Exploring Community of Christ

BASIC BELIEFS: A Commentary

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Chapter 1

What We Believe Is Important

The Good News of Jesus Christ is at the center of the faith and beliefs of Community of Christ. We are a worldwide community and are committed to follow Jesus, bring forth the kingdom of God, and seek together the revealing, renewing presence of the Holy Spirit. We offer here our Basic Beliefs, not as the last word, but as an open invitation to all to embark on the adventure of discipleship. As we seek God’s continuing guidance, we encourage all people to study the scriptures and think about their experiences as they engage in the life of the church.

—from Preface to Community of Christ Basic Beliefs Statement

Most of us at some point have been asked the question “What does your church believe about…?” Sometimes we may have a quick answer; more often we have to stop and think or may even respond with “I really don’t know.” On other occasions we may be in conversation with a member of Community of Christ and realize that our beliefs on a specific topic differ significantly. We may also wonder how closely our personal beliefs align with past or present traditions of the church. We may even find ourselves pondering if the content of belief actually matters.

Life without basic working principles or deeply held convictions is not possible. The explorations of the scientist, the healing action of the surgeon, and the hope of a newly married couple are all based on core beliefs each holds. To “believe in” something, whether for good or ill, is intrinsic to human experience. Indeed, beliefs and symbols deeply form our perceptions of reality and structure our experience of it; they make up the web of meaning that gives a specific texture to human life. There is
certainly more to living than holding beliefs; but there is not less.

Community of Christ has long maintained that it is not a creedal church. Our church does not force members to accept a rigid list of ideas. This important value does not mean we lack beliefs, however; for these are essential to our identity as a Christian church. A “belief” is a verbal expression of a conviction. Beliefs express understandings a community holds as vital to its life and purpose. They reflect in whom and in what a community has placed its trust. Beliefs are not only about what we stand for, they are about what we stand on. In other words, beliefs give the church a foundation; they are what grounds our identity and sustains our mission.

Scripture and Christian tradition unanimously hold that God is infinite. Human perception and speech, however, are finite. Therefore, Community of Christ has historically and consistently acknowledged that beliefs are our limited human attempts to speak of things that surpass our language and understanding. Individual and cultural perceptions always influence statements of belief, as well as our interpretations of them. This was true of the biblical writers, and it has been true of Christian theology ever since.

Community of Christ expects members of our global community to understand our basic beliefs in different ways. What something “means” will depend significantly on the context in which it is being understood. We recognize, and celebrate, that differences in culture, experience, and understanding create variety in our church. “We are many,” as one of our church statements affirms. And we uphold diversity as a gift of God’s Spirit among us. Readers will see this kind of diversity of interpretation in the chapters that follow. At the same time, we are also one: one in Christ, one community sharing a story, a mission, and an identity. The beliefs statement on which this commentary is based expresses our shared foundation, and each chapter tries to offer a compelling interpretation of this foundation. This book was created in hope that exploring Community of Christ’s public theology might aid our continued growth as a prophetic people who seek God’s truth for our time.

The Basic Beliefs Statement

From our movement’s founding experiences in the early 1800s, the church has periodically needed to summarize its faith in public statements of belief. Joseph Smith Jr. wrote one of the first of these statements for a Chicago newspaper in March 1842. The statement was titled “An Epitome
of Faith,” and it expressed core beliefs widely held by church members in the 1840s. As the experience and knowledge of the church developed over time, that statement needed revision and refinement, and eventually even replacement. Revision of beliefs statements is necessary because finite human beings in service of an Infinite God necessarily struggle to express what they believe about this boundless reality.

The statement of basic beliefs this book comments on was published in 2009. While aligned with the 1968 Basic Beliefs Statement, the 2009 statement contains significant new elements. These new elements help articulate the church’s present-day identity, mission, and message. We should expect this kind of updating, especially since more than half a century has elapsed between the 1960s and the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Common misunderstandings often accompany statements of belief, and it is important to address these. Belief statements offer summaries of how the church experiences God’s self-revelation in a specific time and place. The community distills beliefs and doctrines from the divine-human encounter. Statements of faith, as well as doctrines, do not come directly from God. Community of Christ has long held this to be so. Believers find they must speak about what has happened to them. They search for words to express their encounter with God, and rely on the resources of scripture, tradition, experience, reason, common consent, and continuing revelation in this ongoing process. This means that statements of belief can often differ in detail, both in what they say and how they interpret experience.

Furthermore, a simple statement such as “We believe in Jesus Christ” can mean different things to those who make this claim. There are many layers of meaning in this simple affirmation. Belief statements do not, therefore, “settle” the question of the church’s identity, nor at their best do they seek to restrict meaning. Rather, they point us in a direction we can walk together. We respond to God’s love through our commitment to Jesus and to each other, as we, at the same time, acknowledge that “we do not have all the answers. Our shared community compels us to seek answers by listening until we understand. We choose to move forward guided by love and compassion instead of dogma.”

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Our corporate and personal understanding of our beliefs grows and changes. It is guided by our experiences of the Spirit in community, our relationships, information, and our search for more light. In this journey God’s love and the divine yearning to establish the reign of peace and justice on earth prove to be constant. As we respond to God’s love we are continuously renewed. Beliefs are not the end of the journey; instead, they function as both the beginning of our trek and as signposts along the way.

Understanding statements of belief can be complicated. Consider the statement cited above: “We believe in Jesus Christ.” A question that comes to mind is, believe in Jesus Christ as what? Some see or experience Jesus as a teacher, some as a healer, some as divine savior, and others as a personal companion. These varying beliefs about Jesus can easily lead to conflict or suspicion, even though all of them find support in scripture and tradition. The statement clearly does not give the final word on what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. Rather, it points to a common center that can prompt varied responses. These diverse responses are not necessarily problematic, but point to many rich possibilities of ways to follow Christ. They can stimulate further thinking and application of core elements of the faith, and open undreamed-of possibilities in discipleship. These varied responses also remind us that “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part...” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Community of Christ makes an important distinction between public theology and individual or local theologies. Formal statements of belief express the public theology of the church. Public theology is essential to the church’s unity, worldwide mission, ecumenical and interfaith work, and public presence in the complex “marketplace” of religions and spiritualities of the postmodern world. When one is asked, “What is Community of Christ about?” it would be unhelpful to say, “We don’t know, and it doesn’t matter.” It is also untrue. The very name of the church expresses certain convictions about our shared identity.

At the same time, a distinctive feature of Community of Christ is that we do not require rigid conformity to a specific list of ideas. Members have space to grow in their understanding of God and God’s revelation in
Christ, and also have the right of faithful disagreement. Indeed, Community of Christ originates in part from the principle of dissent: the pioneering members of the Reorganization, in the period from 1851 to 1860 cherished their right to resist the kind of religious repression they experienced in Nauvoo. Community of Christ has thus always tried to balance the need for vibrant expressions of shared faith with the freedom of members to think for themselves.

One sees this differentiating of public from individual/local theologies first formally expressed in a crucial, but little read, General Conference Resolution from 1879. Resolution 222 makes a careful distinction between the church’s core beliefs, called “the plain provisions of the gospel” and various doctrines, scripture texts, and interpretations of a speculative and non-essential nature. The resolution makes clear that the church has both formal beliefs and authoritative texts, as well as “liberty of conscience” and great latitude for members to think, question, and live out their faith in personal integrity. Nevertheless, the pulpit—which in this resolution stands for the public voice of those representing the church—is the place to teach the central convictions of the church, not private views or opinions. In the language of the 1870s, the resolution maintains that the public theology of the church should focus on advancing those convictions that relate to the salvation of hearers. In today’s idiom, we might say the primary public message of the church is to focus on those beliefs and principles that lead to a rich, healthy, justice-promoting relationship with God’s love as revealed in Christ.

The church’s Basic Beliefs Statement, then, is an example of a contemporary public articulation of the “plain provisions of the gospel.” At the same time, to use the Basic Beliefs Statement in a manner that did violence to the consciences of members would distort its intent, as well as fail to align with Community of Christ’s traditions and deepest instincts.

Our Restoration tradition was born in a time of seeking. Many of our first members sought a more authentic expression of the Christian faith because they were dissatisfied with the claims made by churches of their day. Like it did for those nineteenth-century seekers, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ still challenges us to seek out the truth for

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2 A document titled “Faithful Disagreement” authored by the USA apostles was published in the Herald 150, no. 3 (March 2013), 21. An updated version is on the church web site at https://www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/FAITHFUL-DISAGREEMENT-PRINCIPLES.pdf

ourselves. We are called to search the scriptures, Christian traditions, our experiences, the best rational knowledge of our day, and the discerned wisdom of the wider community for deeper understanding.

Those who contributed to this book have courageously tried to respond to this same call. They present the following chapters in hope that they will offer fruitful ground for each reader’s personal exploration of our Basic Beliefs. As a commentary, this book does not try to offer final answers to many urgent questions; instead it gives explanations of each belief, provides context and challenge, and suggests how our public beliefs might shape our ongoing journey. The questions and activities at the end of each chapter will help readers explore how our beliefs point toward new meanings, new possibilities, and a deeper encounter with God. This book is an exercise in discovering what matters most in our lives as part of this community and in learning to voice our own understandings in an informed way. The authors’ hope is that this kind of theological work may help us all become salt and light for the world.

Basic Beliefs and Enduring Principles

Closely related to the church’s Basic Beliefs are its Enduring Principles: Grace and Generosity, Sacredness of Creation, Continuing Revelation, Worth of All Persons, All Are Called, Responsible Choices, Pursuit of Peace (Shalom), Unity in Diversity, and Blessings of Community. Community of Christ offers the following explanation of the relationship between enduring principles and basic beliefs:

When people try to understand the church’s identity, mission, and message, they bring different ways of perceiving reality, which leads to different questions.

What is the church like? Enduring Principles are the underlying truths and affirmations that shape the personality of the church. Enduring Principles guide how we live in our communities, families, workplaces, congregations, and cultures. They describe how we experience and share the gospel and the church with others.

What does the church believe? Basic Beliefs are the more comprehensive, rational explanations of what the church holds to be true, arranged in categories that are part of the broader Christian tradition. Basic Beliefs represent a deepening level of inquiry about the gospel and the church.

We need both ways of expressing the identity, mission, and message of the church...to ensure that people can explore and experience the gospel in ways that are the most informing and transforming for them.4

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Basic Beliefs and Enduring Principles are different, but exist in a close, mutual relationship. As is clear by now, this book focuses on Basic Beliefs. However, while it does not concentrate on Enduring Principles, their influence is evident in every chapter. That is appropriate, because the Enduring Principles are equally part of the public theology of the church.

**Organization and Purpose of This Book**

This resource devotes one chapter to each paragraph of the current Basic Beliefs statement. The organization of each chapter follows a carefully chosen pattern. Each chapter first presents the paragraph from the full statement. A short introduction to the topic follows. The chapter then summarizes the biblical foundations of the concept. These summaries help us see how the church’s faith is deeply grounded in the witness of the Old and New Testaments, which are the foundational scriptures of the international church. In this way, the commentary reaffirms that God reliably encounters the church in the testimony of scripture.

This resource uses scripture to illustrate and inspire, not to argue. We focus on the wisdom offered by scripture because it is our primary witness to God’s love as revealed in Christ. We also recognize that in the church today there are diverse understandings of distinctive Restoration scriptures. Where possible we have focused on how these unique texts illumine our heritage as well as offer contemporary counsel to lead us forward. While we do not wish to promote a view of scripture that would be a stumbling block to our mission together, we do want to understand who we have been, and who we now are as a people. Community of Christ remains open to the unfolding revelation of God’s transforming work in the world and in our life together.

A review of how the traditions of the church have understood the topic follows the biblical section of each chapter. This review includes traditions of almost two millennia of Christian experience, as well as those of Community of Christ. Being in conversation with the historic Christian tradition is vital for Community of Christ today, as we engage thoughtfully and creatively with ecumenical partners. These sections on scripture and tradition, then, acknowledge that our movement draws spiritual and intellectual life from generations of faithful witnesses who have gone before us, and from scripture’s testimony to the mystery of God that perennially grounds our experience of Jesus Christ. We claim our unique Community of Christ heritage in this book, but also humbly look
to the faithful of all times whose witness and ministry have brought us to this place.

A section that applies aspects of the specific belief to modern-day discipleship follows the section on tradition. Thinking about our beliefs is not just a mental exercise, but a practice aimed at informing our living of the Good News. A short conclusion follows.

The whole text also assumes the essential value of reason and experience to the task of reflecting on our faith. Reason is careful analysis for the sake of understanding. Experience refers to culturally-influenced personal encounter with God’s love that opens us to the movement of God’s Spirit. Experience is perennially important in Community of Christ theology and in the life of the church. Each of these elements—experience and reason, as well as tradition and scripture—is essential for the important work of exploring our Basic Beliefs. If our quest to discern God’s will and the meaning of our faith in a specific time and place overemphasizes one element, or overlooks one, then our growth and perception as a body suffers. Therefore, this resource in its approach to our basic beliefs also tries to model a way of practicing openness to the many ways God is already seeking us.

Each chapter also includes a short list of resources for further study of the topic and a story or testimony of how the specific belief has touched the life of someone in their faith journey. Testimonies express how aspects of each belief have affected the lives of people.

Each chapter ends with one spiritual practice and two or three questions for individual reflection and group discussion. The practice and questions are intended to help readers explore more deeply and personally insights they gain from the exploration of basic beliefs. The practices especially remind us that theology and spirituality should be inseparable in the church’s life.

This resource has been prepared from contributions by leaders from our international church family. It thus represents different contexts of ministry and interpretation. Authors were carefully selected for their passions and experience in exploring and applying Community of Christ basic beliefs. They are all committed to the contemporary vision of Community of Christ. While the majority is from the United States, several other nations are represented. In some cases, a chapter is authored by more than one individual from more than one culture. The editor has tried to preserve the distinctive voice and style of each author while standardizing the overall approach.
Exploring Beliefs in a Diverse Church

One of the Enduring Principles of Community of Christ is Unity in Diversity. The writers and editor of this resource intend it to uphold the richness of our diversity and at the same time articulate what draws us together in mission. It is a mark of maturity when as a church we can affirm our unity in Christ and also celebrate varied interpretations of central beliefs. This is an opportunity to replace argument with a healthy exchange of perspectives in the context of the church’s shared global mission to proclaim Jesus Christ. As we explore our public faith together we can learn from each other, recognizing that we each have valuable insights to offer. In doing so our individual and community discipleship is enriched.

Finally, the editor wishes to share his enthusiasm for what we here offer to the church. If we are to have integrity as disciples of Jesus Christ, our words and actions—even our whole lives—must be based on sound yet creative understandings of God’s self-revelation in Christ and ongoing presence in the world. Our personal discipleship and our corporate life will reflect what we believe. We invite each reader of Exploring Community of Christ Basic Beliefs to join in the great adventure of exploring our beliefs. This exploration is both an individual task and a stewardship of the whole body. When we together seek more light and truth, our individual beliefs deepen, and the church becomes more faithful to its call.
Chapter 2

God

We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit. We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.

Introduction

From beginning to end, our Christian faith centers on the inexhaustible mystery of God. Human beings in every age have caught hints of this mystery: in the glories of nature and the depths of experience. But the church confesses God’s existence and nature first by means of scripture’s witness. God’s self-revelation as affirmed by the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures and the witness of the New Testament to Jesus Christ is where Christian theology starts. These same scriptures speak of God as Spirit, active in nature, history, and human experience. Thus, as we turn to the sacred story to begin our reflections on the church’s faith, we find the mystery that confronts, calls, and transforms us is a threefold reality: God, Christ, Spirit.

The Basic Beliefs statement is a confession of faith. To “confess” in this sense is to declare something that one holds to be true. The church in this statement is proclaiming that in which it has placed its corporate trust. Faith, both in the biblical tradition and in our experience, is not what is popularly called “blind faith”: a naïve belief in impossible things without evidence. Nor is faith about doggedly holding a list of obscure
ideas otherwise irrelevant to life. Rather, “to believe,” as the statement uses the term, means to entrust ourselves to One who has invited us and awakened in us that trust. We believe in God because, to use the imagery of twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich, we have been grasped by that which is Ultimate. Or in the words of contemporary theologian John Haught, when we say we believe in God, we are pointing to what lies beyond and within human experiences of depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth.1

More specifically, Christian faith is born in us as we find ourselves grasped by the message about Jesus Christ in such a way that we “believe into” this story and “into him.” Theology is the attempt to explain both how we have come to entrust ourselves to God so revealed, and what our faith in this God entails.

God is known through what God does. The Bible tells stories about those who met God through various events and experiences. They came to know something of God’s nature from God’s actions, and so do we. When we confess our faith in a living God, we mean that God is always acting, always present, always seeking the best for the world. A story from the book of Exodus portrays God as the One who causes to be (Exodus 3:1–15). Where there was nothing now there is something. In other words, God’s good, creative work is always to make space for what is other. This gift of life preconditions all other gifts. God creates, and creation is a gift.

Creation is a language that only God can speak. To create, in the sense that many biblical texts intend, is an act of divine freedom. God wills something other than God to be. All that is receives its being from God’s own goodness and wisdom. The creation is the theater of God’s glory, the place where God is at work. We should therefore delight in the beauty and goodness of the world. That is because the good creation displays God’s sustaining and transforming purpose: “[persons] are, that they might have joy” (II Nephi 1:115).

God lovingly upholds the unfolding creation in time and space. When some theologians refer to God as the “ground of existence,” they partly mean that all that is depends on something deeper than itself for its being. This ordered existence is for good and productive ends (Acts 17:28, Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3). God guides the creation in providential care. And yet within the good creation, suffering and injustice still abound. The church’s faith and experience of God affirm that this is not

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God’s will. Our hope, grounded in the story of Jesus, insists that God will ultimately overcome suffering, sin, and evil. The God who creates also works to heal and transform. The church believes this because in Christ and by the Holy Spirit we experience God as both a “mystery beyond understanding” but at the same time as intimately close to us.

In love God seeks our response, encouraging and motivating us to embrace the divine vision of a renewed creation. God saves! As our true source, center, and end, God takes the initiative in loving us and redirecting our lives toward this goal: “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us…” (Titus 3:4, 5). By the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit God continually acts in all creation, moving us to seek what Jesus called “the reign of God.”

The church is called to think about what it proclaims. This is the task of theology. Part of this task is to make clear what the Christian faith means when it speaks of “God.” To be faithful to its story, the church must describe in its own terms its particular experience of God. In our contemporary world speaking of God has for many reasons become problematic. Part of this difficulty is the fault of Christians themselves. Many Christians have developed uncritical or authoritarian habits of the mind: they try to impose answers on others without careful thought or compassionate listening. Others are overwhelmed by the problems of massive suffering and the apparent dominance of evil in so many places. Still others associate the God Christians speak of with hatred, intolerance, and oppression. So, the church must keep asking: who is the God we speak of and how should the community of faith worship and proclaim this God in a struggling world? These questions demand careful consideration. Daniel L. Migliore has written:

While it is true that everyone begins an inquiry about the reality and identity of God with some prior ideas or unexpressed assumptions, a Christian theology should not uncritically adopt these often general and inchoate notions about God and should certainly not attempt to make them normative. Christian faith and theology do not speak of God in a general and indefinite way; they speak of God concretely and specifically. Images of God have great power to enhance or distort life. The church must therefore be deeply thoughtful whenever it speaks of God.

Biblical Foundations

Both the Bible and the long traditions of the Christian church speak of God as “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This brief phrase declares something vital about God’s nature and identity. God is triune: “God in three persons, blessed trinity,” as the hymn\(^3\) goes, conveying that the one God’s very being is to exist in an eternal threefold unity.

Affirming that God is a trinity of persons\(^4\) is at the heart of Christian experience. The four Gospels of the New Testament all speak of God in this way. Centuries of Christian experience affirm that the church ever encounters God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we also baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The triunity of God is not an afterthought; it is central to the story we proclaim.

God’s essence is infinite and beyond human understanding. So, the doctrine of the Trinity places us before the depth of the divine mystery. However, we indeed glimpse this mystery in the witness of scripture, and it is scripture that first gives us God’s name as “Father, Son, and Spirit.” This name points to the inexpressible love of God which the first disciples experienced in Jesus’ words and actions. It points to the one whose power the early church celebrated in worship. It also identifies the source of their profound experience of community. That is why the Apostle Paul blessed the Corinthian church with these words: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Some dismiss belief in the Trinity as empty opinion or speculation. But this position ignores an understanding of God that originates from and is consistent with an informed reading of scripture. “The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s effort to give coherent expression to this mystery of God’s free grace announced in the gospel and experienced in Christian faith.”\(^5\)

The doctrine of the Trinity does not come from a few biblical proof texts.\(^6\) Rather, it arises from careful attention to a much larger pattern in


\(^4\) More will be said later in this chapter about the term “person” referring to the Trinity.

\(^5\) Migliore, 69.

\(^6\) “Proof texts” are individual passages of scripture used without regard for their literary or historical contexts or intended meaning as evidence for an argument or idea. Though popular in some forms of Christianity, this approach to the Bible is deficient in many ways, including its disregard for the fact that the Bible is a library of books, whose authors wrote not passages but works of literature.
the Old and New Testaments (as well as the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants). The Scriptures do not speak of three gods, but of the one God’s three eternal ways of being. Scripture points to God’s creative and reconciling activity in the world in Jesus Christ and speaks of how God brings into being a new creation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture never treats believing in Christ or experiencing the Holy Spirit as anything other than an experience of God. In the language of Paul, by baptism the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ’s Body. We are thence united to Christ and receive adoption as children of God (Galatians 4:4–7). This sums up God’s renewing work in the world. God—Christ—Spirit: this is the consistent witness of the New Testament (2 Corinthians 5:18–20; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 5:1–5; Ephesians 1:3–14; Revelation 1:4–6).

Passages associated with worship and prayer also express the early church’s growing understanding of God’s triunity (Romans 8:9–30 and Galatians 4:4–7). In prayer, the Spirit unites Christians with Christ and draws them ever deeper into the life of God. In mission the church then becomes the means God uses to extend the love of Jesus by the power of the Spirit for the sake of the world.

“Father—Son—Spirit”: mutuality is God’s very nature. Community of Christ’s faith in this God of love known through Jesus and experienced in the Spirit is founded on the witness of our scriptures. In the sacred story we encounter God the eternal community of three persons.

Tradition

The belief that the one God exists as Eternal Source, as Living Word, and as Life-giving Spirit seems obscure to many people. Yet it sums up the distinctive Christian experience of God. As Augustine (a North African theologian from the fourth to fifth centuries) knew, the church must speak about the Trinity, not because we are able fully to comprehend what we perceive, but because we cannot keep silent on the heart of our faith. With Augustine and centuries of Christian witnesses, we simply do our best to understand and express the mystery that continually transforms us.

Most Christians meet the language of the Trinity in baptism. As mentioned earlier, Christians are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19; Doctrine and Covenants 17:21c). This formula has been integral to baptism since the first century. But the ancient church had to answer a question its culture raised: how can you

still believe in one God when you think of Father, Son, and Spirit as each divine? Does that not mean you worship three gods? It took time for the church to find language adequate enough to express its faith in one God in three co-equal persons. The most important events in this journey of understanding were two church councils held in the fourth century. The first was the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. and the second was the Council of Constantinople in 381 C.E. The statements of faith these two councils created remain standards of reference for the global Christian community to this day. These councils affirmed that Christians believe in one eternal God, whose singular nature is to exist eternally as Father, Son, and Spirit. As Gregory of Nazianzus (a great ancient theologian) wrote, “When I say God, I mean Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”

The term “person” when used in trinitarian language has a distinctive meaning. Unfortunately, in many modern cultures, “person” has come to mean an isolated individual, disconnected and independent from other individuals. That understanding does not apply well to what Christian faith means when it speaks of God in three persons. “Person” in a trinitarian context refers to the three eternal distinctions in God’s one nature. To use the traditional language, “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” names the real, substantial diversity within the all-embracing unity of God’s being. “Person” refers here to the “other in relationship to”: God the Source, God the Creative Word, and God the Life-giving Spirit.

The relations are real, not stage-play or mere masks, or human perceptions. God is ever Godself three ways, as the theologian Karl Barth remarked. The persons of the tri-personal God are what they are always in relation to one another. One crucial and much-needed lesson trinitarian language about persons can teach us is that personhood exists always in the form of relationships. This insight was one of the great theological breakthroughs of the Creed of Constantinople in 381, mentioned above, and especially in the rich theological and spiritual reflection that surrounded it.

Community of Christ does not officially use these creeds. But these traditions still inform us today. We remain committed to the doctrine of God they affirm. As early as 1833 Joseph Smith Jr. declared that “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end” (Doctrine and Covenants 17.5h). More recently our 1968 statement of

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faith borrowed language from the Nicene Creed to make clear that our church aligns with other Christian churches in our belief in the Trinity. That statement held: “We believe in Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, who is from everlasting to everlasting; through whom all things were made; who is God in the flesh, being incarnate by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of all humankind.”

Our current Basic Beliefs Statement also makes this amply clear. The doctrine of the Trinity summarizes what is most essential in the Christian tradition: who God is for us.

As noted earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity has roots in Christian experience. It emerged from the lived experience of early Christian communities, as believers thought about how their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Spirit related to their belief in the one God of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus, they knew, did not merely teach about God. Rather, he struck them as intimately connected to the God of whom he spoke. Indeed, they addressed both Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3) with the same title they used for God: “Lord.” In this way the earliest church expressed its faith that God was present in Jesus’ ministry in the fullest possible way. In Jesus Christ they experienced not just a prophet pointing to God, but one who was God with us. From the first Christian communities onward, the church encountered the real presence of God in Jesus. Therefore, over the centuries Christian tradition has consistently held that Jesus is not just “part” of God, or similar to God, but is in the fullest sense “true God” (John 17:3; I John 5:20; Revelation 3:7; see also Mosiah 8:28–35).

The mystery of God’s nature as Trinity is beyond the comprehension of our limited reason. It stretches our imagination and our language. For example, we use the traditional term “person” for Father, Son, and Spirit. But we do not mean three isolated individuals, two of whom are “male,” nor do we mean three separate divine beings. Christian theology at its best has always known that the images of “Father” and “Son” were analogies, and not literal descriptions. Further, following centuries of Christian tradition and reflection, we use “person” to express that while God is one essence, God’s essence is always to exist in three distinct ways. God, according to the tradition always is the Father, always is the Son, and always is the Holy Spirit. God does not cease being the

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Father when God is the Son, nor are these distinctions temporary roles. This mystery of God’s triunity challenges surface comprehension but is not beyond the ken of our spiritual experience or the power of poetry to express its deep truth. In the words of Ruth Duck’s hymn, “Womb of Life and Source of Being”:

Mother, Brother, holy Partner; Father, Spirit, Only Son:
we would praise your name forever, one-in-three, and three-in-one.
We would share your life, your passion, share your word of world made new,
ever singing, ever praising, one with all, and one with you.13

In Christ we know a God who loves and accepts us and indwells the totality of creation. By the Spirit we find divine power to live out this love and acceptance in new ways we couldn’t have imagined. And yet there is a unity to these experiences so that we can properly say of each of them, God has encountered us. As we both listen to tradition and think about our present experience of God, we continue to affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity includes two very important aspects: unity and distinction. God is one eternal essence in three distinct ways of being. The Son is nothing less than the eternal God14 (Mosiah 8:28–31). The Spirit as Lord serves the mission of the Son on behalf of God the Source (John 16:13, 14). God’s personal revelation in Christ shows that there is distinction in God between the Sender and the Sent.15 At the same time, what is known in Christ is not less than God’s very own self. The three are one God; the one God exists in a threefold way. Throughout the history of the church, Christian teaching has thus found trinitarian language necessary for expressing the distinctive understanding of Christian monotheism.

**Application for Discipleship**

Believing in God as Trinity, far from being speculation, is central to the experience of Christian faith. This belief remains pivotal to ecumenical relationships among Christian churches. And personally, we regularly touch the reality of the Trinity in our daily Christian lives. When we pray to God in the name of Jesus for guidance from the Spirit, we are offering a trinitarian prayer. When a scripture or a sermon moves our hearts or

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minds, the threefold reality of God–Spirit–Word is present. We sing this doctrine in hymns and campfire songs. Our communion prayers\(^\text{16}\) remind us of it. Trinitarian language naturally appears when we celebrate other sacraments, too. We also encounter the Trinity in the traditions of spiritual practice we rely on. In the simple joys of Christian community—for example, potlucks, camps, conferences, and retreats—we know the Holy Spirit as God present in Christ’s body. Our convictions about unity in diversity and the blessings of community are grounded in God’s own communal being. The doctrine of the Trinity turns out to be very practical and much closer to our actual practice than we usually imagine. Indeed, it is indispensable to the church.

The Trinity communicates the distinctively Christian understanding of God. However, all our knowledge of God is expressed in human language. This implies many limitations, as noted above. The contemporary church has become aware that an exclusive use of masculine language for God limits God and makes God inaccessible to many people. Traditional trinitarian language—Father, Son, and Spirit—raises important questions about whether this male imagery is adequate. To avoid the problems, should we speak of God in impersonal metaphors? Or should we speak of the Spirit in language that is feminine? Can we use masculine and feminine images for each member of the Trinity? How do we preserve the vital theological claims connected to the doctrine of the Trinity, but not be imprisoned by only one set of metaphors for God? These and other questions abound.

Recognizing that scripture depicts God with a diversity of images, including as both mother and father, can help. Sometimes scripture portrays God as a father who cares and protects his chosen people (1 Chronicles 22:10; Psalms 103:13; Matthew 6:6–9) but also as a mother who gives birth to, feeds, and comforts her children (Isaiah 49:15; 66:12–13). In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus describes himself as acting on behalf of God to gather the people like a hen would gather her brood of chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). Further, we enter the reign of God by being born of the Spirit, which is suggestive of a woman’s labor during the process of childbirth (John 3:5–6). And the Hebrew text of the first creation story in

\(^{16}\) Doctrine and Covenants 17:22d, 23b. Also see Community of Christ Sings (front).
Genesis imagines the *ruach* (wind or Spirit) of God as a mother bird hovering over its nest (Genesis 1:2).  

Traditional language can still provide an important baseline for speaking of the Trinity. At the same time new images, particularly images born of the Judeo-Christian tradition, can complement rather than replace the traditional trinitarian language. Our language about God should increasingly reflect the shared life of the persons of the Trinity who live mutually together in eternal co-unity of the divine being.

Our language about God should work to affirm this relational character of God’s life. The inner divine life is social. The three persons of the Trinity coexist in an eternal communion of love, which some ancient theologians thought of as a kind of dance. This relationship establishes their personal identity. From the perspective of our faith, God is therefore the source and energy for community among humankind. When we seek the reign of God, which Jesus preached, and when we struggle to create a community that reflects the mutual love of God’s own being, we are living in alignment with God’s nature.

The Trinity of love stands in opposition to isolation, selfishness, conflict, violence, and death-dealing imperialism. To believe in God is to speak of the Eternal One, Maker of Heaven and earth, the Source and Center of all that is, the Origin of all things. To speak of this God, as our Basic Beliefs do, is to believe in an eternal community of persons concerned about a just sharing of the resources of creation and about relationships that actively seek the flourishing of all life. To speak of God–Christ–Spirit is to affirm that the divine life is in essence self-giving and always seeks to make space for the other. As feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson so beautifully states it, “Speaking about the Trinity expresses belief in one God who is not a solitary God but a communion in love marked by overflowing life.”

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17 Genesis 1:2 uses the Hebrew verb רחַף (*raḥaf*), which can mean to “hover over” (as in Deuteronomy 32:11: “As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young...”). See Frances Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), s.v. רחַף, 934.

18 The Greek technical term for this inter-relationality was *perichōrēsis*, which literally conveys the image of partners in an interweaving dance step. For a recent hymn that uses this image, see Mary Louise Bringle’s “The Play of the Godhead,” *Community of Christ Sings*, 56.

Triune love is divine vulnerability on behalf of the whole creation. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ decisively reveal this boundless, vulnerable love. The church looks to the triune God as the eternal source of compassion and generosity, the source and center of all love and life and truth. As our belief statement affirms, “All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.”

