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# “Here Is Wisdom; Yea, to Be a Seer, a Revelator, . . . and a Prophet”

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One of the most distinctive tenets of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the belief that living prophets, seers, and revelators continue to make known the mind and will of God in our day. Today there are renewed attacks on and questions regarding the place of ecclesiastical leaders being sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators. Modern cultural changes, such as those regarding same-sex marriage and challenges to Church practice regarding women and priesthood, as well as historical items concerning plural marriage and priesthood restrictions on black members, have brought to the forefront the need to clarify and understand the historical development and doctrinal implications of sustaining members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators.

This chapter provides historical overview, discussion, and references with regard to understanding and answering questions regarding this unique aspect of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We define the calling of prophets, seers, and revelators and identify their biblical precedence.

In addition, we review the historical development of the Lord designating the President of the Church, his counselors, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and others as prophets, seers, and revelators. Further, we discuss the necessary counseling, collaboration, and harmony among these individuals as they seek the mind and will of the Lord in making administrative decisions and declaring doctrine. Lastly, we consider the implications of imperfections in those that make administrative and revelatory decisions as prophets, seers, and revelators.

## The Roles of Prophets, Seers, and Revelators

Prophets are God’s mouthpiece to his people. That is, they speak in behalf of the Lord and are called upon to keep sacred records of the revelations from God as well as an account of the people’s history in choosing to hearken to or reject the words of God as given them by his prophets.<sup>1</sup> In the Bible, the word *prophet* comes from the Hebrew word *nabi*, meaning spokesperson. Another Hebrew word, *ro’eh*, literally means one who sees—a seer. In Greek, the word is *prophētēs*, meaning “one who *speaks forth* by the inspiration of God.”<sup>2</sup>

It naturally follows that a prophet has the spirit of prophecy. “The institution of prophecy is founded on the basic premise that God makes his will known to chosen individuals in successive generations. A prophet is a[n] . . . individual endowed with the divine gift of both receiving and imparting the message of revelation.”<sup>3</sup> The prophets or patriarchs from Adam to Enoch “were preachers of righteousness, and spake and prophesied, and called upon all men everywhere, to repent” (Moses 6:23).

Much of our understanding of the role of prophets in the Restoration is founded upon knowledge of biblical prophets. “The Hebrew word [nabi] for ‘prophet’ is a common noun appearing more than three hundred times in the O[ld] T[estament].”<sup>4</sup> Moses is the great prototype for prophets, and all succeeding prophets have been expected to follow the pattern that the Lord set with his calling of Moses.<sup>5</sup> First, prophets will intimately know the Lord, and second, prophets will receive and declare the word of the Lord to the people.<sup>6</sup> The Lord likened Old Testament prophets to watchmen on mounts, walls, and towers who warned the people of the approaching enemy and declared repentance to sinners.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament Church continued

the use of the term *prophet* in that day to refer to those called of God to teach his message or to those that had the spirit of prophecy.<sup>8</sup> However, it is not clear from the Bible if prophets are the administrative leaders of the Church of Christ or if prophets fulfill a role of advising the Church. For example, Luke recorded that “in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be a great dearth throughout all the world” (Acts 11:27–28). In addition, in the Old Testament, the high priest, as well as priests and Levites, are most often completely separate from those recognized as prophets.

Similar to our understanding of a prophet, our understanding of the term *seer* hearkens to Old Testament times. While not as common in use as the term *prophet*, the term *seer*, from the Hebrew *ro’eh* and *chozeh*, referring to one who sees a vision, occurs in the Old Testament at least twenty times.<sup>9</sup> The term is closely associated with that of *prophet*.<sup>10</sup> For example, we read that “beforetime in Israel when a man went to inquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the *Seer*: for he that is now called a *Prophet* was beforetime called a *Seer*” (1 Samuel 9:9; emphasis added). A further biblical example is in the time of King David: “The word of the LORD came unto the *prophet* Gad, David’s *seer*” (2 Samuel 24:11; emphasis added). In addition, Isaiah placed the terms in parallel poetic verse:

