



Stepping into the River of Revelation in the Restoration Tradition

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The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys.

—Isaiah 41:17–18 NIV

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.

—Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Introduction

I AM HUMBLED TO BE ASKED to give the second annual Wallace B. Smith lecture at the 2009 Restoration Studies/Sunstone Midwest Symposium. Like many of you, I was present last year when President Emeritus Smith inaugurated this series with reflections on his twenty-year tenure as prophet-president of the RLDS Church. His gracious, humble, and self-revealing comments blessed all of us. I believe President Smith was truly a transformative leader. I am grateful for the course he set us on as a church that is still unfolding today.

The first world conference I ever attended was in 1978 when Brother Smith was ordained prophet-president of the church. I was excited and in awe when President Smith brought inspired counsel to the church at that conference. The words he presented are now canonized in the Community of Christ Doctrine

and Covenants as section 153. I would like to read a portion of that section for your hearing:

Let my word be preached to the bruised and brokenhearted as well as those who are enmeshed in sin, longing to repent and follow me. Let the truths of my gospel be proclaimed as widely and as far as the dedication of the Saints, especially through the exercise of their temporal stewardship, will allow.

My Spirit is reaching out to numerous souls even now and there are many who will respond if you, my people, will bear affirmative testimony of my love and my desire for all to come unto me.

—Doctrine and Covenants 153:9a–b

Those inspired words took root in my soul and blossomed into a desire to serve the church as a full-time missionary. Such service became my life's goal.

Little did I know then that in 1992 President Smith would come to our home in St. Louis and present me with a call to serve in the Council of Twelve. I was thirty-six years old at the time. At no time before or after that call did I ever imagine that I would be called upon one day to accept the responsibility of prophetic leadership in the church.

I am, in some ways, the *unexpected* prophet-president. I would not be in this role except for the unique circumstances precipitated by the resignation of President McMurray in 2004. I was not named by the incumbent president as his successor in office. My call came as a result of a church-wide discernment process that came to a focus in the Council of Twelve, who, in those particular circumstances, had responsibility for officially naming the one called.

At the same time, I cannot deny that during the discernment process something deep began to move in me to prepare me for this role. One of the most profound experiences of my life occurred during the meeting where the Council of Twelve initially discerned my call. Sensing the terrible weight I felt falling on me, they encircled me and sang, "I have called you by your name you are mine." I heard the call in that moment and responded not because of any aspiration for the office, or any great capacity I saw in myself, but because I trusted the One who called.

As one "old-timer" church member said to me before the 2005 World Conference, "It looks like just about anybody can become president of the church these days!"

"Apparently so," I replied with a smile, "apparently so."

My Testimony of Doctrine and Covenants 163

WHAT TROUBLED ME most when I was ordained president was the prospect of being called upon to bring words of counsel to the church. I had not been mentored in the prophetic role by any previous prophet. And I had only a few months to prepare before I was ordained. I proceeded based on my willingness to trust God farther than I could see or understand. It was truly a leap of faith.

There was tremendous pressure placed on me by some church members. On more than one occasion I was told rather matter-of-factly, that I might be president, but I would not be the prophet until I brought “real revelation” to the church.

Ironically, such comments, coupled with my inner stubbornness, had a reverse effect. Emotionally, it made me resistant to bringing words of counsel because I was determined that I did not have to prove myself. I was also resolved that before I would ever bring such counsel I would need to be certain that it was truly of divine origin.

During the first year or so of serving as president, I launched into many activities to try to move the church forward. Those who have heard me speak of this time before will recognize the following description. It was like I was out on a huge body of water and I was swimming rapidly in all directions at the same time. There was a lot of surface activity, but no real movement.

I participated in many meetings, conferences, and retreats throughout the church. As I travelled, I listened carefully to the questions and issues that were being raised. A few topics were particularly prevalent: church identity, priesthood accountability, the nature of scripture, and the connection between belief in Christ and the call to engage in justice and peacemaking.

