

Worship Developments in Moderate Mormonism

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Latter Day Saintism: New Testament or Old Testament Roots?

Joseph Smith and his followers were convinced that the movement they were forming was a recovery or more accurately a *restoration* of what they believed to be the original church founded by Jesus. In their efforts to re-create such a time, they turned even further back, to an imagined unity from the beginning of time and before. Consequentially, Latter Day Saints had a preoccupation with things Hebraic. The following represents a summary of findings by Barbara J. Higdon in her paper *Judaism, Christianity, and The Restoration: An Institutional Identity Crisis*.

The church moved west into the Promised Land as Moses and the children of Israel had done. They crossed the Missouri as the Israelites had crossed the Jordan. A dozen early hymns, the best of which, is still beloved "Redeemer of Israel" celebrated the literal and figurative role of the Children of Israel coming out of Egypt. Section 22:24b of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, purporting to be a revelation to Moses, designated Joseph Smith as another Moses:

And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught, and take many of them from the book which you shall write, behold I will raise up another like unto you [Moses], and they shall be had again among the children of men, among even as many as shall believe.¹

The priesthood office of Patriarch from the Old Testament was grafted to the New Testament list of priesthood offices. The Old Testament practice of polygamy came to be considered by some Mormons, at least, as a part of an unchanging covenant. Section 86 of the Doctrine and Covenants provided real - albeit brief - dietary suggestions.

The assignment of tribal identity (usually Ephraim, infrequently Manaseh, rarely Joseph) was part of the patriarchal blessing given to church members. The study of the Hebrew language was an early priority in training priesthood. Joseph's Smith's 1835 *Lectures on Faith*, the stated purpose of which was to convey an understanding of the doctrine of Christ, contains twice as many scripture references to the Old Testament as to the New.

Higdon states that Sterling McMurrin's analysis of Mormon theology suggests a paradigm which, although unique, is much closer to the Hebraic position than to the Christian. McMurrin notes that a finitistic concept of God and the denial of the traditional Christian doctrines of original sin and salvation by grace characterise Mormonism. Finally, Higdon suggests that the practice of

tithing and emphasis on the law and the belief that the American Indian was of Hebraic descent gave final form to a neo-Israelite mind-set.²

With this background, let us turn now to a brief snapshot of early Latter Day Saint worship and sacramental theology.

From Sacrament to “Non-sacramental Alternative.”

Roman Catholic worship has been traditionally centered in the eucharist as the liturgical focal point of the mass. Celebration of the mass was deemed a sacrament because of its inherent salvific power. In 1520 Martin Luther’s treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* challenged the whole system of late-medieval worship:

Herein Luther attacked the whole cradle-to-grave system of sacramental ministration as built on false premises and contrary to the word of God. Only the sacrament of baptism did he relent his attack . . . The final consequence was to move the central focus of Christian worship for Protestants from worship—which, for lay people, had been almost entirely the sacraments — to one in which the sacraments became occasional intruders on a normal pattern of worship. No greater shift has ever occurred in Christian worship, either East or West.³

The determinative factor that established a rite as a sacrament in the thirteenth century was the phrase “instituted by Christ.” Scripture then became the voice, at least for Luther that authorized what was sacrament.

When he [Luther] confronts the sacramental system, he finds that only two or three qualify as sacraments in having “both the divinely instituted sign and promise of forgiveness of sins”. The “promise” is the key to Luther’s concept of sacraments, and for him it means a statement found in scripture. By this standard—one of biblical literalism, to be sure—only baptism and the eucharist deserve the title “sacrament.”⁴

The major point here is that Luther’s challenge struck a deciding note for Protestant worship, historically and at present by establishing a liturgical practice that set the eucharist aside as its central worship. James F. White in *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* makes this point adding, “we might seriously consider labeling Protestant worship the “non-sacramental alternative.”⁵

White looks at Protestant worship through seven categories: people, piety, time, place, prayer, preaching, and music.⁶ For White, “people are the main liturgical document” and he places “people” diagrammatically in the middle in that they relate “both to the circumstance of worship (on the left) and the acts of worship (on the right).”⁷



Although it can be argued that *priesthood* replaced *people* as the main liturgical document in early Latter Day Saint worship, the church originally mirrored the Protestant worship patterns of its day. Yet as we will see, there was a remarkable reframing, a dramatic shift in its sacramental theology. Latter Day Saintism inherited not only the philosophical scripts of the nineteenth century, but also the emerging worship styles influenced by revivalism and life on the American frontier. An examination of early Latter Day Saint worship must begin with an understanding of the *Free Church Liturgy* which emerged from the Enlightenment.

