

Episode 4

Mormon Identity

ONLY TRUE AND LIVING CHURCH

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NARRATOR: Welcome to Mormon Identity, a 30 minute talk radio program that addresses church topics important to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Our host is Robert L. Millet professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University.

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ROBERT MILLET: Welcome once again to Mormon Identity. I'm your host Bob Millet and I'm joined today by my friend and colleague Spencer Fluhman, a member of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. Welcome Spence.

SPENCER FLUHMAN: Good to be with you Bob.

ROBERT MILLET: Today our topic of conversation is the phrase 'the only living and true Church'. 'The only true and living church', however we want to say it, but the language of the Lord in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Before we do that let me just outline a direction we'll hope to go during this period. Let's talk first about how the early Saints viewed the restoration of the gospel, and then let's go to, to that language itself from the Sacred Grove as well as the language of section one. Let's talk about what the phrase 'doesn't mean' and then we'll deal with what it does mean and in other words, how we should indeed as Latter-day Saints feel toward and treat those of other religious persuasions. Let's start with the first. Spence, I know you've done some work on this. Lead us in a discussion for a bit on how the early Latter-day Saints viewed the concept of the Restoration.

SPENCER FLUHMAN: Well, I think it's an important point. I think it can give us a way of kind of pulling together the different contributions that Joseph Smith and other leaders of the Church have provided for us. The early Saints, well, let me start actually with the modern Saints, with Latter-day Saints today. I suspect that if we asked the question to a, you know, ordinary Latter-day Saint in a ward on the earth, you know, "What's Restoration mean?" They might begin by talking about the restoration of doctrine. That, that one probably came, that sense of restoration probably came last, ironically....

ROBERT MILLET: Interesting, interesting

SPENCER FLUHMAN: ...with the early Saints. Right away they sensed a restoration of authority and that was important. One of the earliest missionary trips made by the early Saints was, was made from New York through Ohio along the way to Missouri. As Oliver Cowdery and Parley Pratt and others were going through Ohio, some skeptical editors of newspapers in Ohio picked up on their message and one of, I brought one of the editorials today with me from December of 1830s. This is very early in what we call

the Restoration, this editor said, “Cowdery claims that he is and his associates are the only persons on Earth who are qualified to administer in Christ’s name.” It was from the start...

ROBERT MILLET: That’s 1830.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: That’s 1830, that’s December of 1830. These early Latter-day Saint missionaries realized that they had a message for all followers of Christ, it was critical about authority. So very early on that was in place, in the mind of Latter-day Saints.

ROBERT MILLET: Which is interesting, Spence, because the fact that Roman Catholicism was not very big in New England at this point was it.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Growing, but no, not what it would become truly.

ROBERT MILLET: And of course Roman Catholicism has a hierarchical organization, a descent from the Pope to the lowest member. But what’s interesting to me is that the first thrush should be glorying in the fact that God has revealed authority among a people who mostly, a priesthood of all believers. Comment on that if you would.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Exactly, exactly. Well, that’s why this message was, that’s why this editor brought it out, this was scandalous talk almost for Protestants.

ROBERT MILLET: Almost Papist, almost.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: It sounded like a throwback to Catholic ideas of authority to many Protestants. It really did. So this, yeah, this was a, this was a religious community, Protestantism, as fractured as it was that had defined itself by rejecting a Catholic notion of authority. And so, here are these Latter-day Saint missionaries come, going on about exclusive authority to administer ordinances and these editors raised an eyebrow or two, to them it sounded like something they’d left long before, in terms of Protestantism.

ROBERT MILLET: And it is interesting that the Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery are there in, we presume in 3 Nephi as they inquire of the Lord concerning baptism and authority to perform the same. I’ve often thought and even said that without realizing the Book of Mormon serves as a kind of primer on the need for priesthood authority. Normally if you think of priesthood matters you would of course go to the Doctrine and Covenants in our day.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: I don’t think you have to go that far into the story, I think you’re absolutely right from the Book of Mormon on we have a number of priesthood offices discussed in the Book of Mormon. We have the concept of authority needed for those ordinances, for ordinances discussed there. All of the pieces are there in the Book of Mormon for what we see kind of flower in the Doctrine and Covenants in terms of the way the Church works.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, you have these constant references to my father, having authority from God or so and so, having authority from God. Or when Alma baptizes at the waters of Mormon, he says to Helaman, “Having authority from Almighty God.” So it mattered in the Book of Mormon, I think that had to rub off on Joseph Smith.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: There’s no question that this was one of the major questions and it constitutes the answer to so many questions, to so many questions, that question of authority. And so