Conclusion

“Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:1–2). How we imagine God shapes how we live. It makes a difference to believe in God as an eternal communion of mutuality and love: as Source, Living Word, and Life-giving Spirit. If we live and act from this faith, our communities may become havens of inclusion and mercy. We will not only sing “For everyone born, a place at the table” (Community of Christ Sings, 285) but also work to realize this vision, because it reflects what Christian faith can imagine as God’s own nature. We will support those causes that uphold the dignity of all persons and speak out against any forces that oppose Jesus’ vision of God’s reign. We will treat all of creation with reverence in recognition of God’s limitless generosity. We will recognize that God, whose nature is love, calls us to reflect divine love in all our relationships. Above all, we will embrace life in Christian community as the place where “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” are especially at work (2 Corinthians 13:13). In this way our faith in God will bear fruit in the world for the establishment of shalom.

For Further Reading


**Testimony by Larry McGuire**

She often came into the activities and services late and always wrestling with her two small children. People offered to help her with the children but the kids were not very willing to be far from their mother. She looked exhausted most of the time but did her best to be engaged with the activities in classes and worship.

During one of the worship services, we were invited to share in groups of three about a hymn text that we felt reflected our journey with God. She was part of my group and listened to what was being shared about the hymn I selected, “The Love of God,” number 210 in *Community of Christ Sings*. The hymn reflects what I want to believe about God; however, my experience was often different. My experience has been more of a disruptive and unsettling God, a God that I want to keep contained in a box that I can control. But God continues to push beyond the confines of my box. I noticed tears began to roll down her face and she simply nodded her head in agreement. As she shared about her hymn, she asked us the question: “How do I know I can trust what God is nudging me to do?”

After the worship was over, she asked if she could talk with me. I sat and listened to her story of her journey of faith and how she was wrestling with decisions to leave her community of faith and join
Community of Christ. Her question kept coming to my mind as she shared her journey: “How do I know I can trust what God is nudging me to do?” As I listened, I kept remembering about my grandfather’s car and the compass that was mounted on the dash. He always trusted the compass was pointing him in the correct direction even as he made turns and changes in direction.

I offered my prayerful support for her journey and bore my testimony that there were times I didn’t trust my compass but that it wasn’t because God wasn’t present. I shared that I needed to keep asking, “Am I pointing myself in what I sense through the Spirit to be the right direction?” “Am I continually orienting myself toward God?” Those are compass questions and they are grounded in my belief that God is always present even when I wasn’t trusting the compass.

As we closed our conversation, she shared her appreciation for the opportunity to ask questions and explore what it means to follow God even when you aren’t sure where you are being led. She closed by saying, “I know what I’m being asked to do so I will trust where I’m being led.” She left that experience and two days later sent me a text that she had decided to join Community of Christ.

“We long for freedom where our truest being is given hope and courage to unfold. We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming, and look for ground where trees and plants can grow” (stanza 2, “The Love of God,” by Fred Kaan, Community of Christ Sings, 210). God’s presence was made real in the simple phrases of a hymn and the affirmation that you can trust the compass of God’s love even when you do not know where it will lead.

**Spiritual Practice: Exploring God Images**

Spend time journaling or prayerfully reflecting: When you think of God, what image comes to mind? (Perhaps this is the image you use most frequently when you address God in prayer.) How has this image helped you grow in your relationship with God? How might this image be restricting God’s invitation to continue to grow in relationship?

Practice writing a prayer to a different image of God than what you normally would use. Allow an image to emerge that is calling to you, or consider the following list:

- Creator/Creating God (Genesis 1:1, 26)
- Divine Breath (Job 27:3, 33:4; Isaiah 30:33, 40:7)
- Source of Life (1 Corinthians 1:30)
Liberator (Isaiah 49:9, 61:1; Luke 4:18–19)
• Darkness (Isaiah 45:3)
• Light (Psalms 27:1; Isaiah 60:20; John 1:5)
• Love (1 John 4:8)
• Silence (1 Kings 19:12)
• Hiddenness (1 Corinthians 2:7)
• Rock (Genesis 49:24; Deuteronomy 32:15; 2 Samuel 22:2–3)
• Holy One (1 Samuel 2:2)
• Life-Giving God (Job 33:4; Psalms 119:154, 156; 1 Timothy 6:13)
• Eternal Presence (Psalms 139)
• I AM (Exodus 3:13–14)
• Searcher of Hearts (Psalm 139:1; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Romans 8:27; Revelation 2:23)
• Anchor (Hebrews 6:19)
• Fountain, Water of Life (Jeremiah 17:13; Revelation 21:6)
• Wisdom (Proverbs 3, 8; 1 Corinthians 2:6–8)
• Reconciler (Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:18)
• Sustainer (Psalms 55:22; 1 Corinthians 1:8)

What was your experience of exploring a different image of God in prayer? How is the God beyond all images inviting you to continue to grow in relationship?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How has this chapter helped you better understand the three persons of the Trinity? What examples can you give of how you have experienced each person in your life journey?

2. What descriptive words do you find most meaningful to apply to God?

3. In what aspects of creation do you find God the creator most meaningfully manifest?
Chapter 3

Jesus Christ

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the world, fully human and fully divine. Through Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection, God reconciles the world and breaks down the walls that divide. Christ is our peace.

Introduction

This paragraph affirms that the heart of the church’s life is not an idea, a cause, or a program, but a person. Jesus Christ is the living center of the faith, worship, and action of Community of Christ. We exist not to proclaim ourselves, but to proclaim him (2 Corinthians 4:5). Jesus gives the decisive shape and unique texture to what the church means when we speak of “God,” for in our faith Christ incarnates the second person of the Trinity. In this way we can speak of Jesus as the “human face of God,” and this is why he is so central to the church’s identity. Apart from sharing and embodying the message of Christ the church has no reason for being. Our identity and story, our worship and sacraments, our mission and service to God’s world all revolve around Jesus of Nazareth, like the planets of the solar system revolve around the sun. What the author of Colossians said about the universe is also true specifically of the church’s life: In Christ “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

“We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Word made flesh, the Savior of the World.” The familiar words of this paragraph are not empty titles. They bulge with meaning and mystery. They reflect not only the consistent, life-changing experience of Christians across two
millennia, but also the experience members of our worldwide community continually have today as they come to believe in, know, and serve Christ. Swahili-speaking members sing, “Yesu ni muamba” (“Jesus is the rock”). Tagalog-speaking members sing, “Ang pangalan Niya’y matibay na sandigan” (“His name is a strong foundation”). Bemba-speaking members sing, “Takwaba uwanbanga Yesu!” (“There’s no one like Jesus”). Spanish-speaking members sing “Christo es la vida de mi alma” (“Christ is the life of my soul”). And English-speaking church members sing, “Jesus, name above all names.” In these and many other languages members of Community of Christ voice their encounter with the reality of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

The church, then, must thoughtfully reflect on its proclamation of Christ. Who is Jesus for us today, in our postmodern, global, multicultural church? Who will we let Jesus be, as the church works amidst the profound threats and challenges of our endangered planet? We cannot bypass these questions, because quite candidly this paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement affirms that what we believe and teach about Jesus will be, in the words of one important twentieth-century Christian thinker, the “touchstone” of our whole theology.¹

**Biblical Foundations**

The person about whom the church sings and testifies is not a dead teacher from the past. He is the Christ, risen and present among us. This church knows this first from the sacred story of scripture, which is the “indispensable witness” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.7a) of God’s healing and transforming work in creation. The scriptures bear witness that Christ is “alive forever and ever” (Revelation 1:18), and the church lives from the power of that testimony, confirming the reality of Christ’s presence in our own experience.

The New Testament’s witness to Jesus Christ is foundational for the church. These 27 books were written by early Christian authors to help their churches know, interpret, and faithfully follow Jesus. These books declare the central mystery of the Christian faith, whether in the four Gospels, which tell of the life and ministry of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, or in the Book of Acts, which tells how the Holy Spirit helped the community of his followers become a culturally diverse community, or in the Letters, by which apostles or their companions guided churches in the struggles of discipleship, or in the Apocalypse, which calls disciples to faithfulness in

the midst of oppression.

Christ who was crucified is risen and present among us as Lord. When the earliest Christians called him Lord (Kyrios in their native Greek) they were expressing that no one else, not even the Roman emperor, was worthy of their ultimate loyalty and worship. Surprisingly, they did not find their exalted language for Jesus inconsistent either with their Jewish heritage or the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures that “from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other (Isaiah 45:6). Instead, they saw his life, ministry, and presence in their midst as the further unfolding of the promises Israel’s God had made to their ancestors. Indeed, in Christ they experience that ultimacy which the faith of the Old Testament had reserved solely for the God of creation and exodus, of worship and wisdom, of hope and promise. As theologian Kathryn Tanner maintains, “The divine in Christ comes with no fanfare, no evident power and glory; what one sees is an obviously human life and really not much more than that. The divinity of Christ appears after the fact, as a kind of inference from this particular human life’s affects: ‘believe me from the works I do,’ to paraphrase John 14:11.”

How did those early Christians come to that awareness? When Jesus first appeared, preaching the kingdom of God, he gathered a small group of disciples around him. These followers were both men and women, and were Palestinian Jews, like Jesus. The Gospels relate that, like us, they were sometimes very slow to understand Jesus and his message. They saw his deeds of power and heard his words of liberation and promise: “the kingdom of God has come near!” (Mark 1:15). Many of them simply dropped everything to follow him. They watched Jesus touch lepers, eat with sinners, invite the poor and the lost into God’s kingdom, welcome women as full disciples, and reclaim the rejected. The disciples heard Jesus teach with authority, challenge religious narrowness, command demons to leave the oppressed, and pray with tenderness to the God he called “Abba” —“my father.” But what did all this mean? Little wonder that at some moments all the disciples could do was ask, “Who then is this...?” (Mark 4:41).

Jesus questioned the disciples, too. At a pivotal point in his ministry, he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am”? (Matthew 16:15). In a flash of inspiration, Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). But Peter’s moment of revelation

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2 Kathryn Tanner, Christ the Key (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 299.
vanished as Jesus then spoke of what this really meant. To be the Messiah, God’s agent of salvation, was not about domination or conquest; it was about self-emptying love that would take the form of death on a Roman cross. The disciples were not ready for that kind of revelation.

Only “on the third day,” in the brilliant light of that first Easter, did the truth begin to dawn on the disciples. The One who was now powerfully present in their midst as exalted Lord had always been Lord. Only in Easter’s radiance could they see that Jesus’ cross was really God’s love in action: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). They now believed and declared that his death and resurrection constituted the turning point of history, for a new creation had begun. Old barriers between Jew and Gentile had tumbled; the dividing wall between “us” and “them” had fallen; the world as the disciples knew it could not again be the same. What had happened was surely by divine action, and thus the disciples proclaimed that Jesus was and remained truly “God with us.” In Christ they experienced the breathtaking, liberating, community-forming power of God as the Holy Spirit. They strained to find symbols, titles, and images to express the depth of this new experience: redemption, salvation, justification, reconciliation, new creation; Christ, Lord, High Priest, Sacrifice, Lamb, Life, Light, Bread, Son, even “God.”

Out of this cumulative experience, the author of the Fourth Gospel penned verses that forever sum up why the church holds that Christ is the center of its life: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth….From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace….No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:14–18). The insights that led to the doctrine of the Trinity (explored in Chapter 2) did not spring from esoteric speculation but from the experience of the earliest Christians. The road to that doctrine began as soon as Jesus’ first followers dared to call him “Lord.”

The New Testament testifies that Jesus is the unique, decisive embodiment of God’s love and compassion. Jesus’ every act exemplified shalom: that blend of community-forming justice and love that alone makes things right. With courage and boldness, Jesus had made known God’s will, because he was God’s will, in person. As the Risen One he makes it known still. Included in the divine will is the call for disciples to grow into Christlikeness as we come to know him and the promise of his kingdom more fully. Faith in Jesus Christ is vital for a church that bears
his name. He is not a second best, as if we could bypass him for God. For what we as Christians mean by “God” is glimpsed most clearly through the lens of the good news of Jesus. At the heart of the sacred story is this person, in whom God’s eternal Word became incarnate, who was sent for creation’s redemption and lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Tradition**

The person scripture proclaims as Lord, Christ, Word, and Savior is also known to us through the centuries-long story of the Christian tradition. Community of Christ is linked to “Christians in every place and in every time by our mutual confession of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, author of our salvation, and head of the whole church.”3 Indeed, if generations of Christians before us had not faithfully handed on the sacred story and bore witness of the living Christ, Community of Christ would never have come into existence. We have often forgotten that fact in our past journey. Across the ages, people from diverse times and places have also found in Jesus Christ a sure foundation for their spiritual journey, both in life and in death. We are forever indebted to this great cloud of witnesses.

The voice of the Christian tradition consistently affirms that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. When our denomination confesses that Christ is “fully human and fully divine,” we identify with this long history of Christian faith and worship. The Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 C.E. declared that Jesus as God’s Son was “perfect in divinity and also perfect in humanity; truly God and truly a human being.” These words were not a later innovation or a departure from the Gospels, but a faithful reaffirmation of the central message of the New Testament, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). In another vastly different cultural setting almost fifteen centuries later, a few courageous Christians in Germany found the strength to resist fascism by declaring that Christ alone was their true center, “the one Word of God, whom we are to hear...to trust and obey in life and in death.”4

Again and again across the long arc of the centuries, thoughtful Christians have professed in every new situation that Jesus Christ is God’s self-revelation, worthy of their responsive trust. Community of Christ’s Basic Beliefs and an additional statement titled “We Proclaim Jesus

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3 “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” Sharing in Community of Christ, 58.
4 The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany (1934).
depend on and speak from this long Christological tradition and align us with it. These frail human words help us faithfully declare the divine mystery we experience through Christ’s presence among us. The Jesus we yearn to follow is one who has called martyrs and monks—Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu, Oscar Romero and Mother Teresa—to bear witness of him. Our community journeys in their company.

This historic witness of the Christian faith has been at the heart of our church since our beginnings in the 1820s and 30s. Joseph Smith Jr.’s earliest account of his vision in a grove comes from 1831–32. There Joseph recalls an experience he had when he was about 15 years old. As he prayed for forgiveness of his sins, the Risen Christ appeared to him. Joseph remembered that Christ assured him of forgiveness and reminded Joseph “I am the Lord of glory; I was crucified for the sins of the world....” It is important for us always to remember that our movement began in an encounter with Christ.

A few years later, in 1838, Joseph offered a compelling statement of the centrality of Christ for our community. He wrote in a newsletter at Far West, Missouri, “The fundamental [principle] of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven,’ and all other things are only appendages to these.” Joseph’s declaration here and also in an earlier statement (Doctrine and Covenants 17:5c–d, from 1833) echoes the language of the Bible and the ancient Christian baptismal creeds. In the spirit of that tradition, Joseph maintained that the apostolic witness of Jesus’ identity, death, and resurrection must be the central focus of the church’s life; everything else in our heritage must be considered secondary. Our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ and offer the world a credible twenty-first-century witness in word and deed of what it means to follow him.

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7 Elders’ Journal 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44.
Members of our church have constantly sought to reaffirm this truth and live by it, even when other forces and interests have distracted our attention. Familiar hymns, like Vida Smith’s beloved “There’s an Old, Old Path” and Joseph Smith III’s “Tenderly, Tenderly” have reminded us across decades that Christ is our companion on our journey together. The sacraments, notably baptism and the Lord’s Supper, regularly represent the way of Jesus Christ to us, recalling his baptism in the Jordan and setting before us the emblems of his sacrificial death. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God has ever inspired the church to work for a better world. In the 1920s and 1930s,

President Frederick M. Smith frequently reminded the church that following Jesus Christ was not merely about personal salvation but about social reform: to be disciples commits us to act for just working conditions, better societies, and a different kind of world. And as the church discerned the Holy Spirit inviting us to move beyond its limited traditional vision of itself in the early 1960s, leaders like Clifford Cole reminded us that “on the frontier all signs point to Christ.”

It was in the context of this call to world mission that a profound experience happened in 1967. Church leaders knew that in order to respond more fully to Christ’s mission, they must engage deeply with the historic Christian tradition and learn from it. So they invited several professors from a United Methodist seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, to begin a series of seminars with them. W. Paul Jones, one of those professors, later recounted an incident in the first meeting that marks a turning point in our church’s journey. After a time of introductory conversation, he felt he needed to know how Christian this small and unusual church was. So he asked President W. Wallace Smith directly, “If our mutual studies of Christianity and the RLDS Church were to reveal a discrepancy between what Jesus taught and what Joseph Smith taught, which would you accept?” Jones remembered that the room became very quiet as all eyes turned to President Smith. He took a breath and without faltering said, “We would have to go with Jesus.”

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8 Community of Christ Sings, 244.
9 Community of Christ Sings, 256.
That little-known incident marked a watershed for our denomination. From that moment on, all signs would indeed point to Christ. But in an important sense President Smith was saying nothing new. Rather, he was faithfully re-expressing an instinct as old as Joseph Smith’s declaration in 1838: Jesus Christ, whom the church confesses to be the Word of God Incarnate and Giver of the Divine Spirit, is at the center of Community of Christ’s identity, mission, message, and worship. All else is secondary.

It should come as no surprise that a church proclaiming Jesus as its center would eventually open its Communion table to all believers, change its name to reflect its true identity, join in ecumenical solidarity with other churches to promote justice, labor with Mennonites and Catholics and Quakers in the cause of peace and reconciliation, and welcome the baptisms of other Christians. The way of Jesus is the way of self-emptying love (Philippians 2:5–8), of losing ourselves to find ourselves, of service to others with no thought of cost to self, of spending oneself lavishly for the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:45–46). To believe in Jesus Christ is more than saying the right words; it is to covenant to these values of the reign of God, to be open to the risks and joys they entail. This is Community of Christ’s “unique and sacred place,” which we now take within the centuries-old, never-broken circle of all who call Jesus Christ Lord (Doctrine & Covenants 161:1b).

At this time in our shared journey it is imperative we make very clear that when Community of Christ uses the terms Christ, Son, Lord, Word, and Savior for Jesus, we mean exactly what the Christian tradition has always meant. Before the forces of violence, hatred, nationalism, ignorance, and greed confronting the Postmodern world, it has never been more important that we declare where our central point of reference is found. The Basic Beliefs Statement tries to do that in faithful openness to the One who calls the church to mission.

**Application for Discipleship**

Abba Paul was a fourth-century Egyptian Christian who belonged to a group of dedicated believers historians call the desert fathers and mothers. In the solitude of the wilderness they sought to live the radical depths of the gospel. Their sayings and deeds have captivated Christians for more than fifteen centuries as a testimony of whole-hearted devotion. Virtually nothing is known of Abba Paul. But one of his few recorded
sayings arrests our attention: “Stay close to Jesus.”13 These wise, simple words gracefully sum up what the life of discipleship is about. What does it look like to stay close to Jesus?

To believe in Jesus Christ should not be confused with holding a set of opinions. To believe, as stated in Chapter 2, is to entrust ourselves to the whole way of life Jesus embodied and taught. In our church in the 1870s and 1880s, it was customary in some locations for the baptismal candidate to “make the covenant.” This part of the sacrament occurred just before baptism. The officiant would publicly ask the candidate, “Do you covenant before God to take upon you the name of Christ, to obey his gospel, and to live up to it to the best of your ability while life with you shall last, God being your helper?” To an answer of “yes” the baptizer would then respond, “May God enable you to fulfill your covenant from henceforth and forever. Amen”14 This old formula is no longer used but still recalls a perennial truth: invited by God’s grace into the Way of Jesus, the disciple’s daily task is marked out by baptism. In baptism we yield to God’s embrace and pledge to practice the way of Christ, which is the way of self-emptying love. We stay close to Jesus by living in his love: for self, for neighbors, for enemies, for the creation, and for God.

We also stay close to Jesus by doing what he did. Jesus welcomed outsiders, like a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13). So, we will practice seeing Christ in the face of the stranger, the refugee, and the immigrant. Jesus was a friend to all, yet the special ally of the poor. So, we follow him by giving preference to the marginalized, outcasts, and the impoverished, and work for their well-being. Jesus confronted prejudice and injustice: whether his disciples’ racism toward Samaritans, or his culture’s economic exploitation of people in the Temple. So, the church will not be afraid to confront any who abuse, exploit, or mistreat people.

Jesus rejected interpretations of religion that oppressed or demeaned people. So, the church will reject as counterfeit any interpretations of the Christian message that diminish, oppress, or perpetrate physical or emotional violence against God’s beloved children. Jesus associated with people victimized by principalities and powers, and at risk to himself he empowered his disciples to create change. So, we will

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13 The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection, trans. with forward by Benedicta Ward; preface by Metropolitan Anthony (Trappist, KY: Cistercian, 1984), 205. The term “abba” was a respectful way to address desert monks who had advanced on the spiritual journey. “Amma” was the address for women monastics of mature spirituality.

be a community that risks its comfort for the sake of those who have no voice. We do well to remember the words of the twentieth-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who held that “the church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.” This is the risk inherent in staying close to Jesus.

How else shall a church that believes in Jesus and his way stay close to him? Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God’s reign. So, we will pray as he taught, hallowing God’s name and making the kingdom of God our life’s deepest concern. “The kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus said (Luke 17:21). If the reality of God’s reign is already present, then we will live and serve in hope, connecting with people of other faiths who also share this vision of a transformed world. Jesus came to announce that God’s reign had dawned and salvation had come. So, the church will seek to make his work of releasing the captives its own way of life (Luke 4:18). Jesus forbade his disciples to fight for him or use violence to achieve any goals. So, we will learn to let Jesus disarm us and guide our feet in the way of peace, and we will work for peace and justice wherever we live. As Jesus embodies God’s shalom (Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a), so will we seek to live out the fullness of God’s peace in our homes, churches, communities, and in relation to the endangered ecosystem to which we belong.

If we want to stay close to Jesus, we will also not shrink from preaching the cross, as he did not shrink from accepting it. We will proclaim that in Christ crucified, dead, and buried we encounter the wounded heart of God. God’s self-emptying love reveals and heals our sin: whether that sin be our active or passive refusal to live by the love Jesus embodied. By the word of the cross the church also declares what God has done for the whole injured creation, entering the darkest depths of human misery. From the remembrance of Christ’s cross, we will learn day by day that only in relinquishing our intense desire to control others do we truly live. We will preach the cross of Christ, so that all victims will know that God shares in their suffering, and so that victimizers will see what they have done. As Jesus’ death broke down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14), so we will be a community that learns to practice the costly art of reconciliation. Christ was crucified once for all,

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and so we will teach that history demands no more crucifixions, no more scapegoats, and no more casualties.

We will stay close to Jesus, the Risen Lord. On the way to Emmaus, he made himself known to two disciples in the breaking of bread. So, we will declare the resurrection of the Crucified One in every celebration of the Lord’s Supper and every gathering of the church. Because Christ was victorious over death, we will make our churches places where life can always begin again. Christ has triumphed over the grave; thus, we will not be ashamed to speak of eternal life and the hope of the age to come. At the same time, we will fearlessly let our hope for the age to come empower us to make Earth into heaven now. Christ’s resurrection brought change. Therefore, we will not let Christian hope become an excuse for oppressors to keep oppressing, exploiters to keep exploiting, and abusive systems to remain unchallenged. Christ is risen, and so we will not give half-hearted service to him, to the community, and all who need us. The Basic Belief Statement reaffirms that God raised Jesus from the dead; in that confession of faith the church finds the power to bless our world and its creatures, especially the weak and the powerless and the voiceless, and to stand against those forces that deal in hate and death.

**Conclusion**

The church’s identity—all that it hopes for, affirms, and yearns to become—is already present in Jesus Christ. What we therefore believe and teach about Jesus of Nazareth matters profoundly. This has always been true for Christians and is at the heart of Community of Christ’s journey. Simply stated, “staying close to Jesus” is both a disposition and an action. It is to be the disciple’s daily response to the unfathomable grace of God we have experienced in Christ. Therefore, the second paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement places before the church once again the person in and through whom God has embraced, called, and liberated us for divine service. Jesus is the One into whose life, death, and resurrection we have been baptized, the One through whom we have glimpsed life in its fullness, the One who is “the light of the world” (John 8:12), the One who is our peace. “We live and serve in hope that God’s kingdom of justice and peace will indeed come, bringing healing to the whole, groaning creation. Putting our trust in the Risen Christ, present among us by the Holy Spirit,
we press on together, giving blessing, honor, and glory to God, now and forevermore. Amen.”

For Further Reading


Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


Testimony by Keith McMillan

Most encounters with Jesus begin with a simple invitation. The congregation I attended—Village Heights Community of Christ—was asked to begin an after-school program for kids in a difficult neighborhood called Hawthorne Place. Our first (my first really) response was that we were too busy. We are a good congregation with a healthy youth group and a great group of people attending on Sundays. We didn’t know these kids and were afraid to go into this neighborhood which had become dangerous over the years. But we also had just completed a year-long process with the evangelists of our congregation in discerning what God was calling us to do.

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16 “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” 60.
A couple of us met with the director of the complex to ask if we could begin a program. Her first question was “Who are you again?” We responded quite proudly, “We are Community of Christ.” Her response was: “Well no one from your church has ever darkened our door.” As she looked over the material we intended to teach she said, “Can you take Jesus out of the program?” I immediately said, “No. It is who we are and what we teach kids to become.” Her response surprised and pleased me: “Well we have messed up our community trying to kick Jesus out of our neighborhood and the only way we can fix things is to invite him back.”

We began an after-school program called Jesus and Me (JAM). We taught the kids by telling stories of Jesus, making crafts, and singing about him. Mostly, though, we got to be friends with the people of the neighborhood. At the end of the first day as we gathered in the gym and asked the kids if anyone would like to pray. One little girl, Sekile, raised her hand immediately. We handed her the mic and she said, “What’s pray?” After we explained that she just shared with God and Jesus what was on her heart, her simple prayer was: “Jesus will you keep my daddy safe in prison.”

Our congregation is still doing the JAM program after more than 10 years. Thousands of young people have been through the program over the years and lives have been changed by the love shown, our devotion to telling the story of Jesus, and just becoming friends with kids we would probably never have the opportunity to meet. We don’t always get to see how God takes our devotion and turns it into a relationship with others. But sometimes we do. Sekile, who raised her hand to pray on that first day, became a member of Community of Christ, as did her mother. They moved out of that neighborhood and I lost touch with Sekile until last summer when I ran into her at Graceland University’s Spectacular camp in Iowa. I didn’t recognize her as she came running up to me. She told me she was Sekile, had joined the church many years ago, and now went to another congregation in Kansas City. As we hugged goodbye I asked her, “What’s next for you?” “Oh, I am coming to Graceland in the fall to study to be a nurse!”

Amazing things happen when we have the courage to share Jesus with everyone we come in contact with.
Spiritual Practice: The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is an ancient prayer taught and favored in the Eastern Orthodox churches, originating as early as AD 600. Within this tradition invoking the name of Jesus holds power and connection with the Holy.

Allow yourself to become comfortable and quiet, aware of the presence of Christ. Try to imagine him standing before you. Concentrate on your breath. As you breathe in, become aware of the air entering into your lungs, filling you with life-giving oxygen. Focus as you exhale on the release of all that is not life-giving (e.g. concerns, worries, anger, stress, etc.). As you breathe in silently say, “Lord Jesus Christ.” Imagine you are breathing into yourself the love and grace and presence of Jesus and his peace. Hold your breath for a moment, aware that you are holding within you Christ’s presence and grace. As you breathe out silently say the second part of the prayer, “Have mercy on me,” and imagine that as you do this anything that impedes your ability to receive Christ’s presence is removed from you. Continue this rhythm of breathing in “Lord Jesus” or “Lord Jesus Christ” (or phraseology that is comfortable to you) and breathing out “Have mercy on me.”

Anthony De Mello writes: “The words ‘Have mercy on me’ do not mean just ‘Pardon me my sins.’ Mercy, as the Eastern Orthodox used the word, means much more: It means grace and loving kindness. So when you are asking for mercy, you are asking for Christ’s graciousness and loving kindness and for the anointing of his Spirit.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Who is Jesus for you? (examples: savior, friend, example). Why do you choose this name?

2. If a child were to ask you “Who is Jesus?” how would you answer?
Chapter 4

The Holy Spirit

We believe in the Holy Spirit, Giver of Life, holy Wisdom, true God. The Spirit moves through and sustains creation; endows the church for mission; frees the world from sin, injustice, and death; and transforms disciples. Wherever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control, there the Holy Spirit is working.

Introduction

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners—Isaiah 61:1

When we speak of the third person of the Trinity, our words often fail us. Clear affirmations and precise statements must give way to poetry and paradox. How can we even find words for the powerful, intimate presence of God? And yet, how can we not speak of the ever-flowing divine presence that is everywhere at work? In the Christian tradition, Spirit-talk has often signaled or accompanied new, fresh understandings of our faith. We speak of the Spirit at times of change when things are shifting, and we need to discern the Holy Presence in the chaos of that uncertainty. We speak of the Spirit also to express our experience of the constancy and reliability of the love of God. We also speak of the Spirit when we look back and discover we were mysteriously, silently empowered for some difficult task. Finding words to describe these experiences challenges us. But thankfully, scripture and tradition have
gifted us with many names for the Holy Spirit and many metaphors for thinking about this elusive person of the Trinity.

**Biblical Foundations**

Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament refer to the Holy Spirit with words that have multiple meanings. In the Hebrew Bible the word *ruach* means Spirit, wind, or breath. In the New Testament the Greek word *pneuma* has these same associations. In the original languages of the Bible, then, words for “Spirit” have rich, suggestive meanings, rooted in the dynamic experience of what is most essential to life: breath. This richness of meaning suggests that the term “Spirit” already signals God’s freedom to act in surprising ways.

Spirit-talk in scripture begins, of course, at the beginning, when the Spirit hovers over the waters of chaos at creation. In verse 2 of the first chapter of Genesis, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God [or the “spirit of God,” or “a mighty wind”] swept over the face of the waters.” The aforementioned Hebrew term for Spirit, *ruach*, is a word of feminine gender. This means that speakers of ancient Hebrew referred to *ruach* as “she.” This *ruach*, present at creation, proceeds to blow throughout the long story of the Hebrew Bible. She shows up in both communal and personal situations. She is the Spirit who empowers judges and prophets. She is the life-restoring wind or breath Ezekiel experienced in the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37). Psalm 139 celebrates that there is nowhere one can go to flee from the Spirit (verse 7), and that God’s Spirit is present even when we ourselves are formless substance (verses 15–17).

In Proverbs 8 that Spirit is introduced as Holy Wisdom. Holy Wisdom was present in creation and abides today, guiding our lives and decisions. Proverbs is a book that comes from the genre of wisdom literature. Other cultures and religions have comparable literature, in which people try to distill patterns of meaning from everyday life. Wisdom, the Spirit of God working in our ordinary lives, is therefore not the property of one religion or of a select group of people. In wisdom literature throughout the world we see signs of how Holy Wisdom-Holy Spirit unites human beings beyond our differences in common pursuits of justice and compassion and in living lives that are wise. Spirit/Wisdom is a concept that is easy to translate when in dialogue with other religions.

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit pervades the story of Jesus and the early Christian church. Mary is touched by the Spirit at Jesus’
conception (Matthew 1:18). Matthew, Mark, and Luke testify to the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove after his baptism. The Spirit “drives” Jesus into the wilderness, according to Mark 1:12. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah as he begins his ministry, saying, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [it] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. ...” (Luke 4:18). Near the conclusion of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that even though he will no longer be with them, he will not leave them orphaned but will send them the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to remain with them (John 14:26). The author of John here uses the Greek word “Paraclete” as a title for the Spirit. This title was commonly used as a legal term; it referred to the role of an advocate, one called forth to stand beside another for support and guidance. Jesus promises his disciples on his last night with them that he will not leave them without direction or his sustaining presence.

The most unforgettable encounter with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is Pentecost, as narrated in Acts 2. At this Jewish festival 50 days after Passover, the Spirit dramatically appeared to the first disciples as wind and fire, and in the sound of the many languages of the Jewish diaspora being spoken by the Galilean disciples. In this story the remarkable rushing of the Spirit upon the fledgling Christian community unites them in global mission. The miraculous gift of tongues symbolizes the promise that the Spirit will transform the church into a worldwide community of great cultural diversity, in which all may hear the good news in their own tongue. Part of this promise is that the Spirit itself will help the church bridge and include cultural differences.

