

A First Presidency Or First Apostles?



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The church, like any other organization where a number of people are associated together in a common cause, can best function when there is an orderly and systematic way of carrying on its affairs. It has sometimes been represented that Christ established no system of officers specifically chosen to administer in his church, but we believe a careful examination of the scriptures will prove that He did.

From our point of view it is as important that the church should be organized after the pattern given for our guidance, as that the gifts should be in the church. Indeed, we do not believe the Spirit of God will continue to be manifested in the church if it is not organized according to the divine plan, because of the confusion, friction and discord that will ensue. We believe this position is fully sustained by the following:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: That we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. — Ephesians 4:11-16

When the gospel was restored in these last days we find this promise recorded, coming as a revelation to Joseph Smith in March, 1829:

And thus, if the people of this generation harden not their hearts, I will work a reformation among them, and I will put down all lyings, and deceivings, and priestcrafts, and envyings, and strifes, and idolatries, and sorceries, and all manner of iniquities, and I will establish my church like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in the days of old. — Book of Commandments 4:5

Again, we find we are to take the Bible and the Book of Mormon as the standards of evidence:

And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the scriptures which are in the Bible, and the Book of Mormon, in which is the fullness of the gospel; and they shall observe the covenants and church articles to do them; and these shall be their teachings. — Book of Commandments 44:13

Thus we have pointed out just where to go to find instructions as to how to organize the church "like as it was taught by my disciples in the days of old." Notice that it is not to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, nor the Book of Commandments, but to the Bible and the Book of Mormon. That is the way they did it in 1830.

Joseph Smith, in his history, giving an account of the organizing of the church on April 6th, says:

We now proceeded to call out and ordain some others of the brethren to different office of the Priesthood, according as the Spirit manifested unto us; and after a happy time spent in witnessing and feeling for ourselves the powers and the blessings of the Holy Ghost, through the grace of God bestowed upon us, we dismissed with the pleasing knowledge that we were now individually members of, and acknowledged of God, the church of Jesus Christ, organized in accordance with commandments and revelations given by Him to ourselves in the last days, as well as according to the order of the church as recorded in the New Testament. — Millennial Star, Vol. 14, page 27, Supplement

A First Presidency or First Apostles?

The “commandments and revelations” referred to, must have been chapters 15 and 24 in the Book of Commandments, later appearing in changed form in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, sections 16 and 17, because these were the only two revelations or commandments bearing on church organization that had been given prior to April 6, 1830. A reading of these revelations will show that they are in perfect accord with the New Testament pattern set forth by Paul: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, “ etc. (1 Corinthians 12:28). This is not an isolated statement; it is born out by other passages.

We wish to call attention to the fact that in the organization of His church upon the earth, Christ chose, first of all, the apostles (see Mark 3:13, 14). They were with him constantly during his ministry, receiving instructions from him concerning their calling and work. When he departed, the burden of the church fell upon their shoulders; not only the missionary work, but the general oversight of the church as well, and after the resurrection he appeared unto them and opened their understanding concerning the scriptures and their work among all nations (see Luke 24:44, 53). We, nowhere, find where any higher authorities than the apostles directed the affairs of the church. The first act performed by that quorum after the ascension of the Master was to fill the vacancy in their number made by the transgression of Judas (see Acts 1:15, 26). This would have been a fitting time to have chosen a first presidency, if such was to have been a part of the church organization, since He who had been with them had departed, but from the history to which we just referred we find that “they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” – Acts 1:26

“But did they not have someone who stood at the head of the organization?” someone may ask. We answer, “Yes”. Jesus Christ was head of the church, and the apostles were His representatives on earth – “and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.” – Ephesians 2:20

Some have contended that Peter, James and John were the presidency at Jerusalem, but upon careful examination we will find that these men were always associated with, and a part of, the quorum of the twelve in their ministry. As an example, we find that Peter stood, on the day of Pentecost, with the eleven other apostles, and preached to those who gathered on that occasion (see Acts 2:14). Upon another occasion, when the converts sold their possessions of land and worldly goods, they brought the prices “and laid them down at the apostle’s feet.” (See Acts 4:34, 35.) When the enemies of the church called a council at Jerusalem, Peter and the other apostles answered. (See Acts 5:29.) So far we have not found on passage that would indicate that Peter held any higher authority than the other apostles, but only that he was equal with them.