it would be impossible to overlook. Added to that sense of authority being restored those early Saints very quickly began to understand that the Restoration until the restoration of the spiritual gifts of the ancient Church and that's a critical sense of restoration for those early Saints. They, many of them, had been troubled by appeals to the Bible, but what they saw is the absence of biblical miracles, visions, healing.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, I'm thinking for example, was it not the case that one of the reasons that Sidney Rigdon split with Alexander Campbell was that Sidney, from his study of the New Testament thought that spiritual gifts ought to be a part of the living church and Campbell felt that they had ceased with the deaths of the Apostles.

SPENCER FLUHMAN: And then so here's this figure, Alexander Campbell, this Protestant leader who was talking about restoration, but held to the Protestant line about restoration meaning the miraculous and spiritual gifts, they are to, they ended with the New Testament. That era closed. Rigdon didn't think so. He was ready for the message of those missionaries coming through Ohio.

ROBERT MILLET: Hold that thought, Spence. We'll be right back.

[PAUSE]

ROBERT MILLET: Welcome back to Mormon Identity. I'm Bob Millet, your host, and with me is Professor Spencer Fluhman, good friend and colleague, a member of the faculty of Church History and Doctrine at BYU. Spence, we've been talking about the concept of 'only true and living church'. We've talked about how the concept of a restoration was viewed a little differently by the Saints as time went on and that initially the idea was the excitement that existed in the Saints concerning the restoration of divine authority. The fact that we can now function according to apostolic authority, and then you, we began to talk about a greater emphasis and understanding of the value of having the gifts of the Spirit. And we mentioned that Sidney Rigdon had parted company with Alexander Campbell over a number of things, but one of them was over this matter of gifts, pick us up there.

SPENCER FLUHMAN: Well, and that was just to lead into the discussion of the early Saints and how they rejoiced in those gifts. And for them what had been lost. One of the critical losses from the early church was the visions, angels, healing, all those gifts. And so for them their voices in the 1830s ring out with rejoicing about the restoration of the ancient powers of the Church.

ROBERT MILLET: Well you know it, and you get a feeling for, you know Satan doesn't sleep much, and so by the time you get to Kirtland for example, as I recall the backgrounds to section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants is that the Saints are wrestling a bit with discerning what are true gifts versus false gifts, isn't that the case?

SPENCER FLUHMAN: Absolutely, it always invites that question. So it's one thing to say, "Yes the Lord's brought back all the ancient powers of the Church." It's another to distinguish which are true and how the Holy Spirit will work. And section 50, section 46, section 52, all of those revelations have to be seen in the light of teaching the Saints how to discern the true from the false, the authentic from the inauthentic.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, and as I look at the early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants be it section, say, 6, 8, 9, 11, it's odd, it's the Lord revealing to Joseph Smith things about revelation. I'm going to reveal to you things about revelation, so that Joseph and the

Saints are being tutored in what it means to receive a revelation, how to know if it's from God, and when is it inappropriate and when it is not.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: And it's interesting to know that the first two senses of the restoration that I've noted, one answered the other in section, in section 46. "That to the bishop or those that, who have been called to preside would be given the gift of discernment to discern all those gifts lest there be any among you professing and yet not be of God." So the question of gifts is answered with authority. And priesthood, priesthood answers the question of how does one know which spiritual gifts are true and when an experience is from God and when it's not. Priesthood answers that, at least in part priesthood is the answer.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, Spence, not too long ago, about a year ago I was re-reading Parley P. Pratt's, *The Voice of Warning*. As I understand it one of the first major efforts to kind of put forward the distinctive message of Mormonism. What do you see when you get into that kind of book?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well, and I think *The Voice of Warning* is fascinating because not only is it one of these early attempts to add kind of a missionary message in print, in book form, but it was one of the first times to try and kind of systematize or bring together in some coherent, structured way all the revelations that had been received; Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and so on. In it, Parley Pratt emphasizes authority and emphasizes gifts. What one is kind of searching for in vain is a sense of the doctrinal restoration that, that thing that I started with.