From Non-sacramental Alternative to “Sacramental Imperative”

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”—Santayana

Early Latter Day Saint liturgy was an expression of *frontier worship*, a worship pattern White describes as the "non-sacramental alternative". Nineteenth century Protestant worship became a liturgy of *words* as opposed to a drama of sacramental acts. Sacramental acts were by no means dead, but they were secondary to proclamation, praise and prayer. This was a reflection of: (1) the Enlightenment's drive to place reason on the throne of power, (2) a conviction that righteous teaching would produce a righteous society, and (3) the new American nation's rejection of old forms of authority.

It is no surprise then that this conviction riveted developing Latter Day Saint theology in a works-obedience soteriology. Whether the emphasis of salvation by works was a magnification of Joseph Smith's personal view of salvific orientation or was simply a product of the pervasive work-ethic encouraged by the American romance with Manifest Destiny, is debatable. Regardless of its origin, the Saints' salvation-by-works stance paved the way for the movement's shift toward a worship style centred in bizarre sacramental 'saving' acts. What had perhaps, begun in the Mormon communities of Kirtland and Far West as a ritualistic gesture—the washing of feet, the anointing, statements of obedience and loyalty—would become mandated beliefs in the settlement of Nauvoo. To achieve God's Kingdom on earth would require an unusual people who would go to unusual lengths to succeed and who would worship in unusual ways.

It is an over-simplification, however, to cite works/obedience soteriology as the only causative factor of the church's increasing emphasis on sacramental salvific acts. The need for security was another important influential component. The early Saints had suffered rejection,

persecution, financial ruin and loss of loved ones as they had been forcefully driven from one settlement to the next. There was an ever-growing need for a promise of security and predictability that seemed desperately lacking in their earthly life. The evolving ritualized Temple ministries would provide divine assurance and a promised resolution to theodicy. Thus the permissive worship rituals of Kirtland became salvific requirements in Nauvoo; the non-sacramental alternative became the *sacramental imperative*.

U-Turn to Orthodoxy

Following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith Jr. and fragmentation of the church, those that eventually gathered under the Reorganized Latter Day Saints banner were a people somewhere between traditional Mormonism and Protestantism. They were torn between two conflicting influences. They wanted to gain gentile (Protestant and Catholic Christians) respectability while at the same time lay claim to their Mormon legacy and legitimacy. Historian Alma R. Blair says the Reorganization resolved its competing directional demands by taking a "middle ground of doctrine, beliefs and structure."⁸ The middle ground thesis explains why the Reorganized church has traditionally seen itself as a projection or succession of the Kirtland era of Mormonism and its discomfort and hence avoidance of comparisons with the church's Nauvoo period.

The Reorganization in essence saw the Nauvoo period as a latter day apostasy of the Restoration. The esoteric rites and doctrines of Nauvoo were evidence of a fallen church. The Reorganization was therefore the means of purifying the institution by bringing it back to what they believed were the New Testament six principles of the gospel: faith, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement. Thus, they distanced themselves from temple rituals and returned to orthodox Frontier Worship.

The Reorganized Saints, "a people somewhere between," tried to bridge the gap with non-Mormon Christianity. Mormonism had divided the world into Saints and Gentiles. The young Reorganized church faced the challenge of revering its legitimate Mormon heritage, declaring emerging aberrant Mormon practices free of Joseph's influence, while at the same time desiring to be seen as a *reasonable* movement to other Christians or *Gentiles*.

A reasonable Christian movement would insist that its beliefs and practices were consistent with the New Testament and that its worship life was not foreign to other Christian movements. The Reorganization continued to uphold its belief in modern day revelation but demystified it by asserting that inspiration was connected to other human faculties. Normal rational judgement was

not over-shadowed or denied by the process of divine inspiration. They emphasized education and a promise of freedom of thought.

The Reorganization's emphasis on free moral agency or freedom of choice cohered with the American thirst for individuality and freedom, sending a clear message to non-Mormons that the movement posed no political threat as its members were encouraged to vote according to their conscience, and not as a political block. The hope was that the church would be seen as a valid expression of Christianity rather than as a movement bent on political domination. The message was—*we are a reasonable people; we are a reasonable religious body.*

But the Reorganized church could not solely depend on reasonableness to secure its acceptance by mainstream Christianity. It would have to respond to the unorthodox legacy of Nauvoo worship or forever remain a "people somewhere between". The Reorganization's rejection of Nauvoo's unusual doctrines and practices placed the church on a liturgical *U-turn*—a return to Christian orthodox theology and sacramental liturgy. This about-face, however, did not discourage the eventual co-joining of several worship acts (marriage, blessing of infants, administration to the sick, ordination, and the evangelist's [patriarchal] blessing) with baptism, confirmation and the Lord's Supper as sacraments.

What Does Our History Say to Us?