When the number of disciples had multiplied, it became necessary to arrange for some systematic way of looking after the widows, etc. So that the apostles might not have to leave their spiritual duties to attend to temporal matters, a call was sent out to the membership. Did the call go out under the direction of a presidency? No, it was the twelve who called the multitude of disciples together (see Acts 6:1, 2).

When demands arose along spiritual lines, were they attended to by a Presidency? No. When word reached Jerusalem that converts had been made at Samaria, the apostles sent two of their number, Peter and John, to confirm them (see Acts 8:14, 15).

Contrast the above with some purported revelations given in these last days, and we find quite a change indicated in the way of doing things. Notice the following: “The twelve are a traveling, presiding high council, to officiate in the name of the Lord, under the direction of the presidency of the church, agreeably to the institution of heaven, to build up the church and regulate all the affairs of the same, in all nations,” etc. – Doctrine and Covenants 104:12

A First Presidency or First Apostles?

Again: "It is the duty of the twelve to preach the gospel, and administer in the ordinances thereof, as is directed in the scriptures which ye have received. They are called and set apart to this duty; and are to travel and preach, under the direction and counsel of the presidency." – Doctrine and Covenants 122:3

We find the following remarkable statement regarding the authority of the first presidency: "The twelve are not subject to any other than the first presidency, viz. myself, Sidney Rigdon and Fredrick G. Williams who are now my counselors (and where I am not there is no First Presidency over the twelve)." – Millennial Star, Vol. 15, page 595

Show us where, in the name of consistency, this kind of procedure is in harmony with the way the affairs of the church in the New Testament were conducted! We are told, as pointed out from an early revelation, that the church in these last days was to be established "like as it was taught by my disciples in the days of old." – Book of Commandments 4:5

Let us now briefly review the evidence in the Book of Mormon relative to church organization, for we are told that the Bible and the Book of Mormon contain the fullness of the gospel.

Concerning the twelve apostles we have the following:

And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me again, saying, Look! And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, That he was taken by the people, yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world; and I saw and bear record. And I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted upon the cross, and slain for the sins of the world. And after he was slain, I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the lamb; for thus were the twelve called by the angel of the Lord. – 1 Nephi 3:86, 88

Verses 113, 117-167, 191 and 239 of the same chapter, show that the twelve were the ones upon whom would fall the responsibility of carrying on the work of the church. When Christ appeared unto the people on this land after his resurrection we read:

And it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words unto Nephi, and to those who had been called (new the number of them who had been called and received the power and authority to baptize were twelve). And behold, he stretched forth his hand unto the multitude, and cried unto them saying, Blessed are ye, if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister to you, and to be your servants. – 3 Nephi 5:44, 45

The following is recorded in the 7th chapter:

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words, he said unto those twelve whom he had chosen, Ye are my disciples; and ye are a light unto this people, who are a remnant of the house of Joseph. – 3 Nephi 7:13

In the 9th chapter of 3 Nephi we find the names of the twelve, and a record of how they started out upon their ministry among the Nephites, but there is not found any passage that would even remotely suggest that they were "to officiate in the name of the Lord, under the direction of the presidency of the church," as signified in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, 104:12. We see that the Bible and the Book of Mormon agree that the twelve is the highest quorum in the church.

When John the Revelator was shown the church, represented as a woman about to flee the wilderness, he saw her clothed in the glory of the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars upon her head (see Revelations 12:1). Some would have us believe that the head represents the first presidency, and that the stars are around the head, but please notice that the

A First Presidency or First Apostles?

stars are upon the head of the woman. This same church was to remain in the wilderness 1,260 days (years), after which it was to be restored to the earth again. And so the Lord told Joseph Smith:

I will enlist my church, like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in days of old.

It may be of interest to note that this statement, found in the Book of Commandments 4:5, was eliminated from the revelation when printed in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants in 1835.

