



Type: Book Chapter

A Discussion of Lecture 2: Chosen Vessels and the Order of the Priesthood

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Source: *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*

Editor(s): Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,
1990

Page(s): 179-197

Abstract: No abstract available.



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Chosen Vessels and the Order of the Priesthood

Joseph Fielding McConkie

It is of God we speak and how one comes to know him. The subject commands attention. There is no knowledge of greater importance. Surely there is no salvation to be found in the worship of false gods. Certainly no benefit can accrue from spurious or delusive doctrine. Even that which is innocently ignorant is without the power to bless. Sincerity, however pure it may be, cannot remit sins, raise the dead, or create a celestial kingdom. Salvation is not the child of darkness, it is not the child of stern and heartless justice, nor is it the child of indulgent and intemperate mercy. Christ addressed the issue in his intercessory prayer: “*And this is life eternal,*” he said, “*that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent*” (John 17:3; emphasis added). The bloodline must be pure—eternal life can only be the offspring of eternal truth.

Anciently it was said that all roads led to Rome. It was equally true that there was only one entrance to the Holy of Holies. This is true in spiritual matters as well. There is one path to exaltation. What is it? How then are we to approach the true and living God? What is the system that the heavens have ordained whereby we are to obtain a sure knowledge of the plan of salvation? Such are the questions to which the Prophet responds in the second lecture on faith.

My purpose here is to follow Joseph Smith's lead. Having become a perfect witness of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, the Prophet proceeds to show us the way whereby we too can share that same knowledge. How fitting it is that Joseph Smith himself is the crowning example of the principle that he taught in the School of the Elders. He is God's witness, and it is through his testimony that we are encouraged to seek God's divine presence. Such is the system. We learn of God from those who know him (LF 2:35). If there were none who knew of God, if we had no testimonies of him, we would have little inclination to seek after him. It is because of the testimony of one who knows him that we seek to know him. Initially, we are all dependent on someone else's testimony. Thus, we grow spiritually as we do physically; both body and spirit are born dependant, both require careful nurturing, both are intended to grow to a state of maturity and independence, and then both are expected to assume a parenting role to others that the process may begin anew. All who obtain a knowledge of saving truths, a knowledge of God and his plan for the salvation of his children, have that knowledge because of the goodness and grace of others and therefore assume the obligation to extend that blessing to as many as they properly can.

Adam: Earth's First Apostle

It was not intended that man dwell in darkness. Long before the first of our race was placed upon the earth the Lord had given the command: "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3). Nor was it intended that Adam wander in doubt or uncertainty relative to the nature and purpose of his creation or to whom he was answerable for his conduct. "God conversed with him face to face: in his presence he was permitted to stand, and from his own mouth he was permitted to receive instruction. He heard his voice, walked before him, and gazed upon his glory, while intelligence burst upon his understanding and enabled him to give names to the vast assemblage of his Maker's works" (LF 2:18).

Obviously Adam's transgression did not deprive him of the knowledge with which he had previously been endowed (LF 2:19). Upon hearing God's voice, Adam, knowing his shame, sought to hide himself. Nor did the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of the Divine Presence bring an end to communion with their Father (LF 2:20). Their circumstance in the lone and dreary world immediately evoked the desire for divine assistance. Nor did their prayers go unheeded, for we read,

and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence. And he gave unto them commandments, that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord. And Adam was obedient unto the commandments of the Lord. And after many days, an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying, Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake, saying, This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent, and call upon God, in the name of the Son forevermore. And in that day, the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son (Moses 5:4-9).

The quotation clearly establishes two points: first, the Fall did not cause Adam and Eve to lose their knowledge of God; and second, "no sooner was the plan of redemption revealed to man and he began to call upon God, than the Holy Spirit was given, bearing record of the Father and Son" (LF 2:25). How then did the family of Adam obtain a knowledge of God? Adam and Eve communicated that knowledge to them (LF 2:31). How did Adam and Eve obtain that knowledge? God manifested himself to them in the Garden and he continued to speak to them after their transgression and expulsion from Eden (LF 2:30). Thus it was for Adam and Eve, as special witnesses, to plant the first seeds of testimony in the hearts of their children and their children's children for many generations. Thus man learned to have faith in God after the Fall.

