

Thoughts on Restoration Branches

Seventy Richard Neill

The Lord has on several occasions made reference to branches in the Scriptures. The purpose of this paper is not to question the legitimacy of having Branches in the Restoration but to take the words given to the church through Joseph Smith III, and see if we are – ‘using the things of this world in the manner designed of God’ (D&C 128:8c). Among the scriptures we have on this subject we find in D&C 120:1b-d, ‘...branches and their officers, and districts and their officers are to be considered as provided for by my law to carry on the work of the ministry in caring for the membership of the church, and to relieve the Twelve and Seventy from the vexation and anxiety of looking after local organizations when effected. When branches and districts are organized, they should be so organized by direction of the conferences, or by the personal presence and direction of the Twelve, or some member of that quorum who may be in charge, if practicable; or, if a branch, by the president of the district with the consent, knowledge, and direction of the missionary in charge, when circumstances prevent the missionary in charge being present.’ The nature of the Branch is to be local primarily. I would like to present some things to think about as we deal with some of the issues that face us in the Restoration Branches at this time. The Lord has always commanded his people to look at what they are doing and seek his will in all things.

I have served in the Seventy for 37 years having been ordained in the RLDS Church. I have served as a District President in the RLDS Church, and as a Pastor in the RLDS Church dating back to 1978, and also the Restoration. I have organized branches in international and domestic fields. I share this because I have been involved in leadership at the Branch and other levels for over 40 years. It is out of that background and love for the Lord and his people that I share these thoughts. I wish for this to give us opportunity to have discussion on coming closer to God and closer to each other.

I will break this down around two central thoughts - as to why Restoration Branches exist and what are the limitations of Restoration Branches.

Why do Restoration Branches exist?

- 1) They exist because God created them in his church. We want to follow his pattern. It is a major accomplishment for Restoration Branches to still exist after 35 years since 1984, considering the obstacles that needed to be overcome.
- 2) We became Restoration Branches in order to worship and fellowship as a people dedicated to doing the Lord’s work. We see ourselves as heirs continuing the Restoration work as it was restored and organized on April 6, 1830.
- 3) We desired to become free of a hierarchy that we believe departed from the “word of God”, and the purposes for which the Restored Gospel came forth.

- 4) We wanted to protect ourselves from those who would seek to control and teach doctrines in ways that we could not accept as the direction of the Lord.
- 5) We desired to freely embrace and teach the Scriptures as found in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. We believe that all three books of scripture are historical and spiritual in nature as opposed to being mythological or being a process theology viewpoint suggesting that selected scriptures are outdated or could be considered “disjunctive” by current popular theological understanding now and in the future.
- 6) We want to share Jesus and the Restored Gospel. We are sent forth to invite people to Christ. We seek to practice the ordinances in the manner as has been done by those who have gone on before us in the church. The ordinances are considered to be holy, and represent significant points in a person’s life to seek blessing and guidance from the Lord and to be in his presence. The ordinances are sacred covenants between man, woman and child with God and are central to one’s life and worship of God.
- 7) We desire to raise our families in the Gospel. The family is at the core of the gospel. There are many gatherings – Worship in our Branches, Elders Conference, Reunions, Camps/Retreats and other times and places that strengthen the church and family.
- 8) We feel called to build up the Center Place for its great purpose. The Center Place of Zion, also identified as the New Jerusalem, and the old Jerusalem in Israel will be places of gathering for the righteous as stated in the Scriptures. Center Place Restoration School, now in its 27th year, has survived by the power of God, and the help of many. There are many other efforts that are ongoing and prophesy yet to be fulfilled that are still to come to pass in regards to the Center Place.
- 9) The call of God is to take the Word to all the nations, believing Jesus will return soon. These are promises that the Lord has made before the end comes. The missionary work now covers 5 continents and has been very successful for the most part against major odds. Much more is yet to come. The Branches can support the missionary work in a number of ways.
- 10) Assist in the building of Zion. Meetings of Pastors, and meetings between regional leaders in the domestic field, and leaders in foreign lands seeks the Restoration to work together for the fulfillment of God’s eternal plan.

I limit the above list to 10 items. It is not an exhaustive list. We can see that everything listed above is essential for our spiritual well-being, now and eternally. In those things listed we have felt a measure of peace and joy that we are able to continue the work the Lord has placed before the Restoration. I think we can see the wisdom in preserving the Restoration as best we understand it.

Restoration Branches are faced with a dilemma. One of the cherished aspects of the gospel is agency. Agency can lead to a closer walk with God, or it can lead to sin and separation. This applies to us not only as individuals, but it applies to us in the corporate body as well.

Individuals and Branches can make decisions that lead them closer to the Lord or decisions that lead them apart. Herein, is the dilemma that something can be a strength or be a weakness depending on how it is used. It becomes a matter of the choices we make. This dilemma can lead to great insight or false doctrine and practices. It can lead to one branch accepting the ministry of an individual or another Branch refusing to accept the ministry of that man. The strength of a Branch is that it can be small enough to agree on matters of doctrine and practice, but the Branch is not big enough that its understanding will necessarily be widely accepted by other Branches. If a family does not agree with the understanding or practices of a Branch, they can find another Branch that they feel is more suitable to their interpretations and leave their former Branch. Sometimes moving to another Branch is because of a result of a “falling out” that created hard feelings. This is harmful to all. Instead of resolving the issues or at least healing the hard feelings people move on and this may result in further damage to the whole body. Arthur Oakman, at the beginning of Lecture 2 of the Endowment Series, quotes John Donne. Donne writes about how all mankind is connected, and we are diminished by any man’s death. Likewise, we are diminished by the loss of anyone including the separation of a Branch.

