the fact that Community of Christ has done so is one of many signs that Community of Christ is apostate. But that conclusion is unconsciously sectarian in its foundation: the logic of Restoration and Apostasy necessitate one another. They are held together by dogmatic adherence to the singular codependent logic of religious myth. This myth is itself dependent and contingent on the very Christian metanarrative it attempts to subsume and displace, without which it would have little meaning. That is the Christian myth of Fall and Redemption, and salvation history.

In sum, approaching the myth of Restoration and Apostasy with the tools and assumptions of narrative theology liberates Restoration from its captivity to Apostasy. It allows us to hear the ancient and contemporary narratives of restoration upon which the historical, scriptural, and theological meaning of Restoration rests.

MATTHEW J. FRIZZELL, PH.D., lives with his wife and three daughters in Lamoni, Iowa. He teaches courses in religion and ethics at Graceland University and serves as Dean of the Community of Christ Seminary. Matt is a graduate of Graceland College and Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He received his PhD in theology and ethics from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2010. He has served Community of Christ in full-time ministry as a youth minister, pastor, and Chicago Mission Center President.