

# Toward the Peaceful One:



# Jesus Christ in Restoration Perspective

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**T**he future is uncertain. A lot is changing. What the church is experiencing probably is not a cycle. Things are not going to return to the way they were. It's hard to plan. It's hard to lead.

What can we do? He said, "Follow me."

Christianity is in transition globally. Some call it a crisis. That's not an overstatement. It's hard to know how to characterize the crisis. It's hard to know how to feel about it. The challenges Christians face depend on where they are in the world. We experience them in many ways: declining church attendance, giving trends, changing doctrine, fundamentalism, interfaith conflicts (in many parts of the world), and significant disagreement among Christians on what the gospel means today. Christian faith is polarized on how to read scripture, what the gospel means, and how it applies to the world or daily discipleship.

In many places, church attendance shifts and declines. Pentecostalism attracts many, while denominations age, and congregations close. Individuals are changing the way they affiliate with churches. Spirituality is highly individualized. The crisis is not limited to the USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Again, the challenges are different depending on where you are in the world.

Christian faith is not going away, as some fear. But Christianity clearly is going through a season of change, failures, and rebirths.

## COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

Community of Christ is not alone. Christianity as a whole is in a time of momentous transition. Seasons of change are important and needed. They force us to identify what is essential. Crises take us back to basics to figure out who we really are. Seasons of change are spiritual because they require discernment. We must discern what matters most for the journey ahead.

What is essential and non-negotiable for Community of Christ? This question isn't new. But the questions aren't over for us.

Prophetic people are awake, discerning the essential questions in seasons of change. Individually and collectively, these questions call us deeper. Katie Harmon-McLaughlin's article, "Formed by Christ," in the January-February Herald illustrates this spiritual journey. It is an excellent guide.

Prophetic people identify and respond to God's Spirit at work in the crisis or change. From Moses to Jesus to Joseph to today, that's what prophets always have done. God is faithful, even in trials, doing something new.

## JESUS, GOD'S SHALOM

Jesus Christ is the essential and non-negotiable center of Community of Christ. God's revelation in Jesus is the center of our faith, identity, and call. It is what the name "Community of Christ" is about. God is the message and messenger of God's kingdom in and for the world. In Jesus, God's kingdom is among us. That is our central message. God's good news guides our mission.

Doctrine and Covenants 163 marks a turning point in our understanding of Jesus. Section 163 unfolds a Restoration perspective on Jesus Christ that is relevant to our changing world. Faith in Christ is united with the call of the Restoration to bring forth Zion, God's peaceable kingdom, on Earth. Section 163 clarifies this. Jesus is the embodiment of God's shalom.

Jesus' voice is the voice that "echoes across the eons of time" and invites us to be disciples. (Doctrine and Covenants 162:1b) The call to follow Christ could not be more timely. In the Gospels, Jesus is a prophet who witnesses to God's Spirit at work, sowing hope in Israel's unfolding crisis. His birth and ministry reveal God's role even during overwhelming uncertainty. Jesus' death and resurrection reveal to Israel (and us) that God is faithful—even during failure and rebirth. We need this faith. It is the faith to which the Restoration is called.

A people of the Restoration must be more than a people with a Temple. We must become a people of the Temple (Doctrine and Covenants 161:2a). As "people of the Restoration," (162:1a), we are called to become "Community of Christ" (163:1). Becoming a people of the Temple means Jesus Christ must be the center of Restoration faith going forward. The fulfillment of the Temple's purpose lies in becoming a people of Christ.

How do we do this? We ask another essential question, "Who is Jesus Christ?"

Jesus Christ is an ongoing revelation. Restoration faith prophetically proclaims that Jesus Christ is more than a personal savior or way to heaven. Doctrine and Covenants 163 unfolds a fuller meaning.

Doctrine and Covenants 163:2a proclaims that following Jesus is the pathway to God's peace and the blessings of all the dimensions of salvation. Jesus is the embodiment of God's shalom. But what does this mean?

Who is Jesus, the embodiment of God's shalom? That's another essential question.

Embodiment is a code word. It goes to the heart of Christian faith and takes us back to the beginning. Embodiment means to take on a body or "become flesh." We may think of embodiment as taking on a living human form. John proclaims something very similar in his Gospel.

In John 1, John proclaims that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the Word that became flesh and lived among us. He is God's will and God's reign on Earth. In Christian theology, we call this "the incarnation."

Incarnation is another way of saying embodiment. But, according to John, Jesus is more.

For John, "The Word" also was present at creation. "All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being" (John 1:3 NRSV). This adds a new dimension. Jesus not only is the incarnation or embodiment of God's Word. Jesus also is the revelation of God's will and intention for creation. His life, death, and resurrection reveal God's purpose and fulfillment for creation. The fulfillment of creation is God's peace, shalom.

Doctrine and Covenants 163 echoes John's Gospel. The Restoration comes to fulfillment in following Jesus. A community of Christ is God's kingdom, Zion on Earth. The love of God revealed in Jesus is the presence of God's peaceable reign, shalom.