If nothing else our history tells us that as a people responsive to divine revelation we have certainly been imaginative and open to change. We have not hesitated to *reframe* orthodox perspectives sacramental and otherwise. It seems to be in our DNA. Though not addressed in the foregoing historical summary, we also *reframed* our philosophical outlook from a predominantly providential perspective (i.e., a 19th century emphasis on Manifest Destiny and Divine Providence seen by the early saints thru the lens of the one-true church) to progress philosophy.

Progress philosophy played its own role in shaping what was understood as sacrament. Progress philosophy entertained individual freedom of thought and action toward a desired societal end as opposed to an attitude of blind acceptance or unquestioned loyalty to a cause or a leader en route to a predetermined end. Thus the Reorganization reframed its salvific perspective in light of humanity's crucial role in determining history. By the late twentieth century obedience-works soteriology gradually diminished as the dominant mindset while salvation by

God's grace increased. In other words, one's salvation was no longer contingent upon good works including sacramental ritual.

Thus sacrament as salvific necessity waned and the close of the twentieth century saw people replace priesthood as the main liturgical document. Worship roles once occupied exclusively by the ordained were now everyone's venue—officiating in sacraments being the only exclusion. Again, if sacraments are not mandated salvific rites, it follows that the term sacrament is not limited to baptism, confirmation and the Lord's Supper or eucharist. As can be seen by the reframing of the evangelist's blessing we continue to be sacramentally creative.

Is it a quantum leap to suggest that our "all things are spiritual" credo is the seedbed from which eight rituals have sprung into sacrament status? If so, we must remember that this same soil produced strange esoteric rites that required weeding out. How does our sacramental garden grow? Sometimes without our help. Like other sacred practices preceding it, the reframing of the evangelist's blessings seems to have been given a life of its own. No revelatory document, no prophetic utterance by president-prophet, no church council statement, no imprimatur, no official pronouncement heralds its inception. It simply "is." Apparently that which is seen as sacramental easily graduates to a sacrament and ordinance. But are these terms progressive stages, interchangeable expressions or fundamentally different?

Sacramental? Sacrament? Ordinance? — *One and the Same or Shades Apart?*

At the outset of this chapter, I stated "*a sacrament is always a blessing, but a blessing is not always a sacrament.*" We frequently use the terms sacramental, sacrament and ordinance inter-changeably, but they are not synonyms. What do we mean when we say something is sacramental?

Sacramentalism

All elements of worship—prayers, hymns, scripture readings, sermons, liturgical dance, drama, testimony, silence etc. —are *potentially* sacramental. That is, they can serve as a means for human/divine encounter wherein worshippers experience a lively awareness of God's presence and abiding grace. Their ability to do so depends upon a myriad of subjective dynamics not the least of which is the receptivity of the worshipper. Choir anthems can soar, preachers mesmerize, eloquent prayers and benedictions pronounced—yet fail to be sacred to a worshipper claimed by competing interests. In other words, sacramentalism is experiential; it

occurs when the Spiritual breaks in and the temporal is prepared to receive it. This means of course that sacramental experience is not limited to stain glass windows and pews. Alfred H. Yale and Charles E. Brockway in *Ordinances and Sacraments of the Church* distinguish between sacraments and sacramentalism:

When we speak of sacraments in the church we are not speaking of sacramentalism. In its broad sense, sacramentalism is ascribing to any experience which brings a person to a worship of God, sacramental overtones. In this sense, a person may have a sacramental experience as he observes a beautiful sunset.⁹

Ordinances

Ordinance is derived from the Latin word *ordinans* meaning to put in order.¹⁰ Most dictionary definitions will include reference to a religious act and we commonly use the term interchangeably with sacrament. Specifically ordinance refers to the divine authority empowering a sacred rite and the orderliness with which it is celebrated. Ordinance then has to do with the inception and performance of a sacrament. According to Yale and Brockway, however, the word ordinance has broader implications. In its widest context it may be used to describe any divine unction that benefits human kind:

An ordinance of God is any decree or commandment of god which has to do with ordering the universe for the good of mankind. . . . This may take the form of preaching, rites, or other ministry. . . . Webster defines an ordinance as that which is decreed or regulated by one having authority, as by God—a prescribed practice or usage.¹¹

Four aspects of ordinances:

1. An ordinance may be God's fixed purpose and appointment which affects the state of action and interaction of his (sic) whole creation (e.g. the laws of the universe)
2. Ordinances have to do with God's commandments . . . Thus, through these we can note that God's decrees are ordinances in a broader sense than those found in rites and ceremonies.
3. God's appointing power is referred to as being an ordinance.
4. It is in the realm of worship that most, persons think of ordinances . . . certain rites.¹²

