

# The Community of Christ

## *Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements*

**Official Name:** Community of Christ  
Prior to 2001 known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS)

**Key Figure in History:** Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844)

**Other Key Figures:**

- Emma Hale Smith (1804-1879)
- Joseph Smith, III (1832-1914)

**Current Leaders:**

- W. Grant McMurray, President
- Kenneth N. Robinson, Counselor
- Peter A. Judd, Counselor

**Headquarters:** Community of Christ World Headquarters  
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[www.cofchrist.org](http://www.cofchrist.org)

**Related Institutions:**

- Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa
- Herald Publishing House, Independence, Mo.
- Community of Christ Seminary, Lamoni, Iowa

**Membership:**

- 250,000 worldwide in 50 countries
- Canada (2002): 11,264 in 75 churches
- U.S.A.: 137,844 in 1,346 churches

### History of the Community of Christ

In 1820, a then 14-year-old New York farm boy, Joseph Smith, Jr., claimed God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to him in the woods near his home. Smith says they told him that they would use him to restore true Christianity and the true church of Christ to the earth.

Smith also claimed that in 1823, an angel named Moroni appeared to him and told him where to find a set of golden plates, buried since ancient times. Smith claimed that he miraculously translated the plates from “reformed Egyptian” to King James English, beginning in 1827. In 1830, Smith published his finished product, which he maintained was an inspired extra-biblical scripture called the *Book of Mormon*.

On April 6, 1830, Smith, along with five other men, established what they called the restored “Church of Christ” in Fayette, N.Y. Smith was designated as the

church’s president and living prophet, seer, and revelator. Later, the name of Smith’s church was changed to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and his followers came to be known as Mormons.

Over the next 14 years, Smith led his followers out of New York, westward to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. In 1844, Smith was killed by a mob in Carthage, Ill., following the public revelation of Smith’s abuses of power and practice of polygamy.

After Smith’s death, the majority of his followers accepted the leadership of Brigham Young—who later became the second president and prophet of the LDS. Young led most of the Mormon remnant on a perilous trek to the far west where, in 1847, they established a settlement in what became Salt Lake City, Utah.

Smith’s first wife, Emma Hale Smith, and her children, however, were among a minority of Mormons

who refused to acknowledge Young's authority. Emma claimed that Joseph Smith, Jr., had designated their oldest son, Joseph Smith III, as his eventual successor and president and prophet of his church. So, in 1860, 28 year-old Joseph Smith III was ordained as the first president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS).

In the years after Smith III's death in 1914, RLDS presidents traditionally were direct descendants of Joseph Smith, Jr. This remained true until 1996, when President Wallace B. Smith, Joseph Smith, Jr.'s great-grandson, retired as president and designated W. Grant McMurray as his successor. He became the first non-Smith ancestor to be ordained RLDS president and prophet and he continues to serve today.

In 1920, the RLDS headquarters was officially established in Independence, Mo. This was in an area Joseph Smith, Jr., had dedicated for the construction of a great temple to prepare for Christ's return. In 1994, the RLDS dedicated a temple near that site. It was designated as a special place for worship and to offer prayers for peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit.

In 2001, the RLDS officially changed its name to the Community of Christ (COC) in order to further establish its separate identity from the much larger Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

## Beliefs of the Community of Christ

In the last several decades, the COC has distanced itself increasingly from its larger counterpart, the LDS. As a result, the COC has minimized its historical connections to Joseph Smith, Jr., and has de-emphasized its theological and ecclesiastical distinctives.

The COC's official Web site states, "There is no official church creed that must be accepted by all members. However, through the years various statements . . . have been developed to present generally accepted beliefs of the church" ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

This Belief Bulletin will present and analyze some of those statements on essential doctrinal issues and evaluate them from a biblical standpoint.

### God

The one eternal, living God is triune: one God in three persons. The God who meets us in the testimony of Israel is the same God who meets us in Jesus Christ, and who indwells creation as the Holy Spirit. God is the Eternal Creator, the source of love, life, and truth. God actively loves and cares for each person. All things that exist owe their being to God who alone is worthy of our worship ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### Biblical Response

The COC statement of belief seems to affirm the biblical doctrine of the Holy Trinity, though it never refers to God as "Father." Further, as written, it appears to reflect

a modalistic concept of the triune nature of God. It does not seem to affirm the clear biblical view that the One Eternal and Infinite God exists eternally in three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2).

### Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is "God with us," the Son of God, and the living expression of God in the flesh. Jesus Christ lived, was crucified, died, and rose again. The nature, love, and purpose of God are most clearly seen in Jesus Christ, our Savior ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### Biblical Response

Again, the COC statement concerning the nature of Christ seems—on the surface—to reflect the traditional orthodox view of the deity. However, the statement that Jesus is "the living expression of God in the flesh," does not express adequately the full force of the incarnation of the eternal God in Christ. It, once again, sounds like a form of modalism—a heretical view of the Trinity long ago rejected by Christianity.

Jesus Christ is the eternal, pre-existent Second Person of the Trinity. He came to earth in bodily form to reveal God's nature and character to mankind (see John 1:1-14; 5:17-18; 8:56-59; 10:30-33; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9).

### Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of God in the world. The Spirit works in our minds and hearts through intelligence, comfort, guidance, love, and power to sustain, inspire, and remake us ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### Biblical Response

Once again, the statement on the Holy Spirit reflects its modalistic theological perspective. It also fails to affirm clearly the personal nature of the Holy Spirit.