Adam and Eve establish the pattern to be followed in all subsequent dispensations and in all generations. This pattern is that the posterity of Adam in all ages first learn of God or have the seeds of faith planted in their hearts by special witnesses chosen of God for that purpose. It is for one man to plant the seed in the heart of another. Most properly it is for parents to plant the seed in the hearts of their children, for previous to the time that any of “Adam’s posterity had obtained a manifestation of God to themselves, Adam, their common father, had testified unto them of the existence of God and of his eternal power and Godhead” (LF 2:35).

Thus the whole human family partakes of the fruit of the tree of faith because father Adam planted the tree. Each dispensation in its turn has had its special witness or witnesses—its “Adams”—but in all cases it has been “human testimony, and human testimony only,” that motivated man’s initial investigation concerning God. It has been the belief exercised in “the testimony of their fathers,” that aroused their minds to “inquire after the knowledge of God. That inquiry frequently terminated, indeed always terminated when rightly pursued, in the most glorious discoveries and eternal certainty” (LF 2:56).

Though one may plant the seed in the heart of another, each must nourish the seed for himself. The Prophet said

that after any members of the human family are made acquainted with the important fact that there is a God who has created and does uphold all things, the extent of their knowledge respecting his character and glory will depend upon their diligence and faithfulness in seeking after him, until, like Enoch, the brother of Jared, and Moses, they shall obtain faith in God and power with him to behold him face to face (LF 2:55).

Chosen Vessels

“Thus the Gospel began to be preached, from the beginning, being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God, and by his own voice, and by the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Moses 5:58; see LF 2:24, 30). Adam and his posterity had no

reason to be in doubt as to the nature of that being in whom they were to exercise faith or as to what God expected of them. It is recorded that “all things were confirmed unto Adam, by an holy ordinance, and the Gospel preached, and a decree sent forth, that it should be in the world, until the end thereof” (Moses 5:58-59; LF 2:33-36). Further, we are told that the “same Priesthood, which was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also” (Moses 6:7). Adam, then, is the pattern; his dispensation the example; and the order or system of heaven is everlastingly the same.

Mormon testified,

Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing; and thus it was until the coming of Christ. And after that he came men also were saved by faith in his name; and by faith, they became the sons of God (Moroni 7:25-26).

As to the matter of who it is the angels appear to, Mormon explained that they manifest themselves to “chosen vessels,” teaching them the “word of Christ,” so that those chosen ones can in turn bear testimony to all others.

And the office of their ministry is to call men to repentance . . . by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him. And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts, according to the power thereof; and after this manner bringeth to pass the Father, the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men (Moroni 7:31-32).

Lecture 2 shows how Adam taught his descendants and they taught theirs, all the way to Abraham (LF 2:37-53). Let us look at our dispensation to find a similar example. With the appearance of that God known to Adam in Eden and his Only Begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to the youthful Joseph Smith, a dispensation was born. Though only a boy fourteen years of age, Joseph Smith then knew more about God and the truths of salvation than any other man on earth. He was

earth's most competent witness on the nature and purposes of God. No other man could bear the testimony he bore, for he alone had stood in the divine presence. He was the vessel chosen in heaven from which the truths of salvation were again to be poured out to the generality of mankind.

When we speak of dispensations, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, we speak

of those designated portions of the earth's history when the Lord, through one man, gives his word to the whole world and makes all the prophets, and all the seers, and all the administrators, and all the apostles of that period subject to, and exponents of, what came through that individual. . . . Every prophet is a witness of Christ; every dispensation head is a revealer of Christ for his day; and every other prophet or apostle who comes is a reflection and an echo and an exponent of the dispensation head. All such come to echo to the world and to expound and unfold what God has revealed through the man who was appointed for that era to give his eternal word to the world. Such is the dispensation concept ("This Generation" 4-5).

