

The Lord Leads His Church through Prophets and Apostles

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Editors' note: President Oaks teaches that the Savior organized His Church to help God's children qualify for exaltation. This article explores how the Lord accomplishes that purpose through prophets and apostles who are authorized to act in His name.

The work of the Lord requires an organization led by the Lord through leaders He has chosen and authorized and whom He directs in carrying out His purposes. Scriptural history shows that such leaders have been either a prophet or prophets and apostles. This was the pattern in the years of covenant Israel and in the meridian of time, and it continues in the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Leads His People through an Organization

Our Heavenly Father's purpose is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life" of His sons and daughters (Moses 1:39). In this dispensation, He does this through The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose purpose is "to help individuals and families qualify for exaltation."¹

"The great and compelling triad of responsibility laid upon the Church," President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) taught, is "to, first, carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of the earth; second, to implement that gospel in the lives of the membership of the Church; and, third, to extend through vicarious work its blessings to those who have passed beyond the veil of death."²

In our day many seem to want spirituality or religion but think they can have it without any religious organization. Those who think they can achieve this apart from a formal organization ignore the well-recorded history of what the Lord Jesus Christ established to assure the continuity and effectiveness of His gospel and teachings. As Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reminded us in a notable general conference talk five years ago, "In the meridian of time, Jesus organized His work in such a way that the gospel could be established

simultaneously in multiple nations and among diverse peoples.”³ That organization included the Apostles and other officers described in the New Testament.

Why is an organization required to accomplish the purposes of the Lord? Though our Savior loves and helps us individually, to accomplish His purposes for the whole body of God’s children—especially His covenant people—He acts through an organization led by prophets and apostles.

Only through an organization can the individual members of what the Apostle Paul called “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27) receive the opportunities they need to achieve the spiritual growth that is the purpose of their creation. And only an organization with different talents and a variety of efforts can achieve what is necessary to accomplish the Lord’s work.

Things that can be accomplished only through organized groups of believers include major efforts to help the poor, to proclaim the gospel in all the world, and to build and maintain temples. The Prophet Joseph Smith said God’s objective in gathering His people was “to build unto the Lord a house whereby He [can] reveal ... the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation.”⁴

An organization is also needed to achieve the Lord’s commandment to “be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27). President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency has taught that we cannot achieve that oneness—that unity—as individuals. “We must seek it and qualify for it with others. It is not surprising then,” he observed, “that God urges us to gather so that He can bless us.”⁵

Individual believers also need to experience religion through a religious organization because only in this way can we be authoritatively reproved or chastened for sin and error. That chastisement is essential for our spiritual growth (see Doctrine and Covenants 136:31; 101:4–5; see also Mosiah 23:21–22).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) gave another reason for religious or spiritual persons to be organized: “because random, individual goodness is not enough in the fight against evil.”⁶

The Restored Church of Jesus Christ Is Governed by Prophets and Apostles

The organization of the Church of Jesus Christ must have leaders chosen by Him and given the power and authority to declare His will to His people.

“Ye have not chosen me,” the Savior taught, “but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit” (John 15:16). The Bible is clear on who chooses prophets and apostles. In the Old Testament this is clearly seen in the callings of Moses and Samuel, and in the New Testament it is seen in the callings of the Twelve Apostles and the Apostle Paul (see Exodus 3; 1 Samuel 3; Mark 3; Acts 9). These leaders did not volunteer, and they were not elected by believers.

The Bible also shows that religious leaders must have the authority of God's priesthood, which is conferred by one already holding that authority. The Bible descriptions of the callings and authorizations of Aaron, of members of the Twelve Apostles, and of the Seventy illustrate this principle (see Exodus 28:1–4; Mark 3:14–15; Luke 10:1, 17). Priesthood authority did not come from reading the scriptures or from a desire to serve. And the ordination that confers priesthood authority comes from the heads of the Church, and it is known publicly (see Doctrine and Covenants 42:11).

In the Old Testament, the spiritual leaders were *prophets*. They are described in three different roles. Some were holy men performing a prophetic function for their posterity, like Abraham. Some were leaders exercising political as well as priestly power, like Moses and Joshua. Most were performing their prophetic role independent of patriarchal or political position, like Samuel and Isaiah. The Book of Mormon reports the same three positions of prophets, such as Lehi (patriarch), King Benjamin (political leader), and Alma the Younger (after he relinquished his position as the chief judge) (see 1 Nephi 1–2; Mosiah 1–6; Alma 4–5). However, it is clear that all the prophets who preceded Jesus Christ called the people to repentance, and, most of all, they prophesied of the coming Messiah.⁷

The office of Apostle is first identified in the New Testament, when the Savior called Apostles as He organized His ministry to proclaim, baptize, and heal. The Apostle Paul wrote that the Church of Jesus Christ is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20). Jesus also called Seventies and sent them forth to minister (see Luke 10:1, 17), and He authorized the calling of other officers, such as pastors and teachers (see Ephesians 4:11).