Community of Christ has two statements that echo this New Testament experience of the power of the Spirit to unite a diverse community: “We Are One, We Are Many”\(^1\) and “Enduring Principles.”\(^2\) It is particularly relevant that the Enduring Principle of “Unity in Diversity” identifies one of the signs of the Spirit’s work in our midst as weaving a single community out of a variegated international collection of individual and cultural identities. Indeed, “[the] church embraces diversity and unity through the power of the Holy Spirit.”\(^3\) We can be confident that diversity in the church is a potent sign of the Spirit’s presence and action, as we engage in world mission.

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\(^1\) Sharing in Community of Christ, 68–74.
\(^2\) Sharing in Community of Christ, 27–32.
\(^3\) Sharing in Community of Christ, 31.
The Pauline letters abound in rich imagery for the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11) and so, for Paul, the Spirit is especially the “giver of life.” Paul also writes extensively in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and Romans 12 about gifts the Holy Spirit gives the church. Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians that the Spirit blesses each member of the body of Christ with gifts to be used “for the common good” (12:7). These diverse gifts are “all … activated by one and the same Spirit” (12:11). In Galatians Paul additionally notes how the Spirit works in Christians’ lives to produce community-enhancing fruit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23). These fruits of the Spirit are essential for healthy living in Christian community. These same virtues also give us clues about where to discern the Spirit at work in the world: wherever we see people from any background practicing these virtues we can trust that the same Spirit is present, transforming human life. Finally, for Paul the Holy Spirit is God’s liberating power in action. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is,” writes Paul, “there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Holy Spirit always points the church ahead, setting us free so that neither our successes nor our failures imprison us in our past.

The power of the Holy Spirit, like the wind metaphor the Bible uses to depict it, is far-ranging: from quiet whispers of acceptance to a gale that calls us to the work of seeking justice and correcting oppression. The gentle peacemaking Spirit gives inner strength to disciples like a refreshing light breeze. But it was this same Spirit/Wind that mightily blew aside the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to flee from slavery in Egypt. In other words, we must be careful not to bind the Spirit’s work to one favorite image. This is true because the Holy Spirit is God, at work in creation, unbounded and unlimited. We do a disservice to the scripture’s witness of the Holy Spirit if we overemphasize the Spirit’s role as merely being a “Comforter.” Indeed, the Spirit brings comfort. But the Holy Spirit also inspired the prophets to denounce injustice and shallow, self-serving religion. Community of Christ yearns to be open to the fullness of the Spirit’s activity in the church and the world.

**Tradition**

In theology “tradition” refers to wisdom the Christian church has gathered through centuries of experience. Disciples, theologians, mystics, saints, and ministers of the gospel return to tradition not to be lost in the past, but to find new paths for the journey ahead. Traditions about the
Holy Spirit can expand our experience of God. They can help us make new sense of the divine mystery that enfolds us. And these traditions offer rich soil for Community of Christ’s journey of faith.

Many Christian thinkers have noted that theology in the Western World has tended to pay less attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than to other doctrines. In response to various issues, Western theology has emphasized the other two persons of the Trinity: Father and Son. Not attending to the doctrine of the Spirit has periodically resulted in movements that seek renewed focus on the person and work of the Spirit. Community of Christ is such a movement. Our current emphasis on practicing discernment and becoming a prophetic people is an example of this renewal of the theology of Holy Spirit. Also, in recent times, Christians searching for a broader understanding of God have returned to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit seeking fresh new metaphors for God.

The plea of the poor, the sick, the exiled, the humiliated, and the marginalized for justice, and the cry of the creation itself for freedom from ecological devastation caused by human greed, indifference, and exploitation have fostered new ways of thinking about the Christian faith. Feminist theologians, ecological theologians, postcolonial theologians (theologians who criticize the ways colonialism destroys people and cultures), and disability theologians (theologians who explore Christian faith from the experience or standpoint of persons with disabilities) have all sought in the Spirit a deeper understanding of divine wisdom and our shared responsibility.

Spirit has been a fruitful place, for example, for theologians concerned to uphold the full dignity and equality of women. They have discovered new ways to understand gender and God, by focusing on the nurturing, indwelling nature of Spirit. These ideas often connect to traditional beliefs about maternal, feminine energy. Postcolonial and disability theologians see in the Spirit’s embrace of and celebration of difference new ways to think about human liberation. The Spirit does not hide or fix difference but includes it. This work of Spirit also empowers us to expose and mend Christianity’s sad and frequent support of oppressive political systems with their misuse of power.

The early church believed the Holy Spirit gave special gifts to God’s people. They called these gifts “charisms.” The word comes from the Greek word charis, which means “grace.” The apostle Paul used a related word in his teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14, charisma. Importantly, the two words are connected: grace is freely bestowed, as are spiritual gifts. But the term “charism” has, in the church’s
past, often signified special gifts that enabled people to do remarkable things, occasionally in grim situations.

A chief example was the charism of martyrdom. When the Roman Empire began persecuting Christians on an empire-wide scale in the third century, many Christians were murdered in arenas. The church learned by experience that Christians who volunteered to become martyrs were the most prone to denying their faith. But those whom the Romans seized involuntarily often faced death with calmness and hope. The church saw this as a true witness of the Holy Spirit’s encouraging, empowering presence.

One of the greatest theologians of the ancient church, Origen, wrote these words in a book on the nature of prayer: “The grace of God, immense and beyond measure, showered...on [human beings] through Jesus Christ, the minister to us of this superabundant grace, and through the co-operation of the Holy Spirit, makes possible through [God’s] will things which are to our rational and mortal nature impossible.”

Origen understood that charisms are gifts of the Trinity, and later in this book he asks the Holy Spirit to help him write on a subject beyond his normal ability: prayer. The Holy Spirit, as Paul said in Romans 8, helps us in our weakness.

In third- and fourth-century debates that helped form the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity, the most pressing question was about the relation of the Son to the Father. When in the fourth century attention turned to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the biggest hurdle for the church was to make sure the Spirit was not treated as less divine than the Son or the Father, and not be viewed as merely an impersonal power. By the end of the fourth century, the church affirmed that the Holy Spirit was indeed fully divine, as is the Son and the Father. To encounter the Holy Spirit is to encounter God the Spirit. Thus, the church was right to pray not only to the first and second persons of the Trinity, but also to the third. An example of a prayer to the Spirit is a beautiful medieval hymn called the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (“Come Holy Spirit”). It is from the twelfth century and was used to celebrate Pentecost:

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Come thou Holy Spirit
Send from highest heaven
Radiance of thy light.
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Come Father of the poor
Come, giver of gifts
Come, light of every heart.
    Of comforters the best
    Dear guest of every soul
    Refreshment ever sweet....
    What is soiled cleanse
    What is dry refresh
    What is wounded heal.
    What is rigid bend
    What is frozen warm
    Guide what goes astray....

Christians may address the Holy Spirit in prayer, for the Spirit is not a thing or a mere energy, but a trinitarian person.

St. Augustine (354–430) is a towering figure in the history of Christianity. He was a North African bishop, pastor, famous orator, and prolific author. One of his important contributions on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is in his work On the Trinity. In this book he describes the Spirit as the person of the Trinity who binds the first and second persons together. The Spirit, Augustine taught, is the mutual love between the Father and Son. In God’s own being, the Spirit is “their common life... consubstantial [of the same substance] and coeternal with them”⁶ The Spirit for Augustine is the power of relationship in the Trinity. One of his images for the three persons of the Trinity remains memorable: God is the Lover, the Beloved, and the Loving. Thus, for Augustine, as for many who followed his views in Christian tradition, this is the meaning of 1 John 4:8: “God is love.” The power of love that unites the Trinity is present in the world and in us. It beckons to us to respond in love for God and for our neighbor. In Augustine’s view, the Holy Spirit’s main work is to pour the love of God into our hearts (Romans 5:5).⁷ In doing so the Holy Spirit gives us not less than what God is, which is to say, the Spirit gives us itself.

Celtic Christianity emerged from the traditions of Ireland. It experienced the Holy Spirit in a deeply ecological way, as alive within creation. Irish monks were famous for their illuminated manuscripts, such

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as the book of Kells. Here one sees art that embraces the goodness of a creation filled with the divine presence of Spirit. In its use of nature symbolism and attention to seeing God within the routine tasks of daily life, Celtic Christianity offers valuable possibilities for thinking about Spirit today. Writings such as the ninth-century “Breast-plate of St Patrick” also can guide our spiritual lives. The Breastplate is a morning prayer that celebrates the presence of the Trinity with and within us:

I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the Threeness, through confession of the Oneness towards the creator. ... Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.  

Celtic spirituality combines the Spirit, the practice of trinitarian prayer, and deep attention on the natural world. In our era when the earth “shudders in distress because creation’s natural and living systems are becoming exhausted from carrying the burden of human greed and conflict” (Doctrine and covenants 163.4b), there is much wisdom for us to learn from this ancient tradition.

The Christian mystical tradition from the medieval period can further deepen our understanding of the Spirit. One example from this tradition deserves special attention in this chapter. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was a Benedictine nun who lived in what today is the west part of Germany. In her early life she was quiet and withdrawn. Later, she became a productive writer, artist, musician, herbalist, and theologian. She was renowned as a leader, both as abbess (the head) of her monastic order and in the church and political world. Hildegard experienced Spirit both as a voice that enlightened her mind with words, and also tangibly as the source of her visions about the Christian life.

In the medieval world women had very low status. But Hildegard’s contemporaries treated her as a prophet and her writings as prophetic.

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8 The Works of St. Patrick; St. Secundinus, Hymn on St. Patrick, translated and annotated by Ludwig Bieler; Ancient Christian Writers 17 (New York: Paulist, 1953), 69.
Hildegard uses Earth-based metaphors for Spirit: water, wind, fire, and dove. In these metaphors one hears echoes from Celtic Christianity, other Christian mystical traditions, and from the Bible. She speaks of Spirit as the source of the fertility of life on earth, and the earth as a source of healing and blessing for people. Hildegard was a noteworthy example of how the Spirit works to create new ways of seeing and understanding God’s work in the world. Many contemporary Christians find Hildegard relevant to the church as it seeks to speak faithfully to the Earth’s present environmental emergency. Hildegard offers ways to think about the Holy Spirit that link Spirit to the flourishing of our planet.

Other traditions are nearer to us. Memory of the early Restoration Movement, especially from the Kirtland period, still stirs Community of Christ today. In spite of their struggles and failings, the earliest generation of our church experienced Spirit as an outbreak of transforming power. They knew the thrill of the Spirit’s presence, revealed in miracles, healings, and prophetic gifts. To our ancestors in this movement, these events were signs that the same power for mission the earliest Christians received at Pentecost was still available. Our ancestors did not interpret these experiences of spiritual power as merely preparing the individual soul for heaven beyond earth, but as God’s call to make a different kind of earth here and now. They believed that “the road to transformation travels both inward and outward” (Doctrines and Covenants 161.3d). Thus, they labored intensively to build gathered communities. When these communities knew tragedy, failure, and loss, they experienced Spirit as the force that united them and restored their vision. This is why, even to today, Community of Christ still sings as one of its anthems a song from Kirtland: “The Spirit of God like a Fire Is Burning.”10 This hymn preserves a dangerous and radical memory: the Spirit, like fire, changes things. It transforms a landscape so that the new can grow.

In our time, even amidst loss and struggle, we see the fire of Spirit burning ever more brightly. Movements for justice for the poor and brutalized of the world reflect the prophetic Spirit of the Bible and of radical Christian traditions. From the adoption of Exodus stories of liberation that graced African-American slave communities, we witness a bursting forth of Spirit through music and rhythm. Community of Christ Sings, the church’s current hymnal, richly expresses how song can empower a global community to dream about and create a world where shalom is at home. While in parts of the world traditional worship and

10 Community of Christ Sings, 384.
church-related activities are in decline, there is deep thirst for a spiritually satisfying life. Practices and images from First Nations and indigenous cultures throughout the world inspire the rise of Spirit-centered “green” versions of Christianity that honor Spirit as connection to earth.

The once-strong boundaries between denominations have become open, as Christians across traditions borrow ancient and medieval spiritual practices to deepen their openness to Spirit. New ways of being the church, beyond traditional congregations, are appearing. We hear the Spirit of Wisdom, amidst the chaotic ferment of our time, addressing us in the globally shared concern for a more just and sustainable world and in our yearning for fresh new ways of understanding the gospel.

As Jesus promised the disciples in John 16:13, the Spirit he would send them would ever bring the gift of new understandings of the divine mystery. Paul spoke truly when he wrote, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

**Application for Discipleship**

Community of Christ believes that the Holy Spirit continuously opens new possibilities for us. It helps the church experience God and the world anew and allows space for each other’s journeys and for difference. We have historically seen ourselves as a Christian movement shaped decisively by the Spirit. We have experienced the Spirit as the power of love for one another in community as we have confronted issues of justice related to gender and sexual orientation. The Spirit has emboldened us to see our interrelatedness to the earth and to feel the pain of those the world excludes. By the Spirit we understand ministry as the work of the whole church, and discipleship as the call to radically live out the reign of God on earth. The work of the Spirit never ceases to surprise and delight us, whether in campfires at reunion, difficult decisions in business meetings, or creative new ways to live our cherished principle of the Blessings of Community.

As noted above, in 2 Corinthians 3:17 Paul insists, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Human beings are prone to distorting our freedom. We need not look far to find stories both from our tradition and from elsewhere, of persons who claim to follow the promptings of the Spirit but engage in acts of violence, oppression, coercion, and even death. The tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 is an example. A community begun by a charismatic leader’s responses to Spirit sank into paranoia and mass suicide. Our challenge is to not just open
ourselves to Spirit, but to discern wisely, communally, and carefully when and where the Spirit is truly speaking.

How do we rightly perceive the action of Spirit? This task belongs in part to the work of theology. We look together to scripture and Christian tradition to discover where our ancestors discerned Spirit, as individuals and as communities. We look especially to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who breathed the Spirit on the church. We look to common consent in the church to help us identify where gifts of the Spirit align with the best we know about God’s desire for justice and peace to flourish. We look to spiritual practices, learning to connect with breath and therefore more truly with the Spirit. We look to our best understanding of human experience and reason, which includes the language of science. All these tools can clarify our discernment. A beautiful hymn by James K. Manley, “Spirit of Gentleness,” illustrates how the same Spirit that has been working since the dawn of creation still calls us today to new possibilities:

Refrain: Spirit, spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free, Spirit, spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidity, wind, wind on the sea.

1: You moved on the waters, you called to the deep, then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep; and over the eons you called to each thing, “Awake from your slumbers and rise on your wings.”

2: You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand, and you goaded your people with a law and a land; when they were confounded by their idols and lies, then you spoke through your prophets to open their eyes.

3: You sang in a stable, you cried from a hill, then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still; and down in the city you called once again, when you blew through your people on the rush of the wind.

4: You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams; our women see visions, our men clear their eyes. With bold new decisions your people arise.11

Spirit presses us onward toward New Creation, as it gently stirs us to action. Where for the sake of a more just world hearts are softened and change embraced, the Spirit is at work.

The still, small voice of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to be our companion and advocate stirs us to mission. The Spirit prompts us to hear God weep “for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering” and to “open [our] ears to hear the pleading of mothers and fathers in all nations who desperately

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11 Reprinted with permission of the author and copyright holder, James Manley.
seek a future of hope for their children” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a). As we hear cries of injustice, the Spirit urges us to stretch and grow as disciples into our common work of making a new world. Its voice encourages congregations to open their doors to their neighbors. Its voice calls each of us to see strangers as kin and fellow travelers. Its voice compels us to dismantle structures of racism and oppression. Its voice invites us to see our connection to creation, and to see with God’s eyes ways that lead beyond the callous destruction of earth to the promise of a new relationship with all things. In the endless ways the Holy Spirit prompts us there lies the possibility of abundant life in the family of God.

Conclusion

The experience of Christian discipleship can be wild and tumultuous. We should expect this because the Spirit “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). But the Spirit creates this verdant chaos so that we will learn more about God, community, and shalom for our planet. From this chaos God’s Holy Spirit teases hope from us: the life-giving embrace of new possibilities. As God’s creative work continues to unfold, these words from a Randall Pratt hymn express our prayer to enter more fully into God’s own life:

Spirit fill us, Spirit will us,
to come to God, be in Christ, and
live in you always.12

The Spirit refreshes like a cool breeze as the church journeys toward God’s promised shalom. It sometimes blows like a strong wind, and other times whispers like the voice of a lover. Do you feel it, that tickle in your ear? Listen, breathe, sense Spirit.

For Further Reading


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**Testimony by Ron Harmon**

I vividly remember my first encounter with the Spirit. I was twelve years old and it came during a time of deep searching. I attended a small loving congregation on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio. It was not uncommon to hear a closing prayer giving thanks for the presence of the Holy Spirit. I listened intently and tried to be open to this Holy Spirit but it eluded me.

I did not realize at the time the Spirit had already interceded in my life and was affirming my deepest yearnings to connect with that which is beyond words and human understanding. This Spirit seed had been planted and was beginning to grow as it became the focus of my prayer life each night. I wanted to sense or experience this Spirit and so that became my prayer.

One evening during a youth camp in western Pennsylvania I went out into an open field. I laid down in the grass and looked up into the
immensity and depth of space. By now this prayer no longer needed utterance but was expressed with each breath I took. There were no city lights to hide the vast expanse of the universe. Something not fully explainable but deeply moving occurred that evening as I explored a dimension of creation not often visible to me.

I found myself fully immersed in an awareness that I was not alone. During these moments, I became aware of my connection to an ultimate reality that was beyond my comprehension and yet felt a deeply personal affirmation of divine love and complete wellbeing. Of course, these are the words I use now to describe the experience but its profound impact is felt even as I write these words years later.

Since this time, I have experienced the Holy Spirit in many ways and at times have struggled for any awareness of its presence. During a time of feeling very distant from the Spirit I wrote a prayer that became a plea for spiritual awakening to God’s movement all around me:

God, where will your Spirit lead to today?
Help me be fully awake and ready to respond.
Grant me courage to risk something new
and become a blessing of your love and peace. Amen.

This prayer captures much of my evolving understanding of the Holy Spirit’s function and purpose. I have increasingly experienced the Spirit as disruptive presence helping me to see and understand what was once hidden from view. I have returned to ancient practices that create open and fertile space within for the Spirit to do its transformative work.

This intentional work has created capacity for suffering with those who suffer and courage to speak and act words that lead to God’s alternative future. When I cultivate space and receptivity for the Holy Spirit I find myself more willing to risk new conversations, relationships, and ways to embody Christ’s love and peace.

There are still those times, however, when I am totally surprised by the Spirit. It moves freely throughout creation and is not constrained by my limited conceptions of its function or purpose. For all these experiences, I am deeply grateful and forever changed.

**Spiritual Practice: Breath Prayer**

_This chapter reminds us that Spirit is often described through biblical symbols of wind and breath. Breath prayer is a spiritual practice that awakens us to the Spirit’s life in us and around us here and now._
Begin by observing your breath. Be a gentle observer of your breath as it enters and exits your body, noticing the rise and fall of your chest, the sound of each exhale and inhale. As you continue to breathe, allow a sacred phrase to emerge in you that you repeat silently with each breath in and out. This sacred phrase could take several forms. Choose one that is comfortable for you.

1. **Breath in:** A word or phrase that describes what you yearn to receive.
   **Breath out:** A word or phrase that describes what you yearn to release.
   
   *Example: Breathe in peace. Breathe out fear.*

2. **Breath in:** A name for God
   **Breath out:** A longing for God
   

3. You may use a short phrase from scripture, prayer, or song that you repeat prayerfully with each inhale and exhale.

   *Example: Breathe in: “Be Still…” Breathe out: “… And know.” (Psalm 46:10)*
   
   *Example: Breathe in: “Search Me…” Breathe out: “…O God.” (Psalm 139)*

Spend several minutes breathing with your sacred phrase until you are no longer concentrating on the words but allowing them to deepen a silent receptivity to God’s presence within you. When you feel ready, let the words go and continue breathing as you dwell in the presence of the Spirit with you here and now.

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. In what ways does this chapter connect to your experience of the Holy Spirit?

2. Which scripture do you find best describes your experience with the Holy Spirit? Explain?

3. In what life circumstances do you experience the Holy Spirit most? When do you usually seek the Spirit’s presence or help?
Chapter 5

Creation

As an expression of divine love, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and called them “good.” Everything belongs to God and should be cherished and used justly according to divine purposes. God sees creation as a whole without separation of spirit and element. God calls people of every generation to join with God as stewards in the loving care of creation.

Introduction

This paragraph affirms that God’s world is a gift of love and grace. Earth’s living organisms, both human and nonhuman, breathe in this gift of life from God the loving Creator. To refer to all things as “creation” immediately implies a divine point of reference: a Creator. Christian faith holds that creation in all its beauty, wonder, power, diversity, vulnerability, and mystery is an icon of the living God. Divine Spirit works unceasingly to create, sustain, and redeem all living things and guide them toward the wholeness of peace. God invites human beings to care for each other and all of nature. This call for us to be stewards of creation is fundamentally a call to love what God has generously created.

Creation is the good gift of God, whose eternal triune being is communal. Therefore, creation as a whole reflects in its vast web of relationships the relational, communal nature of God. Human beings, like all other animals, plants, and organisms are part of this larger, interrelated whole. We are all creatures, which, among other things, means we depend on each other for existence. Alike and different from other creatures we
share the same needs for air to breathe, water to drink, food to nourish, and resources for shelter. Each organism is unique and lives out its own special role within the whole of creation. At the same time, because all living things depend on each other, mutuality is at the heart of the good creation. We should not be surprised by this truth, since according to the doctrine of the Trinity, reciprocity is the essence of God’s own life.

Regrettably, we human beings regularly fail to recognize, respect, or love the uniqueness of other species, natural habitats, and ecological processes. Many of our daily choices lead to wasteful consumption of the world’s resources, energy, and lands. Our failure to accept that we are part of an interconnected whole contributes to the dangerous ecological crisis we face today. Climate change, species extinction, deforestation, desertification, cultural extinction, nuclear waste, and pollution of air, soil, and water are assaults upon the wholeness of the global community. How will we as Community of Christ contribute to the healing of Earth? How will we address the difficult ecological challenges before us?

Biblical Foundations

Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions see human beings as stewards of creation. Stewardship is a radical call to live out divine love and compassion for all forms of life. We misunderstand this call if we see it merely as overseeing or managing human lives, other plants and animals, and/or ecological systems. Stewardship is not about placing ourselves over the rest of creation. This approach ignores the Spirit’s presence in creation. To think of ourselves as “over” creation easily fosters corrupt, loveless, and exploitive lifestyles in relation to the rest of nature and the human community. On the other hand, following the wisdom of the scriptural witness, Community of Christ believes human beings are called to be God’s partners in loving care of all creation. The creation itself in all its abundance and diversity reflects the bounty of God’s love. Divine love, then, calls us to be in a healthy relationship with the world, not a hierarchical one. As imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1–2), we must generously care for all that exists.

The Bible repeatedly upholds the goodness of created life. In the Hebrew Scriptures, light and dark, the waters, the atmosphere, land, plants, birds, humans, and other animals are all declared “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The natural world is essentially good, because it

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1 Genesis 1:1—2:4a says five times that God saw that creation was good.
originates from God’s own being, will, and generosity. This conviction is the starting point for a uniquely Christian approach to our human experience, our relationship with God, and our own creatureliness within the web of a universe of creatures. Furthermore, the second Creation story in Genesis (2:4—3:24) identifies humans as a unity of body and spirit. We are made of the elements (dust, or in Hebrew adamah) of the Earth, touched by God’s breath of life (ruach). Bodiliness is intrinsic to our existence, and we are meant to partake of and extend God’s love for the creation as embodied beings (Genesis 2:7; Psalms 104:29; Job 34:14–15).

The story of the Flood ends with a sign: a rainbow by which God covenants with all humans, animals, plants, and the very Earth itself. God is committed to the flourishing of life. In this story, God chose to withhold destructive power and never again flood the Earth. The story, then, is a parable about divine restraint, while a parallel story in the book of Job reminds human beings of our part of the covenant. Through the whirlwind Job was taught humility, reminded of his limited knowledge and power, and allowed to see that human beings are not the center of or in control of all things. We are only part of a complex whole. In humility, restraint, generosity, and actions that help life flourish, humans are to share in God’s covenant of peace with all of creation (Genesis 8:1–22 and Job 38–42).

Other important themes in Hebrew Scriptures are the Sabbath and Jubilee. These were sacred times when the lands, animals, and humans were to stop, rest, lay fallow, be refreshed, and regenerate (Leviticus 25). These themes in the Bible affirm that the meaning of creation is not found in constant activity and production. The land, animals, and people as a whole interrelated community thrive or suffer together. Therefore, different traditions from the Hebrew Bible believed that time for healing and renewal was part of God’s desire for the world (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Human beings have a role in assuring that creation’s gifts are not exhausted.

In the Psalms an “ecological chorus” praises the presence and fruitfulness of God’s Spirit (Psalms 19:1–4 and 104). We also hear in the book of Isaiah a warning that the Earth will suffer at the hands of human beings if they transgress the laws. The Earth will groan and lament, dry up and wither, and suffer violence and destruction as it “lies polluted under its inhabitants” (Isaiah 24:5). Hebrew thinkers had a profound sense
of the earth as a living organism, vulnerable to human defilement, but having a voice of its own to cry to God.²

These Old Testament themes of the loving Creator, the good creation, humility and restraint, Sabbath and Jubilee, the interconnection of all life, God’s live-giving Spirit, and the groaning and suffering of Earth reappear in the New Testament.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses imagery from Isaiah 24 to paint a cosmic picture of the future of creation: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves” (Romans 8:22–23). Human alienation from God, and our consequent inclination toward greed and self-centeredness, harms not only human beings but is a source of destructiveness to the rest of creation. But Paul goes on to announce the hope of God’s future mending of the world. Salvation for Paul is not only about the human future, but the future of all things. The Spirit raised Christ from the dead, and in Paul’s view this torrent of Spirit is now at work in our lives as part of the healing of the whole creation. It is vital for the church today, both theologically and ethically, to reclaim the biblical writers’ view that salvation includes the whole creation. This is a potent reminder that our planet and ecosystems are not disposable.

Three important symbols from the New Testament further affirm the goodness of creaturely life: the Incarnation, the death of Christ as recalled in the Lord’s Supper, and the Resurrection. These symbols reinforce for the church the centrality of God’s gracious, self-emptying love and the hope for a transformed creation. In the Incarnation the divine Logos or Word of God becomes flesh and enters the world in the life of Jesus Christ. Here God is depicted as fully embracing matter and revealing the divine self by means of, not in spite of, what is physical. When we participate together in the sacrament of Communion, we remember Jesus’ death by eating bread and drinking wine. The grains and fruits of the good creation are shared in remembrance of the body and blood of Christ. In taking flesh and blood, Christ shared in creation’s pain and loss. The cross reminds the church that God has entered into the fullness of embodied life. In the resurrection of Jesus, we comprehend the divine declaration that embodied life is of eternal worth. God conserves life. Easter upholds a central truth: that embodiment is not a liability to relationship with God. Recalling the symbolism celebrated in these three

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central events in the story of Jesus Christ renews the church’s identity and its convictions about the sacredness of creation.

Because it is so pivotal to the church’s faith, the Incarnation deserves additional comment. The Gospel of John points to the very heart of the gospel with this line: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Jesus as the Son of God embodies the eternal Word through which God brought creation into being. This Word or Logos (in Greek) is the ordering principle of all that is. John’s testimony is that the Logos is the means through which the Source has brought all things into existence. Further, the unique, historic life of Jesus Christ reveals God the Word entering into union with creation in the most complete and intimate way. For the church this means that God does not despise the physical but affirms it. Community of Christ is a cosmos- affirming, not cosmos-denying, faith.

Jesus the Word made Flesh says in John 15, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5). This organic symbol suggests that his life now flows through the disciples’ bodily lives. The One through whom the good creation came into being now makes us his companions in loving care for all creation. Jesus the Incarnate One represents for us the wholeness and inseparability of spirit and body. The Gospel of John thus emphasizes both Jesus’ unique unity with God and his flesh and blood union with the world. Disciples find in the church’s faith in the Incarnation power to live a vision of divine wholeness, compassion, and love in our relationships with each other and with the whole endangered creation.

Tradition

Christian tradition is rich with examples of healthy relationships with the natural world. The desert abbas and ammas, Christian monastics of the third to the fifth centuries mentioned in Chapter 3 discovered in the solitude of the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria a new awareness of their humanity before God, as well as of the plants, animals, and natural processes of the world around them. Life in the harsh desert helped draw them into deeper communion with the God of all living things. They developed a sense that their lives were continuous with the land, the very starkness of which opened them to the divine. The desert was a place to be respected for its beauty, wonder, and boundlessness, as well as its threatening character. Its vastness also helped these monastics see their own inner life more realistically. The desert fathers and mothers did not
worship the desert, but worshiped God alone. But the desert facilitated
the detachment they sought in their ascetic lives, which “implied a sense
of becoming one with the environment. Their holiness was part and parcel of
a sense of wholeness. If at-one-ment with their neighbor was of the essence
of desert spirituality, so too was at-tune-ment to their environment, to the
world, and to God.”

Within the quite different environment of Celtic Christianity, an
intricate knot of primal (pagan and animistic) religion/spirituality was
woven together with the Christianity of the Latin West. For Celtic
Christians, forest groves, mountains, meadows, springs, and lakes were
where divinity dwelt. Particular places were equated with kinship, the
origins of one’s clan and social status. Celtic Christians, like the desert
fathers and mothers, shared this sense of continuity with the land and the
past. A strong “place-lore” told the stories of relationships to place. Birds
and animals were highly significant within Celtic tradition and probably
reflected the Celts’ deeply held sense of connection to place and the
divine. This tradition has valuable wisdom for the church today, as we
seek a re-enchantment with the natural world.

Perhaps the two best known ecologically aware Christians in the
twelfth and thirteenth centuries were Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of
Assisi. Their lives and teachings reflected the medieval regard for the
natural world as overflowing with God’s glory. Hildegard was a
Benedictine abbess known for her prophetic visions, music, and art in the
form of beautifully detailed illustrations called “illuminations.” She had a
great knowledge of philosophy, literature, theology, medicine, herbalism,
botany, and the natural sciences, as these were known in her time. A
predominant theme in Hildegard’s writings was that of the greening
power of God, or veriditas of nature.

Francis of Assisi forsook the life of wealth he was born into, took a
vow of poverty, and began an order of monks who imitated Jesus’ practice
of wandering and preaching. His poetic writings and the stories that
surround him have an enduring influence in literature, religion, and
environmentalism. The most famous of his writings is perhaps “The
Canticle of Brother Sun.” It was a hymn expressing God’s presence with
and in elemental creation.

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3 John Chryssavgis, In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and
Mothers (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 85.
4 Oliver Davis, trans. and ed., Celtic Spirituality: The Classics of Western Spirituality
5 William Harmless, Mystics (Oxford University Press, 2008), 60, 72–75.
These examples from early and medieval Christianity recall for us the spiritual and theological importance of the natural world in the church’s tradition. Today our global community faces severe ecological challenges our faith ancestors could not even have imagined. Since 1970, a growing number of theologians and lay persons have engaged in the development of ecological theologies and environmental ethics based on Christian scriptures and traditions. This movement explores the connection between Christian faith and social and ecological justice and peacemaking.⁶

The work and ministry of justice and peacemaking for all creation is not new to Community of Christ. We have received divine counsel that reminds us to become peacemakers and loving stewards of God’s world. The church’s early experiences and teachings reflect an inseparability of the spirit and body that is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The fullness of God’s love, healing, peace, and joy are known through the inseparable connection of spirit and element (Doctrine and Covenants 90:5e; Genesis 2:7; Psalms 104:29; Job 34:14–15).

In 1972, the following direction came to the church: “These are portentous times. The lives of many are being sacrificed unnecessarily to the gods of war, greed, and avarice. The land is being desecrated by the thoughtless waste of vital resources. You must obey my commandments and be in the forefront of those who would mediate this needless destruction while there is yet day” (Doctrine and Covenants 150:7). Ten years later new counsel reminded us that “the time for hesitation is past. The earth, my creation, groans for the liberating truths of my gospel which have been given for the salvation of the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 155:7). The Spirit that is ever at work in creation is also the prophetic Spirit, calling God’s people to seek justice and wholeness for all things.

As a response, the church created the Community of Christ Peace and Justice Team. Its commission was to study the root causes of war, violence, poverty, environmental degradation, inequality, and destructive choices and lifestyles. In 1992, the church commissioned a new committee, the Community of Christ Earth Stewardship Team. This team explored how to advance the church’s work of protection of the environment through education, and to encourage congregations and International Headquarters to model responsible environmental choices.

