



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

## **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."

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter A. Judd and A. Bruce Lindgren, *An Introduction to the Saints Church* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1976), Chapter 5: "Revelation," 55–64.

<sup>2</sup> "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.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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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<sup>3</sup> 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> F. Henry Edwards, *Fundamentals: Enduring Convictions of the Restoration*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1948), 256.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur A. Oakman, “Theology: Its Place and Meaning,” *Saints Herald* (May 1, 1966): 25.

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."<sup>6</sup>

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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<sup>6</sup> "For Everyone Born," *Community of Christ Sings*, 285.

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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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<sup>7</sup> “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."<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1: *The Existence of God, Part One: Questions 1–13* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 193–94.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Freedom of a Christian* in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 54–55.

<sup>11</sup> See “Scripture in Community of Christ,” Affirmations 1, 2, 4, and 5, in *Sharing in Community of Christ*, 63–64; <http://www.cofchrist.org/scripture-in-community-of-christ>

<sup>12</sup> *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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> "Standard of Authority," General Conference Resolution 222, *World Conference Resolutions*, located at [www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/WCR-Texts-July2019.pdf](http://www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/WCR-Texts-July2019.pdf)

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.<sup>14</sup> 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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<sup>14</sup> William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 42.

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.

Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994), chapter 9.

Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), Chapter 5: "Scripture and Its Trajectories," 76–103

Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), Chapter 2: "The Meaning of Revelation," 21–45.

### **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.”<sup>15</sup> 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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<sup>15</sup> John English, SJ, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 60.