The personality of the Holy Spirit is evidenced numerous times in the New Testament (see Luke 12:12; John 15:26; Acts 5:3-10; 13:2-4; 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:30; Heb. 3:7). His deity is demonstrated by His divine attributes. He convicts the lost of sin, indwells believers at conversion, and empowers them to live the Christian life (see Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:29; John 14-16; Rom. 8:4, 26-27; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 2:18-19; 5:14-33).

### Salvation

God loves us even though we are sinful. Through the ministry of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are able to turn to God and receive the gifts of salvation and eternal life. Those who accept the gospel are called to respond to Christ through baptism and committed discipleship. As individuals exercise faith in Christ and follow his example and teachings, they become new people ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### **Biblical Response**

The statement fails to mention the sacrificial nature of Christ's atonement. It also does not adequately explain the need for lost people to respond to God's grace through faith in Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior.

Salvation is received totally and assured only by repentance and receiving Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior—not through baptism or church membership (see John 1:12; 5:24; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 1:17-24; 2:2; 15:3-4; Eph. 2:8,9; 1 John 5:13).

### **The Church**

Christian discipleship is most fully possible when it is pursued in a community of committed believers. The church, as part of the body of Christ, is the means through which the ministry of Christ continues in the world today. It is a community of people seeking to bring God's love to all through compassionate ministry, worship, the sacraments, and witness ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### **Biblical Response**

The statement fails to account for the COC traditional view that it is the "restored Church of Christ" on the earth. It also fails to mention its claim to possess the restored Melchisedec and Aaronic priesthoods. Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, claims cannot be substantiated scripturally or historically.

There is no organization or denomination that can claim designation as the "true" or "restored" church. The universal church consists of all the redeemed in Jesus Christ in all of the ages (see Matt. 16:15-19; 1 Cor. 1:12-14; Eph. 2:19; 3:11-12).

### **Revelation**

The process through which God reveals divine will and love is called revelation. God continues to reveal today as in the past. God is revealed to us through scripture, the faith community, prayer, nature, and in human history" ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### **Biblical Response**

The statement reflects the traditional COC view that its prophets, presidents, and apostles are divinely inspired leaders who are capable of receiving direct revelation from God. The Bible warns of false prophets and prophecies which can distort clearly revealed biblical truth (see Deut. 18).

### **Scripture**

The scriptures provide divine guidance and inspired insight for life when responsibly interpreted and faithfully applied. With other Christians, we affirm the Bible as scripture for the church. In our tradition, the *Book of Mormon* and the *Doctrine and Covenants* are additional scriptural witnesses of God's love and Christ's ministry ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### **Biblical Response**

The statement fails to mention the traditional COC view that the standard Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible were corrupted by the apostate church following the New Testament era. Thus, the COC view is that the standard editions of the Bible are unreliable and incomplete.

The COC publishes the Joseph Smith Translation—also known as the JST or Inspired Version—of the Bible, which it claims was translated by Smith miraculously. He supposedly corrected the Bible's corruptions by adding, altering, or removing hundreds of verses and passages—including one entire book, the *Song of Solomon*.

The Old and New Testaments, nonetheless, are the unique, revealed, and inspired Word of God. Their extant texts are reliable, complete, and were never corrupted. The Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice for Christians. All alleged extra-biblical scriptures—such as the *Book of Mormon* and the *Doctrine and Covenants*—must be rejected as false, misleading, and historically untenable (see 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; Rev. 22:18-19). For more information, see "A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon."

### **Sacraments**

The sacraments express the continuing presence of Christ through the church. They help us establish and continually renew our relationship with God. Through them we establish or reaffirm our covenant with God in response to God's grace. The sacraments of the church are baptism, confirmation of membership, the Lord's Supper (Communion), marriage, blessing of children, administration to the sick, ordination to the priesthood, and the evangelist's blessing ([www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp](http://www.cofchrist.org/seek/beliefs.asp)).

### **Biblical Response**

There is no biblical basis for the eight *sacraments* of the COC. Jesus instituted two ordinances—baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism by immersion in water is an act of obedience that symbolizes the believer's identification and faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Lord. The Lord's Supper is a remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ. Neither ordinance is an instrument or provider of grace—only symbols of grace provided through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (see Mark 1:9-11; 14:22-26; Luke 3:21-22; 22:19-20; John 3:23; Acts 2:41-42; 8:35-39; 16:30-33; 20:7; Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 10:16-21; 11:23-29; Col. 2:12).

## Witnessing to people in the Community of Christ

1. Have a basic and clear understanding of the Christian faith and the gospel.
2. Have a clear understanding of the controversial history and traditional beliefs of the Community of Christ, which were formerly called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.
3. Understand how the COC has changed in the past decades and how it has sought to distance itself from traditional Mormonism.
4. Seek to build a personal and respectful relationship with the member of the COC.
5. Establish the sole authority of the Bible. Tell your COC friend that any book or authority that conflicts with clear biblical teaching must be rejected.
6. Focus on the essential elements of the Christian faith. Do not get sidetracked defending your denomination or nonessential issues.
7. Share your personal testimony of God's grace and your faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.
8. Present the basic plan of salvation—including repentance, grace, and faith. Encourage your COC friend to receive Jesus as his or her personal Lord and Savior.
9. Pray and trust the Holy Spirit to lead you as you share with your friend.

For more information about how to have a personal relationship with God, go to [www.thegoodnews.org](http://www.thegoodnews.org).

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*Tal Davis, Manager, Interfaith Evangelism Team*

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