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⁶ For examples see For Further Reading below.
Two years later, the Independence Temple was dedicated to the pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit. In 1999 the Community of Christ Peace Colloquy, using the theme “As the Sky Meets the Earth,” focused on how individuals, communities, and institutions could become more justice-oriented and proactive in the care of creation. In the current time, following Jesus the Peaceful One has direct implications for how individuals, congregations, and the entire church must include care of creation in various ministries.

It is now urgent for the church individually and collectively to commit to practicing radical hospitality to our endangered ecosystem. Community of Christ’s traditions offer rich resources in our scriptures and practices for a deep ecological theology. However, the church has yet to embody the call to live out an uncompromising ethic of stewardship based on God’s love for all creation. Divine counsel to the church at the turn of the millennium again reminded us of the exigency for disciples to be in the forefront of justice and peacemaking for all life and ecological processes:

Generously share the invitation, ministries, and sacraments through which people can encounter the Living Christ who heals and reconciles through redemptive relationships in sacred community. The restoring of persons to healthy or righteous relationships with God, others, themselves, and the earth is at the heart of the purpose of your journey as a people of faith. …

The earth, lovingly created as an environment for life to flourish, shudders in distress because creation’s natural and living systems are becoming exhausted from carrying the burden of human greed and conflict. Humankind must awaken from its illusion of independence and unrestrained consumption without lasting consequences.

Let the educational and community development endeavors of the church equip people of all ages to carry the ethics of Christ’s peace into all arenas of life. Prepare new generations of disciples to bring fresh vision to bear on the perplexing problems of poverty, disease, war, and environmental deterioration. Their contributions will be multiplied if their hearts are focused on God’s will for creation—Doctrine and Covenants 163:2b and 4b–c

The Spirit that midwifed creation calls Community of Christ to rise to the challenge of Earth’s travail.

**Application for Discipleship**

The world exists in and by divine love. The Spirit is itself the spirit of livingness. God loves and sustains life in all its abundance and dazzling diversity. The triune divine community created all life as an interconnected whole. These affirmations of our faith may help us imagine
creation as one neighborhood or community. Jesus’ command to love our neighbor, then, extends in our time to the whole cosmos, with its countless intricate living systems. Nature, as our “neighbor,” can as well be seen as the “poor among us,” for in the biblical tradition, the poor were the most vulnerable. In our own time we also know that human poverty actually arises from the impoverishment of the land (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Psalms 19:1–4; 104; Isaiah 24:4–13) as desertification demonstrates.

Loving our neighbors must no longer be confined to the person next door, the person sitting next to us in church, or even those who live at the other side of the street. Loving our neighbors has become a pressing global call. It will require us to live ethically and compassionately in relationship with all creation. Exciting possibilities open up when we apply Jesus’ command to love our neighbor to creatures like frogs and polar bears, to places like oceans and glaciers, and to the natural processes related to air, water, and soil. By loving all creation, we live and share God’s sacred purposes for the world, which arose from the mystery of God’s boundless love.

Community of Christ values sacred places. In our past journey as a people, and in our personal stories, we associate particular experiences of God’s holiness with special locations. Our history celebrates sacred sites, like the Palmyra Grove, the Kirtland Temple, our numerous campgrounds, the Auditorium, and the Temple in Independence. These are for us what Celtic spirituality calls “thin places” where the distance between creator and creature disappears and we find ourselves vulnerable to grace in remarkable ways. These places connect us to our spiritual heritage, which calls deeper intentionality from us when we visit them. Thus, sacred places become uniquely transparent to a renewed vision of God’s purposes for the world. For many members and friends of the church our sacred sites have become centers of spiritual pilgrimage and a refuge away from the stresses of daily life. Many visit our sacred places in hope of drawing closer to God.

However, if our buildings and special sites are to represent our loving care for creation in the current ecological crisis, we must ask ourselves some challenging questions. Do they utilize energy responsibly? Do they protect or provide natural habitat for other creatures than us? Do they promote holistic concepts of peace? Do we care for these places in ways that do not further harm the environment?

Our sacred sites prompt us to ask further what would happen if we began to perceive the whole creation as a sacred place? From our unique
experiences at a specific campground, for example, how might we work to transform our neighborhood into a “thin place”? How can we take what we experience at Kirtland, for example, and embody it in a transformative way in the places where we live, play, and work?

The sacred interconnection of life means that when we do things for the Earth, we do them for ourselves. Contemporary science readily sees this truth. When we improve the health of air and water, we improve our own health. To act for the well-being of a threatened species has far-ranging implications for human thriving. The poor of the earth are no longer only the human poor, for the creation itself has become impoverished. We confess that our future is linked to the welfare of all the poor: “in their welfare resides your welfare” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a). We cannot separate care for Earth (ecological justice) from care for people (social justice). We are made of the same stuff as the rest of creation. Whatever affects the parts, affects the whole.

Disciples have a choice to make. We can imitate God’s generosity with love for all living things. Or we can continue to walk the path toward ecological devastation, in which the few take what they want for personal benefit at the expense of the many. We are capable of thriving as a global community while at the same time cultivating, cherishing, protecting, and preserving the living systems all around us. The good news of the gospel invites us in the twenty-first century to be in love with the world as God is in love with the world.

Conclusion

All creation groans as it awaits the liberating touch of God’s love. Community of Christ believes it is among those called to bring healing to the world. A concept of salvation limited to a human future beyond time will miss the vital truth of our interrelatedness with all creation and the call to build the reign of God here and now. It will ignore the Bible’s own cosmic vision of salvation as the liberation of all things. That vision yet shapes Community of Christ. In its power, we must work against greed, exploitation, and violence toward others, whether those others are suffering people, plants and animals, or ecosystems. Understanding that God’s salvation is for the whole creation gives us new imagery to help work for the kind of peaceful and just communities God seeks.

In essence, to practice compassion toward the Earth and each other, we must seek the peace of Jesus Christ for all creation. God calls us today to break the bonds of fear and to live a radical kind of stewardship:
When your willingness to live in sacred community as Christ’s new creation exceeds your natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation, you will become who you are called to be. The rise of Zion the beautiful, the peaceful reign of Christ, awaits your whole-hearted response to the call to make and steadfastly hold to God’s covenant of peace in Jesus Christ.

This covenant entails sacramental living that respects and reveals God’s presence and reconciling activity in creation. It requires whole-life stewardship dedicated to expanding the church’s restoring ministries, especially those devoted to asserting the worth of persons, protecting the sacredness of creation, and relieving physical and spiritual suffering—Doctrine and Covenants 164:9b–c

For Further Reading


Community of Christ Earth Stewardship Team, www.cofchrist.org/earthsteward


Testimony by John Glaser

Even as a child, I remember feeling angst at seeing pictures of burning rain forests and the wanton environmental destruction by humans. I have to credit my elementary teachers who taught us of the wealth of forests, nature, and the need to protect our environment. My adolescent character was fostered by social marketing campaigns and slogans by a cartoonish owl stating, “Give a hoot, don’t pollute.” It seems that the onset of adulthood gives us the ability to question the effectiveness of social marketing techniques by the authorities as demonstrated by the rise of debates regarding global warming. Some argue whether or not global warming is a real phenomenon. Meanwhile, environmental destruction continues unabated.
The voice of Community of Christ comforts me greatly. To know that we worship a God that values all of creation and values our participation in that creation gives me hope and grounds my faith. My discipleship requires me to consider the prophetic voices of others such as Rachel Carson. In her book *Silent Spring*, she challenged the pesticide economy that existed in her world by drawing ethical direction from the writings of Albert Schweitzer. We appreciate their voices for they resonate with the inspiration we draw from a God that demonstrates a reverence for all creation.

We in turn lift up the prophetic voice in our time and the places in which we live. It is not a voice that divides but instead seeks to heal others and our environment. To see the interconnectedness of life and spirit allows us not just to understand poverty and suffering, but to feel it. Beyond quantifying poverty, we are given the opportunity to experience it qualitatively and through all our rich human senses as Christ would have too. In feeling pain and poverty we are allowed the opportunity to be participants in creating change and in alleviating suffering.

Although we are drawn to the desire to create significant change in the world, we recognize that change as Christians is interpersonal and is realized in our daily interactions. For example, I was persuaded by a church colleague’s life choices to engage in a plant-based diet. Although I began my diet last year for health reasons, my new eating habits and behaviors have begun to affect and alter my beliefs. I now see my relationship to food with new spiritual senses beyond the mere gustatory. This simple change in eating habits has allowed me to relate to the world around me with a renewed ethic and care for the environment, plants, animals, and humans. These meaningful changes have occurred due to my collegial relationship. Authentic human change is interpersonal. God’s creation in all its beauty and wonder is to be shared one with another in interpersonal dialogue that goes beyond social marketing, mass media, and the sponsored content of the Internet. To borrow a phrase from my childhood, God indeed, gives a hoot.
Spiritual Practice: Holy Attention

Engaging in the practice of holy attention allows us to suspend our inner conversations and agendas and give reverent and receptive focus to a specific person or portion of God’s creation. Respecting another as an unrepeatable miracle whose life journey is unique and sacred brings awareness to and affirmation of God’s presence in all creation. We do this in the spirit of Christ who saw into the deep hearts of people and recognized their true identities as God’s beloved. With this practice we begin to make space for awareness of where God is showing up in the world around us.

Enter a time of quiet reflection. Relax your body and breathing and bring to mind a particular person, group of people, or portion of creation. If you wish, reflect on a photo of a person or sit with something in creation and pay attention to it: a leaf, a tree, blade of grass, the sky, a bird. Ask God to bless you with curiosity and gratitude as you consider the life journey of others including creation.

- In what ways do you feel connected to this person, group, or portion of creation?
- What do you need to hear, see, feel, or learn?
- How are you being led to engage in actions that promote the well-being of this person, group, or portion of creation? Journal your reflections.

— Taken from “A Guide for Lent 2015,”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do your life habits demonstrate responsible stewardship of God’s entire creation? How can you become a better steward of creation?

2. As a result of reading this chapter, what new understandings did you develop about the role of humans in relating to the other elements of God’s creation?
Chapter 6

Humanity

Every human being is created in the image of God. In Jesus Christ, God took on the limits of human flesh and culture, and is known through them. We therefore affirm without exception the worth of every human being. We also affirm that God has blessed humankind with the gift of agency: the ability to choose whom or what we will serve within the circumstances of our lives.

Introduction

Community of Christ cherishes the belief that our humanity is an immeasurable gift from God. All of us deeply and thoroughly share this humanity with Jesus Christ. A newborn baby, an annoying neighbor, a terminally ill friend, a maimed veteran, a developmentally challenged child, an athlete, a refugee, your mother, my grandpa, a local farmer, the prime minister, an undocumented worker, a medicine woman, a malnourished child: we are human beings. The Incarnation, as Chapter 3 explained, refers to the mystery of the eternal divine Word or Logos becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. In the Incarnation, then, Christ assumed the common humanity all of us share: North and South; East and West; rich and poor; male, female, and differently gendered; big and small; black, brown, and white; all with varied abilities. The Incarnation once and for all declared our shared humanity to be spiritually precious. Thinking about this affirmation of faith is theologically necessary and ethically essential.
What does it mean to be human? How do we understand our humanity as the source and hope for the “worth of all persons”? What is human nature and what do our scriptures and the Christian tradition say about it? Human beings are biologically connected to and interdependent with all other life forms, but how can we make sense of the many distinctive dimensions of our human nature? What actually makes us unique, as part of God’s creation? What does it mean that Christ was fully human? How can the church’s beliefs about Jesus Christ influence our thought about what it means to be human and our actions for good in a world that is too friendly to inhumanity? This chapter invites us to think about these and other questions.

Biblical Foundations

The scriptures offer rich images and powerful stories about what it means to be human. In the Hebrew Bible the relationship between humanity and God is complex. As creatures, human beings are distinct from the Creator. We are finite; this means we have limits to our knowledge, ability, and lifespan. We can make independent choices with often disastrous consequences: violence and injustice are the all-too-frequent companions of human attitudes and actions. At the same time, biblical writers consistently see human beings as dependent on God for their existence. We depend on God for life and breath, for daily bread, for the impulse to make responsible choices, and for our ability to act freely. Scripture portrays God as the source of every human being’s incalculable worth. Human beings are an integral part of the creation, which God declared “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Creation’s very being depends ultimately on the generosity of God. Thus, human existence is to be treated as a profound, gracious gift.

One source of our belief in our dependence on God is the Book of Genesis. As Chapter 5 above noted, Genesis tells two separate stories about creation, linked together in chapters 1–3. Both stories contribute important concepts to a Christian understanding of humanity. The first creation story is Genesis 1:1—2:4a. This story introduces a central idea of Jewish and Christian teaching about human beings. Humanity is made in the image of God (1:26–30). This phrase decisively informs our Christian view of our humanity before God. As human beings, we have a unique place in the world, because we reflect something of what God is like. The text does not explain these characteristics but leaves it to readers to imagine them. Through history, both Jewish and Christian interpretations
of this passage have influenced important ideas, such as the inestimable worth of persons and a belief in human beings’ inalienable rights and dignity. Community of Christ is shaped by and upholds this long tradition. In 1829, almost a year before the church’s official organization, members were called to “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 16:3c). Even though in practice we have often fallen short of our convictions, Community of Christ’s faith intends to underscore the beauty, dignity, and value of being human.

Human beings reflect the image of God. The first creation story tells how human beings were created on the sixth day as the next to last act of God’s creation. Genesis 1:27 states, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.” God’s image upon us and in us gives us a unique role among all other creatures. This verse is inclusive. Women and men share equally in God’s image. By extension, so do all ethnicities, tribes, and nationalities, in their diversity. The heart of the biblical tradition would reject as monstrous the idea that there are individuals or groups who lack, or have less of, God’s image. This divine image is the common gift to all, and the church’s faith upholds this claim as one of the primary sources of our belief in the dignity of every person. Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as Community of Christ’s Enduring Principles, affirm this core conviction.

Additionally, Psalm 8 poetically reinterprets Genesis 1. The poet asks the question, “What are human beings...?” (8:4). This question touches the fact that we human beings are deeply mysterious to ourselves. In Kathryn Tanner’s words, “humans imitate God’s incomprehensibility by having a nature that is also in a sense unlimited,” and characterized by “expansive openness.” The Psalmist celebrates the mystery of the dignity and high role God has given human beings in creation: “Yet you have made [humankind] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet...” (8:5–6). In the Psalmist’s lyrical description, the glory and honor God gives humankind are reflections of God’s own majesty. There is an unmistakable “godlike” quality to our human nature and calling. The text understands that people are to share in the divine work of reigning in creation. However, we must be careful not to misunderstand what reigning or dominion means in this passage.

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1 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Current Issues in Theology series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53.
Neither Psalms 8:5–6 nor Genesis 1:26–28 understands dominion as domination, disregard, or abuse. God reigns, but God’s way of reigning is the example humanity must follow. God does not reign in creation as a tyrant or dictator. Rather, the God of the Hebrew tradition reigns by making space for countless creatures to flourish. The high calling of human beings is to care for creation with God, in the way God does. God gives human beings this calling and responsibility. Human beings are not better than the other creatures with whom they share the cosmos, but different from them. Our human dignity is linked to this gift. Humanity’s role within the cosmos is unique: to nurture and fulfill, with God, the purpose for creation, which is its ultimate shalom, or well-being.

The second creation story runs from Genesis 2:4 through the end of chapter 3. It differs significantly from the Genesis 1 story but in its own way also reaffirms the human dependence on God. Genesis 2:7–8, 18–23 portrays God forming the human being out of Earth’s dust. The ancient storyteller here plays with the Hebrew language. The human (adam) is formed from the soil (adamah). This wordplay depicts an abiding connection between humanity and the earth. Next, God breathes life or spirit into the human’s earthen form. God animates earth with ruach to make humans into living beings. Thus, human beings are a unity of flesh and spirit; we are living souls, and indeed the Hebrew word for soul (nephesh) means not something “in” a person, but the person in her or his totality. The Hebrew Bible thereby maintains that embodied life is intrinsic to human existence. A person is body and spirit. “Inner” and “outer” are of equal value. Our wholeness as persons includes bodily life. This view is important for contemporary Christian thought, especially about human nature, and has significant implications for ecological ethics.

These Genesis texts remain valuable to a Christian understanding of humanity. But much more needs to be said. Christian theology looks to the person and work of Jesus Christ for clues to the true meaning and fulfillment of humanity’s existence. The Gospels are especially important. Matthew, Mark, and Luke narrate scenes from Jesus’ life and ministry and call readers to follow or imitate him. They highlight his compassion for others and his actions that liberate people from powers that oppress their humanity. These Gospels depict Jesus’ horrific death and his Easter appearances to the disciples. The Gospel of John further offers a deep meditation on the meaning of Jesus’ identity as Son of God. Jesus is the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1, 14). As the flesh and blood revelation of God, Christ in John symbolically is Light, Truth, Bread, Living Water, Vine, Door, and many other metaphors. According to John’s testimony,
Christ is everything human beings need in order to live their lives most fully and fruitfully in relation to God.

Together the four Gospels portray how Jesus Christ personifies the relationship between humanity and God. For the Gospel writers, Jesus bears the full image of our humanity, frequently expressed in their memory of Jesus’ own way of referring to himself as the “Son of Man” (e.g., Mark 10:33). One meaning of this identifier in Jesus’ context was simply “the human being.” In his life and ministry, Jesus Christ humanly embodies God’s divine wishes for creation. In his death, he takes upon himself the anguish of human separation from God. In the resurrection, his risen body is the sign that the restoration of creation had begun. Both in the memory of his historic ministry and in his ongoing presence and activity through the Spirit, Jesus remains the image of God’s yearning for shalom for the whole creation. This is true with varied accents for the whole New Testament. Jesus’ life, ministry, and risen presence are in the church’s faith the measure of our hope for the fulfillment of humanity.

Paul’s writings offer additional insight about how Christ reveals our true humanity. Two important themes will illustrate this point. The first is where Paul encourages the Philippians to live from Christ’s example of humility. Christ emptied himself of his divine advantages to serve humanity. For Paul the picture of Christ pouring out his own status and prerogatives for the sake of humanity teaches that the fullest meaning of our humanity will emerge by following Christ into self-giving for the well-being of others. The church is to be the community that reveals this kind of new humanity. In Paul’s view, this new humanity arises from embracing the outlook of Christ, who gave himself for others. Paul writes: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5–8). From the example of Jesus’ descent and death for others, Paul upholds for the Philippians that the way to our truest humanity leads through mutual self-surrender. As Jesus himself taught, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

The second Pauline theme is where Paul declares that in the death and resurrection of Christ God has acted to abolish all categories of human division. In Christ, we now share one humanity—a new humanity. Paul writes: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer
slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28). Paul believes that Christ brings a universal and revolutionary new humanity, freed from constructs like class or ethnicity. Christ transfigures religious and ethnic divisions (Jew or Greek). Christ overcomes political and economic divisions (slave or free). Christ even transforms gender differences (male and female). In another letter, Paul imagines Christ as a kind of second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45–47), a sort of fresh start for the human race. In this way Paul believed Jesus represented the renewal of humanity, as well as revealed a radical new way of being human.

The theme of a new humanity in Christ is central to Paul’s message. And one of Paul’s students, writing after the time of Paul’s death, superbly summed up the great apostle’s teaching on this point. This writer held that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15), and those who are baptized into Christ “have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Colossians 3:10–11). In Christ, the Image of God, we see what our humanity is about. Christ’s humility and freely chosen self-offering are the measure of being human. By baptism Christ’s crucified and risen life dwells in us, which empowers the church to imitate Christ’s love and share it for the well-being of the whole creation. Vitally important for our own time, in Christ all human divisions are already overcome. And, in Christ, our humanity is revealed to be not ultimately individual, but most fully realized in community. That is why for Paul the church is to be the place where this new, division-less humanity ought to be visible to the world.

**Tradition**

Christian teaching through the centuries has continued to wrestle with the mystery of what it means to be human. Theologians regularly lift up Christ as the example and fulfillment of human nature. Community of Christ, in alignment with the faith of the historic Christian church, believes Christ to be both fully divine and fully human. In the Incarnation he assumed a complete human nature and in so doing elevated the meaning of human life. But this human nature is distinct from the divine nature. This is because Christian thought also understands human nature in light of the relationship of creature to Creator. Creaturely existence is
marked by finitude. As medieval theologians expressed it, created things, including humans, are “contingent beings.” This means that at one time we might not have existed and one day will cease to be. Eternal being is a property of God, not creatures. Thus, Christian writers have consistently emphasized that human beings are not God or gods, regardless of whatever godlike qualities we may possess. There remains an infinite distinction between being divine and being human. Twentieth-century history confirms that moral calamity follows when human beings disregard that truth and imagine themselves to be gods.

Centuries of Christian thought on the question of human nature is rich and varied. Theologians have often focused on humanity’s unique position within God’s creation. Following the Bible’s affirmation that human beings bear the image of God, many thinkers have sometimes tried to locate that gift in the human capacity to reason, or to exercise free will, or our capacity to be creative. Others have sought humanity’s uniqueness in our ability for complex thought or in our power to love or our desire to understand ourselves and our world. Our ability for imaginative thinking, our yearning to ask about the meaning of our lives, and especially our ability to ask the question of God’s existence indeed point to something distinctive about being human. Who we are is a subject of constant curiosity. The Psalmist was right to ask, “What are human beings?” (Psalms 8:4). We find ourselves poised somewhere between the angels and the rest of creation.

Much traditional theology thinks of human beings as a unity of body and spirit, or body and soul. From this starting point, it is not some inner capacity that makes us spiritual, but the whole person who is a spiritual being. One important figure who thought in these terms was Origen (c. 185–232), one of the most creative theologians and biblical interpreters in the ancient church. Origen brought the resources of his love of scripture, a passionate devotion to Christ, and his training in types of Platonic philosophy to the task of thinking about human nature. Following Paul (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23), Origen saw the human person as body, spirit, and soul. Our spirit is the human point of contact with God’s Holy Spirit; our soul is the center of freedom and will; our bodies define us as creatures.\footnote{This summary comes from Henri Crouzel, \textit{Origen: the Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian}, trans. A.S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 87–90, 206.}

Origen saw bodies as what distinguishes creatures from God, and therefore in the Incarnation Christ assumed a body, as well as a rational
soul. Origen affirmed the immortality of the soul, as did the ancient Christian church generally. But again, following Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, Origen believed that final redemption included not just the soul, but a spiritual body. Salvation in the ultimate sense was, for Origen, the restoration of all things to God. In his view, every single being would finally be elevated to direct contemplation of God. For Origen, the soul’s original ground is God, and bodily existence in time is part of a long journey of the soul back to its source. In the soul’s journey back to God, bodies have as their essential function preserving what Origen calls the “life principle.” The ability of the soul to reason and contemplate God is a significant aspect of the soul’s spiritual journey. Christ as fully God and fully human is the one who both shows and is the way for the soul’s return to God.

With other medieval thinkers, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) understood human nature to be a unity of body and soul. He believed that the soul (anima in Latin) is the “first principle of life”; it is what animates the body. The soul is also the intellect or mind, but in a very broad sense. Human beings understand their world and themselves through the capacities of the soul. The soul is the principle of movement and comprehension. Indeed, the word “soul” holds for Aquinas the essence of what it means to be human. He imagined that though the soul had an independent existence, it belongs to the nature of the soul to be joined with the body. However, the soul ceased to be a person when it is separated from the earthly body. The species “human being” is a composite of soul and body. The soul with all its powers, said Aquinas, “in a certain way, requires the body for its operation.” For him the body is as important to being human as the soul. Having a body and a rational soul are the necessary components of being a person and living a human existence.

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4 Origen, On First Principles, Book III, Chap. 6.4–9.
5 Origen, On First Principles, Book II, Chap. 10.3.
6 Aquinas discusses the nature of human being as the unity of body and soul in Summa Theologiae I-I, q. 75–76.
7 Summa Theologiae, I-I, q. 76, a. 1.
8 “The body is not of the essence of the soul; but the soul by the nature of its essence can be united to the body, so that, properly speaking, not the soul alone, but the ‘composite,’ is the species.” Summa Theologiae, I-I, q. 75, a. 7.
These traditions have valuable insights for us today. Using the term “soul” in our theology illuminates important aspects of our human experience. In spiritual formation, language about the soul gives a way to glimpse the depth dimensions of life. To sing with Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46), or with the psalmist “My soul waits for the Lord” (Psalms 130:6) helps convey an element of our encounter with the Divine. Centuries of Christian spiritual traditions also depend on language about the soul. We need this language still. For example, when we are sad or unwell, referring to what is amiss in our souls conveys that physical existence is but one dimension of our personhood.

These traditions also have limitations. Christians have sometimes used this language in ways that treat the human person dualistically. Dualism creates a sharp division between the physical and the spiritual. It denies the unity of body and soul/spirit that makes us human. This division has led to unhealthy assumptions and practices, like emaciating fasts or an unhealthy rejection of the goodness of human sexuality. Some types of dualism even treat physical nature and bodily expression as if these were evil. Furthermore, severing the spiritual from the physical has often allowed oppressive political powers to assert unjust control over economic and social life. At different times in history, these powers have argued that the church should take care of “spiritual” needs, but the state must control everything else. This is one of dualism’s negative consequences.

Gnosticism in the ancient church was an extreme example of dualism. Gnostics held that God as Spirit was too pure to come into contact with matter. Gnostics thought of the material world as a mistake, instead of being very good. This view, which first appeared at the beginning of the second century, made belief in the Incarnation impossible. But Christian tradition at its best has rejected these kinds of dualism and contended that the physical nature is itself good and thus capable of revealing God.

Biblical thought and much recent theology criticize the lingering effects of dualism. Community of Christ theology also has traditionally rejected this division of spiritual and physical. We understand human nature as a unity. Body and spirit are essential to our humanity. We believe our ability to reason, to relate to the good creation physically,

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9 Consider Doctrine and Covenants 28:8 for its use of language concerning the spiritual and temporal. In the view of time and eternity, the temporal refers to the time-bound and the physical.
emotionally, and mentally, to reflect on our experience, and to act creatively in the world all reflect what it means to bear God’s image. Human agency and intelligence and embodied life are divine gifts that make responsible choices possible. Agency and intelligence are part of our bodily life. Spirit and element are inseparable. These beliefs also inform Community of Christ thought about our common humanity and the worth of all persons. They have implications for how we act in the world. Among these are that the creation matters to God. It is therefore the arena in which God calls us to act responsibly: for the dignity of others and for the well-being of the world itself.

For millions of people, violence, poverty, racism, oppression, and economic injustice hinder the full expression of their humanity. Community of Christ theology aligns with Christian traditions that work against any forces that would deface the image of God in every person. As tyranny descended on Europe in 1937, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these important words: “Christ has taken upon himself this human form. He became a human being like us. In his humanity and lowliness we recognize our own form. He became like human beings so that we would be like him. In Christ’s Incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ.” Bonhoeffer voiced here a principle deeply embedded in Community of Christ thought: the principle our tradition calls the worth of souls.

The Incarnation underpins our belief in the goodness of humanity. To be Community of Christ commits us to seek human well-being in every new setting. Our belief in the goodness of human life and the worth of persons further calls us to learn from the wisdom of various theologies of liberation. These theologies seek to address and transform the oppression of marginalized people: the forgotten, the harassed, the persecuted, the refugees, the ignored, and the disadvantaged. They are the poor, the differently gendered, women, the victims of structural racism, immigrants, the disabled, indigenous peoples, and others. Theologies of liberation believe that a key principle in the Bible is God’s special concern for people pushed to the sidelines. Christian theology that is credible must address oppression, work to dismantle political and social structures that

create oppression, and oppose beliefs and policies that do not promote the flourishing of all people.

Recent Community of Christ thought about humanity reflects the positive influence of liberation theologies. We can see it especially in Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a: “God, the Eternal Creator, weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering. Such conditions are not God’s will. Open your ears to hear the pleading of mothers and fathers in all nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children. Do not turn away from them. For in their welfare resides your welfare.” This counsel may remind us that our ancestors in the Restoration movement were poor and despised. It also summons us to side with the marginalized of our time, seeking to alleviate conditions that dehumanize people. Community of Christ thought about humanity also reflects the influence of Paul’s writings. We can hear echoes of Galatians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians in Doctrine and Covenants 164.5: “It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.”

The word “imperative” gives this counsel a moral or ethical urgency. In Christ, God overcomes human divisions and reveals our common humanity. In Christ, the Holy Spirit renews our humanity with knowledge of its true image.11 Through Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection, God calls us in our humanity to seek the restoration of creation, which is the work of living and declaring God’s shalom.

**Application for Discipleship**

Our humanity carries the creative power to make peace or destroy. We can obliterate ourselves and devastate God’s creation through genocide, poverty, war, nuclear holocaust, environmental ruin, and refusing to solve global problems like climate change. Or we can offer all the resources of our humanity to God and work for the blessing of God’s world. What shall we do?

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11 Compare Colossians 3:10
Community of Christ’s faith calls the church to live by a different vision of the world and our role in it. We affirm that all human beings, created in the Image of God, have inestimable worth. We believe that by the Incarnation Christ shares our common humanity and elevates what it means to be human. Christ is present in every person. Therefore, what we do for the sake of others, we do to Christ. Our church yearns to be a community that lives by and lives out these values and this vision. Our baptism calls us to be a church that follows Jesus into the difficult work of lifting up “the least of these.” We live to help others discover their truest humanity. This is part of the work of God’s kingdom on earth. Our understanding of human nature, informed by voices from Christian tradition and from Community of Christ’s unique journey, points to new ways ahead.

Believing in the worth of persons has political implications for the church. Of course, that is complicated. But to “affirm without exception the worth of every human being” requires action that may set us against the powers that be. Given what our basic belief about humanity upholds, it makes immediate sense for the church to align with movements and organizations that promote human flourishing, care for the earth, stand for equality and justice, and struggle for peace. In response, members would quite properly devote themselves to study, spiritual practice, communal life, and political involvement to help bring the blessing of justice to others. We are called to be a prophetic people who confront religious and political powers that dehumanize God’s children. Thus, we must speak against theologies that defend inhuman conditions and the suffering of creation as God’s will. Further, we will learn to embrace other human beings and their stories as part of Christ’s mission. In this way we will practice putting flesh on Jesus’ command to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–39). This is a picture of what it can mean to live out the image of Christ, which is our path to expressing our fullest humanity.

Discipleship calls us to embrace this life with all its dangers and limitations. As human beings, we are creatures. Our physical bodies limit us: we hunger, thirst, are vulnerable, feel fear, and are mortal. We need

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12 For the divine commission to be in the forefront of organizations promoting the worth of all persons, see Doctrine and Covenants 151:9, 164:9c; to care for the earth, see Doctrine and Covenants 163:4b; to seek justice, see Doctrine and Covenants 162:8b, 163:3a; to struggle for peace, see Doctrine and Covenants 133:2d; 156:5a; 161:2a, 6b; 162:1b; 163:2a, 3a–b.
shelter, companionship, and protection. We depend on others and our ecosystem in physical and material ways. Our limitations reflect our created existence, which Christ took on. But ever we recall that created existence is a gift.

Even with our limits, we must never forget that we bear the image of God. Our shared humanity enables us to reach beyond ourselves toward God and our neighbor. God has blessed us with gifts and abilities that can enrich others. We have the capacity both to explore the universe and practice kindness to strangers. We have an endless ability to imagine a different kind of world. We can think about what is just and true and beautiful. We can envision the common good. We can “seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalms 34:14). Confident that God who created our humanity has also claimed it forever, the church can turn its life and energy, its gifts and desires to the healing of creation.

**Conclusion**

As disciples we believe that in Jesus Christ the Image of God we glimpse what it can mean to be truly human and that in following him the journey of discovering our fullest humanity both ends and begins. He has inaugurated a new creation. It embraces us with our limitations but touches us with God’s limitless possibilities. The Spirit awakens in us a yearning to know who we are and to become more fully what we are created to be. In the words of a beloved hymn,

We long for freedom where our truest being
is given hope and courage to unfold.
We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming,
and look for ground where trees and plants can grow.  

May the church become a community open to all the dimensions of a renewed humanity!

