
Governments Instituted by God

D&C 134:1

At a general assembly of the Church on August 17, 1835, at Kirtland, Ohio, it was agreed to publish the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. After the agreement was reached, William W. Phelps read an article on marriage prepared by Oliver Cowdery. Phelps was followed by Cowdery, who read the article “Of Governments and Laws in General,” today known as Doctrine and Covenants, section 134. This article as well as the article on marriage were included with the revelations in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Of the article on government and laws, the Prophet Joseph Smith penned, “That our belief with regard to earthly governments and laws in general may not be misinterpreted nor misunderstood, we have thought proper to present, at the close of this volume, our opinion concerning the same.”¹ The article on government (which has been included in every edition of the Doctrine and Covenants since its proposal in 1835) is not considered a revelation but “a declaration of belief regarding governments and laws in general” and a rebuttal to some of the accusations against the Latter-day Saints (D&C 134: Introduction).

Although it is rightly said that the principle of government was given by the Lord, the Lord did not institute every form of government. According to past Church leaders Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl,

The Lord in the very beginning revealed to Adam a perfect form of government, and this was “instituted of God for the benefit of man;” but we do not hold that all governments, or any man-made government,

¹ History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], 603. Joseph Smith Papers.

was instituted of God although the Lord holds a controlling hand over them. It was not long after the Lord established His government with Adam, and had commanded him to teach correct principles to his children, that men began to rebel and turn away (see Moses 5:12–13).²

Rebellion led to earthly governments—governments formed by men. Of these earthly governments, Elder Erastus Snow said, “Anarchy—shall I say, is the worst of all governments? No! Anarchy is the absence of all government; it is the antipodes [opposite] of order; it is the acme of confusion; it is the result of unbridled license, the antipodes of true liberty.”³

According to President David O. McKay, our adherence to government leaders should be based on the 12th Article of Faith, which states, “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” President McKay said that there are “three significant words used in the 12th Article of Faith ... —obey, honor, and sustain. ...

Obedience implies a higher attitude than mere submission, for obedience has its root in good intent; submission may spring from selfishness or meanness of spirit. Though obedience and submission both imply restraint on one’s own will, we are obedient only from a sense of right; submissive from a sense of necessity.

Honor expresses an act or attitude of an inferior towards a superior. When applied to things it is taken in the sense of holding in honor. Thus, in honoring the law, we look upon it as something which is above selfish desires or indulgences.

To sustain signifies to hold up; to keep from falling. To sustain the law, therefore, is to refrain from saying or doing anything which will weaken it or make it ineffective.

We obey law from a sense of right.

We honor law because of its necessity and strength to society.

We sustain law by keeping it in good repute.⁴

² Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *The Doctrine and Covenants containing Revelations given to Joseph Smith Jr., The Prophet with an Introduction and Historical and Exegetical Notes* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1965), 852.

³ Erastus Snow, “The Gospel—The Perfect Law of Liberty, etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, 22:149.

⁴ David O. McKay, *Conference Report*, April 1937, 28.