
Book Reviews

Andrew Bolton and Casey Paul Griffiths, eds. *Restorations: Scholars in Dialogue from Community of Christ and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 2023. 256 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1950304318.

Reviewed by Steven L. Shields

Restorations is the newest book project that attempts to compare Community of Christ (CofC) with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). There have been many such books that have come before. I was commissioned in the late 1980s by the CofC First Presidency to write a new comparison that was hopefully more objective than previous CofC publications. I missed the boat on several points. Richard G. Moore, who writes the introduction to this current book and participated in the conversations, also published a comparison book in the early 2010s.

The book we now consider, unlike previous comparison books, is a disparate collection of essays on doctrinal topics that might seem to be common to both denominations, but in fact, are common in name only. In this book, there is no thesis being argued, few conclusions made, except comments along the lines of it being interesting to hear the viewpoint.

The LDS scholars are, for the most part, employees of the church as professors at Brigham Young University's religion department, where adherence to the church's message is a requirement of employment. Scholars from the CofC realm are trained in a broad range of fields and work in various jobs, not necessarily for the church. In any event, CofC does not require a test of faith for employment. The two groups of scholars couldn't be more different.

I believe dialogue is usually a good thing. However, dialogue must extend beyond mere conversation. Only through deeper, more substantive engagement with others can understanding emerge. This has been the goal of the editors of this volume and the group that met over several years to discuss, listen to, and learn

from one another. However, I wonder if the dialogue to which I refer was, in fact, achieved.

Both the LDS church and CofC have institutional positions. However, those positions are markedly different. For the LDS, institutional declarations on all matters of faith take precedence over personal beliefs in the rare instances of any differences. CofC's institutional position is to avoid concrete institutional positions on matters of faith. Thus, for CofC members, personal beliefs are rarely, if at all, uniform, and they have the freedom to express those differences. Here's where a key challenge for this volume emerges. The LDS church adheres to and promotes an insular interpretation of history and beliefs. They hold fast to a singular understanding of how things came to be and how things must always be. On the other hand, CofC eschews absolutist interpretations of the past and willingly, though sometimes painfully, develops new understandings of who and what God and the church are and are meant to be. LDS folks criticize CofC folks for adapting to societal changes rather than holding fast to perceived universal truths. CofC folks criticize the LDS for a relatively tight-fisted insistence that plenary universal truths even exist.

I believe this is the crux of the problem with this volume. The two different DNAs at play among the conversationalists have hindered the development of genuine understanding. The LDS church insists on one true church (institution), only one authoritative priesthood, and that Joseph Smith Jr. received or learned information given to him by God without human intervention. CofC understanding is almost diametrically opposite in its expression and understanding.

Yet, at the same time, some of the LDS writers in this volume seem to question such an all-or-nothing, plenary view, but do not go so far as to reject it outright. With LDS DNA at play—and for many it's subconscious—most LDS folks, be they scholars, church leaders, or laypersons, will insist their view is the only legitimate view and demand that others adopt their view. Even though most LDS will politely listen to others, at least one writer inferred that Community of Christ is devoid of legitimate priesthood authority, so at best its adherents would have a lesser salvation than LDS counterparts. Based on this, the outcome of the dialogue appears not to have achieved the lofty goals of fostering understanding and accepting others' right to believe differently.

CofC DNA is so dissimilar to the LDS that I believe most CofC members, especially the writers in this book, reject plenary inspiration, as well as the idea of a singular true church or sole authority over salvation. Further, the role of Joseph Smith Jr. is vastly different. CofC has stridently tried to avoid concrete declarations on matters of belief. Even among the highest-ranking leaders of the church, one will be hard pressed to find uniformity of belief on most of the topics considered in this book.

Most of us in the Smith-Rigdon movement, when comparing one another's institutions, tend to default to polity matters, that is, church structure with a prophet, and so forth, as well as key doctrinal matters that have been pervasive of the movement for now almost 200 years (Zion, first vision, priesthood, salvation, the nature of God and humanity). Thus, any hope of an ecumenical or interfaith conversation gets bogged down because the rubric of interpretation is different for each group. For a genuine dialogue to take place, the most basic beginning point ought to be an agreement on the interpretation rubric. This means a conversation between friends of two vastly different DNA structures would best be focused on foundational interpretive matters. The doctrine-based approach is over-simplistic.

In my reading of these essays, the two parties often talked past each other, neither comprehending the deeper differences that extend beyond doctrinal expression. Sometimes this showed up in what may be basic errors of understanding. For example, one CofC writer talked about the LDS church's canonization of the "first vision" in the "Book of Moses" (49), but it is actually in the "Pearl of Great Price," a fourth book of LDS scripture.

I believe that any future dialogue should first focus on the basics of what constitutes scripture (and not just the names of books), because this foundational point hinges on all other doctrines and understanding of what it means to follow Christ. While there are three books with common titles, the LDS have a larger canon that extends beyond their four standard works, including statements of the leading authorities of the church (where all the First Presidency and twelve apostles are declared to be prophets, seers, and revelators), with a focus on declarations of the "living prophet." The LDS church gives equal weight to the three books sourced from Joseph Smith Jr. (Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price) but in some ways still views the Bible as deficient.

CofC has three standard books (the Pearl of Great Price having emerged long after the two movements went in separate directions). The CofC canon is narrower, though many CofC people like to think that the current edition of the hymnal (of whatever era it may be) constitutes a sort of book of scripture. CofC follows a stricter view than the LDS in that only the single prophet-president can contribute words of counsel to the church. However, unlike the LDS, CofC periodically canonizes some of these documents as sections in the Doctrine and Covenants. I don't know anyone in CofC who would extend such prophet, seer, or revelator authority to other members of the First Presidency or members of the Council of Twelve. I certainly do not. For CofC, the Bible is the preeminent essential foundation, along with more contemporary sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, as they tend to reflect modern-day matters of importance. For most, the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith are, at best, footnotes in history.

The next level of discussion between this group or others could perhaps focus on the inherent DNA differences and develop, first, a mutually acceptable rubric of interpretation, rather than “you tell me your position, and I’ll tell you mine.” There is a myriad of unasked and unanswered questions lacking in this book. While LDS writers often questioned their CofC counterparts, the same was not generally true in reverse.

Such a dialogue, as proposed by the organizers, surely requires questions to be asked and basic assumptions to be challenged. A genuine dialogue cannot simply stop at each group declaring what they think or what their institution declares. Thus, I am hopeful that further discussions might produce such an exchange.

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