**For Further Reading**


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**Testimony by Barbara Carter**

Growing up in a small town on the Oregon coast was for me idyllic. I had extended family around. I felt safe, love, supported. My circle of friends didn’t change very much from the time I entered first grade to when I graduated from high school. I had exposure to another circle of friends and acquaintances through the faith community when we attended gatherings such as reunions (family camps), youth camps, and conferences. For me, though, there wasn’t a large distinction between family and the faith community. There weren’t characteristics that set them apart from each other. Each was a homogeneous group that mirrored the other. I went to a small Midwestern college when I was 18. The people there shared many of the characteristics that I had experienced at this point in my life through my family, friends, and faith community. While there was some diversity, it wasn’t enough to challenge the status quo of whom I considered part of my world.

It is easy to read Galatians 3:27–28 and believe you are living it when the humanity you have experienced is consistent with what you have always known. This Bible passage reads: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” And yet the beauty and challenge of being transformed in Christ invites us into relationships and places that expose the unknown, the different, and the uncomfortable. It is in this place I found a new journey that has led me to
seek understanding about what it truly means to seek and desire a new humanity in Christ.

When I open myself up to individuals whose experiences, beliefs, and approach to life are different from mine I am exposed, leaving me vulnerable. It is in this place that I have found space and freedom to try to see others as Christ sees them and to allow myself to be seen as well. I have been blessed to spend time with ecumenical, and to some extent inter-faith, groups. Here I have experienced the sharing of thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and positions that would normally create a negative and threatening environment. But because the need for us to understand each other and work together is greater than any single individual’s perspective, we have been able to reach moments when our humanity is not ultimately individual but is most fully visible and most fully shared in community. It is in moments like this that I catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God coming closer.

**Spiritual Practice: Mindful Eating**

“To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration”


When sitting down for a meal, take a deep breath before you take a bite. Inhale the scent of the food that is before you. Notice the colors and textures on your plate. Place the food in your mouth slowly and savor it. Feel how it dissolves on your tongue and pay attention to each flavor. Contemplate in wonder the way your body processes this food as an act of nurturing and surviving.

Consider the journey this meal has taken to arrive at your plate, the earth from which this food was harvested, the labor of the farmers and workers. Give thanks for the ways we are connected as humans, as creatures, on this beautiful planet. Confess the ways we sometimes live as though we are separate and cause destruction to other people and creatures because of our actions. Commit to mindfulness in the moments ahead. It may be a deeper gaze when stepping outside, eating a meal, receiving an embrace, or taking a breath. Pause in wonder throughout the day at your sacred humanness and connection to this sacred creation.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Consider your own humanity. What do you consider your gifts and strengths? Your weaknesses and failures? How can you affirm and give thanks to God for your whole self?

2. Who is included in your closest circle of family, friends, and colleagues? How can you affirm their humanity and belovedness by God?

3. Who is outside your circle or holds a different perspective on important issues? How can you recognize their worth and embrace their humanity?
Chapter 7

Sin

God created us to be agents of love and goodness. Yet we misuse our agency individually and collectively. We take the gifts of creation and of self and turn them against God’s purposes with tragic results. Sin is the universal condition of separation and alienation from God and one another. We are in need of divine grace that alone reconciles us with God and one another.

Introduction

Sin is our personal and universal separation from God. This estrangement includes alienation from ourselves, each other, the creation, and our ultimate Source, God. Sin is never simply a wrong choice that individuals make, such as the decision to cheat, lie, or steal. These acts spring from a prior condition. That condition is what Christian theology means by “sin.”

As a condition, sin is both personal and structural. Systems of abuse affect families and cultures over generations. Systems of privilege and racism become embedded, by human choices, in political and social orders, creating pain and misery for many over literally centuries. We are born into systems that generations of decisions have already shaped. We may not have created these conditions, but they form and influence us, and often some benefit from these conditions at the expense of others. At the same time, we find ourselves at some level responsible for both our choices and the wider conditions in which we make them. But the tragedy of human history is that, again and again, the powerful and privileged
refuse to admit complicity or act in ways that right wrongs. All of these experiences are captured by the word “sin.”

The authors of scripture understand sin as a power that corrupts God’s vision of creation, community, and life together in harmony. The creation remains very good in its essence, but at the same time biblical writers realize that something has distorted our capacity to image God’s image in us. Our way of being in the world is shadowed by selfishness and by patterns of behavior that promote not peace but destruction. For Christians, the doctrine of sin reminds us that we are not and cannot be God, and that we need something that we cannot simply give ourselves. In our separation from God, we cannot return either to our Ultimate Source or to childhood innocence by our own resources. We can only be graced into a new way of being. “Grace,” as used in this paragraph of the belief statement, identifies God’s love-in-action on our behalf as pure gift. In the gift of divine love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are met by resources that seek to heal our separation from God, others, the creation, and self. We experience reconciliation with God, one another, and with our place in creation. And we find ourselves empowered by the Holy Spirit for the work of mending the world.

**Biblical Foundations**

Scripture is the basis of Jewish and Christian thought on sin. What is unique about scripture’s portrayal of sin is that generally it does not speak in abstractions but with stories about the human struggle of life together. These stories ring true to our own experience. The story of David and Bathsheba, for example (2 Samuel 11) realistically depicts the consequences of misguided desire and the abuse of power. The story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 36–50) illustrates the destructive potential of jealousy. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son and his brother (Luke 15:11–32) vividly portrays the dark side of declaring independence from God but also of arrogant self-righteousness. The varied stories scripture tells about the human condition can illumine our common experience. Sin, it seems, not only separates us, but also ties us all together.

Christian theology traditionally looks to the second creation story in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, referenced in Chapter 6 of this commentary, for clues about the meaning of sin. One should note, however, that this story never uses the word “sin,” a concept later Christian traditions have typically overlaid on the story. Rather, Genesis 2–3 illustrates one way the
Hebrew people tried to understand the mystery of human experience as a kind of alienation from God and each other, in a world that still remained God’s good creation. They told this story to help explain why so many things seemed amiss.

In Genesis 3, the ancient Hebrew storyteller paints a picture to illustrate how human reality became broken and distorted. The man, the woman, and a serpent are the main characters in this story. The woman and the man live in the Garden of Eden in a state of simplicity. But the serpent introduces curiosity and doubt into their experience. This ancient story vividly represents universal experiences in human life: the shift from childlike innocence to adult awareness; the experience of awakened desire and temptation; a consciousness of guilt; disobedience and deception; the tendency to evade responsibility; conflict with nature and the struggle of relationships. Without using the word “sin,” the storyteller successfully describes the human experience of “missing the mark” that Christian theology often means when it uses that important word. At the same time, the story hints at the gracious character of God. God, who worried that the human being not be alone (2:18), reaches out after the disaster to clothe the man and the woman so they will not be vulnerable (3:20–21).

From that point, the consequence of an initial disobedience overflows into the story of Cain and Abel. When God prefers the offering of Abel to Cain’s, Cain responds with violence and kills his brother. God’s warning to Cain before he kills Abel exposes the essential nature of sin. It is like an animal that can overpower us: “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7). The text identifies sin and how it operates and, in doing so, defines an enduring aspect of the human condition after the exit from Eden. We can choose sin; but sin has a seductive power that quickly becomes larger than any single choice. The result in this tale is also true to our experience: enmity has generational consequences.

Other biblical texts confirm the extent of sin’s reach into all dimensions of human life. The poet in Psalms 14 and 53 openly cries out, “There is no one who does good” (Psalms 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3). King Solomon prays to God in 1 Kings 8:46, “there is no one who does not sin.” Ecclesiastes drives the point even deeper. Sin reaches even to the righteous: “Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). As Jeremiah watched his people swerve from what would bring hope, the prophet cried out, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?” (Jeremiah
More than mistakes or misdeeds, sin affects the heart, which, according to the Hebrew Bible, is the center of human life. A wounded, sick, or distorted center means that sin has a mysterious power to work beyond the choices of one person. Thus, the Hebrew Bible testifies of the indiscriminate impact of distorted choices throughout Israel’s history.

In this context we understand better God’s remedy, declared by prophets like Ezekiel: God yearns to give God’s people a new spirit and new heart (Ezekiel 11:19–21; 18:31). Only the gift of a new heart—a revitalized center—can restore what sin has damaged: our mis-directed wills. In other words, the prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible came to believe that God must re-create the human spirit and human will, individually and collectively. Human beings need God’s help to re-center their lives on divine love, and it is God’s will to bring about this renewal.

After the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BCE), the Jewish tradition responded to God’s call to turn from sin to righteousness by following Torah, or God’s law as it is found in the first five books of our shared scripture. According to a later rabbinic tradition, Torah alone contains 613 different laws or commandments. They cover essential matters of life and worship: what to eat and not eat, instruction on work and rest, rules for economic exchanges, sexual relations, arbitrating disputes, as well as instructions for worship that include rituals of purification and sacrifice. God’s law, as Judaism came to understand it, expresses God’s will for a life lived in right relationship with God and with the community. The covenant people are to write God’s law in their hearts, to carry it on their bodies, and to observe it as they enter their homes. Through following the Law, they live out their part of the covenant with God.

However, as Judaism has always known, and as Christianity would discover, the covenant itself was initiated by God’s own gracious redeeming act. For Israel, it was in the Exodus from Egypt. For Christians, it was in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In either case, it is held that humanity’s redemption from sin can only happen because God first acts in liberating and renewing compassion. Living rightly is the proper response to a divine gift, freely given. The Hebrew Bible understands, and bears witness to, this deep theological truth, and in

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1 Compare with Paul’s language of Christ being the Last or Second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) and becoming a new creation in Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:17. See also Jesus’ action of breathing on the disciples after his resurrection in John 20:19–23, which is reminiscent of God’s act of breathing life into human being at creation in Genesis 2:7.
doing so prepares us for the central revelation found in the New Testament.

The Christian faith holds that God’s pivotal act of liberation from sin comes in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist declares of Jesus: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus was aware of the impact of sin. To marginalize others is to act sinfully. Thus, Jesus reached out to victims, those who were ostracized by their illnesses, poverty, or decisions, and offered them restoration, hospitality, and healing (Luke 7:36–50). He also reached out to the victimizers; he challenged their hostility and insensitivity, and their refusal to see their own sin (John 7:53—8:11). He also opposed the kind of sin that was embedded in ethnic prejudices and financial practices. For example, he spoke directly to a Samaritan woman (John 4) and overturned the moneychangers’ tables in the Temple (see Mark 11:15–19). Jesus also criticized assumptions that limited the dignity of women (Luke 10:38–42). In the final moments of his life Luke portrays Jesus forgiving his executioners and promising salvation to a penitent thief (Luke 23:32–43). Jesus confronted sin in all its forms, but he consistently preached mercy instead of legalism and practiced compassion instead of condemnation.

Paul was one of the ablest early interpreters of the meaning of Christ. His letters leave us some of the Bible’s richest reflections on the nature of sin. He cared deeply about how God’s revelation in Jesus Christ aligned with the best of Jewish tradition. Paul had inherited from some of those traditions a conviction about the universal effect of sin in the cosmos. He confirmed the Old Testament witness referred to earlier that no one is exempt from sin: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). His experience of Christ as Risen Lord, sent to reconcile the world, expanded his previous understanding of sin. Paul understood sin as a power to which the whole human race was captive. Sin in this sense expressed itself in human relations primarily as selfishness. When Paul lists the “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19–21, he is not disparaging bodily life. In his theology, rather, the body is essential to our humanity. Instead, the “works of the flesh” are deeds originating from the deep well of humanity’s self-centeredness. The essence of sin for Paul is self-worship, whether active or passive. If God is not the center, then the self and its interests have become an idol.²

Paul occasionally speaks of humans as “slaves of sin” (Romans 6:17–20). In other words, even though we are creatures made in the image of God, we are in the grip of a power that is not part of our true identity as human beings. This power has brought separation and death to humanity. God’s law was very important to Paul’s Jewish past. Even as a Christian apostle, he still sees the law as holy, just, and good. But now, it reveals our predicament, by showing us the extent of our captivity to self-centeredness: “[I]f it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (Romans 7:7–8). In Paul’s view we can see our situation of alienation but cannot overcome it. If we try to pursue righteousness as the solution, our self-centered motives simply rebuild the barriers. This is so because, once more, our actions place the self at the center, not God. To paraphrase Paul’s desperate question in Romans 7:24, “Who will liberate us from our human predicament?”

Paul finds the solution in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism frees us from sin’s ownership and for life in the Spirit (Romans 6:1–13). This is so because baptism unites us to Christ’s death. In his death and resurrection, Christ bridges sin’s estranging power in our lives. God is not a passive bystander in this event, nor does Paul think Christ dies to satisfy God’s anger. Instead, Paul sees all that happened through Jesus as God’s own revelatory action, done in love. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, Christ himself experiences humanity’s alienation and separation. Christ becomes what we were in order to make us into what he is: the expression of God’s justice in the world. Only God could do such a miraculous thing.

The divine gift we receive in Jesus Christ defines what righteousness is. To be “righteous” is to be in sound and whole relationship with God. This new relationship is lived out in loving communion within Christ’s body, the church. It flourishes by faith, hope, and love: faith, God’s gracious gift, love for all, and hope for the final healing of all creation (Romans 8:18–25). In Christ risen, Paul glimpses what the prophets once hoped for: the New Creation, which is the answer to creation’s wounded predicament: “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was
reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us....For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:17–19, 21). In Christ, God has acted to end the separation and alienation sin constructs in human life (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). The church acts as God’s ambassador, representing a whole new state of affairs.

Scripture witnesses to God’s boundless love and concern for human well-being, as well as for the wholeness of creation in its entirety. Stated simply, the God of the Bible ceaselessly reaches out to humanity in relationship—restoring love, seeking to liberate us from all that separates us from each other, from our own truest self, and from the Divine.

**Tradition**

Christian tradition comments abundantly on the human condition. Indeed, the stubborn reality of human evil is obvious and in need of careful analysis. This is true even when we resist the very idea of sin, which is part of the problem. Across the centuries, thinkers have pondered this puzzle of our existence: how can we who bear God’s image act in ways so utterly alien to the love of God?

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) was one of the most influential Christian writers of all time. He was a perceptive observer of the human condition. As astute reader of scripture and observer of human activity, Augustine sought constantly to understand the concept of sin, both in his life and as it touched people in the late Roman Empire. His spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions*, has been widely read since the fifth century. In this book Augustine narrates the story of his personal transformation from a pleasure-seeking, but conflicted philosopher to a Christian disciple. In the light of his later Christian faith, he reflects in this book on past scenes from his life. One incident he recalls happened when he was sixteen years old.\(^3\) As a late-night prank he and some friends robbed pears from a neighbor’s tree and fed them to pigs. As a reflective Christian leader in his later years, Augustine probes why he did this. He admits he had better pears in his garden. He was not hungry. He knew it was wrong. The act was malicious, and yet he realizes he loved the malice

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of it. Human beings are thus capable of loving evil for its own sake. Even in our most loving relationships, Augustine observes, we seek to satisfy the self and not necessarily to love the other for their own sake. This pride and self-centeredness overflow into every area of life, and our hearts are a mass of warring loves. Empires, dictators, possessive lovers, and well-intentioned families leave a trail of human wreckage. Something is deeply wrong with human beings, and they cannot fix it themselves. This is the intended meaning of the idea of “original sin.”

Nevertheless, even in this twisted situation, our souls yearn for truth and wholeness. Augustine’s life gave clear testimony to the power of sin and to the discovery that God had never abandoned him, even amid his worst actions. God seeks us even when we have turned away. In fact, it is only because God seeks us that we can find the way to God. Ultimately, Augustine found God’s love more satisfying and attractive than the attractions of self-centered wishes and actions. He expressed the twin mysteries of sin and the beauty of God’s grace in this famous line:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new,
late have I loved you.
Lo you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong,
I, misshapen,
You were with me, but I was not with you....”

The essence of the human condition for Augustine is that we habitually resist being with that which our hearts most want: God. Augustine’s experience taught him that he was unable to make a decisive move away from this resistance and toward Christ without some help. Grace made possible what for him was humanly impossible. Finally, Augustine knew liberation from compulsion and estrangement. God’s grace was the believer’s best and only hope.

Augustine’s encounter with the ideas of a British monk named Pelagius deepened his convictions about sin and grace. Pelagius preached an optimistic view of human capacity. If God expected perfection from humanity (Matthew 5:48), then it must be entirely possible. Pelagius said, “No one knows better the measure of our strength; and no one has a better understanding of what is within our power than he who endowed us with the very resources of our power.” Pelagius’ view was that if a human being ought to do something, then they could do it. While Pelagius saw

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grace as a help to the Christian believer, he believed that humanity possessed an unlimited freedom of the will. He did not imagine that self-centeredness had already damaged our wills or held us captive. Unlike Augustine, Pelagius did not think there was anything really wrong with human beings that a stern warning and good self-motivation could not fix.

The church officially rejected Pelagius’ teachings. His understanding of sin was superficial, and in his theology Christ’s redemptive role was not clear. But his ideas endure, and many Christians still think in Pelagian terms. Unfortunately, Pelagius’ views perpetuate individualistic ideas of salvation and the common good: “I only need myself” or “I can do it all myself.” Indeed, the aphorism, “God helps those who help themselves” is little more than a popular re-expression of a claim Pelagius advocated. The Christian tradition Augustine represented, on the other hand, saw humanity’s condition as more complex and impaired. In light of humanity’s profound brokenness, Augustine understood that we need much more than a little bit of help from God to become more fully what God intends us to be. We need the full, divine measure of grace that Christ embodies.

Christian tradition has often pictured sin as rebellion or defiance that deserves punishment. This view has roots in the Bible. But it is not the only way biblical authors or theologians from the Christian tradition understand the human condition. One remarkable thinker from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries followed a different line of thought. Julian of Norwich (1342–1413), whose real name is unknown, was a hermit who lived in a small hut attached to St. Julian’s church in Norwich, England. In 1373, during a time of severe suffering in England, she experienced a series of visions she titled “Revelations of Divine Love.” Through insights received in one of these visions, she portrays the human predicament not one of sin and guilt, but of woundedness. Human beings are like a servant who while responding to their master’s request have fallen into a ditch and been injured. In our wounded condition our injuries consume us, and we lose sight of God’s loving gaze on us. Our pain and sorrow evoke blame in us; but God does not look at us as blameworthy. God has only compassion for wounded humanity. According to Julian, Christ’s Incarnation and Passion are the means by which God enters into humankind’s woundedness. Christ clears our sight so we can see the loving gaze of God again. Julian’s fresh perspective on the human

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condition brings balance to other views of sin. Human beings never cease to be the object of God’s compassion. Injury as a state all human beings share in captures a broader dimension of our condition than traditional views of sin as defiance can.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther struggled with the reality of sin in his life. His quest to find a God of love and forgiveness amid personal awareness of separation and guilt led him to the Bible, especially to the Pauline letters. Paul’s view of sin as a power that holds humanity captive rang true for Luther. As the reformer pondered scripture and his experience, he came to understand sin not simply as mistakes or offences. Sin affected the character of the whole person. In his Lectures on Romans, Luther describes this situation colorfully. Our nature, he wrote, is “curved in upon itself.”\(^7\) We try to bend everything to self-interest and end up being bent in on ourselves. In this way we misuse the gifts of God. To use a modern image, what characterizes the human condition is our desire for everything to orbit around the self. Faith in Christ frees us from this tendency. Luther’s spiritual breakthrough came when he discovered the deep truth of Paul’s message: humans have a restored relationship with God by faith in Christ, not by doing all the right things. God justifies human beings by faith, not by works. Faith in Christ is the passport from slavery to freedom, from fear to love of God and others. But Luther made an extra important discovery. Faith in Christ brings forgiveness and a new direction but does not magically rid us of sin.

The self’s habitual inward curve remains in the Christian’s life. Its presence can work to our advantage, however by reminding us of our constant need of Christ. Freedom comes from grasping that Christian discipleship is not about being or becoming morally perfect. As Christians, Luther argued, we are “at the same time righteous and sinners.”\(^8\) God’s redeeming power ever works for our benefit even though we are imperfect and continue to sin. The life of discipleship is a kind of life-long recuperation from selfishness and the church is the “hospital” that aids our recovery: “So then, this life is a life of cure from sin; it is not a life of sinlessness, as if the cure were finished and health had been recovered. The church is an inn and an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents.”\(^9\) The gospel declares that God has graciously embraced

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\(^8\) *Lectures on Romans*, 120–21.

\(^9\) *Lectures on Romans*, 130.
our full humanity. It calls not for people who are perfect, but for people who trust God’s love and grace.

Some of these traditions have shaped Community of Christ’s views of sin. Our movement arose on the American frontier in a period of intense religious discussion and revival. Historians call this period the Second Great Awakening and date it from about 1790 to 1840. Sin and conversion were the chief themes of much debate in this period. Joseph Smith Jr. and the early Restoration movement shared the widely held view of sin as captivity. The Book of Mormon describes the human condition in terms familiar to revivalist preachers: human beings are “encircled by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction awaited them” (Alma 3:13). But in the context of a newly formed American democracy, there was a strong tendency to think of sin only in individual terms. In 1842 Joseph wrote a short summary of the church’s beliefs for a Chicago newspaper. On sin he stated, “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression.”

Joseph intended this statement to differentiate the church from other denominations, and not present a comprehensive theology. However, his description of sin leaves much unsaid. For example, it does not account for the prior condition that would lead individuals to choose sin. That task would fall to later thinkers and leaders in the church.

Frederick M. Smith tried to articulate a more comprehensive understanding of sin. For this task, he found the theology of the Social Gospel movement a helpful influence. Social Gospel theology was a late nineteenth-century movement in American Protestantism. It sought to understand the gospel in light of the new social and economic realities people faced in modern industrial countries. One of its most important advocates was the Baptist theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918).

As he ministered among the impoverished workers of New York City, Rauschenbusch began to see much then-current Christian theology as inadequate to the task. It did not address the social or economic conditions in which people lived, conditions that shaped their lives.

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Traditional Protestant preaching saw sin in merely moral, individual terms, and salvation as a promise for a better life in heaven. This pale reflection of the gospel gave comfort to industrialists and bankers, and encouraged their exploitation of workers and the poor. Rauschenbusch believed these views compromised Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God, with its roots in the Hebrew prophets’ message of justice for the poor. Rauschenbusch further believed that human existence is essentially social, not individual, and that sin is a collective and institutional experience that impacts and even shapes individual choices. To tell people struggling in inhuman living and working conditions not to act brutally, without working to change their social situation is absurd. It misses what Jesus meant when he called his disciples into the kingdom of God, which was to be a whole new state of affairs. Rauschenbusch held that the Christian church would become irrelevant if it failed to “Christianize the social order.” Justice, fairness, good wages and working conditions, education, and social advancement belonged to the church’s message of salvation. Sin is more than personal choices. It refers to broader forces that influence persons’ actions.

F. M. Smith saw the clear affinities of Social Gospel theology with the faith of Community of Christ. He saw phrases Rauschenbusch used, like “Christianizing society,” as akin to our concept of building Zion. He focused on the social implications of Jesus’ message, and insisted that the church’s message must affect society, not just the individual. “The teachings of Jesus were social in significance,” he said, “to be sure...there is always strong appeal for personal righteousness, but a more than casual analysis of those appeals reveals a strong social content and bearing.” When in the same lecture Fred M. Smith states, “We are our brother’s keeper, not his destroyer,” it is clear he sees the human condition as one of shared responsibility. The struggle of human life cannot be reduced to individual errors and choices. We need a doctrine of sin that gives us expanded vision of our complicity in the travail of the world.

Ultimately, the reality of sin touches every human being. That is why the church’s belief statement notes that “We take the gifts of creation and of self and turn them against God’s purposes with tragic results. Sin is the universal condition of separation and alienation from God and one

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another.” Sin and redemption are not simply personal matters. They have social and cosmic dimensions. In the past century, we have witnessed and participated in genocides, world wars, the rise of nuclear weapons, racism, sexism, oppression on a massive scale, idolatrous nationalism, and the degradation of the ecosystem. We cannot understand these events apart from a clear and realistic doctrine of sin. A doctrine of sin helps us understand our explicit or implicit support for structures of violence and systems that degrade life. It helps us grasp our passivity before evil. It allows us to analyze our refusal to embrace peaceful community with others and the creation itself.

At the same time, the church has a message of good news for sinners. To quote Paul, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). The church proclaims that in Christ we find forgiveness, acceptance, and the power to live God’s peace here and now. Sin does not outmatch God’s grace: this is the good news of the gospel. Grace really is quite “amazing.” It frees and empowers us to act in transforming ways on behalf of the world.

Community of Christ teaches that God embraces the whole creation in Jesus Christ. We see “sin” as any attitudes, actions, and systems that deny the worth of persons and obstruct shalom. Whatever works against God’s reign of justice and peace is sin. As many feminist theologians have noted, sin can take the form of actively working against God’s love for creation, but it can equally be expressed as passivity before or acquiescence to injustice. Refusing to take racism and sexism seriously or denying their existence is as much an expression of sin as is directly harming or denigrating others. As Nicola Slee eloquently observes, “Because right relations are those which are mutually empowering, sin occurs whenever a person or group uses or abuses an individual, group or natural resource for their own purposes, thereby disempowering, degrading and all too often destroying who or what was used.” Sin in human experience must be addressed, and the gospel promises to address it, in all its forms. Recent counsel to the church reminds us of God’s good news to sinners: “Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life. Follow Christ in the way that leads to

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God’s peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation” (Doctrine and Covenants 163: 2b). “Rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17), Community of Christ will actively counter self-centeredness, brokenness, and injustice in the world. In this way we will seek the kingdom of God.

**Application for Discipleship**

It may seem an outmoded idea or even make us uncomfortable, but disciples need to think about sin. Religious or spiritual people are prone to self-deception, usually about our goodness. A realistic understanding of our own capacity to deny the deepest truths we know fosters humility. Christian history sadly reveals how often the Church and the churches have represented evil, not good in the world. The following words from the Doctrine and Covenants make this amply clear for our own time:

There are subtle, yet powerful, influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God. Be especially alert to these influences, lest they divide you or divert you from the mission to which you are called—Doctrine and Covenants 163:3c

Sin affects all hearts but has great power over those that claim not to be so affected. This is because sin thrives most as a form of self-deception. It is vital to our prophetic identity, then, to practice self-criticism, which is another word for “repentance.”

At the same time, disciples must acknowledge the constant need to focus on God’s goodness and love, and on God’s desires for the world. We feel the tension between who our loving God made us and who we actually are, between our essential being as bearers of the image of God, and our actual existence as those who live in separation from God. We confess we are not the agents of love God desires us to be. We fall short, even in our best moments. Luther spoke truly when he said Christians are at the same time righteous and sinners. This double-sided reality may tempt us to slide into frustration and to despair at our inadequacy. It may also prevent us from becoming graced agents for change in the world. It is important not to let candid judgments of ourselves become a further occasion for self-centeredness, by disabling us from a trusting relationship in God’s grace. Focusing only on our sin can itself become a form of “curving in on ourselves.” It is helpful to remember that the Bible and Christian tradition contain a long lineage of simple, sinful people who heard God’s call in their heart and responded willingly: “Here am I.” Our
participation in this great work rests on God’s grace, not on our lack of limitations.

The sin that distorts human hearts also corrupts the deep structures of our political and economic life. Paul claims that creation itself is in bondage and is waiting for “the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19–21). The book of Isaiah affirms that God’s standard of righteousness for public life is justice (Isaiah 1:16–27). For a disciple of Jesus Christ, justice is not simply a matter for government and courts. In the biblical sense, it is God’s will for the world’s wholeness. As God’s grace is working out salvation from sin in every sphere, so God calls us to work for right and just relationships in our political life, and to live responsibly in society.

If we believe we are made in God’s image and redeemed by Christ for lives of purposeful action, then we cannot be satisfied with selfish pursuits and chronic estrangements. To “be vulnerable to divine grace” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10b) opens us to claim the spiritual hunger within. It opens us to the boundless prior reality of God’s love and our need for repentance. Confession of sin and expression of our yearning for personal and societal wholeness signifies grace already at work within us. We will not justify or excuse ourselves, for grace delights in our honest self-appraisal. But we trust God’s gracious love alone, which opens us to humility and acceptance.

Deep communion with God elevates our humanity, and simultaneously can break our hearts as we become deeply aware of the injustices that bind creation. We are tempted to turn away from the brokenness we see or to fix everything at once through a frenzy of service. This lure of supposing that all depends on us can drain compassion and energy. It is good to recall from the second creation story that the primal sin was to try to be “like God” (Genesis 3:4). Our rightful and necessary struggle against injustice can trick us into placing ourselves in God’s position at the center of creation. But once again, the church is called back to the gift of redeeming grace, revealed as Christ’s acceptance of us in our limitations and with our perplexity at the tasks before us. Discipleship must keep itself rooted in God’s loving kindness. The sheer goodness and love of God promote humility as we seek in our own partial ways to do God’s will in and for the world.

God desires the flourishing of all things. Sin disfigures creation. Before the harsh reality of sin, as outlined by the sixth paragraph of the Basic Beliefs statement, it might be easy to isolate from one another, be suspicious, and become unwilling to seek the common good. But the
church knows that this is not the whole story of our existence. God’s very heart has been revealed in Christ, and this revelation has claimed and begun to renew us. Indeed, only God’s heart can empower us to live in the kind of love that will never abandon the world and never give up on God’s preferred future for creation. Sin and selfishness abound, yet in Christ God has commenced renewing all things. The church hears the Spirit whisper a call to adventure on the path that leads to wholeness for all things. Divine love and acceptance and God’s call to participate in the mending of the world open us to discovering the hidden depths of our own humanity.

Conclusion

Within the Christian imagination there is a deep tension between what is and what is not yet, between the world we know and the future reign of God. Humility before the reality of sin and God’s more-than-sufficient love helps us not be overcome by this tension. We live in permanent vulnerability to and need of God’s grace. We first expressed our need of this grace in baptism, where we accepted Christ’s love for us and consented to become instruments of the Spirit in a world that is not yet what it can be.

Sin wounds, but the Spirit makes whole. Taking up the image of God’s self-emptying love revealed in Christ’s cross, we will become a voice for victims. Taking up Jesus’ proclamation of repentance, we will open ourselves to the revolutionary change God’s kingdom of peace requires. Taking up our prophetic call, we will speak out against injustice, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness in all their forms, in all arenas of human living. The words of Edith Sinclair Downing’s hymn speak our own truth:

We are the ones the world awaits to live the words we pray.
God, grant us courage that we dare to practice peace each day.
We must confess that Jesus’ words “They know not what they do”
Expose our shared complicity as we our sins review.¹⁶

Community of Christ trusts in a God of grace for the salvation and transformation, not only of our humanity, but of all creation.

For Further Reading


Testimony by Stassi Cramm

I have taught the Basic Beliefs of Community of Christ in various settings both inside and outside the USA. In almost every situation, the conversation in the class comes to a screeching halt when we get to the topic of “sin.” No one wants to talk about sin. I suppose in many ways, I don’t want to talk about sin and perhaps the class is simply reflecting my own discomfort.

To admit that I am sinful is to be willing to accept that I sometimes unintentionally, and yes, sometimes intentionally, hurt others or work against God’s purposes in the world. It also means admitting that I am part of larger systems that bring harm to others and the earth. I know this to be true, but it is not something I want to linger on. And I don’t want to throw back the curtains and allow the light of day to shine in on all of my sinfulness with others watching. After all, maybe they haven’t figured out all of my failings.

In some classes, people want to keep the discussion more abstract. They want to make a list of what is sinful. Some feel that we should have a Community of Christ vice list which we could all use to evaluate
ourselves (and others) about our sinfulness. I know there are some absolutes that we can agree on that are sinful, but I suspect the more prevalent sins (or at least the ones more prevalent in my life) would not be universal.

When I reflect on sin as something that separates me from God and others, I realize this is a fine line. For instance, when my husband is talking to me and I continue to work on my computer, I suspect at times that becomes a form of sinfulness. Or when something happens and I let my temper get the best of me, I know this is sinful. I also have a growing awareness of how my desire to stay in my comfort zone can cause me to turn a blind eye to larger societal issues that are sinful.

What I’ve come to learn about sin is that talking about it is important. I need to be honest with myself and others about where I fall short of being the person God calls me to be. I also need to seek out others’ perspectives. I’ve learned that sometimes I can’t see my own sinfulness and I need trusted friends or family to be my mirror. Identifying my sinfulness is a necessary step in creating pathways for confession, repentance, and forgiveness. The same is true for communal sin. Only through honest conversations can we collectively identify and change explicit and implicit systems that bring harm to others and the earth, thus drawing closer to God as a community.