Thus when we find the Lord saying to Joseph Smith, "this generation shall have my word through you" (D&C 5:10), he means our dispensation,¹ the period from the First Vision to the Second Coming. "Shall" means "must"; it is mandatory, it is the bold assertion that there are no options. You accept Joseph Smith's testimony or you are damned. "My word" means the

¹The word "generation" is used with a wide range of meanings in the scriptures. For instance, it is used to describe an indeterminate period or age, as in the declaration that the priesthood is found in the Church "in all generations" (D&C 84:17), or in the Savior's statement that it is a "wicked and adulterous generation [that] seeketh after a sign" (Matthew 16:4). Similarly, it is used as a synonym for a dispensation, as in the statement that the Book of Mormon is given to prove that God will call prophets in this "age and generation, as well as in generations of old" (D&C 20:11). By contrast it is also used to describe more limited periods, for instance, the time necessary for children to grow to maturity and have offspring of their own (see D&C 98:28).

The question in the present text is how it can confidently be asserted that "generation" is being used as a synonym for "dispensation," when it is used with a different meaning in the previous verse. Such an interpretation conforms to a significant number of other texts. For instance, a revelation given on the day the Church was organized directed its members to "give heed" to all of Joseph Smith's words with the promise that the gates of hell will have no power over those who do so and cause the heavens to shake for their good (D&C 21:6-7). Indeed, we are told that we are to declare the things revealed to Joseph Smith for they are "glad tidings of great joy unto this generation" (D&C 31:3), obviously meaning dispensation.

“gospel of salvation; the word is the plan of salvation; the word is the mind and will and purposes of the Lord as pertaining to his children on earth; the word is all the truths and rights and powers and doctrines and principles that are needed by men so they can take the souls they possess and transform them into the kind of souls that can go where God and Christ are” (McConkie, “This Generation” 3).

Revelation is in no way limited only to the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was called to stand as the dispensation head. Our faith embraces “all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal” and the promise that “He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (A of F #9). Classic illustrations include Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead (D&C 138) and Spencer W. Kimball’s revelation extending the privilege of the priesthood and the temple to those of all races (OD #2). Yet, it was for Joseph Smith to lay the theological foundations of the Restored Church. He was the chosen vessel to whom the angels appeared to restore every key and power and authority necessary for men to work out their salvation and obtain their eternal inheritance. The revelations that came after the ministry of Joseph Smith, came to other chosen vessels to amplify, to expound, and to expand upon that which he received. No such revelations are ever given to those who have rejected the testimony of the dispensation head.

In our day the faithful Latter-day Saint stands in fast and testimony meeting and testifies that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith is the great prophet of the Restoration, that whoever is presiding over the Church at the time is his lawful successor, and that this is the only true and living Church on the face of the whole earth. Had we attended a testimony meeting in the days of Adam, Enoch, Noah, or any of the other gospel dispensations, the nature of the testimonies would have been essentially the same. In Adam’s day, for example, we might have listened to a testimony to this effect: “I know that God lives, that he will yet have a Son in the flesh who will work out an atoning sacrifice and thereby redeem us from the effects of the Fall. I

know that Adam is the chosen vessel of the Lord, the one called and ordained to stand at the head of the Church in this dispensation and reveal to us the laws and ordinances necessary for our salvation.”

The Order of the Priesthood

Although the words “Priesthood” and “order” are not used in Lecture 2, it is clear that the transmittal of the gospel message from Adam to later generations was patterned and orderly (LF 2:43-44, 52-53). The gospel, that is the revealed knowledge of God and his plan for the salvation of his children, by its very nature bespeaks system and order. There is no disorder in the kingdom of heaven. God does not get confused, he does not forget, he is not the author of contention, his ways are not capricious, he does not act with irregularity, his kingdom is not one of disunity, disarray, or dishevelment. He is a God of order. Indeed, we have been told that “he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons; and their courses are fixed, even the courses of the heavens and the earth, which comprehend the earth and all the planets” (D&C 88:42-43). He has done all this that man might be taught the gospel. Are we then to suppose that God forgot to ordain a system whereby this would be done—a system that would allow all men in all ages equal opportunity to hear the message of salvation and lay claim to the blessings of heaven?

Surely the system whereby the message of salvation is to be declared must be worthy of the principles it espouses. It must be a system of order, consistency, and unity. It must be a system of God’s ordination, not man’s. Pure water cannot be housed in impure vessels. What then is the system that God has ordained by which his gospel is to be taught? The scriptures, as we shall see, respond with plainness.

