Why Independent Restoration Branches Must Remain Independent

By Vance Snively

7) e, in independent Restoration branches today, are keenly aware of the criticisms leveled against us by those who promote the idea of unity between all who trace their religious heritage back to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This criticism originated with the *organized* groups of Restoration branches (which we call factions)—those believing either that they have set the Church in order or that they are in the process of doing so.² It is their belief that we are all a part of the same Church—having the same priesthood authority from Christ to preach His Gospel, perform the ordinances of His Church, and build up the Kingdom of Zion. As a result, they believe that all baptisms and ordinations are authoritative and that all priesthood members have the authority to preach, teach, perform ordinances, and administer the Gospel in all aspects—respective to their priesthood duties. Thus, they believe that we should ignore our differences, just love one another, and all unite to be of one heart and one mind. In fact, they have taken the position that the problems in our Church today are a direct result of our refusal to unite,

and that uniting is the key to solving these problems and eventually building the Kingdom of Zion. While these groups have maintained their position on this type of unity for several years, it is now alarming that this idea is beginning to find its way into the thinking of some within the independent Restoration branches.

So, what is the harm of independent Restoration branches worshiping together with factions and accepting their priesthood authority? Or, what is the harm of independent Restoration branches uniting together, according to their desire, as one church under centralized leadership? Indeed, it is a very appealing idea to have a united RLDS Church again, like in the days before liberalism overtook the hierarchy of the Church. I do not know of anyone today who does not long for the time when the people of His Church will again be united in their efforts to assist in the building up the Kingdom of Zion—being of one heart and one mind. However, is this type of unity the answer to resolve the divisional problems of the Church today? In my mind, the answer is No!

As we know, the Lord has established His true Church in these latter days—through Joseph Smith Jr., and continued in the Reorganization—with the same doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood authority of His Church from the beginning. Thus, any true solution to the problems of His Church today can only come from the Lord, in His own way and in His own time. I am sure that He grieves because of the condition of His Church today. It is not functioning as He desires and cannot, in its current condition, fully assist Him to bring forth His Kingdom. However, He must initiate the solution because it is His Church, not ours. Moreover, He knows how and when to do this so that the truth of His Church is not compromised, and neither is His presence and authority within it. We have no authority of ourselves to set His Church in order; only He can do this. We are His servants and only have the authority from Him to do His will. If we do other than His will in trying to heal His Church, it is wickedness and apostasy! And, as we shall see, it is apostasy that has caused the problems of disunity in His Church today.

^{1.} Because this article was previously published in 2019, it has been revised by the author to update it according to current events, as well as to modify some of the content for clarity.

^{2.} In addition, the 2022 Conference of Restoration Elders (an unauthorized group that has no authority over independent Restoration branches), which is composed of elders supporting independent Restoration branches, decided that independent Restoration branches are not unified and that action should be taken in the near future to remedy this. (See 2022 Conference of Restoration Elders Notebook, Section 5: CRE Minutes, p. 8.) However, this disunity is not true. While independent Restoration branch governments remain autonomous-because they are independent from one another-many of them support the activities of each other, such as social gatherings, musical concerts, preaching services, teaching, missionary work, reunions, etc. Even priesthood and Church membership in one branch are generally accepted by other branches. In addition, they are mostly united in their belief that they must wait on the Lord for Him—not man—to set His Church in order by bringing forth the next Prophet and the higher quorums of the Church under the power of His Spirit, and bringing together the independent Restoration branches under their leadership.

While the explanations below may be a little detailed for some, they are necessary to understand the need for Restoration branches to remain independent of all factions.

Understanding the Nature Of Apostasy and Factions

To understand the problems in His Church today, it is important to understand the nature of apostasy and factions and the problems they cause. Let's start with apostasy. The Lord's Church apostatizes when its leaders change the Church's doctrine, ordinances, or priesthood authority to what they want—to reflect their will, and not the Lord's will. This change usually occurs over a period of time and can engulf either the entire Church or just the governing body (hierarchy) of the Church. When the entire Church apostatizes, the Lord withdraws His Spirit, and His Church no longer exists upon the earth. Then, it must be completely restored by Him, with the presence of His Spirit, to again exist upon the earth. An example of this is the great apostasy that happened to the Church, which Jesus established in Jerusalem, and then the Lord's restoration of His Church in 1830 through Joseph Smith Jr.