I’ve also learned that sometimes I’m not ready to change nor am I ready for the world to change. I am prone to self-deception that I’m doing my best and the world is doing its best; but sin is present in my life and in the world. Honest conversations and growing understanding of “the other’s” experience motivate me to accept change.

I confess there is a gap between who I am and who God created me to be just as there is a gap in society. I am grateful for faithful disciples who are willing to honestly identify individual and collective sin and find ways to do better. I am also thankful for a God who generously extends grace while patiently guiding our transformation.

**Spiritual Practice: Prayer of Examen**

The Prayer of Examen invites us into sacred review by searching our memories and seeking God’s presence in all things. Through this prayer, we become aware of the Spirit’s presence and invitation in the entirety of our human experience.
**Pray for Light:** Begin by taking a few deep breaths and imagining yourself in God’s gaze of unconditional love and grace. Pray for the light to illuminate the spaces in your life where God is seeking to be revealed.

**Offer Gratitude:** For what are you grateful this day? Where have you been most aware of the presence of God?

**Review Memories:** Allow memories to surface within you (of the past day, week, or month) regardless of whether they seem mundane or significant. Pay attention to how you felt as you engaged the different aspects of your day, spent time in relationships, and carried out responsibilities.

**Confess and Reconcile:** Gently and honestly notice the places in your memories where you felt most disconnected from God’s presence. What patterns of thought or behavior restricted your response to God’s call? What situations or relationships need reconciliation? The aim of this movement of the prayer is not to induce shame, but to stoke our awareness of thoughts and actions contrary to our deep desire for connection with God, others, and creation.

**Discern the Future:** Take a few moments to consider your future. Anticipate the circumstances and decisions that lie ahead. Imagine what life could look like as you become more available to God’s invitation in every moment, in all things. Close your time of prayer by offering your life, and your future, to God.

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. In what ways have you “sinned and fall[en] short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)? How have these behaviors separated you from God and others?

2. Write your own definition of sin. How easy or difficult is it for you to experience God’s forgiveness and love while acknowledging your sin?
Chapter 8

Salvation

The gospel is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ: forgiveness of sin, and healing from separation, brokenness, and the power of violence and death. This healing is for individuals, human societies, and all of creation. This new life is the loving gift of God’s grace that becomes ours through faith and repentance. Baptism is how we initially express our commitment to lifelong discipleship. As we yield our lives to Christ in baptism we enter Christian community (the body of Christ) and have the promise of salvation. We experience salvation through Jesus Christ, but affirm that God’s grace has no bounds, and God’s love is greater than we can know.

Introduction

Christianity is a religion of redemption. Salvation is its central theme. Even Jesus’ name in Hebrew means “The LORD is salvation.” However, in many contexts today “salvation” has become an empty word. Billboards or pamphlets warn readers to be “saved.” They offer heaven and threaten with hell. Christians in some denominations demand to know, “Have you been saved?” They believe salvation is a single event that happens in a specific way and at a specific time (even though this belief has little basis in the Bible). Others equate salvation with deserting the earth and its challenges for an otherworldly heaven, or they think of salvation as release from the body, as if our bodily life were inconsequential to God. Some think of salvation as the reward for
believing the right list of ideas. Others think of salvation as a special promise of protection or divine guarantee of prosperity in this life if you only have the right amount of faith. In all these ways and others, salvation has become a word laden with unhelpful meanings. What sense can we still make of this term, which remains crucial to Christian faith?

In Christian theology, salvation refers broadly to God’s action of delivering from a negative state of affairs. God “saves” by bringing about a new situation of well-being for individuals or a community, or the whole creation. Terms like “redemption,” “restoration,” “healing,” “reconciliation,” and “new creation” give glimpses into the layers of meaning “salvation” tries to convey. Salvation can be liberation from real, physical conditions. For example, we may need deliverance from injustice, from a tyrannical ruler or system, from disease, or from the unfair distribution of wealth. But salvation is also deliverance from less tangible, though no less debilitating, attitudes, like selfishness, greed, racism, or hatred of others. Salvation is both a present experience, and a future one. It is personal, corporate, and even cosmic. In its broadest sense, salvation is God’s response to all that harms the good creation, especially humanity’s sin. If the term “salvation” is to have any meaning for us today, it must refer to God’s action in Christ to overcome human selfishness in its many forms.

The Basic Beliefs statement identifies Jesus Christ as the one in whom we experience salvation. He embodies what the Bible calls “shalom”: God’s peace, healing, and justice for the whole creation. Christ offers the gifts of hope in the midst of loss and despair, forgiveness for our individual and social failings, and a vision of a new future for the earth. We follow Christ in the way of peace and so experience “all of the dimensions of salvation” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a). The Holy Spirit in our midst, which according to John’s gospel Christ breathed on his disciples (John 20:22), energizes the church to live the coming reign of God as a present reality. This Spirit is also the foretaste, or as Paul described it, the “first fruits” (Romans 8:23), of salvation in its fullest, cosmic sense: the ultimate future of the whole creation.

**Biblical Foundations**

The word “salvation” appears more than 125 times in the Bible, and forms of the verb “to save” occur more than 375 times. God’s action as one who delivers is clearly a central theme of scripture. The God of the Hebrew Bible is truly the “hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble.”
(Jeremiah 14:8). It is helpful to understand some of the images of salvation from the Hebrew Bible because these shaped the understandings of Jesus’ early followers. In most of the Hebrew Bible, people experienced salvation as a this-worldly phenomenon. The classic story of salvation in the Old Testament is the Exodus from Egypt. Salvation originates in God’s compassion: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...” (Exodus 3:7–8). God calls Moses and sends him and Aaron to help free God’s people from bondage. Instructively, the Hebrew Bible makes no distinction between the “spiritual” and the “political”; the Exodus from Egypt is both. The Old Testament also portrays salvation as part of practical, everyday life. Salvation is connected to living in safety (Jeremiah 33:16) or not making a careless promise to one’s neighbor (Proverbs 6:3); it relates to the experience of God’s daily support (Psalm 68:19).

The Hebrew prophets especially knew God as Israel’s savior (Habakkuk 3:18; Jeremiah 3:23). Typically, they understood salvation as God’s deliverance of Israel or Judah from national foes or from the disastrous power of their own disobedience. No prophetic book speaks of salvation more than Isaiah. It is fitting that salvation is a constant theme of the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem (8th century BCE), since his name in Hebrew means “Yahweh is salvation.” The two anonymous sixth-century BCE prophets whose sayings make up chapters 40–66 of this book constantly echo their predecessor’s theme. As in much of the Hebrew Bible, the message of the Book of Isaiah links salvation and faith. Trust in God is vital to experiencing God’s saving action: “if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (Isaiah 7:9).

Israel’s later hope for a messiah—an anointed king in David’s line who would bring final national deliverance—arose from the oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isaiah 40–66 reflects the later setting of the Babylonian Exile, the years immediately after (587–538 BCE). In this time of living as refugees with little hope for the future, the anonymous prophets in Isaiah’s line declare that Judah’s salvation lies in the promise that God is true to God’s character. As God saved their ancestors from Egypt, God will soon make “a way in the sea” and “do a new thing” (Isaiah 43:16–19). God does not wish chaos and homelessness for God’s people but will

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bring them “everlasting salvation” (Isaiah 45:17). That salvation will come in the form of a glorious return to the homeland.

The Hebrew Bible also links the call for justice with salvation. To push aside the needy (Amos 5:12), to trample and cheat the poor (Amos 2:6, 5:11), to abandon the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:23), and to ignore the cries of the poor (Jeremiah 8:19–21) are contrary to the fullness of life God wants for God’s people. The prophets relentlessly warn the people to practice justice, which in the Hebrew mind includes compassion for those with little means and for those who are aliens. When lives do not flourish, there is no shalom. Peace in its broadest sense is what many texts in the Old Testament mean by salvation. The Jewish scriptures also know God as a God of forgiveness. In spite of God’s anguish at injustice and faithlessness among God’s people, God is always ready to forgive and lead them to fullness of life. The Hebrew Bible consistently sees deliverance as a gift of divine faithfulness, love, and grace. Human striving, power, scheming, and military might do not bring God’s salvation.

Until the second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible understood salvation as experienced in this life. The Book of Daniel, however, is the first writing in the Hebrew Bible to envision final salvation as beyond present experience in a resurrection of the dead into a new creation. This book was written during the Maccabean Revolt, perhaps around 165 BCE. Its author faced the problem of unjust suffering and the murder of faithful Jews during the Syrian king Antiochus IV’s reign of terror. The level of suffering stretched to the breaking point traditional Old Testament beliefs that faithfulness yielded rewards in this life. How could one now think about salvation, if within history obedience to God brings death while injustice and violence bring life, not punishment?

The Book of Daniel represents a new theological answer to that problem in ancient Judaism. It addressed the problem of death and injustice by reinterpreting salvation as the conquest of death by the divine gift of resurrection. Salvation in the ultimate sense lies beyond current history in a new time. This new understanding of a future life will become important both to Judaism and to the New Testament authors. At the same time, it is important that over against the views of Daniel, the Hebrew Bible vigorously maintains that salvation includes justice, well-being, and peace within history.

The New Testament echoes the approaches to salvation we see in the Hebrew scriptures but enlarges on them with rich new insights. Redemption is still the present experience of a new way of life. For example, the tax collector Zacchaeus responds to Jesus by declaring his
intent to redistribute half his wealth to the poor and repay those he has defrauded fourfold (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus declares of Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9). But New Testament writers also think of salvation as a future universal event, in which transformation will come to the whole creation, including our bodies (Romans 8:18–25; Philippians 3:12–21). Salvation is personal and this-worldly: Jesus responds to a desperate father’s plea and heals his son (Mark 9:14–27). It also involves promise of life beyond death: the crucified Jesus assures a dying thief of a place with him in paradise (Luke 23:39–43).

Salvation, further, has a social dimension. The breaking down of ethnic-religious walls between Jewish and Gentile disciples (Ephesians 2) is a clear example. We also see the social dimension of salvation in Paul’s subversive way of undermining the Roman system of slavery by the application of his principle that all are one in Christ (Philemon). And it appears especially in Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and outcasts. Salvation includes the forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:36–50) and the restoration of persons to community (Mark 1:40–45). Importantly, the New Testament connects salvation not simply to Jesus’ death, but to his life and resurrection as well.

Jesus’ followers had traditional, inherited ideas of what salvation should be like. However, he dismantled their ideas and, in his life and ministry, demonstrated that salvation was to be imagined in the broadest possible way. The salvation Jesus brought did not include destroying enemies. Neither was it for those who were “good enough.” Jesus defied widely held expectations by welcoming all, especially women, the sick, and outsiders into companionship with him. He proclaimed a kingdom completely unlike the empires of the world, a kingdom for the lost, the maligned, and the poor, and a kingdom with no borders. As one New Testament writer put it, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;...[and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Nevertheless, a close companion betrayed Jesus and Rome executed him next to common criminals. Many of his followers abandoned him. A few women saw where he was buried, and then “on the third day” found the tomb empty. They proclaimed this good news and within days the disciples regrouped, convinced Jesus was alive.

It all sounds familiar to Christians, but this was not the triumphant victory story many first-century people hoped for. Yet the New Testament authors look to these pivotal events to discover the meaning of salvation. God had acted for the sake of all creation in this series of events. Salvation
is not a success story if measured by standards of common wisdom. But for the first Christians and for the church ever since, the salvation Jesus brings is breathtakingly more than we could ever imagine or hope for.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus’ parables and sermons and his encounters with people—both the suffering and the self-righteous—illustrate this wider meaning of salvation. Jesus’ teachings, healings, words of forgiveness, and self-offering on the cross reveal God’s mercy and saving action, for they portray God as entering into the fray of human experience. Jesus portrays salvation with images like a table shared with sinners, a lost coin found, a despised outsider binding a stranger’s wounds, and a father’s joy at the return of a wayward child. Above all else, Jesus came to declare that the reign of God had drawn near. It was visible in all Jesus did and taught, for those with eyes to see it. Indeed, as one great historian of Christianity, Adolf von Harnack, once observed, Jesus was in his own person what he taught. In other words, he embodied the very things he proclaimed. The kingdom of God is clearly depicted in Jesus’ memorable words in the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.—Luke 4:18–19

The church’s teaching about salvation would be completely deficient if it neglected these words, which are Jesus’ description of his mission.

John is the most symbolic of the Gospels. It frequently portrays salvation as “life” and especially as “eternal life.” Much later Christian tradition has commonly interpreted “eternal life” to mean life after death in heaven. John actually means something else. A scene from Jesus’ last night with the disciples illustrates what John means by eternal life. Jesus offers a prayer for his followers. In the prayer he acknowledges that his authority to give the gift of eternal life comes from God. Then he says, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Eternal life for John focuses on present experience. To know God in Christ is already to have “life.” Jesus is already the “resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). God’s own indestructible being is available in Jesus Christ, and to believe in Christ is to participate in God’s life in the here and now. This, too, is salvation.
For the Apostle Paul, the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Romans 1:16). Paul has different terms for salvation, which he sees primarily as a future cosmic reality anticipated in the church’s present experience. For Paul salvation in the final sense is about the liberation of all creation from its bondage to death (Romans 8:18–25). He uses terms for this future reality like “resurrection of the dead” (1 Corinthians 15), “imperishability” and “immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:50–54), “transform[ation]” (Philippians 3:21), and “glory” (Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:21). Paul inherited this language from the apocalyptic Jewish traditions one sees in Daniel. But he differs from these Jewish traditions in that, for Paul, the Messiah has come and is now at the center of God’s work of salvation.

Salvation for Paul is both yet to be (Romans 13:11) but also a present process (1 Corinthians 1:18). In the church “new creation” is already visible (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ has already reconciled us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul notes that the community already experiences Christ as “wisdom” (meaning, as one who reveals God’s purpose), “righteousness” (meaning, as one who brings us into a renewed and sound relationship with God), “sanctification” (meaning, as one who sets others apart to serve God), and “redemption” (meaning, as one who liberates from bondage). Yet all these present realities, Paul insists, are partial. They are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23) or a kind of “first installment” (a financial term that meant a “down payment”) of final salvation (2 Corinthians 1:22). And most importantly for Paul, everything Christians experience in the present is unfinished (1 Corinthians 13:8–12). These “puzzling reflections in a mirror,” as the New English Bible puts it (1 Corinthians 13:12), are pointers to a future culmination.

An important dimension of Paul’s vision of salvation is his understanding of “justification by faith.” Paul draws this language from Jewish and Old Testament legal traditions. Justification refers to the act of making a broken relationship right. When Paul used this language in his letters, it was almost always linked to how Gentiles become part of a community that originated within Judaism and Israel’s covenant with God. The first Christians were Jewish. Very quickly, though, the message of Jesus attracted non-Jews to discipleship. Paul maintained that by their faith in Christ as God’s saving revelation, and not by following legal prescriptions, Gentiles became full participants in the church and heirs of the divine promises for the future complete renewal of the world. In this way Paul grasped the universal reach of God’s love as this was revealed in
the death and resurrection of Christ. Like the historical Jesus, who welcomed all to his table, Paul invited all to trust in God’s generosity, which had now broken down traditional walls between Jews and Gentiles. 

Faith as radical trust is the means by which God mends humanity’s fractured relationship with God, as well as the great fissure that exists between human communities. For Paul, this entire experience is an astonishing gift. Our response to God’s gift in Christ is a life of faith, hope, and love. Paul calls our response “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). Salvation in its complete sense remains primarily in the future: the full coming of the reign of God. But in the present, Christians participate in this final salvation in an anticipatory way. In a healed relationship with God, believers now give themselves in self-emptying service to others.

Sin and death are personal and structural for Paul, rather like an infection. Therefore, he believed salvation must come to all things. Paul linked the hope of salvation, experienced as a foretaste in the here and now, with a hope for the healing of the cosmos in Romans 8:19–23:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Just as a woman longs for her child to be born, Christ’s followers, along with the whole creation, groan for the complete transformation of all that is. In Paul’s view the whole creation is destined to participate in God’s own freedom and glory (Romans 8:18–21). This vision gave Paul an invincible hope about the future, even in the midst of present suffering and sorrow.

Other New Testament books, especially Revelation, echo this conviction that salvation has a breadth that extends to the whole cosmos. In fact, in Revelation final deliverance is not about humans going “up to heaven,” but about heaven coming down to earth. Final salvation is depicted in this book with the symbol of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21): a city with open gates, sitting peacefully amid a renewed creation. The New Testament concludes with a reminder that salvation is not merely individual, but is communal and cosmic. The many-voiced biblical witness agrees. Salvation is not some kind of divine evacuation plan, but the work of God, in the present and the future, to bring all things to dwell fully in God’s shalom.
Tradition

Salvation in the Christian faith has personal, corporate, and cosmic dimensions. The proclamation of the good news of salvation has thus taken many forms through the centuries. Often, however, overemphasizing a single theme has replaced the diversity of the Bible’s rich imagery. In Western Christianity, many views of salvation have centered on the redemption of the individual soul from sin, guilt, and death, to the exclusion of the corporate and cosmic scope of salvation. Some of these views have unfortunately reduced salvation to believing in a particular theory of the meaning of Christ’s death. Other interpretations have so emphasized the eternal aspects of salvation that they have excluded significant concern for justice within this world or have ignored the call to transform the world’s structures. Some perspectives, on the other hand, have abandoned the future dimensions of salvation and focused only on historical life and experience. This ignores the reality of death and indeed the historic reality of mass death in the form of genocide and war, as well as the sheer limits that exist in human experience. One-sided approaches to salvation mean something of value will be lost.

Holistic interpretations of redemption have always had advocates throughout the history of the Christian church. In the second and third centuries, when Gnostic beliefs devalued the material creation and treated salvation as secret knowledge about the destiny of individual souls, important theologians combatted this view. Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202 CE) held that in the Incarnation God acts for the redemption of the whole embodied person. This includes the actual physical creation. Perhaps few statements capture better an all-inclusive vision of human salvation than Irenaeus’s famous maxim, “the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be what even he is himself.” Salvation here is not a post-mortem reward, but a vision of the renewal and transformation of humanity. Irenaeus connects salvation not only to Christ’s death but to the Incarnation, as well. Thus, he says that Christ came and restored humanity’s freedom. Christ undoes what Adam did and gives humankind a fresh new start. Salvation affects the whole person because it

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3 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V. Preface.

4 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III.V.3.
is the gift of the whole Christ: Incarnation, birth, life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection. God’s preferred future is to draw all creation forward to share fully in God’s own life. Salvation encompasses this life as well as the life of the age to come.

Medieval Christians were deeply occupied with the question of salvation. Their cultural and intellectual context is foreign to us today, which means we need to be careful not to deride medieval Christians’ intense pursuit of eternal salvation. Our contemporary concern for the well-being of society and the environment was not their concern. Unlike postmoderns, medieval people lived in a world saturated with Christian symbols. These shaped every aspect of their lives, in a setting in which social structures were believed to be eternal. But their quest for the soul’s salvation beyond death had positive social consequences. For example, many Christians in that period served Christ by caring for the sick. Seeking personal salvation contributed to the rise of hospitals in Europe. Others sought to follow Christ by helping the poor. St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) began life as son of a wealthy merchant but abandoned his life of comfort and luxury to care for the poor and sick. The Franciscan Order, which St. Francis began, embodied Christ’s radical call to “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21).

Additionally, medieval theologians sought to bring all human knowledge into relationship with Christian doctrine. Two theologians deserve special mention: Albert the Great (1206–1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). These two thinkers helped reintroduce the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle’s philosophy to the Western world. Without this philosophy, the rise of modern science is hard to imagine. In their search for eternal life, medieval Christians thus contributed important pieces to a more comprehensive view of salvation.

Many Christians in the late 1700s and early 1800s saw salvation not merely as a reward in the afterlife but as a way of life here and now. Various groups experimented with communitarian living. Following the biblical pattern from Jesus’ ministry and the Book of Acts, they saw salvation as social and communal, not just individual. They experimented with sharing life in gathered communities: they held goods and property in common, and saw Christianity as embracing their life together now, as

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well as preparing them for life beyond death. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox monastic communities had already successfully followed this pattern for centuries. But new communitarian experiments, especially in the United States, arose among people of Protestant heritage. This communitarianism was a response to changing economic patterns, which arose from industrialization. But it was also a counter-response to the message of revivalist preachers that limited salvation to eternal life, understood as a gift received for making a certain kind of religious profession. Joseph Smith Jr. grew up in this context. His developing view of Zion as a gathered community shared much in common with other communitarian views of salvation. One could say that all these communitarian experiments had an instinct that something of the breadth of the Bible’s view of salvation was missing from much religious experience.

Community of Christ emerged in a setting where the Christian doctrine of salvation had collapsed exclusively into concern about heaven and hell. It is to Joseph Smith’s great credit that he was among those American Christians dissatisfied with the abusiveness and narrowed focus of this theology. The early Restoration movement was not alone in its concern to rediscover the broader vistas of salvation present in scripture. Joseph imagined that salvation was both a temporal and an eternal reality. It embraced the individual, the community, and ultimately Earth itself, and even included elements that would have been familiar to frontier Universalists. (Universalism held that all human beings would ultimately be saved.) In Joseph’s early vision of salvation, God’s grace is never seen as capricious and very few people are finally denied redemption. Salvation, too, as the early Restoration communities experienced it, had an intensely communal dimension to it. Joseph and the early church applied many communitarian ideals to their rethinking of scripture and tradition. “Zion,” the city of God, which they borrowed from the Bible and from Puritan traditions of a covenant community, became an all-encompassing symbol of salvation for the early Restoration movement.

Yet this evolving early Latter Day Saint theology was not without problems. It increasingly came to interpret salvation as a commodity managed solely by the “right” church and therefore open to manipulation by human actions and special rites. Salvation became less the gift of a gracious God and more and more an achievement, magically tied to membership in and obedience to the church. The Reorganization eventually distanced itself from those developments, while retaining some
of the communal and this-worldly salvific emphases of the early Restoration.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a theological movement arose that had direct consequences for Community of Christ’s developing understanding of salvation. As noted in Chapter 7, industrialization brought misery to many workers in the cities of the United States. Horrible working and living conditions caused immense suffering for the urban poor. Many Christian churches ignored these social ills. Preachers urged people to seek salvation after death, which made Christianity irrelevant to the concerns of this life. However, some pastors and theologians, among them Walter Rauschenbusch, sought new ways to think about the Christian message of salvation. The Social Gospel movement arose in this context. It is in many ways a forerunner of contemporary theologies of liberation. Rauschenbusch was the chief thinker of this movement. After careful study of the Hebrew prophets and the message of Jesus, he concluded that the Christian churches had neglected, or even abandoned, the significant social dimension of salvation prominent in Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God on Earth, and the Hebrew prophets’ concern for justice to the poor.

Under the influence of revivalism, much Christian theology of the era had lost a holistic vision of salvation. Many churches spoke only of eternal salvation. Turning away from social conditions created by business and industry gave religious validation to dehumanizing and unjust practices. The Social Gospel movement, on the other hand, sought to help Christian faith and practice rediscover all the biblical dimensions of salvation. Rauschenbusch argued that human beings cannot be separated from the vast and intricate social webs of which they are part. A doctrine of salvation must take this truth into account. God does not redeem the individual independently of these social webs. Therefore, God calls the church to “Christianize” the social order. The church does this by applying the biblical principles of love, compassion, and justice for the poor to society’s problems. Frederick M. Smith had inherited beliefs and images of Zion from the earlier RLDS tradition. But in Rauschenbusch’s theology, Fred M. found new insight and resources for a more expanded vision of Zion as a transformed society.

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To this day in Community of Christ, we generally think of the salvation of individuals as meaningful only when we also speak of the redemption of communities, society, and the whole creation. The liberating truths of the gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 155:7; 164:8a) have both individual and social dimensions. Salvation in our theology is neither an escape hatch from responsible life in the world nor a tool of judgment, terror, or manipulation. Jesus’ name means “salvation,” not “horror,” and whatever does not align with his ministry and teaching, and with his loving concern for people, is not worthy of the term salvation.

Indeed, the church cannot fix all the world’s problems. But to preach salvation without working to alter whatever deforms life—racism, sexism, nationalism, poverty, exploitation, violence, and ecocide—is to become complicit in evil. As the great Civil Rights leader the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remarked in a famous sermon titled “A Knock at Midnight,” people come to the church seeking love, peace, and justice, but too often have found the church sanctioning violence or hate, or defending the status quo. For Community of Christ, salvation in the individual, communal, and cosmic senses is fully the work of God’s grace, which empowers us to right these and other wrongs. We stand in and are informed by traditions that go back to Christian beginnings. But we also listen for the voice of the Spirit today, calling the church in our life together to express “all of the dimensions of salvation” (D and C 163.2a) for the sake of a wounded world.

**Application for Discipleship**

Community of Christ grounds its understanding of salvation in the full picture of Jesus Christ, who as the divine Word made flesh shares the burden of human sin and oppression, and calls us all to change for the sake of the reign of God. We believe Jesus is God’s visible “Yes!” to creation: and that means to refugees, the incarcerated, the marginalized, the poor, and to the planet. In Christ God affirms that creation is not disposable but the object of God’s loving outreach. The cross in particular

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8 Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a: “Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life. Follow Christ in the way that leads to God’s peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation.”
reveals that salvation comes at an unimaginable cost to God: divine love pours itself out for broken creatures. Baptism immerses us into the way of Jesus, which includes both his life and death. Dying with Christ, we enter into solidarity with all who yearn for God’s loving embrace. Raised with Christ, we join in hope with all who work for a just and peaceful world. Salvation is misunderstood if seen only as a future reward. For Community of Christ salvation is always a way of life characterized by self-giving love (Philippians 2:1–13). This way of life opens us in hospitality to those who are different, especially those of other religions. Salvation without grace, humility, and charity would not be the salvation Jesus came to bring.

Community of Christ envisions salvation in a comprehensive way. Every dimension of salvation points back to Jesus Christ. God’s saving embrace of the world, we believe, calls us to “create pathways in the world for peace in Christ to be relationally and culturally incarnate” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3a). The church’s concern for the suffering of the poor and the travail of creation’s natural systems (Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a–b) are consistent in every way with who Jesus is and what he proclaimed.

Some Christians ask, “Are you saved?” How should we answer? Community of Christ believes the broad witness of scripture: salvation is a way of life lived in communion with God. We believe that this way of life is, from start to finish, a gift. God generously gives us this path and God’s grace enables us to walk it. Salvation is so much more than life after death. It includes the invitation to live in intimate relationship with the Trinity here and now (John 17:3), which means in an ever-expanding love. It includes seeking the reign of God on earth (Matthew 6:10, 33). It includes concern for communities but also for the deeply threatened ecosystem. Clearly a better answer to the question, “Are you saved,” must include the biblical authors’ views that salvation is both present and future. Are we saved? “Already, but not yet!” Already, we are loved. But the poor suffer, all creation groans, and we cannot ignore the cries. This is the answer of a community that knows God’s boundless love in the present but prays and works for the reign of God on earth, where poverty and abuse, hatred and suffering have ended.

Others may ask us, “How do you think salvation happens?” Community of Christ places no limits on the ways God reaches out to human beings. For some people, God’s love comes in a single, life-changing moment in which they welcome Christ as their savior. But to hold that a single “born again” experience is the only way salvation
“happens” is unfaithful to the full witness of scripture. It is also untrue to our corporate journey. Others experience life in communion with God as a process of gradual growth or in several experiences over time. And yet others find service in community as the way they come to know God. We respect and appreciate all these experiences. This is because we understand salvation as graced communion with God in which persons experience the Spirit of love in increasing measure. From Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) we learn that whatever brings people into communion with God is cause for celebration.

What we believe about salvation has consequences for both human beings and the planet we call home. If we see salvation as something that happens separate from our life in the world, then this home can be thrown away. But if salvation has to do with the here and now reality of the world, in all its injustice, struggle, and chaos, then being good stewards of the only world we know becomes an urgent matter of faithful discipleship.

In our world the poor and vulnerable need to be saved now, not in some hoped-for afterlife. For those who are hungry now, a promise of future salvation and relief outside this world is hollow comfort (James 2:14–26). To tell someone who is oppressed by poverty, violence, or illness (physical or mental) that their suffering is somehow necessary to their salvation is to wound and oppress by our words. To fail to confront the people and systems that sponsor oppression and racism is to turn the Christian doctrine of salvation into a mascot of abuse. In the Spirit of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus dealt with the suffering he saw. To abolish poverty and end suffering is in full alignment with the heart of scripture, and with Jesus’ life.

Indeed, Community of Christ’s hope is not limited to this world. The message of Jesus and the Spirit’s love expressed in community give us resources to face our own mortality. Salvation encompasses everything, including how we live and how we die. In Paul’s words, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:8–9). We and all creatures have been embraced in a love that will not let us go, and in that love we remain secure. This is what it finally means to be saved.
Conclusion

Many elements shape our view of salvation. But central to Community of Christ’s faith is that Jesus Christ shows God’s unreserved love for the world. Through this lens we glimpse God’s redeeming action in the world. The Spirit of God works ceaselessly to conserve, restore, and transform God’s good creation. God’s extravagant generosity shows us the way to life in its fullest: in love, justice, and compassion. This way of life does not place its trust in what the world considers wisdom or in material success or human might. It looks to Jesus whose way is peace and whose name means “salvation.” As the church responds to the way of Jesus Christ, it embraces God’s intent to save, restore, and make whole the groaning creation.

For Further Reading


Testimony by Karin Peter

One evening when I called home from a summer reunion Ray told me that on his morning walk there was a homeless man with a Pitbull. As he passed, the dog lunged at him. Ray put out his arm to deflect the dog and ended up with a large gash across his hand. Ray wrapped his hand in
paper towels from the nearby convenience store, asked the homeless man for his identification, and notified the police.

When the officer arrived he took Ray’s statement and then talked with the owner of the dog. At the end of the conversation the officer turned to Ray and asked, “Mr. Peter, what do you want to see happen here? How can this be resolved?” At first, looking at his wounded hand, what Ray really wanted was for this dangerous dog not to be around people. As he gave it more thought he realized this would mean the man would lose his dog. Without his dog for protection the man and his belongings would not be safe. All of this went through Ray’s mind; then he answered, “I want this man to learn how to control his dog.” The dog’s owner agreed to control his dog more effectively and everyone departed.

The incident was over, but it was not resolved. Ray was concerned. How would the man learn to control the dog? Would the dog attack someone else and be taken away? Each day when he passed the same man and dog, he would offer to share some techniques for training the dog but each offer was met with a gruff “no thanks.” Ray decided to try a different approach. He started carrying a dog biscuit with him each time we went out walking. Each day, with the owner’s permission, he would give the dog a treat. Through this daily ritual he learned the man’s name was Dan and his Pitbull is named Riot. Soon Riot began to watch for Ray and before Ray gave her the treat Riot learned to sit quietly and to gently take the biscuit from Ray’s hand.

In the following months Dan and Ray began to see each other differently. Dan became concerned when Ray missed a day or two of walking. Ray was delighted when Dan found temporary employment. The incident that brought them together faded into the background as a relationship developed.

As we receive God’s grace it changes how we treat those around us. We learn to extend grace to others by making choices based on the teachings and actions of Jesus. This allows us to consider the circumstances and desires of others as well as our own. Salvation becomes more than an individual event. It is the process of sharing that divine encounter with others, inviting them to reconcile, to be restored, and to be whole. While I do not think Ray set out that morning to purposely model salvation, I do believe that because he had experienced the restoring, saving purposes of God, he was able to live into a way of salvation that would bring healing and wholeness to Dan and Riot. It also challenges me to look anew at my interactions with others. How might I live the restoring purposes of God if I ask myself at each encounter: What do you
want to see happen here? How can this be resolved in ways that bring to life the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ?