In response to the question of how the gospel is to be taught, let me cite two classic scriptural texts—one from the Book of

Mormon, the other from the Doctrine and Covenants. Alma, in the conclusion of a marvelous discourse on how we obtain salvation, testified: “I have spoken unto you plainly that ye cannot err, or have spoken according to the commandments of God” (Alma 5:43). In that which preceded this verse, Alma had indeed spoken with considerable plainness. That those carrying the gospel message are to be plain and straightforward is obviously part of their commission, for Alma continues, “For I am called to speak after this manner, according to the holy order of God, which is in Christ Jesus” (Alma 5:44).

Note particularly the language Alma uses to identify his commission to preach—ie, “the holy order of God.” This is a phrase that we read frequently in the Book of Mormon. It is interchangeable with the phrase “the order of his Son,” and has reference to the Melchizedek Priesthood. The same phrase is used in the revelations of our dispensation as the Lord describes the nature of the priesthood to us. We also find it in the Old Testament to the extent that the purity of that record has been retained. Section 84 in the Doctrine and Covenants describes the Melchizedek Priesthood as “the holiest order of God,” and then states that this holy priesthood is to administer the gospel (see 84:18-19). In the JST Genesis we read that Melchizedek, the very man after whom the priesthood was named, was first “approved of God” and then he was

ordained an high priest after the *order* of the covenant which God made with Enoch, it being after the *order of the Son of God*; which *order* came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God; and it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name (14:27-29; emphasis added).

In Section 107:3-4, we learn that anciently the priesthood was called *the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God*. But out of respect or reverence to the name of the Supreme Being, to avoid the too frequent repetition of his name, they, the church . . . called that priesthood after Melchizedek” (emphasis in original).

Mechizedek's name was used because he "was such a great high priest" (v 2).

Now the thrust of all this is that the doctrine of "order" is inseparable from the functioning of the priesthood and that priesthood is inseparable from the declaration of the gospel. This is why we have Joseph Smith saying, "Where there is a prophet, a priest, or a righteous man unto whom God gives His oracles, there is the kingdom of God; and where the oracles of God are not, there the kingdom of God is not" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 272; hereafter *TPJS*). Now he didn't say where one believer is, there is the kingdom of God also. It takes more than the conviction of one individual to comply with the heavenly ordained order whereby the gospel is to be taught. Thus the very name of the priesthood (ie, the Holy Order) stands as a refutation of the protestant concept of "priesthood of all believers," which is the idea that to accept Christ grants one the authority to act in his name.

Returning to our text in Alma, we read the prophet saying, "I am commanded to stand and testify unto this people the things which have been spoken by our fathers concerning the things which are to come" (5:44). His testimony is that he had been "called . . . according to the holy order of God" and that he was "commanded" to declare certain things—specifically that which had been spoken by the fathers, that is the things recorded in the scriptures. "And this is not all," he added.

Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself? Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me. And moreover, I say unto you that it has thus been revealed unto me, that the words which have been spoken by our fathers are true, even so according to the spirit of prophecy which is in me, which is also by the manifestation of the Spirit of God. I say unto you, that I know of myself that whatsoever I shall

say unto you, concerning that which is to come, is true (Alma 5:45-48).

Alma then testifies about the coming of Christ:

And now I say unto you that this is the order after which I am called, yea, to preach unto my beloved brethren, yea, and every one that dwelleth in the land; yea, to preach unto all, both old and young, both bond and free; yea, I say unto you the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation; yea, to cry unto them that they must repent and be born again (Alma 5:49).

In summary, Alma did not assume the right to preach; rather he was called and ordained to the “holy order.” With that ordination came the commandment to preach with plainness. That which he preached was that which he learned from the testimony of the fathers—that is, the witness of the scriptures and that which had been revealed to him through his study of them. Thus he had the confirming revelation about what the fathers had taught and additional revelation that enabled him to expound and expand upon that which the chosen vessels of times past had recorded. In a subsequent chapter we read that Alma

began to declare the word of God . . . according to the revelation of the truth of the word which had been spoken by his fathers, and according to the spirit of prophecy which was in him, according to the testimony of Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . and the holy order by which he was called” (Alma 6:8; see also 8:4, 24).