When the hierarchy and some of the members of the Church apostatize, His Church and Spirit still remain with those who do not follow that leadership into apostasy. This "partial" apostasy happened to the original LDS Church after Joseph's death and under Brigham Young's leadership. Their higher quorums (hierarchy) changed Church doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood function, which grieved the Spirit adversely affecting their priesthood authority. Many within the Church followed the apostatized leadership to Utah. However, the true Church remained with the priesthood and the members of the original Church who stayed behind (worshiping in independent branches), even though they were scattered and had no central leadership. It is important to remember that the Church was not dead. The true Church was alive in their branches because they continued the doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood authority given by the Lord to the original Church. However, since the higher quorums of the Church had apostatized, those remaining true to the faith had no authority on their own to organize the higher quorums again. Only the Lord could direct them to do so. He had established those quorums in the original Church through Joseph Smith Jr. and He, not man, would

have to reestablish them again.

Nevertheless, there were those who thought otherwise—J. J. Strang, William Smith, Sidney Rigdon, etc. These men took it upon themselves to establish their own churches (or factions of the original Church), claiming that they were the true successors to the Church established by the Lord through Joseph Smith Jr. And they gathered many of the scattered Saints—who had not gone west with Brigham—to their organizations. Nevertheless, the men who established those factions were not directed by the Lord to do so. As a result, they lost their priesthood authority from the Lord to represent Him under the direction of His Spirit.

In order for His Church to again function in its fullest authority to bring about Zion, the Lord called upon priesthood men from the original Church who had rejected the authority of the factions. He called upon men such as Jason W. Briggs and Zenos H. Gurley Sr. to wait upon Him to set His Church in order. When it was time, He called them to reorganize His Church³ with the higher quorums and eventually a Prophet—of the father-to-son lineage of Joseph Smith Jr.⁴—to lead it. Another "partial" apostasy—very similar to the apostasy of 1844 described above—occurred in the Reorganization in our day, which will be discussed a little later.

So we see from history, the pattern that the Lord uses to recover His Church from apostasy. Whether His Church entirely apostatizes, or whether the leadership and only some members apostatize, the Lord always recovers His Church in the same manner. First, the Lord initiates the recovery from on High by the *power* of His Spirit. Second, once the Lord establishes His Church, He gives His Spirit to it in power through the gifts of His Spirit and angelic ministry to authenticate it as His work and not that of man. Thus, the pattern is that the Lord recovers His Church by His authority through the power of His Spirit. He did this with Joseph Smith Jr. and the 1830 Church, as well as with Jason W. Briggs, Zenos H. Gurley Sr., and the Reorganization. As stated before, it is His Church and only He has the authority to create it and

^{3.} For detailed information about the beginning of the Reorganization, see RLDS *History of the Church* 3:200–226 or *Vision* issues 87–90.

^{4.} Please note that there could be hundreds of men who exist today who are of the father-to-son lineage of Joseph Smith Jr. See Dale Volskay, "The Choosing of the Next Prophet," *Vision* 50 [August 2005]: 13–14; see also Vance Snively, "The Next Prophet," *Vision* 94 [September 2017]: 13–16.

sustain it with His Spirit. The Lord stated to His servant Joseph Smith Jr. in 1831 that He gives "a pattern in all things, that ye may not be deceived; for Satan is abroad in the land, and he goeth forth deceiving the nations" (DC 52:4b). Thus, according to the pattern the Lord has given, *only He*—not man—has the authority or power to organize His Church.⁵

Factions, as mentioned above, have very similar characteristics to the Church when it apostatizes. Factions are groups that break away from the true Church and establish a separate organization built up by men-not God. They usually make changes in doctrine, ordinances, or priesthood authority—as does an apostatized church. (This was the case with the factions organized after Joseph's death.) However, even if they do not, the fact that they have sought to set the Church in order according to their will—and not the Lord's—means that they are in error by not following the pattern the Lord has given. What is important to remember is that when a faction breaks off from the true Church—just like when the true Church apostatizes—the Lord withdraws His Spirit and the authority to represent Him. He does so because they are no longer His Church. And the Spirit only bears record of God's work, not man's work.

We, who have roots in the Reorganization, should be keenly aware that factions do not have God's authority to represent Him. The Lord did not continue His Church through any of the factions arising after Joseph's death. Instead, He chose to reorganize the original Church using priesthood who had rejected the authority of factions and factional priesthood to represent God. Similarly, in 1859, the Lord spoke to Joseph Smith III in answer to his inquiry as to which of the many groups of the Restoration to join. In answer, the Lord told him, "The Saints reorganizing at Zarahemla, and other places, is the only organized portion of the church accepted by me. I have given them my Spirit and will continue to do so while they remain humble and faithful" (RLDS History of the Church 3:263; italics added). Only the Reorganization was acceptable to the Lord as His Church. This is a statement from the Lord against the authority of factions and factional priesthood to represent His will in teaching and preaching His Gospel and in performing the ordinances of His Church.