As I previously shared in my testimony about section 163 in the *Herald*, during a retreat with ethnic ministers, statements of personal pain about the prevalence of racism and sexism in the church moved me deeply. I sensed the need to help the church see the gap between the vision of our name, “Community of Christ,” and the actual experience of some beloved brothers and sisters.

About a year before the 2007 World Conference I scheduled time away so that I could engage in more sustained prayer and scripture study. It was difficult to break free of the intense pace of church administrative work, but I knew I had to create space to center myself in the Spirit.

As I began that time, I wrestled with the urge to get back to work! I discovered that the real work I needed to do was to stay in a contemplative, spiritually open mode. During this time I noticed a growing desire, almost like hunger, to read from the Old Testament prophetic writings, especially Isaiah

and Jeremiah. Sometimes, I would read passages over and over again, letting the words soak into to my mind, my heart, my soul. In some ways, I can say that the voices of the ancient Hebrew prophets awoke the prophetic voice in me.

Soon thereafter I began to sense some emerging direction that I thought I needed to bring to the church. I am not sure how to describe this experience except to say that I felt a drawing power that focused my thinking on certain themes. I had a persistent, growing awareness of dynamic truth seeking expression in words and concepts.

Another way to describe this experience is to return to my metaphor of being out on a large body of water. Once I ceased trying to create direction and forward movement through all of my flailing around, and paused to simply float on the water, something unseen and deep within the water began to move like a strong current or river. I decided to go with that flow and let it take me where it would. I began to write. As I wrote, I sensed affirmation that what I was writing was in the right direction.

In January 2007 the First Presidency gathered for a pre-world-conference retreat in Colorado. I took long walks in the crisp winter air, gazing upon majestic mountain peaks, and tracing with my eyes the winding course of rivers in deep valleys.

During the retreat I asked my counselors, Presidents Ken Robinson and Dave Schall, to review an initial draft of the words of counsel. Becky Savage, who would be called as a counselor at the next conference, was also present and participated in a review of the document.

I wanted my counselors to be part of the process. I believe that in spiritual matters, we all must be accountable to others because it is so easy to wander off on tangents when left to our own motivations, feelings, and emotions.

It was difficult to present the first draft to them because I knew it was unfinished and unrefined. I felt vulnerable as I shared my experience and the words I had written. It was the first step in a long process of sharing the words of counsel and then letting go of them so that others could interact with them.

After reading the words I had written, my colleagues shared helpful insights in response to my questions. Most importantly, they encouraged me to stay open and alert to the movement of the Spirit and to take whatever time I needed to continue to articulate what I was experiencing.

As you might imagine, the months before world conference became more and more hectic due to the press of many matters. At one point, I found myself being swept away by the side currents of organizational demands, and I had to discipline myself and my schedule to allow time for continued prayer, meditation, and study.

Also, as I have shared in multiple settings, I continued to wrestle with the words of counsel, never feeling satisfied that what I had written was good enough to express the divine nature and will. I kept looking for better, more precise, more worthy words. In God's presence, we become acutely aware of the limits of our human abilities, including our language. That experience is deeply humbling.

One Saturday, I recall sitting in my study still mulling over the words of counsel. After prayer, I reached for a copy of *Hymns of the Saints* and turned to the section on revelation. I read beautiful expressions describing the church's yearning and openness for "yet more light and truth." My focus was drawn to hymn 298, "Fountain of All Revelation."

Fountain of all revelation, Grant us thy life-giving power;
Without thee, no sure salvation Will deliver us this hour.
May no veil of our tradition Mask the light that comes from thee!
Let not pride nor low ambition Waste the strength that sets us free.