The church that meets with approval of God must be after the same pattern that was taught by the Disciples of Christ; must be like the church of Christ, Himself, established among men. It should not take much argument to convince latter day saints of this. Joseph Smith understood what the church was to be like when he proceeded to organize an apostolic form of church government as has been stated before. It was an apostolic system that was set forth in the early revelation of the church that had been driven into the wilderness, which, we have seen from both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, was a church in which the twelve were the presiding or directing, or the highest quorum in the church.

We would ask the reader not to forget that the Lord did not consider that any more light was needed as to fundamentals of church organization prior to April 6, 1830, than is revealed in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. There are only two revelations giving any instructions along this line that were given before the church was organized: The first, known as chapter 15 in the Book of Commandments, only reiterates the principle set forth in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, and calls attention to the fact that others were to be called, "Yea, even unto twelve" (verse 27). The second revelation referred to is chapter 24 in the Book of Commandments, also known as "Articles and Covenants;" and no such thing as a first presidency is mentioned there, either. Not one word had been said about the first presidency when the church was organized in 1830; nothing to indicate that there ever would be a first presidency.

As further evidence to show that, when the church was organized, Joseph did not consider himself, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer a first presidency, Joseph, in his history, refers to chapter 15 of the Book of Commandments to "illustrate the nature of our calling to this Priesthood, " as well as that of others who were to be called (see page 20 of supplement to Millennial Star, Vol. 15). This shows that he understood their calling to be that of apostles. This is plainly evident in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 15, Book of Commandments:

And now, Oliver, I speak unto you, and also unto David, by way of commandment; For behold I command all men everywhere to repent, and speak unto you, even as unto Paul, mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called.

The idea is advanced by some that the presidency are apostles, but notice that Joseph, Oliver and David were not instructed to call twelve others besides themselves, but only to call enough to make the total number, including themselves, twelve.

And now behold, there are others which are called to declare my gospel, both unto Gentile and unto Jew: yea, even unto twelve. — ibid v. 27

The revelation we are examining was given to the church almost a year before the church was organized, and before the men named in it had been ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood, as the following from the history of Joseph Smith will show:

We had not long been engaged in solemn and fervent prayer, when the word of the Lord came unto us in the chamber, commanding us that I should ordain Oliver Cowdery to be an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ, and that he also should ordain me to the same office; and then to ordain

A First Presidency or First Apostles?

others as it should be made known unto us from time to time. We were, however, commanded to defer this our ordination until such times as it should be practicable to have our brethren, who had been, and who should be baptized, assembled together, when we must have their sanction to our thus proceeding to ordain each other, and have them decide by vote whether they were willing to accept us as their spiritual teachers or not... - Millennial Star, Vol. 15, page 20, supplement

Take this in connection with what he said a little later in his history, and we will find that Joseph was proceeding along lines "according to the order of the church as recorded in the New Testament." Notice the following quotation in which Joseph fully expresses the idea that he understood the importance of the work he was to do, for he says:

Among other things of the kind, we obtained of Him the following, by the spirit of prophecy and revelation, which not only gave us much information, but also pointed out to us the precise day upon which, according to His will and commandments, we should proceed to organize His church once again upon the earth. — ibid, p. 22

This has reference to chapter 24 of the Book of Commandments, which is called the "Articles and Covenants," and which might be truly said to be the constitution of the church. It was given ten months prior to the date the church was organized, as preparatory to the organization of the church. Not in this revelation nor in the other given before the organization of the church (Chapter 15, Book of Commandments) is anything said about a first presidency. Surely it seems that God intended to set in the church "first apostles" etc., since he designates no other office to be superior to them.

SUMMARY

Now, to make a brief summary of the matter presented above, we find:

First, that God promised to establish his church in the last days "like unto the church in days of old";

Second, that ten months before the church was organized, the Lord gave two revelations directing that the church should be organized after the apostolic plan set forth in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon;

Third, that the pattern furnished by the church "in days of old," as set forth in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, the pattern pointed to and commanded in two revelations given preparatory to the organization of the church, make the twelve apostles the highest quorum in the church.

Reference to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants is from Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints editions.

For further information about the Church of Christ, or to obtain other literature, including the Book of Commandments, write to the church at the address on the front cover.

May God be with you in your honest search for truth.