Our second example is a revelation directed to a young elder by the name of Orson Hyde. It is important to note that this revelation was given some three and half years before Elder Hyde was called to the Apostleship. It announced that he was “called by his ordination [to the priesthood] to proclaim the everlasting gospel, by the Spirit of the living God.” It further stated that he was to reason with those to whom he preached, “expounding all scriptures unto them” (D&C 68:1). Elder Hyde was then told to be an “ensample” (v 2), meaning he was to be the pattern or model for all others who held the same priesthood.

And this is the ensample unto them, that they shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost. And whatsoever they shall

... speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation. Behold, this is the promise of the Lord unto you, O ye my servants (D&C 68:3-5).

The revelation then directs “all the faithful elders of [the] church” to be of good cheer, to preach without fear, and to testify of the Christ, and it states that the promises given therein are directed to them (vv 6-7).

This is what Alma called the holy order—that is, when men have been properly called to the priesthood and commissioned to go forth to teach, they are to do so from the scriptures (or as Alma said, the things spoken by the fathers). Then with the Holy Ghost, they will be granted the power to expand the written word and to add scripture to scripture. The principle is succinctly stated in a revelation instructing the early missionaries of this dispensation: “And let them journey from thence preaching the word by the way, saying none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written, and that which is taught them by the Comforter through the prayer of faith” (D&C 52:9).

A modern Apostle articulated this principle in this very instructive language:

Those who preach by the power of the Holy Ghost use the scriptures as their basic source of knowledge and doctrine. They begin with what the Lord has before revealed to other inspired men. But it is the practice of the Lord to give added knowledge to those upon whose hearts the true meaning and intents of the scriptures have been impressed. Many great doctrinal revelations come to those who preach from the scriptures. When they are in tune with the Infinite, the Lord lets them know, first, the full and complete meaning of the scriptures they are expounding, and then he oftentimes expands their views so that new truths flood in upon them, and they learn added things that those who do not follow such a course can never know (McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* 515-16).

We must keep all the commandments of God. “But,” as Joseph Smith observed, “we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know unless we comply with or keep those

we have already received” (*TPJS* 256). If we are to receive more and thus know more, we must master and live by what we have been given. We reduce the realm of the unknown, not by wandering in it, but rather by feasting on and expanding our knowledge of that which God has already revealed. Hence, we have the commandment to teach from the scriptures with the attendant promise that by so doing we will be granted understanding that goes beyond the written word. This is the reason the canon of scripture can never be complete. To argue for a closed canon is to defeat the very purpose of scripture, it is to contend with the Spirit of truth, and offend the Holy Ghost.

The Book of Mormon has been criticized because its prophets quote so frequently from Bible texts. Well of course they do. It is the holy order of God. It is the manner after which their prophets were commanded to preach. Only if they didn’t do so could it be argued that the Book of Mormon was not authentic scripture. Those prophets whose teachings are recorded for us in the scriptures are our patterns; chief among them is Christ himself. He commenced his mortal ministry with a quotation from Isaiah (Luke 4:16-21), constantly quoted the scriptures in his teaching (Matthew 19:4; Mark 12:10), challenged his detractors to search the scriptures (John 5:39), and even in his appearances as a resurrected being continued to expound “in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27, 44-45).

While he was among the Nephites, the glorified Christ not only quoted Old World scriptures, including the words of Moses, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Micah, and Malachi, but he “expounded all the scriptures unto them which they had received” (3 Nephi 23:6). That is, he expounded their own Nephite scripture, then “expounded all the scriptures [both the New World and the Old World scripture] in one.” And then he commanded them to “teach the things which he had expounded unto them” (3 Nephi 23:14). Thus the inspired pronouncements of the fathers kindle the spirit of revelation in the resurrected Christ who speaks new scripture to the Nephites. They in turn were to teach the words Christ has

spoken to them. By so doing they came to know the spirit of revelation and were able to amplify what he taught. Thus the gospel goes forth in ever widening circles until that glorious day when it will fill the whole earth as the waters do the seas. This is the pattern, Christ is the classic example, and the manner in which the scriptural prophets teach illustrates it. When Amulek, for instance, wanted to support Alma's teaching that "the word is in Christ unto salvation," he noted that Alma had quoted the prophets Zenos, Zenock, and Moses, and then he said, "And now, behold, I will testify unto you of myself that these things are true" (Alma 34:5-8). Thus in compliance with the holy order he taught those things which had been manifest to him by the spirit of revelation. In our day we have the Doctrine and Covenants as the perfect illustration of this principle. In literally hundreds of instances the Doctrine and Covenants picks up a phrase from the Old or New Testament and amplifies on it. Many of these revelations grow out of Joseph Smith's work on the Bible, which we now call the Joseph Smith Translation. That is, as he labored over the meaning and intent of the words of the biblical fathers, the spirit of revelation unfolded that meaning to him in the form of additional scripture for our dispensation. Such is and ever has been the system—the holy order of God. This is the way it was with Adam and those who followed in his family down to Abraham as outlined in Lecture 2:35-53.