Sacrament

We have said that the term ordinance (in reference to a sacrament) denotes divine appointment and orderliness of a sacred rite. Sacrament is both the celebration and affect of the rite. Put another way, ordinance is the procedure or means (the acting-out or mechanics) of the worship ritual, while sacrament is what transpires in the mind, heart and soul of the worshipper during divine encounter. One can participate in an ordinance and not experience sacrament. For example, I can follow all the proper procedures of the Lord's supper. I can kneel for the blessing of the bread and wine and partake of these emblems, yet fail to celebrate sacrament. If my mind is focused on other issues, if I am merely going through the *motions* of the communion

meal—my experience will not be sacramental let alone sacrament. Sacrament involves covenant, a two-way divine communication. Sacrament is restoring. Sacrament in renewing. Sacrament is transforming. Sacrament is life giving. Yale and Brockway list the following to distinguish sacraments from ordinances:

1. The symbol. There must be one or more symbols used in the sacrament.
2. The ordinance (commandment).
3. The covenant—The agreement between two parties, mankind and God free of coercion or imposition of will.
4. The sacrifice. “Any sacramental experience has a note of sacrifice, the sense of an offering made to God.”
5. The rite. In the sacred ceremony some of the details may vary but other parts are fixed.
6. The intermediary.
7. The recipient. The person must comprehend the total act in relation to its parts.¹³

Peter Judd in *The Sacraments: An Exploration into Their Meaning and Practice in the RLDS Church* states that “each sacrament has its own unique characteristics.” He lists the following characteristics of all sacraments clarifying that each characteristic may not be equally evident in each sacrament¹⁴:

1. The sacraments are vehicles of God’s action and revelation in the lives of humans.
2. In the sacraments Christ is present
3. In the sacraments the church is renewed.
4. The sacraments are expressions of the covenant relationship between God and humanity.
5. The sacraments are performed in response to Christ’s instruction.
6. The sacraments provide opportunity for remembering Christ.
7. The sacraments are acts of obedience to God.
8. The sacraments use common things to symbolize intangible reality.
9. The sacraments are the acts of the corporate body. When one individual is blessed, baptized, or confirmed, the whole body of the church participates in the sacrament.
10. The sacraments serve as avenues to new life.
11. The sacraments are ritual acts with specified procedures.¹⁵

Judd suggests five elements usually expressed when the sacraments are celebrated:

1. The expression of praise and thanksgiving.
2. The acknowledgment of human dependency on God (repentance and confession are received by God with love, forgiveness, and acceptance.)
3. Our preparation for receiving God through the sacraments (contemplation of the meaning and importance of the ritual act itself.)
4. The sacrament is celebrated. God gives and we receive.
5. Our response to God’s action in the sacrament (we affirm our desire and willingness to participate fully in the divine mission to which we have been called).¹⁶

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Doctrine and Covenants (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1970) Section 22:24b, p. 65.
- ² I have summarized Barbara Higdon's findings in her paper "*Judaism, Christianity, and The Restoration: An Institutional Identity Crisis*".
- ³ James F. White, Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 36–37
- ⁴ White, *Protestant Worship*, p. 38
- ⁵ White, *Protestant Worship* p. 14
- ⁶ White's category of time is germane to the individual evangelist's blessing which seeks to meet needs at various points within what he describes as the "*lifetime cycle or important rites of passage*." White states:
 There are four main cycles of liturgical time: daily, weekly, yearly, and lifetime. The daily cycle involves such matters as public, family, or private prayer. What happens on Sundays (or the Sabbath) and other days of the week determines the weekly cycle. The yearly cycle may concern such matters as . . . various punctuations of time made through the Christian year . . . The lifetime cycle involves important rites of passage . . . baptism . . . confirmation, marriage, ordination, healing, and Christian burial all derive their chief meaning on which they occur in the course of a person's life. (White, *Protestant Worship*, pp.)⁶
- ⁷ White, *Protestant Worship*, p. 16
- ⁸ Alma R. Blair, "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormons," The Restoration Movement, ed. F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, F. Henry Edwards, (Lawrence Kansas, Colorado Press, 1973) p. 210.
- ⁹ Alfred H. Yale and Charles E. Brockway, Ordinances and Sacraments of the Church (Independence, Missouri: Herald House Publishing, 1962), p. 13
- ¹⁰ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. William Morris Ed., (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), p. 925
- ¹¹ Yale and Brockway, "*Ordinances and Sacraments*" pp. 8- 9
- ¹² Yale and Brockway, "*Ordinances and Sacraments*" pp. 9 - 10
- ¹³ Yale and Brockway, "*Ordinances and Sacraments*" pp. 14 - 15
- ¹⁴ Peter A. Judd, The Sacraments: An Exploration into Their Meaning and Practice in the RLDS Church (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1992 Revised Edition), p. 12
- ¹⁵ Peter A. Judd, "*The Sacraments*", pp. 12 -17
- ¹⁶ Peter A. Judd, "*The Sacraments*", pp. 18 - 19