Now I want to present some things that have limited our success, and have sometimes led to misunderstanding and division. I would like to list this in 10 items, as well, knowing this will not cover all that could be on the list. I do not do this in a spirit of complaining and recrimination but rather to engage discussion on these matters that more understanding might come about as the result. I believe I have to be more explanatory on these items, since the above list would be much more self-explanatory and embraced within the Restoration.

What are the limitations of Restoration Branches? The Lord did not set up the church with the Branch as the highest organizational body so what are we missing and what is the effect?

- 1) There is no higher executive, legislative, or judicial bodies in the church than the Branch currently. Many questions fall to the Branch to answer versus the leading quorums, orders and councils of the church handling those matters in accordance with their scriptural authority. Questions such as who has authority in the church becomes a branch responsibility to determine. This can lead to inconsistency and consequently division and confusion. This places potential barriers between Branches. Every ordinance comes under question when priesthood and Branches are in question about someone, and that would include if someone has received an ordinance by someone considered or not considered to have authority. (i.e. – baptism, ordination, etc.) The Lord set up checks and balances in the church and many of those checks and balances don’t presently exist because of not having all priesthood quorums, orders, and councils existing at the present. We have priesthood who are accepted in some Branches, and not in others. This is not a political statement it is just stating the facts as they exist.
- 2) Priesthood and membership training are also inconsistent. At times training does not exist at all. Therefore, this responsibility falls upon the Branch firstly. The outcomes have been mixed.

- 3) The teachings of the gospel may be different and thus inconsistent in some ways either in the level of teaching, or the content and viewpoint of the teaching. This can lead to confusion.
- 4) If relationships are mostly in the Branch or in a narrow setting the fellowship and interpersonal relationships will be of a more limited nature. This will make the task of becoming one, more difficult and more challenging.
- 5) The financial law taught and practiced by Branches make it more difficult to be consistent in teaching and practice. This makes it a greater challenge to support ministries of a broader focus than many branches often have done - such as CPRS, missionary work, or the Joseph Smith III/Israel A. Smith home. Some Branches may choose to not support anything outside of the Branch, while others may give quite a sum. This disparity may be misinterpreted and cause upset because the communication and “teamwork” is not functioning as needed between the branches.
- 6) Strong territorial boundaries could create pride (Who is the greatest?), exclusivity, and mistrust of others. Small “kingdoms” could be set-up that could feel threatened by being part of a larger body. Leadership in the Branch may feel threatened by being part of a larger body as well. Branches could be susceptible to an individual or group within or without the branch attempting to control the Branch reminiscent of the difficulties of the RLDS hierarchy days that were found to be unacceptable to most all Restorationists.
- 7) A lack of enthusiasm may result. It becomes much harder to see the big picture when we are not hearing a great deal of the testimony and thought from a wider range of people. This in turn could lead to other conditions – disinterest, loss of youth and more because of being isolated from one another and being part of a smaller, more disconnected body.
- 8) Poor communication may result by being separated and isolated. Many in the Restoration do not know what is going on. The shepherds want to protect the flock – this is understandable. However, this can cause a firm control on who or what gets presented to the Branch. This can be good by keeping out bad things or in some cases not so good by keeping out good things.
- 9) The branch has been a help for the church to survive. But the branch, as the leading organizational body, is a solution for short-term benefit. At some time, the survivor mode has to be enlarged to a larger setting in order to survive long-term. How do we know this? The Lord talks about the gathering to the Center Place, and he talks about the “word going to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” as well as other larger things that are yet to come to pass. At no time do we understand in scripture that all of this will come to pass through a singular Branch.
- 10) Zion is identified as a people by the Lord, more so than as a Branch. (Genesis 7:23 – the Lord called his people Zion, II Chronicles 7:14 – if my people which are called by name, I Nephi 3:186-187 – blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, D&C 140:5c – zionic conditions are no further away nor any closer than the spiritual

condition of my people justifies) There are many more references in scripture and historical events and writings.

*** The Summary

Jesus will come and reign as Lord and as the King of Zion. His title will exceed Branch President or even President and Prophet of the Church. Our branches are beautiful things, and we praise the Lord for them. But let us not forget that they are set apart to contribute to the work, and are not the object and fullness of the work in and of themselves. This is not a plea for organization. Before the organizational church can exist the “living church” mentioned in The Doctrine and Covenants, Section 1, needs to be functioning as the Body of Christ. All of us need to accept responsibility for our condition. We cannot completely lay blame upon the RLDS Church leadership for our present Restoration condition. The Branch was never designed to be the highest body of organization in the Church. Naturally since this is our current condition it would suggest that we are “using branches in ways more than what they were designed by God for” (D&C 128:8c). We deal with certain conditions and situations that are beyond our capability to find solution to in our present condition. So, the questions I place before you are these. Can we be sufficiently humbled enough to take these matters to the Lord? Can we do this in a way that allows the Pastors and the priesthood – the shepherds – to maintain the ability to protect the flock from the wolves that may seek to enter in? Can we discuss these questions in our Branches and in other gatherings in order to hear from the people? I believe not only that this can be done, but that it must be done. Enoch, Moses, King Josiah, King Benjamin (Book of Mormon), and Jesus, to name a few, came before and addressed multitudes of people. In each of these instances there was a powerful, transforming response from the people. The people of King Benjamin declared this; *“because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually”* (Mosiah 3:3). That same Spirit has the power to transform our generation as well. Amen.