**Spiritual Practice: Circles of Salvation**

*This practice is inspired by the Buddhist prayer of loving kindness. In this prayer, one begins by blessing oneself and gradually expands outward from there, eventually wishing good intentions for the entire world and all beings, even our enemies. Likewise, in this Circles of Salvation, one begins by acknowledging the gift of salvation for oneself, and then moves to loved ones and friends, to all people, and to all of creation.*

You may light a candle or sound a chime to indicate your intention to begin this prayer practice, which can be offered in a group or individually. Allow yourself to come reverently into the presence of the Divine. Find a comfortable position. Take several deep breaths, allowing your body and mind to relax and focus on prayer. Greet God in a way that is natural for you, and give thanks for this time of awareness of Spirit

Saving God, cleanse my heart. Accept the confession of my flaws and failures, and make me whole. Transform me, O God, that I may know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. *[Pause for 20 seconds.]*

Saving God, I give thanks for all those whom I know and love, and those with whom I struggle, for each is created and loved by you. May I remember that salvation is theirs as well. May they know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. *[Pause for 20 seconds.]*

Saving God, there are many of your children in communities around the world, both far and near, who have not yet learned that they too are part of your dream of shalom in this world. May all of your people come to know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. *[Pause for 20 seconds.]*

God of all creation, stir within us a deep connection with everything you have created; make us aware of the sacred nature of all that surrounds us and lead us into deep reverence that cultivates nurturing actions. May all of your creation be saved from greed, violence, and senseless destruction. *[Pause for 20 seconds.]*

May these prayers of concern, compassion, and transformation for ourselves, others, all people, and the earth lead us into a world shaped by your unconditional love and eternal salvation, O God. Amen.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you respond when someone asks if you have been saved? How is God’s salvation more than about what happens to me as an individual?

2. From what and to what are we saved? What is your personal experience with salvation?
Chapter 9

The Church

God intends Christian faith to be lived in companionship with Jesus Christ and with other disciples in service to the world. The church of Jesus Christ is made of all those who respond to Jesus' call. Community of Christ is part of the whole body of Christ. We are called to be a prophetic people, proclaiming the peace of Jesus Christ and creating communities where all will be welcomed and brought into renewed relationship with God, and where there will be no poor.

Introduction

In Community of Christ, “church” has many meanings. The word “church” commonly refers to a building or place. It can also mean the specific group of people who are one’s worshiping and missional community. In this sense, the word stands for congregational life, whether the gathering is large or small. Often, we use the term “church” to refer to our denomination as a whole. And we also use the term for all those who in every place look to Christ as God’s love revealed. The community called “the church” births and nurtures disciples, those who follow the way of Jesus.

In Community of Christ we experience being the church at reunions and camps, at conferences in mission centers, in online ministries, in other creative new expressions of practicing Christian community, and gathered at International Headquarters for World
Conference. We experience the life of the church in worship and singing, in works of hospitality, healing, and justice, in celebrating sacraments, and in the struggles and delights of life together. God has formed the church in the world to proclaim Jesus Christ and live out a glimpse of God’s future reign in the here and now. The idea of church has universal and even cosmic significance. Indeed, we believe the life and witness of the church is one of the primary ways God pursues the divine mission of reconciliation in the world.

**Biblical Foundations**

“Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation” (Psalms 111:1). Biblical authors understood that life before God was essentially a collective experience. From Israel’s liberation from slavery to the Day of Pentecost, the narrative of scripture identifies as God’s chief witness in the world the worshiping community. Moses tells Pharaoh that God says, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (Exodus 8:1). Paul appeals to the church in Rome, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). God intends the life of faith to be life in community.

The sacred journey of the Old Testament recalled an ever-widening circle of relationships between the people of Israel and God. The initial relationship was between God and a family. God enters into a mutual covenant with Abraham and Sarah for the blessing of all the nations (Genesis 12–18). Israel later preserved the memory that God was the God of their ancestors. The phrase “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” was an abbreviated way of recalling that the story of God’s people began with extended families.

God remains faithful to this ancestral covenant by compassionately freeing the descendants of Abraham and Sarah from slavery in Egypt. The story of the Exodus reminds its readers that God did not release the Israelites to be a loose association of individuals, pursuing their own private ends. Rather, God liberated them to be a servant community. The Mosaic covenant begins with a reminder to the newly freed slaves that theirs is to be a shared life in service to God: “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). God’s gracious call and act of redemption in the Exodus was the foundation of the covenant relationship. Worship and service was the people’s response to God’s gift to them. The Old Testament understands that the call to community is at
the heart of God’s revelation. Israel’s response to the gift of a covenant relationship with God was to live in gratitude and justice. Importantly, their task as God’s people depended on God’s prior gift. God’s grace forms people into a community with shared memories and a shared vision of their life in the world.

New Testament writers use the word “church” over a hundred times. In their native Greek, the term for church was *ekklēsia*. It literally refers to a group of people who have been “called out” or summoned together for a task. In the New Testament, as in the Old, to be a covenant community is a divine gift before it is a duty. God’s call is what gives the community its distinctive identity; its mission flows out of this gift. This is why Paul so often refers to members of the community as “saints.” It is not because they possess extraordinary personal holiness. They are “saints” or “sanctified,” rather, because God has set them apart to engage in the divine mission. As Israel was set free so that they might worship God, so did the Holy Spirit sent through Jesus Christ form Jews and Gentiles into a new worshiping community, called to live in love and service (Romans 12:1).

The church was born out of Jesus’ activity of calling women and men to be part of his new community. There was nothing inherently special about Peter or Mary Magdalene or Thomas or Salome. The Gospel writers do not conceal from readers that imperfect people made up the nucleus of the church. What bound them together was their response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him. Following meant that they were to learn from Jesus, to imitate him, and to live in his way. And they were to do this together. The church was to be a communion of disciples, not a loose connection of spiritual individualists. We see this truth clearly in the aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion. Even though the disciples are depressed and scattered, the experience of the resurrection calls them to find each other so they can be together again. It is essential for members of Community of Christ today, especially in individualistic cultures, to rediscover from the Gospels that “being church” is intrinsic to following Jesus. This paragraph of the Basic Beliefs Statement affirms that the church was not an afterthought or a hindrance to the way of life Jesus taught. Life in sacred community is the way he taught.

Jesus Christ is God’s eternal Word made flesh. He came embodying “the fullness of deity” (Colossians 2:9). If God’s nature is love, an outgoing love focused on the well-being of the other, then we should not be surprised that Christ created a community. Not only would this community bring the good news to the world, it would be Christ’s body—
his very presence—in the world. During Jesus’ ministry people who were near him found peace and a new vision of life. An inexpressible power drew people to Jesus—often people who would not have associated with each other. This same power drew his followers to each other in what the New Testament writers call koinōnia: “fellowship,” or better, “community/communion.” Community is God’s language of unconditional love. That is why Paul uses the same word that refers to the Christian community to identify the experience of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13).

The Spirit works for the conversion and transformation of life precisely in the relational setting of the church. Connecting with Jesus changes people. Interestingly, in the Gospels, this connection with Jesus typically happens in gatherings. “As he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples” (Matthew 9:10). Acceptance and reconciliation were communal experiences, not just individual ones. God’s revelation in Christ formed not just individuals, but a people—a koinōnia with a common koinos (vision).

Jesus’ death jeopardized the future of his community of believers. Amid the grief of Good Friday and the darkness of Holy Saturday, the community itself experienced a kind of death. Yet through the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna, the embryonic church survived this trauma. The church would be reborn “on the third day” at the astonishing news, “He has been raised” (Mark 16:6). The resurrection was not only an event that happened to Jesus; it happened to his disciples, too. Through the risen Christ’s own counsel to his disciples in the form of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20), and by the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2), the community Jesus created in Galilee took new shape. Jesus’ disciples began a mission that would embrace the whole world. The presence of the Risen One among them transformed them and set them aflame with passion for the way of life he had shown them.

Among the values the new community cherished were hospitality to strangers, care for the poor, and right relationship with God and each other. They regularly recalled Christ crucified and present among them by celebrating the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:24–26). The signal characteristic of their life together was agapē: love that sought only the welfare of the other. The church was the body of Christ, the visible means of grace by which this kind of good news could be lived out and proclaimed everywhere.
The church is not incidental to the good news. It belongs, rather, to the essence of the good news. Human beings were created for the community. We are the image of God, a God who’s very being is an eternal community of three coequal persons. Thus, forming and living amid the joys and risks of community is part of the revelation in Christ. A responsible reading of the New Testament insists that Christianity without the church is unimaginable.

**Tradition**

God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is the author of the marvelous work called the church. As Anne Clifford observes the English word “church” derives from the Greek word *kyriakos*. It means, “belonging to the Lord.”¹ This word originally reminded Christians that the church has its being in Christ the Lord. Because the triune God is the church’s own source and ground, no one can claim ownership of the church or even grasp the full implications of this divinely formed community. We cannot “own” the church, but we can belong to it. We cannot fathom the church’s mystical depths as the visible body of Christ, but we can grow in community.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the earliest Christians used the term *ekklēsia* for their shared life together. The Greek word *ekklēsia* comes from a verb that originally meant “to call.” This originating meaning points properly to the activity of God. The church is a group of people that God has “summoned” to be together, but in a real sense God has called this community into being. The church is thus God’s work, which makes its members God’s coworkers. Understanding these important aspects of the church helps us avoid the common mistake of first thinking of the church as a building. Interestingly, it was not until the third century that Christians had “churches,” special buildings for gathering and worship. Until that time “church” always referred to a group of people. Whether with or without buildings, Jesus Christ continuously calls the church into being. His body consists of all those who have responded to his love and yearn to follow and proclaim him as Lord. Christ is thus the church’s “essence.”

Late in the second century Christian communities faced a dangerous challenge from a philosophy called Gnosticism. Gnostics used Christian language and texts, but interpreted them in abstract,

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individualistic ways. Gnostic teachers typically denied the value of the material creation. Because they viewed flesh and matter as evil, they did not believe the Christian God was the creator of this world, and they consequently rejected belief in a real Incarnation. Christ, many Gnostics said, only seemed to be a full human being: he wore the body as a disguise that he shed later. Redemption depended not on believing in his life, death, and resurrection, but only trusting in secret truths that told Gnostics of their true identity as beings of light trapped in bodies. Salvation in the Gnostic view was not of the world, but from it. To many early Christian leaders and thinkers, these views endangered the good news of Jesus and belief in God’s love for the world. While Gnostics often associated with Christian communities, their belief that most Christians were not “mature” enough for more enlightened Gnostic beliefs threatened the integrity of Christian communities.

In this context Christian communities developed a statement of faith that would eventually be called the Apostles Creed. This creed was first used in baptism services. It helped the fledgling church stay true to its core experiences and beliefs. This creed affirmed belief in God as creator of all things, in the saving reality of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and in the church as a visible community of the faithful. In fact, this statement of faith affirmed the importance of believing in “the holy, universal church.” This statement, in other words, asked candidates for baptism to pledge their loyalty to the visible, flesh and blood community. It rejects the Gnostic ideas that the church, like Christ’s body itself, is unimportant, and rejects the idea that members of the church who believed in Christ’s Incarnation could be dismissed as unenlightened. Instead, Christians affirmed that the life of the church is part of God’s revelation to the world. In this way the Apostles’ Creed appropriately restated a belief that was central to the Gospels and Paul’s letters.

By believing in the church ancient Christian thinkers upheld several beliefs at once. One was their belief in God as creator and the goodness of creation including social structures. They affirmed the flesh and blood reality of Christ, now present in the flesh and blood community called the church. And they affirmed the world as the setting of God’s mission and their role as leaven in the world. The Letter to Diognetus is an anonymous late second-century Christian text. It eloquently depicts the

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2 The Greek word for “universal” is *katholikos*, meaning literally “according to the whole.” One of the first Christian writers to use the word was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, around the year 110 CE.
church’s identity with an analogy from ancient psychology. “What the soul is to the body,” writes the author, “Christians are to the world” (Diognetus 6:1). Christians are to give life to the creation, and especially to their social world, not to despise or reject these. The calling of the church is to be in the world and bring blessing. The church is not to flee from the world, but to help hold it together (Diognetus 6:7–10). It can only fulfill this calling, notes the author, if it is true to its own identity in Christ.

The story of the growth and expansion of the Christian community in the centuries that followed is complex, and so interwoven with world history, that it is impossible to tell the story fully here. But as the church developed, it faced, and always faces, a constant tension. That tension is between faithfulness to its identity as the body of Christ, and relevance to the varied cultural contexts in which it finds itself. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches grew out of the church of the late first and early second centuries. They worked to maintain continuity with the apostolic message in the late Roman Empire and then in the medieval world. These communities literally preserved and fostered the development of the Christian tradition for almost 1500 years. To them we owe deep gratitude, for many reasons, among them the fact that they bequeathed to later generations the manuscripts of our shared scriptures and much of our vital theological language, sacramental theology, and practical Christian wisdom.

The Reformation movements of the sixteenth century opened a space for new worship practices and new ways to use and understand the Bible, as well as for new approaches to imagining the church itself. In the centuries that followed, various revival movements tried to make Christianity practical and experiential for the masses that lived increasingly in the industrial and individualistic settings of the modern age.

We also owe a great debt to two twentieth-century theologians for their wisdom about the nature of the Christian church. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) maintained that the church is itself sacramental; as the elements of bread and wine, for example, are visible signs of divine grace, so the church itself is a visible sign of God’s self-giving love for the world. The second figure is the Lutheran

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theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). He is well known and widely revered for his resistance to Nazism, which cost him his life. Bonhoeffer taught that the church is actually the way in which the Risen Christ exists in the world. He held that to share life together in visible community, even with its struggles, is “grace, nothing but grace.”

The postmodern situation of the church today brings major challenges to all churches, including Community of Christ. Old familiar forms of being the church seem increasingly irrelevant in the rapidly shifting landscape of the present time. In response, some Christian communities are evolving into new shapes. For example, the global pandemic that began in 2020 forced many Christian communities to experiment with meeting in the online environment. New expressions of “church,” such as online gatherings, create the opportunity to form fresh interpretations of Christian community that speak creatively to our global pluralistic world. In this context rediscovering from the New Testament and early Christian tradition that “church” was first and foremost a community of people, and not a place, has become powerfully relevant.

Community of Christ draws inspiration for what it means to be part of the church from all of these traditions: ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern. But we steadfastly affirm that from the time of Jesus to today, the world has never been without faithful manifestations of the body of Christ. It is within this centuries-old circle of “those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ” that we claim our “unique and sacred place” (Doctrine and Covenants 161:1b).

The experiences that birthed Community of Christ sprang from a yearning for the restoration of spiritual authority and authentic community, as early nineteenth-century American Protestants understood them. Features of this context included new democratic assumptions about religion, a belief in the validity of individual spiritual experience, suspicion of tradition, a desire for simplicity, and competition among various denominations. This theological context shaped the mind and experience of Joseph Smith Jr., the prophetic leader of the fledgling church. There were other prophetic figures in frontier religion, but few of the communities that formed around these leaders remain today.

Those who united with Joseph Smith’s movement also believed him to be a prophet and became a church around their convictions about his teachings, oracles, and interpretations of the gospel. Today, we can be

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both critical and grateful to the pioneering figures of our church. We can see that the church of these early Restoration ancestors shared in the patriarchal assumptions of its culture. They often over-focused on the prophet’s authority, which eventually led to the need for reform and division. But the early Restoration church emphasized care of physical as well as spiritual needs and encouraged all believers to use their stewardship for the purpose of God’s reign on earth. They also believed passionately that life in community best expressed both the gift and demands of the gospel. They viewed the church not merely as a way to prepare for life in heaven, but as a covenant community called to build heaven on earth. They believed the life of the church ought to transform things here and now. Their profound experiences of divine nearness continue to nurture Community of Christ’s ecclesial imagination today.

Our movement is called to undertake God’s mission in the world. This mission invites the church to live out a vision of God’s peaceable kingdom wherever our community is found. The story in the Book of Acts that describes the earliest Jerusalem church sharing resources so all could live in equality (Acts 2 and 4:31–35) captivated early members of our church. From the experience of building the Kirtland Temple in Ohio, when the community had very few material resources, to the outpouring of gifts in recent years that helped put roofs on churches in Africa, sacrificial giving has characterized our experience of life together. The memory of these formative historic experiences and our ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ has opened us to the call to build “signal communities of justice and peace that reflect the vision of Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 163.5a). This call highlights key features of our unique place within the Christian circle. To promote “communities of generosity, justice, and peacefulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 164.4b) is part of our vocation as a prophetic people.

Our tradition hands on to Community of Christ today the unique image of being a prophetic people. Our identity is found not only in the fact that the church is guided by a prophet. It is also found in the Holy Spirit’s call to the whole church to live prophetically: to be a “prophetic people.” An important twentieth-century leader of Community of Christ, F. Henry Edwards (1897–1991), voiced this awareness as early as 1963. He wrote:

Beyond doubt it is the will and purpose of God that his people shall be a prophetic people....The people of God should have neither time nor inclination to follow after every widely heralded cause which lays claim to their support.
But...church members lack the maturity required of their calling if they stand supinely by while members of minority groups are exploited or are denied their human rights, or if they neglect their duties as citizens because they consider politics “dirty business,” or if they manifest no sustained indignation against the betayers of public trust, or make no significant protest when the children of the poor go hungry, or ill housed, or half educated. These are the things that concerned the prophets....

Edwards’ remarks appeared in the context of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. He saw that the church’s past experience of being oppressed and marginalized gifted us with eyes to see and hearts to respond to the brutal experiences of racism and poverty—if we would listen. Indeed, deep listening to the cries of the oppressed characterized the ministries of the classical Hebrew prophets. So did courageously confronting political powers and social forces that had stripped people of dignity and laid waste to whole communities. Community of Christ as a church has been slow to rise to the challenge of its prophetic charter. To be a truly prophetic people remains one of the great challenges before Community of Christ in the twenty-first century.

Many denominations still claim to be the one true church and deny that salvation is possible outside their particular community. Community of Christ once followed that exclusivist path. But we are grateful that embedded in our tradition is the belief that God continuously calls the church to transformation. Through a long process of conversion, aided immensely by international mission and careful theological reflection, Community of Christ no longer claims to be the only Christian denomination with divine authority. In 2010, in fact, the church became a full member of the National Council of Churches of Christ, one of the premier ecumenical associations in the United States. Even before this time, Community of Christ members and jurisdictions had long experience in ecumenical and interfaith ministries around the world. We recognize that the Holy Spirit, like the wind, is free to blow where it will (John 3:8). Each community is called to offer its giftedness as part of the whole body of Christ. One of Community of Christ’s unique offerings is our passion to so live from God’s call that we embody in every aspect of our life together the image of Zion, where there are no poor and where every person is welcomed to a place at the table.

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Application for Discipleship

The church is an intentional work of God. As the universal body of Christ, it exists as the means by which the Holy Spirit brings people into a living encounter with Jesus. The Spirit of Christ is working everywhere to transform people from self-centeredness into trust in God, from individualism into genuine communion with others. But the church is God’s primary means of grace. It is one of the ways by which God brings forth the peaceable kingdom on earth. In our tradition, we have called this work the “cause of Zion.”

We believe that God’s will for creation is that every creature may come to know that kind of wholeness, justice, and peace, which the Hebrew Bible calls “shalom.” The church exists as a visible community to forward this divine purpose. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!” (Matthew 6:10). The church’s mission is inspiring, and it ennobles those who pursue it. It challenges disciples of Jesus to live in union with him, and to nurture healthy relationships with one another. Given the raw facts of the human experience, as explored in Chapter 7, authentic community has never been easy. Yet it is exactly this kind of life to which the Spirit of Christ calls us. This may be why Jesus prayed for all his disciples, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). This prayer invites the church ever to enter into the trinitarian life of love for the other. In the spirit of that prayer, Community of Christ will actively work with and seek reconciliation with other communities in the circle, as well as those of other religions.

As the church pursues God’s mission for the world, it is important for us to live in company with Christ who embodies that mission. Jesus said in John 15:5 “Apart from me you can do nothing.” This means even in its most persistent efforts in mission, the church’s work depends on the prior gift of new life in Christ. We nurture companionship with Jesus through spiritual practices and through mutuality in community. As people commit themselves to prayer and meditation, study and reflection, worship and koinōnia, this opens us to personal and corporate transformation (Doctrine and Covenants 161:3d). In this path transformation takes place in two ways. First, grace renews us as we travel in the inward journey toward Christ. Second, renewal comes as we travel the outward path with the community in service to others. The twenty-first century has brought widespread interest in spirituality.
Community of Christ congregations are called to live out distinctively Christian spiritual practices. This is not to diminish other ways. It is, rather, to claim the way we have been given. That way appears in the divine call to be a prophetic signal community in which the love of God for every creature is lavishly present.

What kind of community will we become? This is the kind of question a prophetic people ask themselves. They ask it because they know that powerful, destructive forces in the contemporary world seek to divide people from each other. Will the church let forces of nationalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, hatred, fear, and violence dictate our self-understanding? In the freedom that characterizes human life, God will indeed let us be who we want to be. But a prophetic people must ask a counter-question: into what kind of people will we let God make us? Here we can glimpse a distinctively Community of Christ answer in our mission initiatives: Invite People to Christ; Abolish Poverty, End Suffering; Pursue Peace on Earth; Develop Disciples to Serve; and Experience Congregations in Mission.

This path is deeply rooted in the Bible. It also has deep roots in the best thought from centuries of Christian tradition. And it is faithful to our historic journey. This contributes to the church’s unique and sacred place within the circle of all who call upon Jesus Christ. Will the church be faithful to its unique vocation?

The Spirit has urgently reminded the church of its calling, its unique reason to exist: “God is calling for a prophetic community to emerge, drawn from the nations of the world, that is characterized by uncommon devotion to the compassion and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:11a). But this prompt is prefaced with the words, “Be vulnerable to divine grace” (163:10b). The way forward for the church called Community of Christ is the path of vulnerability. This is the way of Christ, which is the only path the church can take. A community that is truly vulnerable to God can also become a community vulnerable to a suffering world: open and exposed to the pain of creation, which simultaneously opens us to the healing power of God. This is the kind of community we want to be.

We bring to the table Christ’s message of peace and our gifts of relationship and community building. We offer sacraments to people inside and outside the church. We strive to work ecumenically and with interfaith movements. We testify that God is working to bring us closer to the Christ who embraces everyone regardless of religion, race, color, gender, and sexual orientation (Galatians 3:28). We confess that the church
is to be a community where everyone experiences love and acceptance, a place of refuge and safety, a place of sanctuary and peace. We realize our limits to fulfill this task, and thus we ask always for “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:13). With God’s assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation, we yearn to create new expressions of the church where each person is welcomed and recognized, where no one experiences discrimination or prejudice, and where the transforming presence of Christ is vitally present. We proclaim the Christ whose love has no bounds. This is the kind of community we want to be.

More than a community with a prophet, we will struggle to become a prophetic community. Christ, the Word of God, became flesh. The church as part of his body continues his ministry. A Community of Christ affirmation titled “We Proclaim Jesus Christ” states it this way:

[Christ] prophetically condemned injustice in the temple and proclaimed the good news of the coming reign of God on Earth, preaching liberation to the oppressed and repentance to oppressors. He taught his followers to love God, to love their neighbors, and to love their enemies. By eating with sinners, serving the poor, healing the unclean, blessing children, and welcoming women and men as equals among his disciples, Jesus declared that all persons are of worth in the sight of God.7

Our prophetic message is to bring forth the peaceful reign of God on Earth and we generously commit our energies and resources for its realization. To be prophetic entails risk. It takes courage to boldly confront the systems and structures of selfishness and make them give way to God’s will and reign. “Above all else, strive to be faithful to Christ’s vision of the peaceable Kingdom of God on earth. Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue peace” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b). We will be a community that risks all for the peaceable kingdom.

Peace is central to the vision and calling of Community of Christ. It is deeply interwoven through scripture and embedded in our Enduring Principles, sacraments, and Basic Beliefs. We strive to be faithful to Christ’s vision of a peaceable kingdom, of a world in harmony. Jesus Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14). He is the source of our experience of peace, and our model of peacemaking. Jesus’ life and ministry personifies shalom. This kind of peace is costly. As a faith community striving to proclaim the peace of Jesus Christ, we will embrace the “cost of

7 “We Proclaim Jesus Christ,” Sharing in Community of Christ, 58–59; also at http://www.cofchrist.org/we-proclaim-jesus-christ.
discipleship” (Bonhoeffer). To seek peace and pursue it is our permanent commitment. This is the kind of community we believe we are to be.

One of the modern-day purposes of the church is to end poverty and unnecessary suffering. The Holy Spirit confirms that God is concerned for the welfare of the poor and those who suffer. In the cries of the poor we will train our ears to hear the call of the prophetic Spirit (Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a). A church that turns away from the poor and abandons them to their own fate has ceased to follow Jesus Christ. A church that follows Jesus, on the other hand, will make his mission (Luke 4:18–19) its own mission. It will unflinchingly extend compassion to the poor, and in the spirit of the Social Gospel Movement that since Frederick M. Smith’s ministry has contributed to our identity, we will work to confront and change those structures that condemn millions of people to suffering at the edges of their society. This mission started with Jesus. It defines who we are as a church and, if we follow it, we expect that we will never be popular. But we want to be the kind of community that unreservedly follows Jesus in the care and blessing of all, especially those who are the least.

**Conclusion**

God is leading the church into new and deeper forms of community. This is not for our own sake, even though blessing will come. It is for the blessing of the world. Far from being a useless relic from an earlier time, the church—life together in Christian community—has never been more essential to the health of the whole creation than it is in our time. Through consent or silence, churches can be complicit in the massive injustices the powers that be inflict on the world. Or the church can dare to be faithful to Jesus and “seek justice, correct oppression” (Isaiah 1:17 RSV). The God who breathed life into creation and the Holy Spirit into that small group of Jesus’ followers at Pentecost calls Community of Christ to be a peace-making, justice-practicing, difference-affirming community where wholeness and mutuality reign. The peace of Christ draws us into solidarity with the vulnerable people and creatures of the Earth. For the church to be a blessing to the world, it must fulfill its prophetic call.
For Further Reading


Testimony by Carlos Enrique Mejía

The church is where we find sanctuary, where we receive guidance to convert us into disciples. That is where we can grow in our relationship with God, grow in our faith, and where we create and strengthen our interpersonal relationships, where ministry is received and given.

I met Christ and the church in 1984 in a small town in Honduras. This has been the best and greatest blessing that could have come to my life. In the church I met my wife, we had a family, and it was there that we were born and grew spiritually through our relationships with God, Christ, and our brothers and sisters.

Together with my wife and family, I have been a part of and lived through all of the changes the church has had in the last 33 years. We, along with many other members, have gone through many difficult situations that the church has suffered. Many times, as human beings, we have thought that it was the end, but quite the contrary. I have always seen that, because of those crises, the church has become more united and strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the unity of its members. I call the church indestructible because it belongs to God. How has the church been able to grow, be transformed, and help so many other
people and communities in the world? It has only been possible through the Holy Spirit that supports it, sustains it, and guides it.

My eldest daughter asked me one day: “Papi, what would our life be like if we didn’t know Christ, and we weren’t in the church?” She told me, “I feel the church is our second home where my family is so much bigger and more diverse.” I felt a great satisfaction at hearing what the church means to her and everyone in our home, and to see the fruits of those examples and teachings that, together with my wife, we have been able to ingrain in our daughters. Today I can see how this eldest daughter and her husband are transmitting the same example to their son. I’m happy to see my entire house serving the Lord and the church.

I see my father, a man who is 84 years old, being the pastor of that small congregation in my hometown. Every day they worship he walks sixty-eight steps up to get to the sanctuary. Sometimes I tell him he shouldn’t be climbing those steps anymore, and he responds, “I do it all for love of God and the church; I’m happy serving it.” This is a marvelous example for me.

Many times, in the field where I serve as apostle, I have heard nonmember friends say Community of Christ is different. They say there is something special reflected in its members. When I think of our Enduring Principles, they tell us what defines the essence, the heart, and soul of our identity, mission, and message. They describe the personality of the church that is expressed through its members and its congregations.

Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to love our spiritual home, to transmit to other generations God’s love through Jesus Christ and the church. I love the church so much that I say: “If one day they throw me out the door of it, I’m going to come back in through the window!”

**Spiritual Practice: Invitation and Hospitality**

One of the hallmarks of the church has been the extension of hospitality, not only to friends and family but to strangers as well. Hospitality is not about impressing others with well-decorated homes and churches and with gourmet cooking. It’s not simply for the gifted or those with lots of money. Neither is it just for women. Hospitality is a way of loving our neighbor in the same way God has loved us. Parker Palmer says in his text, To Know as We Are Known, that hospitality is a way of “receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care.” One of the Mission Initiatives of Community of Christ is Invite People to Christ. We can invite others into conversations, into
friendship, to our homes for a meal, to the experience of sacred community, to the church for activities and worship, and to the awareness of a loving God.

Allow yourself to be open to the possibility of who you may invite and to what you will invite them.
Pray for the people you invite.
Pray for them as you invite them.
Pray for them during their conversation/visit/experience/gathering.
Pray for them as they leave.
Reflect on how your sharing of hospitality has connected you with those you invited as well as with God. Offer thanks for the experience and consider the next opportunity for invitation.


Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When you think of the church, what comes to mind? Consider as many different dimensions of “church” as you can.

2. Why are you a member of Community of Christ? What is most important to you about the church to which you belong?
Chapter 10

Revelation

We affirm the Living God is ever self-revealing. God is revealed to the world in the testimony of Israel, and above all in Jesus Christ. By the Holy Spirit we continue to hear God speaking today. The church is called to listen together for what the Spirit is saying and then faithfully respond.

Introduction

A pivotal conviction of Community of Christ is that God is self-revealing. We believe this has been characteristic of God from the beginning of time and that God will ever continue to reveal the divine self. Revelation flows from God’s nature as the eternal self-giving community of love: Source, Incarnate Word, and Spirit. Sharing is the essence of love. Thus, God reaches out to human beings in love and grace to draw us into relationship with the Divine and toward the ever-fuller discovery of our humanity.

Community of Christ often summarizes this revealing attribute of God with the simple faith affirmation: “God speaks today!” This is a declaration about who God is as well as a confession of faith based on our community’s shared, historic experience. Without the past and present testimony of those who have experienced God’s self-revelation, we could not make this claim. Indeed, we would be utterly in the dark about God’s being and purposes. The ninth paragraph of the Basic Beliefs statement is for our church a passionate confession of faith about our experience and identity: it is through revelation that we encounter God, glimpse
dimensions of the divine nature, and come to know about God’s intent for
the world.¹ We are true to our deepest instincts as a church when we sing
The church’s life is built upon the rock of revelation.
Our joyful hearts are nurtured by prophetic inspiration.
No private creed shall dull our mind nor selfish pride unduly bind
the Spirit’s validation.²

Biblical Foundations

The Bible testifies to the existence, saving presence, and continuous
action of God. God creates, calls, liberates, sustains, and renews. Writers
of the biblical books were convinced that God not only created the
universe but was active in the world, their lives, and their communal
story. The biblical writings testify to the reality of God, mysteriously
present in nature and in human experience, in times of success and joy,
and in times of great loss and deep pain. This full sweep of the biblical
narrative gives us a sense of who God is and what God desires for the
whole creation. In their varied witness, the many writers of the books of
the Bible assure readers that God did not create the world only to desert it.
Scripture depicts God neither as an “outsider” nor as an “absentee
landlord.” Nor does scripture depict God as a non-personal indifferent
force. Rather, God the Spirit permeates creation, awakening trust in God’s
existence and calling people to serve the cause of justice for the world.
God cares passionately for all that God has created. “Where can I go from
your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence,” wrote the Psalmist
(139:7).

The biblical witnesses attest, through their encounters, that God
unceasingly upholds creation, nurturing it toward the time of shalom,
which some texts call “the reign of God.” Indeed, we have the Bible only
because in remarkable life-changing ways communities experienced the
divine presence and found those experiences so transformative that they
could not but write about them and preserve them. In a broad sense all the
sacred experiences that formed Israel and the church, and sustained them
on their journey, are what Community of Christ first means by
“revelation.”

¹ See Peter A. Judd and A. Bruce Lindgren, An Introduction to the Saints Church
² “The Church’s Life,” Community of Christ Sings (Independence, MO: Herald House,
2013), 68.
The Bible is one of the outcomes of centuries of such revelatory experience. Writers and communities recalled how the self-revealing God met them in diverse contexts. They reflected on these experiences, interpreting these divine-human encounters in light of, and within the limits of, their own times and places.\(^3\) The library of books that would eventually be called the Bible helped facilitate new encounters with God. Over time, the communities that used these texts gave them authority to be permanent guides. This process, called canonization, insured that subsequent generations would have a reliable way to remember and connect to the originating revelatory events that formed the community.