ROBERT MILLET: He doesn't deal with that a great deal.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: No. And I think there's reasons for that. I don't think the early Latter-day Saints discerned a doctrinal restoration in the ways that you and I do until Nauvoo. Until Joseph Smith's teaching gravitated to those topics like the nature of God. And he began saying things in distinctive enough ways that the Latter-day Saints began to discern a real addition to their understanding of God and humanity and eternity and so on. Many of the revelations in the 1830s put forward new ideas, but the Saints didn't discern a doctrinal restoration really until the late 30s and into the Nauvoo period. I think that's when they begin to see that something else was going on along with authority and gifts.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, Spence, when you look at the, at the opening pages of the Doctrine and Covenants and for example when you look at the chronological order of things we'll notice large numbers of revelation in 1831 as I recall, in '32. Not as many recorded revelations in the Nauvoo period. It seems to that there's a kind of a turning point in the Prophet's ministry as he moves into Nauvoo. Where rather than regularly dictating revelations per se, he's teaching them to the Saints from the pulpit. Is that your feeling?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: I think so. I think he 'changed vehicles' as it were. Where early on they're formal, dictated revelations, he turned more and more to sermons in the Nauvoo period as the vehicle to communicate ideas and insight and inspiration to the Latter-day Saints.

ROBERT MILLET: I get a feeling that in those early years he felt very self-conscious about being, not being, a very polished speaker. I suppose that would be natural to be friends with Sidney Rigdon or Oliver Cowdery.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: He did defer to others. And that may, it may be just part of his own personality. Another interesting point in all of this too though, is to recognize that with the elaboration of Church government. The revelations that create other councils, the Twelve, the Seventy and so on. I don't think it's insignificant that the number of revelations tail off precipitously as other councils and layer of Church governments are added by the revelations themselves. In a way, and others have made this point, revelation gets pushed into other spaces as well, not Joseph Smith only, but other councils and presidencies can get the mind and will of the Lord for their own stewardships.

ROBERT MILLET: We'll pick up with there, Spence, after this.

[PAUSE]

ROBERT MILLET: Welcome back to Mormon Identity this is Bob Millet. I'm joined by my colleague Spencer Fluhman. Well Spence, up to now we've talked about how the concept of restoration was viewed by the Saints first in terms of authority being restored and then the magnificent importance of spiritual gifts and then the concept of doctrine. Say a little more about the Nauvoo period.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well I think it's a time where, again, the Saints came to recognize that they were they were being forced to see the world a little bit differently. That in some ways the cosmos was rearranged for them in Nauvoo. I think the revelations in terms of Joseph Smith's own teaching reoriented their questions about humans and about God the Father, about the Son and so on, in some ways. And I think, I think they began to discern, if Parley Pratt had written *Voice of Warning* in 1847 instead of a decade earlier I think it would have come out a little bit differently.

ROBERT MILLET: Well in fact he writes the *Key to the Science of Theology* in what '57?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: He does, exactly. Exactly, so that, and that comes out...

ROBERT MILLET: ...very doctrinal

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Very, yeah.

ROBERT MILLET: ...very doctrinal. Let's get to the question now of the language used in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, "The only true and living church, with which I the Lord am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually." Spence, let's begin, let me ask, you what do you think that that statement does not mean? And I think it's important for us to decide what "only true and living church" doesn't mean.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well, I think one of the things it doesn't mean is that the Lord recognizes only Latter-day Saints as faithful followers of His Son. It doesn't mean that.

ROBERT MILLET: So, it would never be true to say we're the only real Christians.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: No, in fact I think one of the, a revelation that actually predates it in the Doctrine and Covenants makes that point in a rather forceful way. The revelation that we now have is the Doctrine and Covenants section 10 was given much before section 1.

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah, I think it's 1828

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Yeah, and, and part of the revelation reads an interesting way and I think it's important to see section 1 in tandem with section 10, starting in verse 52 the Lord says "I do not bring it", the Church, the Restoration, however you want to phrase that, "to destroy that which they have received but to build it up, and for this cause have I said," let me skip down to verse 54 rather, "Now I do not say this to destroy my church but I say this to build up my church."

ROBERT MILLET: Now it's 1828.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: And so the Lord is using the phrase "my church" in a much broader way than we do sometimes.