The LORD has poured out upon you  
a spirit of deep sleep,  
and has closed your eyes, the *prophets*,  
and covered your heads, the *seers*.  
(Isaiah 29:10; emphasis added)

At the dawn of the Restoration the term *seer* was also closely associated with seer stones. It appears that reference to the Prophet Joseph Smith as a seer most likely also referred to his use of seer stones in translating the Book of Mormon and receiving revelation. Referring to the stones deposited with the Book of Mormon plates, Joseph explained that “the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times” (Joseph Smith—History 1:35; see also Mosiah 28:13–16).<sup>11</sup>

We are indebted to the Book of Mormon for further understanding of a seer. In the record of King Limhi and Ammon’s discussion, Limhi declared,

“A seer is greater than a prophet. And Ammon said that *a seer is a revelator and a prophet also*; and a gift which is greater no man can have. . . . But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed” (Mosiah 8:15–17; emphasis added). They conclude, “Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8:18).

The third term, *revelator*, continues the linking of prophets and seers. As noted in the passage above from the Book of Mormon, a seer is a revelator. However, unlike the terms *prophet* and *seer*, an ancient equivalent word for *revelator* is not found in the Bible. On the other hand, the concept of a revelator is present in the understanding of the callings of prophets and seers. Elder John A. Widtsoe taught, “In the sense that a prophet is a man who receives revelations from the Lord, the titles ‘seer and revelator’ merely amplify the larger and inclusive meaning of the title ‘prophet.’ . . . A revelator makes known, with the Lord’s help, something before unknown. It may be new or forgotten truth, or a new or forgotten application of known truth to man’s need.”<sup>12</sup> Although the term *revelator* does not occur in the Bible, the Apostle John is commonly distinguished as the Revelator due to the vision he received and revealed, giving name to the book of Revelation in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the expectation is that revelators will receive revelation from the Lord and then convey it to others.

In summary, President Russell M. Nelson explained, “Prophets see ahead. They see the harrowing dangers the adversary has placed or will yet place in our path. Prophets also foresee the grand possibilities and privileges awaiting those who listen with the intent to obey.”<sup>14</sup>

### Joseph Smith as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator of the Church

How did early members of the Church learn of the place of a prophet and seer as well as the meaning of sustaining Church leaders as prophets and seers for the Church? The first reference to members of the restored Church of Christ sustaining a prophet and seer occurred on the day that the Church was organized, 6 April 1830. About fifty individuals had gathered in the Peter and Mary Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, to fulfill the Lord’s

command that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery be ordained elders in the Church of Christ (after receiving the sanction of those willing to be baptized and confirmed members of the newly organized church). Joseph and Oliver were to “have them decide by vote whether they were willing to accept us as spiritual teachers or not.”<sup>15</sup>

The Lord instructed those gathered to call Joseph Smith “a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church” (D&C 21:1). These designations were not necessarily new to the little flock gathered to organize Christ’s church. Most likely they understood that Apostles were “to take the lead of all meetings” and elders were “to conduct the meetings” (D&C 20:44–45). In addition, prior to that day, Joseph Smith was looked upon as a prophet and translator as he had received several revelations and translated the Book of Mormon. Early followers saw in him the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joseph who was sold into Egypt, that “a seer shall the Lord my God raise up, who shall be a choice seer unto the fruit of my loins. . . . And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father” (2 Nephi 3:6, 15). However, the revelation received the day that the Church was organized formalized the practice for Church members to officially sustain Joseph in those roles. The Lord’s commandment connected the spiritual callings of a prophet, seer, and translator with that of the administrative office of an elder of the Church as well as to that of an Apostle. That is, the spiritual gifts of prophecy, seeric endowment, and translation were associated with ordained priesthood offices in the Church and the apostleship.<sup>16</sup> The office of an Apostle, even at that early day, may have already carried with it a sense of duality in that it referred to those that governed over both spiritual and administrative matters. Based on the Saints’ knowledge of the callings of the New Testament Apostles, it could be understood that Apostles were also prophets and served as both spiritual witnesses of the divinity of Jesus Christ as well as the administrative leaders of the new Christian church.<sup>17</sup>