God, our rock of revelation, We would build our lives on thee;
For without thy sure foundation None can find stability.
We will order not thy wisdom To some cherished form or mold,
But will search for truths now hidden As we live by those we hold.¹

As I read those words I had sung many times before since childhood, something surged forward in me, like a reservoir of water that is freed to find its natural course again. I knew that I was in the presence of a living, revealing God. I stayed in the flow of the deep current that was moving me with the evident intent of moving the church. Clark M. Williamson, in his book *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*, states, "Revelation is not an 'inert' thing; it gets you moving."²

While the entirety of the experience was profound, there was one particular aspect of it that continues to stand out. As I was completing the document, I had a sense of confirmation of direction coupled with a feeling there was yet more to be said. What was it? I prayed and reflected. Out of that time of searching prayer, the words that are now paragraph 10 were birthed.

I became aware of the eternal depths of God's love for people and the divine yearning for reconciliation and healthy, redemptive relationships. I remember saying to myself, "This is nothing new. It is the constant theme of scripture." But

¹ Deam Ferris, text, and Franklyn S. Weddle, tune, "Fountain of All Revelation," *Hymns of the Saints* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1982), 298.

² Clark M. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 45.

then a phrase I had never used before thrust itself into my mind: “Be vulnerable to divine grace.”

I would like to share that phrase within its written context:

Collectively and individually you are loved with an everlasting love that delights in each faithful step taken. God yearns to draw you close so that wounds may be healed, emptiness filled, and hope strengthened.

Do not turn away in pride, fear, or guilt from the One who seeks only the best for you and your loved ones. Come before your Eternal Creator with open minds and hearts and discover the blessings of the gospel anew. Be vulnerable to divine grace.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:10a–b

As these words were penned, I became aware of the overflowing, powerful, yet freeing nature of God’s grace. I sensed that while most of the words of counsel I had written were about vision, mission, and calling, God’s love would remain constant and available even if the church did not respond. Such is the nature of everlasting love.

I approached the Sunday night service at world conference, during which I planned to share the words of counsel, with an unusual sense of inner peace. That afternoon, I had an opportunity to chat with my counselor in the presidency David Schaal. I asked him if the words of counsel were of such a nature and quality that they were worthy of that title. President Schaal said he had been waiting to share some words of affirmation with me. He encouraged me to let go of the heavy sense of responsibility I was bearing for the church and to simply share what had come to me. As he spoke I felt a burden being lifted and I sensed freedom to proceed.

Before speaking to the world conference assembly that evening, I paused to survey the faces, young and old, of the gathered crowd. I felt an overflowing love for the church with all of its struggles and potential. In a way, I saw the church as it could become.

As I began to share, I felt an unusual sense of peace and release. In that moment I began to understand that the prophetic role is to bring what the prophet has experienced and to give it to the church and the world. It is then up to the church to determine what to do with the words. As I was letting go, the church was beginning to receive.

As pointed out in the preliminary preface to section 163, I had not made a decision yet about what the eventual status of the counsel would be. I sincerely wanted to put the matter in the hands of the church.

Without going into a lengthy description, suffice it to say that during the week of conference there was a growing desire expressed by many to have the opportunity to consider the words of counsel for inclusion in the Doctrine and

Covenants. I was especially moved by the testimonies that came from children, youth, and young adults that the words of counsel had given them a sense of direction and hope for the future of the church.

My primary hesitancy about releasing the words of counsel for formal consideration arose from questions I had discussed with others about quick canonization. I was concerned that as a church we like to have the experience of revelation, but we often miss the fuller meaning of the content. There are many sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that have yet to be mined in terms of all their richness of insight and perspective.

On Wednesday of conference week, I met with the Council of Twelve to sustain their officers, after which we talked about the words of counsel. We explored the option of not canonizing too quickly so the church could spend time probing the meaning of the words. Surprisingly, even those most concerned about prompt action urged me to go ahead and release the document for formal consideration.

That afternoon, after a long talk with my counselors, Presidents Schaal and Savage, I recalled some words that President Robinson had spoken many months before. He had said that I should not only remain open to what was becoming words of counsel, but that I should remain open to what might happen during world conference. He emphasized that I should trust the discernment and direction of the church.