God's shalom is life, peace, and fulfillment in this world. Following Jesus' example, discipleship is the pathway and revelation to this fulfillment. It is the hope and pathway to Zion. John's Gospel proclaims this same message when Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 NRSV).

I want to be clear. John 14:6 does not mean what many Christians think. Jesus is not saying that Christianity is the only true religion. That twists John's Gospel and takes this passage too far out of context. Jesus' proclamation in John 14:6 is not primarily about personal salvation from sin or getting to heaven after death. Jesus is speaking about all the dimensions of salvation. He is talking about the eternal source of life in this world. God, the Father, is the source of life and creation, including new life and the new creation. Jesus' way, truth, and life speak to our liberation. It is for new life in this world. John 14:6 proclaims something very close to Doctrine and Covenants 163:2a when he talks about the embodiment of God's shalom. Trust in Jesus Christ. Following his life and teaching and living in God's reign are all the same thing. Jesus is the embodiment of shalom, the incarnation of God's will and Word.

## JESUS CHRIST, GOD'S SHALOM, THE RESTORATION TODAY

I believe Doctrine and Covenants 163 gives meaning to Jesus Christ in Restoration faith. It also gives prophetic guidance on whom Jesus Christ is today. It speaks directly to the crisis Christianity is in. Following Jesus today means discerning Christian voices, some of which aren't of God. Doctrine and Covenants 163:3c offers this Old Testament-style warning.

There are subtle, yet powerful, influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God.

We must discern, but the warning is clear. Reject images of Jesus and Christian voices that do not reveal or embody God's shalom. Christ is inseparable from community. But his community is a certain kind of hope-filled, just, reconciling, and peaceable community.

To me, that means rejecting Christian messages that self-righteously pit saint against sinner. It means rejecting Christianity that promotes national superiority, racial supremacy, or exceptionalism. While Jesus' message of the kingdom resisted and disturbed the powers that be of his time, Jesus did not build spiritual or material walls of fear and prejudice. He broke them down.

Positively, following Jesus means striving for the peaceable kingdom of God on Earth (see Doctrine and Covenants 163:4b). In God's vision for shalom, the meaning of Restoration extends to human relationships, living systems, and the Earth. That is what discipleship is about today.

Doctrine and Covenants 163:4a–c prophetically speaks to God's shalom through the ethics of Christ's peace. The ethics of Christ's peace guide disciples toward the embodiment of God's shalom in the world. The dimensions of salvation in paragraphs 4a-c include liberating victims of unnecessary suffering caused by poverty, disease, and abuse (mistreatment). The ethics of Christ's peace also aim Christian faith at the perplexing problems of poverty, disease, war, and environmental deterioration. These ethics guide Christian action and vocation.

But do Christian discipleship and building Zion today really require us to embrace—even lose ourselves—to the world's problems? More essential questions.

In the ancient world poverty, disease, catastrophe, and war were believed to come from supernatural forces. The ancients explained misfortune as the result of sin or disfavor with the gods. This is what made Jesus' message so powerful. He forgave sins, reached for the outcast, and blessed sinners simply for repentance, change of heart, and faith. In the worldview of Jesus, he threw himself into the problems and problemed-people of his world. In the end, he was crucified and died as one of them.

In the 21st century our worldview has changed dramatically. Modern knowledge, technology, and human systems shape almost every aspect of life globally. Wealth, health, peace, and prosperity are not the result of God's favor or supernatural forces. Rather, they are created by individual and collective human action. They are shaped by global relationships and human systems. Therefore, poverty, disease, violence, and environmental degradation are not the result of chance, disfavor, or "acts of God." They also are influenced and shaped by human systems, actions, and decisions. Therefore, we can do something about them.

Jesus invites us to "follow him," and face the problems and problemed-people of this world. Today, it means the same as it did in his time. It means examining ourselves. It means changing our heart, bearing our cross, symbolically turning our face to Jerusalem, and confronting the powers that be. Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b challenges us to "courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God."

Doctrine and Covenants 163:11a summarizes the call:

God is calling for a prophetic community to emerge, drawn from the nations of the world, that is characterized by uncommon devotion to the compassion and peace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the upcoming Heralds, authors will share more about moving toward the peaceful One. Their articles will focus on what it means to follow Christ, the embodiment of God's shalom, today. They will ask essential questions that flow from the vision for Jesus Christ found in Doctrine and Covenants 163.

Community of Christ holds a Restoration view of Jesus Christ and discipleship to Jesus Christ. It arises equally from Restoration scripture and the gospel. Becoming a people of the Temple means giving our hearts and resources to Christ's mission. He is the embodiment of God's shalom.

Some still ask, "What's unique or distinctive anymore about Community of Christ faith?" I say the answer hasn't changed. It's Jesus. If that's not unique to you, you've not met him.