A paramount function of Apostles in the Church that Jesus established was to hold the keys of the priesthood. When the Savior promised the Apostle Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” He described this as the power that “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). In other words, the keys assure heavenly effect to the authorized actions of priesthood authority on earth. Apostles who hold the keys of the priesthood have the right and responsibility to preside over and direct the activities of the priesthood of God and the Church of Jesus Christ upon the earth.⁸ This includes the performance and supervision of the essential ordinances of the gospel.

As part of their responsibilities, prophets and apostles have the prophetic duty and gift to teach the truths of the gospel and to testify as “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:23). They identify truth and error and authoritatively state, “Thus saith the Lord.” President J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961), First Counselor in the First Presidency, declared that Apostles “have the right, the power, and the authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church.”⁹

As servants of the Father and the Son, apostles and prophets teach and counsel as directed by the Holy Ghost, with no desire other than to speak what is true and to encourage all to follow the pathway to God's blessings, including His ultimate

destiny for all of His children: eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7). Their voices can be trusted.

President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has said: “In today’s world, where 24 hours a day television and radio commentators spew forth conflicting opinions, where marketers compete for everything from your money to your vote, there is one clear, unpolluted, unbiased voice that you can always count on. And that is the voice of the living prophet and the apostles. Their only motive is ‘the everlasting welfare of your souls’ (2 Ne. 2:30).”¹⁰

Access to the teachings of apostles and prophets is both a blessing and a great responsibility. The blessing is the ready access to what the Lord would have us hear. The responsibility is that this access to the Lord’s teachings makes us accountable to hear and to heed those teachings. Unfortunately, some believers fail in this responsibility. Not surprisingly, many in the world reject the fact that God gives apostles and prophets the authority and inspiration to speak in His name. Even more reject prophets and apostles on the premise that God or that absolute right and wrong do not exist.

Fortunately, many choose to believe and follow the teachings of prophets. They receive the promised blessings. President Russell M. Nelson has taught this: “God’s long-established pattern of teaching His children through prophets assures us that He will bless each prophet and that He will bless those who need prophetic counsel.”¹¹

Prophets and Apostles Act through Councils

The Lord leads His Church through prophets (plural) and apostles (plural), as they act through councils. There are many illustrations of this.

The Lord calls one prophet to initiate a new dispensation. Then, when that new restoration grows and matures, doctrine and policies for the group are revealed and taught through an organization led by apostles and prophets. Thus, as the restored Church grew and matured in this final dispensation, the Lord revealed that its most important business and most difficult cases should be decided by a council of the First Presidency and Twelve Apostles (see Doctrine and Covenants 107:78–79). There, every decision “must be by the unanimous voice of the same” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:27). Otherwise, they would not be “entitled to the same blessings which the decisions of a quorum of three presidents were anciently” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:29).

All of this shows the Lord’s direction that His Church must be governed by councils of apostles and prophets. This protects and promotes the unity that is essential in the Lord’s Church.

“The Lord in the beginning of this work revealed that there should be three high priests to preside over the High Priesthood of his Church and over the whole Church,” President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) taught in the general conference where he was sustained as President of the Church.¹² He affirmed the importance

of *three* high priests in the presidency by declaring “that it is wrong for one man to exercise all the authority and power of presidency in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”¹³ He added, “The Lord never did intend that one man should have all power, and for that reason he has placed in his Church, presidents, apostles, high priests, seventies, [etc.]”¹⁴

The reference to the plural, *prophets* and *apostles*, is also prominent in this familiar teaching by President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972): “There is one thing which we should have exceedingly clear in our minds. Neither the President of the Church, nor the First Presidency, nor the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will ever lead the Saints astray or send forth counsel to the world that is contrary to the mind and will of the Lord.”¹⁵

To become the official doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ, the individual teachings of apostles and even prophets need to be affirmed through the process of approval by other apostles and prophets. This is illustrated in the Bible in the approving action of the Apostles when Peter reported his revelation to take the gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 11:1, 18). Similarly, when the dispute over the need for circumcision was brought to the Apostles, Peter reminded them of the significance of the revelation he had received, and the council then approved and settled the dispute with a confirming epistle to the Church (see Acts 15).

Similarly, in the restored Church, doctrine is not canonized until the body of the Church has received it by the law of common consent (see Doctrine and Covenants 26:2, 28:13). That principle was revealed in 1830 and has been applied since that time.¹⁶ This practice, which had not been followed by churches existing during the period we call the Apostasy, protects gospel truths from being altered or influenced by private ideas or individual opinions.

Finally, the essential unity on doctrine among different leaders is preserved by the long-standing rule that questions addressed to individual Apostles or other authorities about doctrine or policy that is not clearly defined in the scriptures or handbooks are to be referred to the First Presidency (see Doctrine and Covenants 124:126).¹⁷

Prophets and Apostles Witness of Jesus Christ

During his ministry, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught this: “As God governed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as families, and the children of Israel as a nation; so we, as a Church, must be under His guidance if we are prospered, preserved and sustained.”¹⁸

This article has described how the Lord has done His work through the ages and how this pattern and procedure continues in our own day. As the Apostle Peter taught, “all the prophets” have given “witness” of Christ (Acts 10:43). In our day, the Lord continues to do His work through prophets and apostles who are authorized to act in His name to do His work to bring to pass the eternal life of man. Read more insights from Church leaders on the blessings the Church brings us (page 32 of this issue).