ROBERT MILLET: Because there was no The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints in 1828.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: It predates the organization of the formal organization of the Church and so as the Lord's using "my church" in Section 10, He's saying, "I'm not restoring the gospel to destroy my church," broadly speaking the followers of Christ. I'm not doing it to destroy the varieties of Christianity that have predated The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, but to build up followers of Christ. And I think it's an important validation of what had gone before and a much broader sense of "my church" than sometimes we have in mind. I think it's an important note.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, when you think of for example I'm thinking of two revelations, section 35 to Sidney Rigdon and section 39 to James Colville, both of whom were ministers before, and the Lord doesn't condemn them, in fact He commends them for the work they have done and in the case of Sidney Rigdon. He says, "You were an Elias before the coming of Elijah." Isn't that right?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Absolutely. So He's validating their Christian walk before their entrance into the Church, it's not like anything they did before was false or utterly misguided or insignificant in God's eyes. None of that, none of that's at play there.

ROBERT MILLET: You know I'm reminded too of the language of the Lord in section 18 where the Lord says to Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, it's just a clincher of a sentence and I'll get your comment on it. "Contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil."

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Yeah...

ROBERT MILLET: What do you make of that?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well, put together with section 10, they're not to contend against other Christian churches, they're to contend against evil.

ROBERT MILLET: Yes! Yes!

SPENCER FLUHMANN: They're to contend against evil.

ROBERT MILLET: I remember Elder B.H. Roberts, I think it was the April 1906 General Conference, he talked about that the Church of the devil was made up of a "federation of unrighteousness" whereas the Church of the Lamb of God was made up of a "federation of righteousness and all who seek to come unto Christ and who seek to build up and establish the larger kingdom of God."

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Yeah, and Elder Maxwell put it simply too, that we've got "no corner on goodness, on kindness, on righteousness." And I think the revelations are bearing this point out. Anyone who has friends of other faiths knows that there is much, much goodness and sometimes we do so little with what we have.

ROBERT MILLET: What else does it not mean, 'only true and living church?' It certainly would not mean, as you've indicated, that truth can't be found in other churches, it certainly doesn't mean that all priests or pastors or reverends in other churches are corrupt or are somehow so misled that they can't help their people find the way to Christ. What else?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well, and what you've said there, I think is important to underscore; that there's truth to be found in other churches. I am struck by the ways in which the revelations validate parts of the Christian tradition. Section 20 was an incredibly significant revelation in the early Church. Its function is something of a constitution. It was a summary statement for this new church. It was read in early Church conferences and there are parts of that revelation that speak in the language of the Christian tradition, and it validates part of them.

ROBERT MILLET: I was thinking, yeah, I hadn't thought about this, but I just began to think as you were talking, the language of the doctrine of justification is "just and true", the doctrine of sanctification is "just and true" those were, of course, big, big concepts to Protestants in particular who spoke often and much about the concept of "justification by faith through Christ alone".

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Absolutely, I think, I think what we're seeing is parts of the revelation validate what had gone before. The language about justification is striking. We know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true. No Protestant of Joseph Smith's day would have quibbled with that verse of the Church's early constitution. That would have warmed Protestant hearts. That would have warmed Catholic hearts. It is an uncontroversial statement about the place of Christ's grace in the justification of God's children. And it's uncomplicated. A few verses later, points that contradict forcefully some of the teachings of John Calvin. And so within this one revelation we've got validation of part, rejection of other and I think that, I think that middle course is a helpful paradigm for us in dealing with our friends of other faiths.

ROBERT MILLET: Well said, Spence. We'll be right back.

[PAUSE]

ROBERT MILLET: Welcome back to Mormon Identity. This is Bob Millet, your host and I'm joined by my friend, Spencer Fluhman, member of the Church History and Doctrine faculty at BYU. We've been talking about 'only true and living church', we've talked about a number of things, Spence, but it seems to me it would be worth our time to talk a bit about the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Light of Christ relative to the gifts of the Spirit.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: I think it fits well, I'm kind of haunted by your statement what is the statement in D&C 1 not mean?

ROBERT MILLET: Yeah.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: And I don't think that it means that other people of other faiths lack spiritual experiences with God. I don't know, I grew up kind of with a sense of that, I don't know where it came from, but I kind of grew up thinking that if others had some kind of spiritual experience it was perhaps unauthentic or maybe it was their own kind of emotions getting the best of them. I think that doctrine of the Light of Christ is more potent than we give it credit for. We're taught in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 88 and other places this Light of Christ is a power influence that emanates from the presence of God and fills the immensity of space, gives life and light to all creation. One point even it says that it's the "light which enlighteneth your eyes." And if you've ever met anyone, just this weekend I sat across from an Anglican with some light in his eyes and our doctrine of the Light of Christ gives us a way of understanding that. And recognizing God's hand working in the lives of all of His children, if they'll give heed to it, if they'll hear His voice; He'll work with whatever we give Him. Whatever space we give Him to work.