### The Presiding Priesthood Officer to Receive Revelations for the Church

Comprehending the place and appointment of prophets, seers, and revelators in the Restoration incurred some mistakes, correction, and even divine

chastening. The meaning and ramifications of sustaining Joseph in these spiritual and administrative positions were not clear in the early days of this dispensation. A few months after the Church was organized, two events helped to further clarify the importance and connection between Joseph's administrative office to serve as the presiding elder of the Church and his calling as the prophet and seer for the Church. Joseph Smith received a letter from Oliver Cowdery, who also was an Apostle and an elder of the Church. Joseph Smith explained:

He wrote to inform me that he had discovered an error in one of the Commandments, Book of "Doctrine and Covenants" Sect, 2nd Par. 7th [D&C 20:37] "and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto a remission of their sins."

The above quotation he said was erroneous, and added; "I command you in the name of God to erase those words, that no priestcraft be amongst us."

I immediately wrote to him in reply, in which I asked him, by what authority he took upon him to command me to alter, or erase, to add or diminish to or from a revelation or commandment from Almighty God.<sup>18</sup>

Joseph explained that the second incident occurred when "Brother Hyrum [Hiram] Page had got in his possession, a certain stone, by which he had obtained to certain, concerning the upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church, &c &c, all of which were at entirely at variance with the order of Gods house, as laid down in the new Testament, as well as in our late revelations. . . . Finding however that many (especially the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery) were believing much in the things set forth by this stone, we thought best to enquire of the Lord concerning so important a matter, and before conference convened, we received the following. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

In response to these two challenges and to correct the order of his kingdom the Lord revealed, "No one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses" (D&C 28:2).<sup>20</sup> Later, these commandments and revelations referred to were published as the Doctrine and Covenants. In essence, the Lord established that new revelation to be

included in the scriptures, or standard works of the Church, would come through Joseph, the prophet and seer for the Church. To Oliver, the Lord further explained, "If thou art led at any time by the Comforter to speak or teach, or at all times by way of commandment unto the church, thou mayest do it. But thou shalt not write by way of commandment, but by wisdom; and thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church; for I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead" (D&C 28:4-7). That is, the Lord had appointed Joseph to be a prophet and a seer to the Church holding the keys of revelation, and they were a function of Joseph's calling as the presiding elder and Apostle.

Confusion most likely occurred due to the original penning of the Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ (see D&C 20; 22). "The designation of Joseph and Oliver as 'first' and 'second' elders of the Church was added to the original document which simply read 'elders.' This denomination helped clarify their role as the presiding officers in the Church during its early years when its size did not justify the organizational structure known to us today."<sup>21</sup> This later revelation further clarified Joseph's presiding position ahead of Oliver Cowdery in receiving revelations for the Church. Thus, Oliver and any elders were distinct from Joseph Smith in their offices in the Church in that, as the first elder, the Lord had appointed Joseph alone to receive commandments or revelations for the Church. Early revelations emphasized and clarified that other individuals could receive revelations and inspiration; however, these revelations were not for the Church, but for their personal lives and ministry.<sup>22</sup> With reference to Hiram Page's revelations for the Church, the Lord commanded and explained, "Tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him; for, behold, these things have not been appointed unto him, neither shall anything be appointed unto any of this church contrary to the church covenants" (D&C 28:11-12).

A few months later, in February 1831, members of the Church in Ohio were disturbed by a woman, who "came making pretensions of revealing commandments, laws and other curious matters."<sup>23</sup> John Whitmer identified the intruder as "a woman by the name of Hubble [Laura Fuller Hubble] who professed to be a prophets of the Lord and professed to have many

revelations, and knew that the Book of Mormon was true; and that she should become a teacher in the Church of Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

Joseph inquired of the Lord, and the Lord reiterated to his Saints this clarifying principle:

Ye have received a commandment for a law unto my church, through him whom I have appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations from my hand.

