



Learning From the Past: **Finding Inspiration in the Community of Christ Archives**

The distinguished historian of church creeds, Jaroslav Pelikan, once stated that “we do well to recognize as infantile an attitude toward our parents that regards them as all-wise or all-powerful and that is blind to their human foibles. But we must recognize no less that it is adolescent, once we have discovered those foibles, to deny our parents the respect and reverence that is their due for having been, under God, the means through which has come the only life we have. Maturity in our relation to our parents consists in going beyond both a belief in their omniscience and a disdain for their weakness, to an understanding and a gratitude for their decisive part in the ongoing process in which now we, too, must take our place, as heirs and yet free.”¹

As I was doing research for my master’s thesis two years ago now, I spent day after day in the Community of Christ archives, mostly pouring over old application forms for Zionite colonies that were envisioned by church leaders and laity in the 1920s. Back in the 1920s, members of the RLDS church really, really wanted to build a physical community that would be the Kingdom of God on earth. Motivated both by a desire to eliminate poverty and a millennialist belief that the end was a moment away, members tried to set up cooperatives where people would help each other, would take care of the poor, and be unified as one body. Of course, their hopes were not met completely, as the communities never were built or the communities never functioned in the envisioned capacity. Knowing this, I scanned their applications looking for what they expected for the future, asking rather academic questions through the lens of critical theory about power and the human body. What I found is hard to verbalize. Even while trying to guard myself against nostalgia (and trying to definitely not feel like I was LDS), I experienced a surprisingly deep, spiritual connection to the people that I met on the yellowed application forms. Here were very ordinary people, old, young, immigrants and citizens, people of other nations, saints, and even a few scoundrels. They all longed for something better for themselves and their children. Many had problems in their lives--from sick children to bed ridden spouses, and from broken homes to broken bodies. Some were poor and some had modest means. The year on most of the applications was 1930, and the applicants were all struggling, but they were struggling forward. I was sad for many of them when I read about their own human brokenness, but I was also grateful for their lives. To my surprise, I recognized the last names of some of the applicants. They had been the grandparents and great-grandparents of people that I knew. No, the people who filled out the applications were not omniscient, and they were

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), 54.



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wrong about a great many things (as I am sure that I must be, too). But, as theologian Paul Tillich once eloquently stated, “Ultimate concern is ultimate risk and ultimate courage.”² These saints displayed such human courage in the face of life’s most difficult questions.

In a less philosophical and more confessional mode, I might add that even in their brokenness, the hopeful, ordinary saints of the 1930s served as a conduit for divine grace to many individuals. Even in their limited understanding, they provided hope, friendship, and spiritual communion for countless people. Even in their weakness, they passed on a goodly faith and heritage to others. Or to paraphrase Pelikan, they were “under God, the means through which has come the only life” that I have, that in a metaphorical sense, we all have. With God’s grace, then, may we all grow in a mature appreciation of our past, as we too, take our places in the ongoing story of history, “as heirs yet free.”

-Testimony by David Howlett, former Kirtland Temple fellow (2004) and Associate Professor at Kenyan University

² F. Forrester Church, ed., *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 23.