That evening, weary from the day of conference business, I retired to my home study where I prayed for guidance. When I thought about releasing the document for formal consideration, I felt peace. When I thought about not releasing the document, I had a troubled feeling. I decided to release the document for formal consideration.

The records of the world conference contain the details of the deliberation by the delegates. Obviously, the conference eventually chose to include the document as section 163 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

With the prospect of the document's inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants before me, I expressed hesitancy about following the traditional protocol of being escorted back into the conference chamber as the song "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" was sung. However, my colleagues convinced me that the church would be blessed by that experience. So, plans were made accordingly.

As I walked back into the conference chamber following the vote to include the document in the Doctrine and Covenants, I was fighting to contain my emotions. It was difficult for me to absorb all that had happened in a few short years since I had been ordained prophet-president of the church. What I had feared the most had become a blessing.

I knew deep down that the church's experience with Doctrine and Covenants 163 was just beginning and that it would take decades for it to bear a full measure of its possibilities. I continue to pray that the church will fully see, hear, and respond.

Responding to Critique

HAVING PRESENTED AN OVERVIEW of my experience regarding Doctrine and Covenants 163, I would like to use this occasion to respond to some of the critique I have received. I appreciate the observations and questions that have been raised as people have endeavored to engage the document. While this summary of critiques and my responses will not be exhaustive, I hope that my comments provide some additional commentary that will be helpful.

1. Section 163 is too long!

I AM NOT QUITE SURE how to respond to that one. During the consideration of the document at world conference, an evangelist came up to me and said, "Steve, the church needed a drink of water and you turned a fire hose on us!" I still chuckle when I remember that light-hearted exchange.

I can share with you that I was concerned about the length of the document before it was released to the church. I asked my counselors if there were any sections that were unnecessary or redundant. Each time they and I attempted to reduce what was there, we found that we could not identify what to extract. The document, with its various elements woven together, had become a whole fabric.

Interestingly, based on comments I have received since, while all sections of the document do not speak in the same way to everyone, each section speaks in helpful ways to various portions and different generations of the church.

2. There is nothing really new in Section 163.

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS to respond to this critique. Daniel Migliore, in his book *Faith Seeking Understanding*, devotes a chapter to "The Meaning of Revelation." In that chapter he compares revelation to self-disclosure between persons. In such self-disclosure he suggests that one of the ways we really get to know someone is to pay "*attention to persistent patterns* in their actions that manifest ... who they really are, what is in their heart, what their true character is. By analogy, the revelation of God can be understood as God's self-disclosure through personal action that exhibits a particular pattern."³

³ Daniel L. Migliore, "The Meaning of Revelation," in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 36.

In other words, if revelation is genuine, we should not be surprised that there are some familiar topics or *persistent patterns* that are sounded over and over because such themes arise out of the very eternal nature of God. For example, just as the ancient prophets and Jesus passionately called for justice and peace in the land, modern prophets immersed in the river of prophetic vision call for the same response in each generation. Interestingly, following the release of section 163 through the church's website, I received a letter from a Jewish rabbi who wanted to affirm that he discerned the "prophetic voice" he was familiar with from the Hebrew tradition in the document.

Also, I believe that one of the functions of modern-day revelation is to *refresh* understanding of the gospel message in the midst of many divergent interpretations that reflect human agendas and accommodations of the larger culture. Therefore, certain scriptural or gospel themes may be re-sounded or re-enlivened in a contemporary context so that the gospel is heard anew even if the basic message is not new.

With that said, I do believe that Doctrine and Covenants 163 contains some additional insight into the nature and mission of the church today as a *restoring community* rather than just as a *church restored*. Also, as I have previously expressed, paragraph 10, which ends in the phrase "Be vulnerable to divine grace," at least for me, is an added window through which the light of the gospel can fill one's soul. Others have shared testimony with me that the same is true for them. They used phrases like "I never thought of it that way before" and "That helped me see what the scriptures were really talking about."