However, Community of Christ has insisted since the time of Joseph Smith III that what the authors of scripture wrote is not revelation itself. They wrote works of literature that are pointers to revelation. Former member of the Community of Christ First Presidency F. Henry Edwards wrote, “Revelation cannot be fully expressed in words. Words are but tools, and must be quickened by the illumination of the Spirit which shines in the hearts and minds of the readers….Revelation, then, is one thing, and the record of revelation is another.”\(^4\) Former apostle Arthur A. Oakman made the following observation in an important 1966 article:

The prophets saw the movement of God in history. It was there before they saw it. Had they never apprehended it, it would still have been there. But it became revelation to them when they appreciated this divine movement. What we have in the Old and New Testaments is not, therefore, revelation. It is a record made by the preceptor. ….There are, then, strictly speaking, no revealed truths. There are “truths of revelation”—statements of principles, that is, which stem from the actual revelatory experiences.\(^5\)

In its theology, ethics, and pastoral practice, Community of Christ believes it is essential to make this kind of distinction between revelation and human beings’ varied literary accounts of revelation. Without this distinction, communities are always tempted to worship not the Living God, but their texts, traditions, and interpretations, which can bring and has brought great harm into people’s lives.

Beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, what more can be said about revelation? Old Testament writers looked to God’s “mighty acts” in

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\(^3\) For the language of ”divine-human encounter” in relation to the biblical narrative, we are indebted to Clyde E. Fant, Donald W. Musser, and Mitchell G. Reddish, *An Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).


the saga of their people for clues about God’s nature and claim on them. Within the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the pivotal action that reveals God’s identity is the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus was a profound communal experience of divine self-revelation because it involved the deliverance of a whole people from the oppression of slavery. God’s concern for the misery of the covenant people in Egypt reveals the divine compassion and loyalty. Embedded in the larger revelatory experience of the Exodus is the remarkable call of one individual, Moses.

In one of the Bible’s most memorable scenes, God meets Moses in a burning bush on Mt. Sinai. The experience happens not because Moses is good or just; indeed, he is a fugitive from Egypt. But to borrow contemporary language, “God calls whomever God calls” (Doctrine and Covenants 165.4a). Revelation is never earned but is always at God’s initiative and for God’s purposes. Moses’ encounter with God was also not for his personal advancement. From the story it is clear the encounter left Moses stunned and reluctant to accept the task God gave him. Rather, God revealed the divine self to Moses for the redemption and well-being of the community, and in faithfulness to past promises God had made with the ancestors. Intriguingly, God called Moses to a task he felt unsuited for, and about which he had nothing but questions. In the scene in Exodus, one of Moses’ questions prompts an arresting answer from God that marvelously expresses the essence of divine revelation: “Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you”’” (Exodus 3:13–14).

In this formative encounter, what is revealed to Moses is not first information. Revelation is not about getting lifeless facts or information. Instead, revelation is about coming into graced contact with God’s own being. Revelation is an experience of encountering the depths. Moses wants to control or place limits on God with words. But God is beyond all that human beings can know and will not be the plaything of human whims or a mascot of human causes. God reveals God’s name to Moses. This name in this text is a kind of puzzle: “I will be what I will be,” or “I will be who I will be.” Or as the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures put it, “I am the one who is.” God’s very name connects to the verb, “to be.”
From this scene we learn that in authentic revelation, two things are present. First, God remains utterly mysterious, beyond all the ways human beings think and act. But second, without ceasing to be mysterious, God comes near, in compassion and mercy, to deliver people into a new way of living. Revelation does not give us “data.” In it, rather, we are met by the infinitely mysterious Other who desires the wholeness of the creation, and whose very presence awakens us to the very depths of our own humanity.

Revelation, if it is genuine, seeks to liberate people from bondage. In the story from Exodus, God acts through Moses to rescue the Israelites not only from slavery, but from destruction at the hands of the pursuing Egyptian army. At the Red Sea, Israel’s corporate memory recalled how their ancestors miraculously escaped from Pharaoh’s cruel tyranny, a saving event remembered to this day in the Jewish celebration of Passover. In the story, God subsequently met Moses and Israel at Mt. Sinai in the giving of the Law, which was to guide their response to the gracious gift of salvation from Egypt. The sojourn in the wilderness for forty years in route to the Promised Land further taught Israel about God as sustainer who could be trusted when things seemed bleak. Through this journey, the people were to understand that life in covenant with God is about mutual faithfulness. God pledged to be their God and chose them to be God’s people. Israel’s role was to live in grateful obedience to the one who had set them free.

Revelation in the Bible, therefore, comes in the form of stories about how God’s action, as remembered in the journey of a people, discloses, in an unfolding way, aspects of the divine character. The diverse writings of the Hebrew Bible narrate what Israel came to understand in its centuries-long experience about God’s nature and their own character as God’s people. They learned that God was holy: utterly, incomparably unique, and different not in degree, but in kind, from creatures. They experienced God’s steadfast love, mercy, and kindness. They realized they could pour out their laments to God, as well as their praises—that God was their partner who shared their sorrows and joys. They experienced revelation not only in special events, but also in the wisdom distilled from everyday life, as in the Book of Proverbs. They understood that God required them to live in justice and equity, not defrauding or abusing the poor or aliens. They also found God to be faithfully present, even in times of unthinkable suffering.

Israel’s moral failures never lessened God’s commitment to them. Even in the Babylonian Exile God fashioned new hope for their future out
of the ashes of their past. The God of revelation loves relentlessly and persistently seeks to be in relationship with us. God’s primary aim in revealing the divine self is to invite human beings to enter into an ever-deepening relationship with God and with each other. In other words, central to the Old Testament experience of revelation is the call to community.

The Old Testament compellingly testifies that God is a God of justice. What God most required of the covenant people was that they “do justice…love kindness, and…walk humbly with…God (Micah 6:8). Justice in the Hebrew Bible is a broad concept that includes the well-being of the whole community, but especially the vulnerable and those easily abused. Justice is the opposite of oppression and exploitation (see Amos 5). To marginalize aliens (non-Israelites), to deceive and mistreat the poor, to exploit the powerless, to deprive the weak of legal means to correct grievances: all these are forms of injustice, and are contrary to everything Israel’s story taught them about God’s nature.

The Hebrew Bible uses the term “prophet” to identify people God sets apart to censure injustice. In fact, the main Hebrew word for a prophet is nabi. It literally means “one called.” God called people like Amos and Isaiah to reveal God’s will for a just and peaceful world. Judgment is also part of revelation. The prophets came forward to pronounce God’s judgment on the people when they had turned away from acting compassionately to pursue selfish ends. To be prophetic was to call people to repent, or to “turn back” to God, to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). God who demanded fairness and integrity was also full of mercy, quick to forgive repentant sinners. Harmony and consideration of others were the hallmarks of God’s reign: what God intends for all creation. God’s self-revelation in the story of Israel called people to a qualitatively different kind of life together. From the Hebrew Bible, then, we also learn that genuine revelation will always summon us to seek more just and equitable social conditions.

The witness of the New Testament continues the story of God’s presence and action for the well-being of creation. Community of Christ, in full accord with the historic Christian faith, affirms that God decisively revealed the divine character in the person of Jesus Christ. In passage after passage, New Testament writers speak of God’s self-revelation in Christ. A clear example is this text from Colossians: “in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile
to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19–20).

God’s revelation once again comes not as facts, or lists, or propositions. It comes in a person who has a story. Who and what we mean by “God” is visible in this historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth. If the heart of revelation is personal encounter, then God cannot be reduced to a system of ideas or a list of rules or doctrines. The New Testament insists that God’s own nature is decisively revealed as love (1 John 4:7–10). The revelation in Christ manifests the dignity of human beings before God, and calls us to live in a responsive love: for God, others, self, and even for enemies. In the New Testament, as in the Old, justice and love remain the two highest criteria of authentic revelation.

In the Christian faith, Jesus as the Word made flesh is God’s decisive declaration of the divine nature and purpose. According to the four Gospels, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom or reign of God as both present reality and future hope. He invited people to a new kind of life lived in the power of God’s reign of love. In stories like the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) Jesus called people to a radically compassionate way of living, that included the abandonment of self-centered motives and behaviors. As a Palestinian Jew, Jesus was formed by a culture steeped in the traditions of the Hebrew scriptures, as were his followers and those with whom they interacted. But rather than apply old laws and centuries of interpretation, Jesus demonstrated through the example of his own interactions with others the deepest meaning of the Law.

Jesus came, in Matthew’s view, not to do away with the commandments but to fulfill them by lifting up the underlying principles and rejecting legalism. Jesus regularly shocked religious authorities, for example, when he favored the poor, the sinful, the suffering, and the foreigner. In acting in this way, he revealed God’s loving care for all. During Jesus’ ministry, his disciples found themselves often baffled by this new and strange kind of life, which included a renunciation of traditional views of power and punitive justice. The mystery of Jesus’ own person and the scandalous intimacy with which he related to God were like nothing the disciples and Jesus’ contemporaries had ever seen. Jesus’ cruel execution by the Romans left his disciples dismayed and scattered. But Easter restored their faith in him and endowed them with new power to live as he had taught, in self-giving love. The resurrection of Jesus was in many ways the culminating event of revelation for the disciples. Indeed, the New Testament books and the communities that wrote them
would never have existed if those earliest disciples had not experienced Christ as risen and present. Easter revealed that neither imperial oppression nor death could destroy or diminish God’s love for the creation.

The revelation in Christ, of which the New Testament bears abundant witness, broke down ethnic, gender, and cultural barriers. Jesus made room for people in the great diversity: tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, Gentiles, children, and women. It should not surprise us that after Easter, the church—in the power of the Risen Christ’s presence among them—was compelled to open itself to the great cultural pluralism of the Roman world. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28). Through Christ God makes salvation possible for all who will follow him. Authentic revelation always includes: it ever widens the circle and always seeks to create a “place at the table.”

In the light of the Easter experience, the New Testament writers looked to the future in anticipation of the full dawning of the reign of God. Revelation is not only about a past experience of divine self-disclosure. The crowning moment of the sacred story is yet to be. This finale will itself include the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:7; 1 John 3:2). The church sojourns through the struggles of the present time, knowing that the journey will end in divine grace: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13). This anticipated future revelation, which brings to completion the church’s long spiritual journey, will embrace all creation in an experience of the glory of God (Romans 8:18–26). The Bible’s witness to the history of revelation promises a future in which God’s love becomes victorious in every possible way. Revelation is therefore not only the ground of our present faith, but also of our future hope.

**Tradition**

The Christian tradition consistently holds that the God of Jesus Christ is not proven by rational arguments but mysteriously encounters us in life-changing experiences. God initiates all in our experience that sets us

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on the journey of faith. Revelation is thus always a gift of grace. Experience in community over time validates divine revelation and deepens us in wisdom. The only way to demonstrate the truthfulness of divine encounter is through the test of faithful living. Revelation does not give us scientific knowledge but calls persons into a vital relationship of faith to journey into the infinite depths of God.

Both Jewish and Christian traditions accept the primacy of revelation as the principal source for human knowledge of God. Knowledge of God does not come as a result of human effort or cleverness; rather, it is God who beckons to us in tantalizing glimpses of the divine self in the midst of our regular experience. Whether through what Christian tradition calls the “general revelation” of God in nature, or through the “special revelation” of God in historic experiences connected to the Bible, revelation is always a gift. Whatever we know of God we confess has come by God’s own gracious, generous activity.

Special or historical revelation always occurs in specific cultural contexts. God’s call of Moses and the deliverance of the Israelites took place in the late Bronze Age. The Hebrew prophets ministered during the Israelite and Judean monarchies. Jesus Christ lived in Roman-occupied Palestine and was crucified by the empire. The Christian tradition has developed over two millennia in amazingly diverse contexts and complex cultural situations. In Restoration tradition, the experiences of Joseph Smith Jr. and his theological teachings and ideas reflect the context of a period of nineteenth-century religious revival historians call the Second Great Awakening. Understanding something of the setting in which divine encounters occur helps us grasp the traditions that develop from these experiences more thoughtfully. The church today does not find it troubling to state that, although revelation comes from beyond time and place, it always bears the distinctive marks of time and place. This knowledge fosters humility about the gift we have received.

God graciously and lovingly becomes known in very specific human experiences and under the conditions of human limitations. This means that the church has always needed to distinguish the substance of revelation from its cultural trappings. Even the prophets and apostles had to evaluate and interpret their experiences of God. They had only their language, time-bound understandings, and personal limitations to use as they expressed for their people the meaning of their encounters with God. Culture shapes the ways revelation is both experienced and comprehended. This means that uninterpreted revelation does not exist; in that sense the church does not believe in “direct revelation.” In testimony
in an early 1890s suit seeking possession of land occupied by the Church of Christ (Temple Lot) Joseph Smith III said, “We do not believe in the plenary inspiration of the Bible, and therefore do not believe it to be infallible. Understand me, we hold that everything which passes through human hands is fallible.” The community needs both discernment and careful theology to interpret claims to revelation and to express its meaning in new settings.

Over the centuries Christians have debated the relative importance of reason and revelation in the quest for knowledge of God. Sometimes these two sources of theology have been treated as mutually exclusive. Some believers in “reason alone” have held that only knowledge derived empirically and that stands up to the scrutiny of rational thought is reliable. Some advocates of revelation, on the other hand, have argued that only revelation “by the Spirit” gives trustworthy knowledge, and that all other knowledge, including legitimate scientific knowledge, is to be viewed with suspicion. But the main lines of Christian thought have tried to avoid this kind of dualism. Revelation and reason are not the same, but they can and must creatively coexist. They are not enemies as some would contend. If one accepts as a starting point that when it comes to understanding God the finite human understanding has sheer limits, then revelation remains an absolutely vital idea. But if we appreciate that revelation needs to be understood and communicated in human language, then reason has an important, supportive role in our knowledge of God.

Key figures in the history of the church, like St. Augustine (354–430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), supported this view. They maintained a high estimation of the primary revelation in Christ as the center point of our knowledge of God. At the same time both thinkers used rational methods to understand God’s self-disclosure and express its meaning for human life. Aquinas in particular believed God had created the world in such a way that reason was the prime means to know some kinds of things; revelation, however, was necessary to know divine things. Christian theology at its best is never afraid of rational knowledge, but also respects the limitations of reason when it comes to encountering, knowing, and loving the infinite God. Christian faith is thus misguided when it opposes proper scientific knowledge. God commands us to love God with our minds, and the world as God’s good creation calls forth our best use of our rational selves to understand its processes. At the same

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7 “Complainant’s Abstract of Pleading and Evidence,” In the Circuit Court of the United States…[Temple Lot Case] (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House and Bindery, 1893), 493.
time, God as the infinite Ground of the universe and its processes, far exceeds these processes, as well as surpassing all human rationality and knowledge. Only by the grace of God’s revelation, properly known in the relationship of trust called faith, can we begin to grasp who God is. As Thomas Aquinas himself put it, by revelation we learn “certain things about [God] that we could never have known through natural reason, as for instance that [God] is both three and one.”

Christian tradition bequeaths to us an important distinction about types of revelation. There is a difference between originating revelation and continuing revelation. Originating, or original, revelation refers to those founding encounters with God that initiate or decisively shape the direction of the whole sacred story. They furnish the unique central symbols by which the entire tradition understands itself. To use a scientific image, originating revelation provides the “genetic code” for a religion. For Christians, the biblical story is where we glimpse the originating revelation, through the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. These stories give us the foundational coordinates for the whole journey that follows. We refer back to these original revelatory events as our formative authorities, which give us clarity as we journey into the future.

Continuing revelation, on the other hand, refers to subsequent developments and new insights that unfold from the original. Authentic continuing revelation aligns with and properly expresses the meaning of the original revelation. Jesus told his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:12–14). Whatever the Spirit subsequently reveals in the life of the church must be rooted in the primary revelation in Christ, the living Word of God. The Spirit brings the new, but always in alignment with the originating experience.

Community of Christ believes in continuing revelation in the sense described above. Claims to revelation that depart from what God has

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9 This distinction between original and dependent or continuing revelation is made by Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 126–28, and Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 10–18.
expressed in Jesus Christ cannot be treated as genuine. This is why the church has rejected some purported revelations of Joseph Smith Jr., for example his later departures from trinitarian monotheism. On the other hand, the revelations that opened ordination to women (Doctrine and Covenants 156:9) and made possible more inclusive understandings of gender roles and relationships (Doctrine and Covenants 164:5–7) are fully consistent with God’s originating revelation in Christ. They are part of the trajectory initiated by and revealed in Jesus Christ.

From the founding of Community of Christ in 1830, belief in a God of revelation has been one of the church’s theological pillars. This belief stood in contrast to a popular idea that revelation had ceased with the writing of the last book of the biblical canon. Many Protestants on the American frontier equated revelation with the Bible as a fixed book and referred to it as the “Word of God.” Simply reading the Bible in English was all one needed to understand God, salvation, and how to live one’s life. But competing interpretations and the rise of hundreds of separate groups should have raised a note of caution about this simplistic view of revelation.

In Joseph Smith’s setting, many Christians knew little of the careful distinctions earlier traditions had made regarding the phrase “Word of God.” Time and place also unfortunately separated them from Christianity’s long tradition of continuing revelation (in the sense mentioned above), embodied, for example, in the experience of mystics and monastics for centuries. Community of Christ’s view of continuing revelation as the unfolding of biblical revelation in the lived experience of Christians was not a concept that simply reemerged in the 1830s, though it perhaps felt that way to early participants in the Restoration. But an unfortunate consequence of the revivalist tradition that shaped Joseph Smith’s religious context was that it often held a very literalistic view of revelation, confining it to the Bible itself.

Three centuries before the time of Joseph Smith, however, the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther insightfully referred to the “Word of God” as the gospel of Christ. By “gospel” he did not mean four particular books of scripture. Instead, Luther meant the message of salvation embodied in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Scripture, to be sure, was the carrier of this message, but he made a careful distinction. For example, Luther colorfully referred to the Bible as the cradle in which the Christ child rocked. The Bible is not the Christ! But it is the indispensable means
of access to the Word of God, who is Christ himself.  

Luther’s distinction meant that reading and using the Bible required careful discernment and informed study. Some parts of the Bible give clearer expression to God’s revelation in Christ than other parts. For this reason, Luther thought some books of the New Testament were less useful than others. His distinction between the Word of God as the person of Christ and not simply all the words of the books is a distinction Community of Christ also makes in its view of scripture. This distinction helps us not idolize the words of scripture, use sacred texts to harm others, and avoid narrow understandings of how God works in the world.

Jesus Christ—the Incarnation of the Word of God—is the focal point and theme of our faith. Even though the name of the church has changed several times since it was organized as the Church of Christ in 1830, the name has always included Christ. When asked in 1838 what are the fundamental principles of the religion that he headed, Joseph Smith Jr. said: “the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven;’ and all other things are only appendages to these.” In this way, Joseph tried to draw members’ attention to the originating revelation of God that must remain at the heart of the movement he began. Sadly, he did not always follow his own best instincts, but his words point us in a salutary direction. Focusing our message and identity on the originating revelation in Christ calls us to constant vigilance in our preaching and mission.

Members of the church have often become preoccupied with other things ("appendages") and have been tempted to place individual agendas, obscure ideas, particular interpretations of the church’s history, and organizational matters ahead of Christ and the reign of God he preached. Yet Community of Christ’s testimony is that the Holy Spirit has continually called us back to “Hear Him,” that is, to listen to Christ who has claimed our deepest loyalty. Our church’s calling and purpose is to form a community of disciples who live out an “uncommon devotion to the compassion and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 163:11a). Christ is the central revelation of God’s purpose for all creation.

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12 Elders’ Journal 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44.
Community of Christ believes the church must be guided by revelation. We mean this in two ways. First, the church in its teaching, preaching, and mission in the world is always accountable to the originating revelation in Christ. This deep, sound instinct was already at work in 1879 in General Conference Resolution 222. This resolution differentiates the heart of the church’s message from secondary matters, the essential from the peripheral. The resolution sought to relegate private beliefs, abstract or dubious ideas, and speculative teachings or interpretations to the sidelines, in favor of keeping the church focused on its central message.\(^\text{13}\) Secondly, the church listens for the Holy Spirit as it helps us grasp for its own time new dimensions of God’s unfolding work of new creation. In our tradition, the one called and accepted as prophet-president of the church has the responsibility to discern and express God’s present activity for the church today. The church assembled in World Conference has the heavy responsibility, however, of acting in its role as a prophetic people, discerning the validity of revelatory pronouncements.

In the earliest years of the movement, Joseph Smith Jr. exercised his prophetic role with charismatic fervor. Many of his followers accepted his utterances as coming directly from the mouth of God. This practice often created problems, and in some ways simply reproduced the problem of literalism others on the frontier expressed in their treatment of the Bible. Since 1996, however, prophet-presidents have shared guidance to the church in words that recognize their personal human role in expressing what they have experienced. They have also referred to the direction they share with the church as “words of counsel.” This approach is a responsible way to acknowledge that revelation always includes the experience of interpretation. This approach thus properly rejects the questionable idea that revelation is divine dictation. Such a view remains widespread among many Christians and is usually paired with the concept of inerrancy of scripture. But as noted earlier, since Joseph Smith III first articulated it in the early 1890s, our church officially rejects this understanding of revelation, whether in the Bible or in continuing revelation. Increasingly church leaders and members understand that the words of scripture emerge from the matrix of Spirit-led interaction between the writer and his or her social and historical context. Experience

with the divine can never be fully captured in language.

Recently the church has also become more aware that the process of revelation is deeply communal. The biblical writers and editors did not encounter God apart from the communities and traditions that shaped them. Revelation and subsequent processes of canonization are, and have always been, processes experienced and assessed within community. As noted above, becoming a prophetic people calls us to understand continuing revelation as an experience that demands the highest level of spiritual and theological discipline and reflection by the whole community. The whole church joins in this process through its own practices of discernment and common consent. Continuing revelation as a communal experience is a hallmark of our movement and a unique dimension of our journey into God’s preferred future.

Application for Discipleship

Continuing revelation in the life of the church is anchored in our belief that God is always self-revealing. God yearns to be known amid the struggles of life and desires that we open ourselves to a deepening relationship with the triune community: Source, Word, Spirit. This conviction calls for spiritually disciplined people. Belief in continuing revelation also demands a community that is scripturally literate and well informed by Community of Christ and wider Christian traditions. It needs a people who are attuned to the best knowledge of their day, who attend deeply to their personal and cultural experience, who listen lovingly to each other, and who practice corporate discernment in common consent. These tools provide checks and balances for our faith community as it tries to hear God’s call amid the many competing voices of our time. They help us guard against self-deception as we respond to Jesus’ promise that the Spirit will lead us ongoingly into all truth. The community must cultivate a shared willingness to ever be open to the countless ways the Holy Spirit is vitally present in the world. Continuing revelation is an empty idea if it is not paired with a community of people who strain forward to see each new event as a new “burning bush.”

Community of Christ believes that the prophet-president is called to discern God’s will for the church and to articulate that in words. The experience of the prophet is by no means the endpoint of revelation. When the prophet presents counsel to the church, members have the responsibility to prayerfully consider how or if it represents God’s yearnings for the community. As the church hears and meditates on
words of counsel, do we find there an expression of the divine nature as outgoing love? Is this document consistent with the central, historic revelation of God’s character and purpose in Jesus Christ? Does the counsel speak in a timely way? In other words, part of the church’s prophetic role is to ask if formal expressions of continuing revelation align with the original revelation in Jesus Christ. In this sense the church’s president, while having a unique role in the prophetic process, shares this role with all members. Even when new instruction has been approved and canonized, the revelatory process does not stop. As we reflect on a new section of the Doctrine and Covenants, even over many years from the time of its canonization, we ask: How can we embody in our place and time the wisdom the whole church has perceived in these words? It is crucial to understand that the revelatory process includes the church’s faithful response and is incomplete without it.

This principle applies to other parts of the scriptures. When we read the creation stories in Genesis 1–3, for example, how do we experience God anew through those texts even though we may have read them dozens of times before? How do new scientific understandings about the origins of the universe invite us to revise previous understandings? In our current context of escalating environmental destruction and cavalier denial of this evil on the part of public figures, what do these ancient words of Genesis call us to do and be now? As we ponder the Bible’s witness to God as Creator, how will we pay attention to the presence of God the Holy Spirit among and within us so that new meaning can unfold from ancient words? And how will we remain open to the Spirit, so that we can keep our own ambitions and egos in check as we seek to respond anew to God’s revelation, even as it unfolds from our wrestling with ancient sacred texts?

Because continuing revelation is a communal process, when the church seeks God’s will related to a specific issue, it is crucial that members join together in spiritual practices of listening and discernment. In a world full of competing voices, many of which champion selfishness, hate, and greed, we must always be sure we hear the diverse international voices of other disciples in our community. New revelation is often most clearly heard when we willingly suspend past and present understandings and check assumptions of spiritual or cultural superiority. When we undertake this form of repentance, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, we make space to hear or glimpse together the new thing God is doing, rather than be imprisoned by our own prejudices and past experience.
The ways of God’s self-revealing love are manifold. Beyond the context of church life, we must practice looking to the beauty, order, and rich complexity of creation to catch glimpses of the infinite God. A visit to the Grand Canyon in the USA, Victoria Falls in Zambia, or a local zoo, aquarium, or flower garden remind us of the intricacies of nature and keep our hearts open to a staggeringly imaginative God. Like a thumbprint, God’s character is revealed in the grandeur of the night sky, as the psalmist noted centuries ago: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalms 8:3–4). Nature itself, when viewed through the eyes of faith, can thus be an endlessly surprising expression of continuing revelation.

As people of prayer Community of Christ members often ask God for help in making difficult decisions or overcoming adverse circumstances. In doing so we express that the practice of prayer is itself an instrument of continuing revelation. Too often we do not take the time to empty our cluttered lives to listen to the One who loves us without qualification or condition. Although prayer frequently becomes much more about talking than listening, if we want to experience God as the mysterious self-disclosing Other, it is important to remember that haste is the enemy of real spiritual encounter. Prayer as listening helps us find God’s self-revealing presence amidst pain and ambiguity. Jesus’ experiences of prayer, whether in the prayer he taught his disciples to pray for the kingdom or his own anguished prayer on the night of his betrayal and arrest, are luminous reminders that we will encounter God as we seek God’s reign and as we face personal and corporate suffering. Our own experiences of prayer can become instances of continuing revelation that truly flow out of the originating revelatory experience of Jesus’ life. Above all else, it is vital to see continuing revelation as reaffirming the central proclamation of original revelation: that the creation is loved beyond its wildest imagination. Prayer is one of the trustworthy paths into this revelation of love.

God’s revelation is not a sign of privilege. It is an urgent call to respond with our whole selves. In our personal discipleship, there are important facets to this response. After experiencing what we identify as the Divine, we will pause for a shorter or much longer time to reflect on what has happened. We will test our understanding of the experience in light of both scripture (the testimonies to original revelation) and the community’s wisdom. We will view our experience through the lens of
our past journey and our immediate situation. We will search for possible meanings this experience could have for our present life. We will prayerfully linger with our memory of the experience, kept alive by the Spirit’s touch. With humility and openness to critique, we will bring our experience back to the community for its guidance. We will question ourselves and our own motives and ask how our understanding of this experience upholds the values of love, justice, and the worth of all persons, so central to Community of Christ faith. And we will always check this experience and our interpretation of it again in light of the central revelation of God in Christ. Whatever cannot stand in that light must be discarded.

The revelatory experience may have been enlightening or encouraging, or it may have been sobering and challenging. In either case, as befits life in Christian community that imperfectly reflects the mutuality of God’s own triune life, our personal experiences of divine encounter deserve to be shared with other persons. We may enthusiastically or perhaps quietly share the essence of the experience and what it means to us with a friend, family member, or group. We may also choose to write down our recollection of what happened. This may be in a private diary or journal or it may be in written communication with select others. As we talk or write, we are extending our interpretation and the meaning it has for us, but also allowing others to share in the meaning of the encounter.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our response comes in action for the sake of the church and the world. What effect will this experience with God have on my life? How will I live differently or treat others differently as a result? How will I now spend my time and resources? In what ways can this small glimpse of who God is and what God wants help me become more Christ-like? “The test of our belief is always in our practice,” wrote the great twentieth-century British theologian William Temple. He might equally have said that increasing love and authentic community is the test of revelatory encounters with God.

**Conclusion**

Belief in a God who is ever self-revealing is intrinsic to Community of Christ’s identity and faith journey. We are a church founded on God’s

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revelation in Christ and on its continuous, life-giving unfolding in our journey. Being a prophetic people commits us to the struggle and joy of discerning where in our world the Holy Spirit is speaking. Grounded in the story of Jesus, we open our hearts and minds to God’s ongoing call to practice radical justice and love. To believe in continuing revelation does not mean that we have secret knowledge others lack. On the contrary, genuine continuing revelation always places Christ and his mission at the center of the community’s life. To hear the Word of God means to pay attention to Christ speaking in our midst. How can the church demonstrate what it means to believe that the God revealed to prophets and apostles long ago still works and speaks in our world? In creativity and openness, through reflection and study, with disciplined attention to spiritual practices and common consent, and in works of justice and compassion, we will continue to hear God’s voice in each other and in the struggles of our time.

For Further Reading

Bradley C. Hanson, An Introduction to Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), Chapter 1: “Faith and Theology,” 1–18.


Testimony by Richard James

The Enduring Principle of Continuing Revelation resonates deep within me. The God I have come to know is always self-revealing and is not limited to just one way and a set time of revealing with us. We cannot demand this encounter, but we can make ourselves more open to receive and be aware of the Divine around us. However, there are other times when this encounter is not expected, and we can be surprised by the Divine.
In the early 1990s my employer had relocated me to a new city. Life was very good there: our family was very happy, we had a nice home, and professionally things were going very well. Then an encounter with God happened: this occurred as we talked with some church friends who had just experienced an opportunity to experiment with a new form of ministry. The conversations were filled with hope and possibilities. God was revealing and present in these conversations. As our family prayed about how we could engage in this ministry I found myself being relocated again by my employer to another city where we did not have a church presence. Divine revelation was opening doors that we could not have anticipated. We found ourselves in this new city with a strong sense of God’s call to us to be there.

However, I still had longing for what I had left behind. This felt like I was in a city where God had invited me to be but my head was still living in the good place I had left behind. I also had left a very financially secure profession in banking and started working for the church. This is where the second encounter with God happened. I had been travelling through Europe and had just been visiting some church people in a nearby city. On my way home I intended to visit my old house and to see our neighbors. In this area our family had been very happy and the quality of life was very good. The neighborhood had a feeling of being well cared for with well-maintained streets and flowers.

As I traveled on this journey I heard a voice that said, “Richard, where are you going?” I believe this was God speaking to me. In my response to this voice I said, “You know where I am going, I am going to see my old house, see my neighbors, and see the flowers on the roundabouts.” Then I hear this voice again: “But Richard, I have called you from this place!” Wow, this struck me so powerfully that I had to stop the car and acknowledge the presence of the Divine and what this revelation was saying. And then as I continued my journey I drove past our old home and neighborhood but it did not have the same shine or sparkle. In that moment I had let go of what was holding me and I had moved on.

Maybe we need to hear the divine voice that says, “I have called you from this place—let go and move on.” God’s revelation can be personal and life changing. It can invite us into a deeper understanding of God’s will for us and how we can live fully meaningful lives.
Spiritual Practice: Examining Sacred History

Our personal and communal histories are a “revelation from God to be reflected upon and prayed over.” Create a timeline of significant or formative experiences throughout your life. Draw a line across a piece of paper and on the top record the situations, events, or people who come to mind for you. Beneath the line, record observations about how you were formed, how you felt, and how God was revealed.

Once you have completed your timeline, view it as a whole and enter a time of prayer. Notice how God has been revealing God’s self throughout the various movements and stages of your life. Consider the variety of ways God has been present. Notice what surprises you and give thanks for what feels affirming. Do you sense any invitations to fresh understanding or summons to respond as you review your sacred history? In prayer, offer your future to the God who is continuously revealed in all things. (Consider examining your family sacred history or communal/congregational sacred history. How is God revealed in and through our shared life together over time?)

Having examined your sacred history, take some time for journaling or quiet reflection with the following questions:

- What effect will this experience with God have on my life?
- How will I live differently as a result?
- How will I now spend my time and resources?
- In what ways can this small glimpse of who God is and what God wants help me become more Christ-like?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How have you experienced God’s self-revelation? Describe one specific experience and how it impacted you.

2. What discipline is important to you in being open and prepared to experience God’s revelation?

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