A Word of Caution

As we emphasize the fact that the gospel is to be taught by chosen vessels, there is a tendency to say that only one chosen vessel, the president of the Church, can interpret and expound scripture. Some contend that no one but the head of the Church should declare or write doctrine. Let us briefly consider the implications of such a notion. If, for instance, we are to state that no one but the president of the Church can write scripture or can speak to the whole Church, what are we to do with the New

Testament? Of its twenty-seven books, it can be argued that only those written by Peter and John were written by “the prophet”; and it is highly doubtful that the writings of John and Peter were all done while they presided over the Church. Be that as it may, certainly Matthew, Mark, and Luke never presided over the Church; yet, we have accepted their writings as scripture. Paul, of course, is the major contributor to the New Testament, generally credited with fourteen of its books. No one argues that Paul presided over the Church. The discussion as far as Paul is concerned is whether or not he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. It seems evident that he was, but there is no clear proof even of this. As to James and Jude, according to the standard suggested, they obviously had no business writing “general” epistles either. And be there no mistake about the fact that they intended their writings to go to all the world. James addressed his epistle “to the twelve tribes . . . scattered abroad” (1:1); Jude addressed himself to all who have been “called,” and “sanctified” (1:1).

This is not to suggest that there was no discipline in the meridian Church relative to who could write and preach. Certainly there was. The house of God in every dispensation must be a house of order. The writings of both Paul and John indicate that all within the faith, both men and women, were entitled to the spirit of prophecy and revelation—indeed, they were expected to be prophets or prophetesses (See 1 Cor 14:29-32; Rev 19:10). The commonality of prophets among the congregations of the meridian Saints is seen in the frequent warnings against false prophets that would arise among their number (see Matt 7:15; 24:11; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Though it was believed to be within the providence of all to prophesy, some were specifically identified as holding the office of a prophet in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church (see 1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 2:19-20; 4:11).

Paul’s doctrine was that when Saints met together they were all to share the fruits of their spiritual gifts. One could come having written an inspired hymn, another with doctrinal understanding,

another speaking in tongues, another to interpret, and still another with the spirit of revelation. “All things to be done unto edifying” (1 Cor 14:26). “For ye may all prophesy one by one,” Paul declared, “that all may learn, and all may be comforted” (v 31) that “all may be edified of all” (D&C 84:110), or as another modern revelation states, “that every man may have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets,” Paul said (1 Cor 14:32). That is, the doctrine espoused by any who truly have the spirit of prophecy will be in harmony with that doctrine revealed through those whose office it is to officially establish the doctrines of the kingdom. By way of illustration, Paul’s epistle is regarded as scripture. His office and calling as an Apostle granted him the right to speak as one having authority, as a chosen vessel, to the Corinthian Saints. In turn all the members of the church in Corinth were entitled to that same spirit of prophecy that they might edify one another. In doing so they would teach no doctrines that were out of harmony with the inspired counsel or holy writ they had already received. Still they neither individually nor collectively had the authority to write an epistle of instruction to Paul or to some other branch of the Church. Thus their spirit of prophecy and revelation was subject to the prophets, the chosen vessels, who had been called of the Lord to preside over them. Concluding his thought, Paul said, “Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues [nor, it might be added, forbid the expression of any other spiritual gift]. Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:39-40).

As to our own day, there are many revelations relative to proclaiming the gospel and teaching one another the doctrines of the kingdom. The revealed word tells us that the gospel and the priesthood were restored so “every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world” (D&C 1:20). As already quoted, whatever is spoken by any elder when moved upon by the Holy Ghost is scripture and is the mind and will and voice of the Lord. Joseph Smith said that God would not reveal anything to him that he would not reveal to the Twelve, and to

the least and last Saint as soon as he was able to bear it (*TPJS* 149). He further declared that even those holding office in the Aaronic Priesthood were “to preach, teach, expound, exhort,” with the scriptures by the spirit of revelation (D&C 20:46; 42:14).