ROBERT MILLET: Well and to the extent, I think the 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants suggests to us that if we're true to the light that is within us, we will be led to the higher light.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Absolutely. And that light groweth brighter and brighter to the perfect, unto the perfect day, and so it kind of helps reorient us with regard to God's children outside the Church as it were, that we're all in this together. We're all trying to discern the light as best we can and we're all heading toward the light as best we can. I think it helps us see that He is working in those lives.

ROBERT MILLET: So we should not be surprised or unnerved if we should find a person who is terribly discerning who is not a member of our faith.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Yeah, and I think those, that we've got a whole handful of apostolic statements to bear that out, that the light flickered but did not extinguish, it didn't extinguish. That God still calls His children still can respond. Yeah.

ROBERT MILLET: Well, it's a great subject. Let's turn our attention to what does it mean, 'the only true and living Church upon the face of the whole Earth.' It's strong language to be sure. Spencer, what comes to your mind?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Well, I think, just to kind of recap where we've been, part of it has to do with authority. That conversation is inevitable for the Latter-day Saints. That only true and living, that the, you called it the legal administrators of the gospel in terms of ordinances, we are there, that's part of the message we have to the world. And that's part of our reason for being, and we can't ever shy away from that message about kind of unique authorization in terms of the ordinances of the gospel. It's not to mean that it doesn't, it's not meaningful in other's lives but our doctrine of baptism for the dead makes powerfully clear our position on authority.

ROBERT MILLET: It does, and I appreciate you're saying this, that no one should go away from hearing this program supposing that Spencer Fluhman and Bob Millet don't believe in the distinctive reality of the Restoration and the need for a restoration. But that in no way should prevent us from recognizing the hand of God, the influence of God, the Spirit of God, the Light of God, in the eyes and the countenances, in the speech and the writings of persons of other faiths. I mean, we only have to pick out certain great

people like C.S. Lewis or other obviously enlightened, spiritually enriched people, who add so much to the religious literature of the world.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: I think the Lord's injunction in the revelations to "learn from the best books" as broadly as that is stated, makes that point, that there is light and wisdom and understanding to be had in an array of sources, well beyond what we create ourselves within the Church. Anyone who's spent time doing it has sensed that. I certainly have.

ROBERT MILLET: Elder Neal A. Maxwell as only Elder Neal A. Maxwell could do wrote this once, "When the word *living* is used, speaking of the only true and living Church, it carries a divinely deliberate connotation. The Church is neither dead nor dying. Nor is it even wounded. The Church, like the living God who established it, is alive, aware, and functioning. It is not a museum that houses a fossilized faith; rather it is a kinetic kingdom characterized by living faith in living disciples." Is that a Maxwellian phrase or what?

SPENCER FLUHMANN: Perfect.

ROBERT MILLET: You know, we've talked then about the concept of 'only true and living church'. We've talked about what restoration meant to the early Saints. We've talked about what 'only true and living church' doesn't mean. Spence would you, would you give a concluding thought and then I'll give one on how we therefore should look upon our brothers and sisters, really our brothers and sisters of other faiths.

SPENCER FLUHMANN: I am touched by that quotation from Elder Maxwell. So often the revelations the Lord unequivocally states, "My word is quick and powerful." And quick in that setting means "alive" or "living", and I think that is the message. God is working now, He's working today. He's not a, he's not located in some past experience. Now in our lives, in other's lives, He's working now and I'm just, I think we can rejoice with others in that.

ROBERT MILLET: The older I get the more I find myself looking into the eyes of people sitting opposite me on a subway in New York City or walking down a street in some corner of Brazil, a crowded area here, there and I find myself thinking this is a child of God. This is my brother, this is my sister. And in his own way, God is surely working to bring them to the highest level of light and understanding and truth that He possibly can. And so because of my belief in God's power and in God's mercy, I know that through His marvelous and mysterious ways He will bring the light of truth to every man and woman and that if they'll be true to that, they'll be led to higher understanding and deeper light.

[MUSIC BEGINS]

NARRATOR: You've been listening to Mormon Identity. Thanks for tuning in. We hope you join us next time.

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