Understanding the Problems In His Church Today

The divisional problems in the Lord's Church today are directly related to the problems caused by apostasy and factions as discussed above. As a brief summary of events, the liberal movement⁶ within the RLDS hierarchy began to take solid root in about 1958, which coincides with W. Wallace Smith's ordination as Prophet of the Church. The movement soon progressed into all of the higher quorums of the Church, as well as the Religious Education Department, The Saints' Herald, and the History Department at Graceland College.⁷ Most fundamental beliefs of the Church were questioned by this liberal movement, and members were coerced by Church leaders to accept their liberal interpretation of standard Church beliefs, doctrine, and ordinances—or leave.

By the 1980s, the liberal interpretation of the Church's fundamental beliefs became the norm of the higher quorums and a majority of membership. In 1984, a "revelation" from Wallace B. Smith was presented to the Church authorizing the ordination of women to the priesthood, which was approved by a majority of Conference delegates. Within a few years, Restoration branches were started by those who either voluntarily left the RLDS liberal hierarchy or were locked out of their churches for not supporting them. Those who left did not leave the true RLDS Church. They only left the liberal hierarchy. In fact, according to the suggestion of Richard Price⁸, they established Restoration branches for the purpose of continuing the doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood authority of the true Church.9

While many of the priesthood were silenced by the liberal RLDS leaders for this action, those silences were

^{5.} For more information about this pattern, see Vance Snively, "God's Pattern to Establish His Church," *Vision* 99 (June 2019):17–20.

^{6.} This liberal movement was the systematic replacement of fundamental RLDS beliefs with liberal Protestant theology.

^{7.} The date of 1958 and the specific progression of the liberal movement within the RLDS Church, as stated above, were indicated by William (Bill) D. Russell. As a self-admitted, early promoter of this liberal movement, he gave this information in a presentation at a Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, UT, in the year 2000. The title of the presentation was "The Decade of the Sixties: The Early Struggles in the RLDS Shift from Sect to Denomination."

^{8.} Richard Price began the concept of Restoration branches under the direction of the Spirit.

^{9.} For more information on the purpose of Restoration branches, see *Action Time* and *Restoration Branches Movement*, both by Richard Price and assisted by Larry Harlacher. Both of these resources may be purchased at the Restoration Bookstore or on-line at www.restorationbookstore.org.

not recognized by the Restoration branches. The liberal RLDS leaders were in apostasy and had no authority to silence priesthood solely because they were supporting the true doctrine of the Reorganization, which is the same true doctrine restored by God through Joseph Smith Jr. The liberal RLDS hierarchy took the remaining church—including the higher quorums—further into apostasy and became the Community of Christ. This left the Restoration branches as the *only continuance* of the true RLDS Church. Again, it is important to remember that the Church was not dead. The true Church was alive in the Restoration branches because they continued the doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood authority given by the Lord to the original Church.

At first, the Restoration branches were autonomous, with no higher organized Church structure. They were independent from the liberal RLDS Church hierarchy and any governing organization of Restoration branches. Thus, they were referred to as independent Restoration branches. According to the pattern established by the Lord in reorganizing the Church, they had no authority to call priesthood to higher offices than elder, and no authority to organize the higher quorums of the Church, unless He initiated that action as He did in 1853. Thus, independent Restoration branches were to wait for the Lord—not man—to again set the higher quorums of His Church in order as He did with the Reorganization.

Unfortunately, all independent Restoration branches and priesthood did not stick to their purpose. Some became impatient with the Lord in bringing His Church into full order and thought that if they moved out in faith, the Lord would follow them. Some thought it was their duty as elders to set the higher quorums of the Church in order. As a result, over the years, several factions (about thirteen) were formed from the remaining RLDS Church. In effect, they broke off from the true Church and became churches of their own-most with higher quorums including prophets, apostles, high priests, seventies, etc. Thus, they lost the authority of God to represent Him. Of course, they thought that they were the true Church and that the Lord had organized them. However, none were (or are, for those still in existence) the Lord's true Church. We know this because the Lord never authenticated them with the powerful presence of His Spirit, as it is His pattern to do. Whenever He establishes His Church on earth, He gives His Spirit in power to it through the gifts of the Spirit and angelic ministry. He does so in order to authenticate it as His

work and not that of man.10

However, the vast majority of these factions have since failed, which is the fate of all factions. According to Jason W. Briggs, on the last day of the April 1853 Conference (which reorganized the Church except for the highest quorum—the First Presidency) many gifts of the Spirit were manifest. He wrote:

It had been declared through the gifts [of the Spirit] that the various organizations of Latter Day Saints, under the lead of J. J. Strang, J. C. Brewster, Baneemy, Alpheus Cutler, Lyman Wight, Sidney Rigdon, Brigham Young, and others, together with some yet to arise, should one after another come to naught, and cease to be. (RLDS History of the Church 3:224; italics added)

In fulfillment of this prophecy, the factions of the original LDS Church (including those mentioned in this prophecy) have, for the most part, become extinct or almost so. Of course, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (followers of Brigham Young) is still very strong. However, in recent years, large numbers of members have been leaving their church. This is, in part, due to dissatisfaction with leadership control, as well as believing that Joseph Smith Jr. was not a polygamist—which is in direct opposition to their present-day church teachings. So today, we continue to witness, before our very eyes, the fulfillment of this prophecy happening to the remaining factions of the original Church. In addition, the phrase "together with some yet to arise," means that all factions of the RLDS Church over time will also "cease to be." Since most of the factions of the RLDS Church to date no longer exist, we can expect that all RLDS factions current and future—will meet this same fate, because God does not lie.

We see, then, that the problems in the Church today greatly parallel those in the Church directly after Joseph's death. The apostate church at that time fled to Utah, while the apostate church of our time fled into the Community of Christ. Some of the leaders after Joseph's death built up churches unto themselves (factions) and brought into them many of those left from the original Church (worshiping in independent branches) who did not go west with Brigham Young. Today, some of the RLDS priesthood and members—who did not go into the Community of Christ—built

^{10.} Again, see Vance Snively, "God's Pattern to Establish His Church," *Vision* 99 (June 2019):17–20.

up churches unto themselves (factions) and brought into them many who were associated with independent Restoration branches. After Joseph's death, the Lord rejected the authority of the factions to represent Him, and He chose those to reorganize His Church who were *not* associated with the factions. Thus, today, the Lord rejects the authority of the factions and their priesthood, and He will use *only* those of His true Church (independent Restoration branches who seek to do His will) to set the higher quorums of His Church in order, strictly under His direction.

Conclusion

The division in the Church today is not because we refuse to get along, to love one another, or to be "of one heart and of one mind." As stated earlier, the Saints desire to have a united and organized RLDS Church again, with the higher quorums and the powerful presence of the Lord's Spirit. The problem is that we continue to make the same mistakes of the past. We continue to run ahead of the Lord and try to do what we think is right for the Church. However, as history shows, this only creates more division and disunity because the Lord is not doing it—we are.

If independent Restoration branches either unite to establish a church under the direction of men—and not God—or, embrace any part of factions (worship together, accept their priesthood authority, or accept their ordinances) they will lose their authority to represent the Lord as His true Church. Thus, His Spirit will be withdrawn from them, and they will go into apostasy. This cry for unity, while seemingly good on the surface, is an invitation for the destruction of His true Church. We do not need more factions or apostasies. We need the fullness of the Lord's true Church again upon the earth, and only He can do this by restoring its higher quorums by the power of His Spirit.

So, should the independent Restoration branches remain independent? Absolutely! As shown above, independent Restoration branches are the *only continuance* of the true RLDS Church, if they continue the doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood authority of the original Church—established by the Lord through Joseph Smith Jr. in 1830 and continued in the Reorganization of 1860. In addition, they continue His Church when *they wait upon the Lord* to set in order its higher quorums, which He will do in time. They need

to continue to be patient and follow the advice the Lord gave to Jason W. Briggs in 1851.

Let the elders . . . [not] faint in the discharge of duty, which is to preach my gospel as revealed in the record of the Jews, and the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants; and cry repentance and remission of sins through obedience to the gospel, and I will sustain them, and give them my Spirit; and in mine own due time will I call upon the seed of Joseph Smith, and will bring one forth, and he shall be mighty and strong, and he shall preside over the high priesthood of my church; and then shall the quorums assemble, and the pure in heart shall gather. (RLDS History of the Church 3:201; italics added)

May we in independent Restoration branches remain independent and stay the course—waiting for the Lord to set in order the higher quorums of His Church. As we do, may we continue to strive to *teach* and live the fullness of the Gospel. As the Lord told the Church in 1832:

I give unto you a commandment, that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom; teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God. (DC 85:21b)

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you, and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him: for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. (DC 85:18; italics added)

If we strive to keep His commandments and be faithful to the Lord and the Gospel that He has restored to the earth, only then can Zion be (see Genesis 9:21–23). Only then can we have true unity under the direction of the Lord's Spirit—being "of one heart and of one mind," dwelling in *righteousness* with no poor among us (see Genesis 7:23). ("Independent Restoration Branches Must Remain Independent," *Vision* 99 [June 2019]: 12–16; revised by the author)