To join the Church is, in a sense, to join a School of the Elders. To receive the priesthood is to accept the responsibility to teach and testify of those truths revealed to that vessel chosen as the instrument of restoration in the particular dispensation in which one lives. To those of our dispensation the Lord has said: “You shall declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun.” (D&C 31:4). Thus it is for us to teach the message of the restoration and to do it from those scriptures the Lord has given us for that purpose. We are without the right or the authority to preach any other gospel than that restored to us. Our commission is to “declare the word with truth and soberness,” that is to faithfully declare the gospel as it has been revealed, without distortion of any sort to please either the speaker or the listener (see Alma 42:31).

Now just what does it mean to declare doctrine? Are we speaking of adding to, augmenting, and changing doctrinal concepts? Or, do we mean preaching and interpreting the doctrines now found in the standard works? Is the President of the Church the only General Authority who can declare doctrine in the sense that he alone writes doctrinal books; or is his position unique in that he alone can announce new doctrine and stand as the final arbiter upon differing doctrinal views? Certainly there is a difference between writing by wisdom and writing by commandment, as illustrated by the divine command to Oliver Cowdery: “If thou art led at any time by the Comforter to speak or teach, or at all times by the way of commandment unto the church, thou mayest do it. But thou shalt not write by way of commandment, but by wisdom” (D&C 28:4-5).

Surely it is not intended that only ordained prophets write all the inspired books, poetry, plays, or music in the Church. Neither is it intended that they give all the patriarchal blessings, deliver all the inspired addresses, teach all of the classes, or lead

all of the choirs. Indeed, it may never be their lot to paint the great paintings, sculpt with inspiration, or design chapels and temples. The kingdom of God is to be built as the tabernacle in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem were, that is, by the revelation of God as it manifests itself through a prophet, and also a nation of artists and craftsmen. All who labor to build the house of the Lord, be it temporal or spiritual, be it ancient or modern, are to do so with the spirit of revelation. And it goes without saying, that as the greatest of temples awaits building, so the best of books, music, art, and all things that testify of our God still await the day of their earthly creation.

Conclusion

How then have men learned of God and what they must do to please him? From the days of Adam to our own, the only answer that can satisfy is revelation (LF 2:13). Unless God chooses to reveal himself as he did to Adam and has to his other chosen vessels through the centuries, men are forever without a sure and certain knowledge of him. They would therefore be unable to exercise faith in him for they can hardly exercise faith in uncertainty. Thus God has chosen to manifest himself and his plan for the salvation of his children to certain chosen vessels who stand as witnesses of him in all the world.

All but Adam first learned of God by human testimony (LF 2:30-31). Thereafter it is the right of every living soul through faith and obedience to obtain a personal manifestation of the verity of that testimony communicated to them. Thus they stand independent and become the source of first testimony to others (LF 2:34).

For our day, Joseph Smith was the chosen vessel through whom the dispensation was established and the pure knowledge of God was again restored to the earth. Those who listen in faith to his testimony come to know by the manifestation of the spirit of prophecy and revelation that he is a competent and reliable

witness and that the authority of heaven rests with him. Having obtained such a testimony, members then become witnesses themselves and aid in taking the message of the restored gospel to the ends of the earth. The spirit of this divinely ordained system—outlined in Lecture 2 and known to us in the scriptures as the order of the priesthood—is beautifully captured in Parley P. Pratt’s poetic tribute to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

He has organized the kingdom of God—
 We will extend its dominion.
He has restored the fulness of the Gospel.
 We will spread it abroad.
He has laid the foundation of Nauvoo.
 We will build it up.
He has laid the foundation of the Temple.
 We will bring up the topstone with shouting.
He has kindled a fire.
 We will fan the flame.
He has kindled up the dawn of a day of glory.
 We will bring it to its meridian splendor.
He was a “little one,” and became a thousand.
 We are a small one, and will become a strong nation.
He quarried the stone from the mountain.
 We will cause it to become a great mountain and fill
 the whole earth (151-52).

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