3. Section 163 reverts to presenting administrative guidance that more recent sections of the Doctrine and Covenants avoided.

I UNDERSTAND THE CONCERN about administratively managing the church through inspired counsel, but I also have to stay true to my experience. While I was not conscious of an inherent organizational pattern in the document, others have pointed out to me that there is a natural flow that goes something like this: vision for the church, workers for pursuing the vision, resources for implementing the vision, assurance of God's love, clear call to mission, and the critical need to prioritize. In other words, section 163 is about aligning the church spiritually, relationally, and organizationally to pursue its calling.

Evidently, the portion viewed as "more administrative" is paragraph 5. It deals with the call of the Council of Twelve as apostles of peace and the need to closely collaborate with the Seventy as "forerunners of Christ's peace." The purpose of close cooperation is to pursue "wholistic evangelism" and promote "signal communities of justice and peace" as the heart of what it means to share the peace of Christ. Paragraph 5d states that procedures regarding the calling

and assignments of presidents of Seventy and members of the Quorums of Seventy should be developed to ensure full collaboration with the Twelve.

From my perspective, this section is not so much about detailed administrative instruction as it is about core ministerial identity and alignment with primary mission. If the Twelve and the Seventy embody their callings as “apostles of the peace of Jesus Christ” and “forerunners of Christ’s peace” the church will begin to be transformed. Since Doctrine and Covenants 163 has been released, there has been positive movement in the direction described and the church is being blessed as a result.

4. Section 163 contains words and phrases that you used in sermons and classes before.

BEFORE BEING ORDAINED president of the church, I went on a retreat to prayerfully reflect on the current needs and future of the church. During that time certain concepts and phrases such as the “peace of Christ” began to become firmly rooted in my understanding and vision.

In retrospect, my 2005 World Conference sermon entitled “Share the Peace of Christ” contains the seeds and many thematic elements of section 163. Evidently, what was to become words of counsel to the church was already beginning to flow in me at that time.

Also, as I have prayerfully reflected on this question, I have come to understand that God did not call me to the presidency as a *blank slate* upon which God would write following ordination. God called me with the concepts, vision, and sense of direction for the church that had formed over many years of ministry throughout the world. Section 163 was a refining or a magnification of that which was already living in me.

5. Section 163 uses passive and poetic voices too much.

I KNOW THAT PASSIVE and poetic voices are difficult to translate into other languages and I want to be sensitive to that issue. In terms of the passive voice, I understand its use to mean that there is space for personal discernment and choice. It also reflects a view that holds that revelation is encounter with God, not the precise words that describe the encounter. The passive voice is the voice of humility.

In terms of the use of poetic and metaphorical phrases, I guess that puts section 163 in good company. The scriptures are full of poems, metaphors, and hymns that attempt to express truths deeper than ordinary words can contain. I discovered that I could not do justice to significant encounter with God without using symbolic language that has the capacity for multiple layers of meaning.

In *Finally Comes the Poet*, Walter Brueggemann laments the reduction of divine truth into prose that is routine. He calls for the rediscovery of another way of speaking that is

dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in another conversation, free of the reason of technique, unencumbered by ontologies that grow abstract, unembarrassed by concreteness. Such speech, when heard in freedom, assaults imagination and pushes out the presumed world in which most of us are trapped. Reduced speech leads to reduced lives.

He goes on to assert that

to address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be *poets that speak against a prose world*.... By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace.⁴

I guess that is enough said about using poetic expression in prophetic speech.

Conclusion

IN CONCLUSION, DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 163 came through the grace of God and belongs to the church at large. I am still studying it to distill out the meaning and insights that are contained in its words, phrases, and images.

I find a great deal of hope in the experience that resulted in Doctrine and Covenants 163. I remain open to whenever and however the revelatory experience with God may occur in the future. And I have discovered that the river of revelation in the restoration tradition still flows for those who are willing to step into its waters and yield to its currents. Come on in, the water is fine!

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 3.