And this ye shall know assuredly—that there is none other appointed unto you to receive commandments and revelations until he be taken, if he abide in me.

But verily, verily, I say unto you, that none else shall be appointed unto this gift except it be through him; for if it be taken from him he shall not have power except to appoint another in his stead.

And this shall be a law unto you, that ye receive not the teachings of any that shall come before you as revelations or commandments; and this I give unto you that you may not be deceived, that you may know they are not of me. (D&C 43:2–5)

### The President of the Church as Presiding High Priest and Prophet, Seer, and Revelator

Change and growth in the kingdom of God are constant. This includes development of Church priesthood offices and those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators. A little more than a year after the organization of the Church, the first individuals were ordained to the high priesthood or to the office of high priest.<sup>25</sup> Later, on 25 January 1832, at a conference held in Amherst, Ohio, Joseph Smith was sustained and ordained as President of the High Priesthood.<sup>26</sup> In later instructions regarding the standing of the President of the High Priesthood, Joseph explained, “And again, the duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church, and to be like unto Moses—behold, here is wisdom; yea, to be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the church” (D&C 107:91–92).

Line upon line, precept upon precept, the Lord revealed his laws to his Saints as he further directed the organization of his Church. The calling of prophet, seer, and revelator was not centered in the person of Joseph Smith. Rather, it is wisdom that the President of the High Priesthood, whoever he may be, exercises those gifts of prophecy, seeric endowment, and revelation. Today the President of the High Priesthood is more commonly referred to as the President of the Church, in harmony with Joseph’s explanation above. This understanding is reflected in presentation of Official Declaration 2. The letter presented to those attending general conference declared that President Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation to extend the priesthood to all worthy men. President N. Eldon Tanner explained, “Recognizing Spencer W. Kimball as the prophet, seer, and revelator, and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is proposed that we as a constituent assembly accept this revelation as the word and will of the Lord” (Official Declaration 2).

### Sustaining Additional Prophets, Seers, and Revelators

Moses exclaimed, “Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!” (Numbers 11:29). The next clarification regarding others to be sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators required as much, if not more time, to unfold. Today, we also sustain members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators. Expansion of the organizational structure of Christ’s Church preceded expansion of others being called as prophets, seers, and revelators. Sustaining Joseph as the President of the High Priesthood and of the Church, along with two counselors as fellow presidents occurred a little over two months after Joseph had been first sustained and ordained President. In March 1832 the Lord called Sidney Rigdon and Jesse Gause to serve as counselors to Joseph and to be “given the keys of the kingdom, which belong always unto the Presidency of the High Priesthood” (D&C 81:2). A year later Frederick G. Williams was called to replace Jesse Gause and the Lord clarified that he and Sidney Rigdon were “accounted as equal with [Joseph] in holding the keys of this last kingdom” (D&C 90:6).<sup>27</sup> Within three years of the organization of the First Presidency, individuals

were called to serve as members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles on 14 February 1835.<sup>28</sup> However, neither the counselors to Joseph nor the apostles were formally recognized as prophets, seers, and revelators until later.

On 27 March 1836, during the dedicatory session of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet Joseph Smith first “called upon the several quorums commencing with the presidency, to manifest by rising up, their willingness to acknowledge me as a prophet and seer and uphold me as such by their p[r]ayers of faith.”<sup>29</sup> Following an intermission, Joseph “made a short address, and called upon the several quorums, and all the congregation of saints to acknowledge the Presidency as Prophets and Seers, and uphold them by their prayers, they all covenanted to do so by rising; [he] then called upon the quorums and congregations of saints to acknowledge the 12 Apostles who were present as Prophets and Seers <Revelators> and special witnesses to all the nations of the earth, holding the keys of the kingdom, to unlock it or cause it to be done among them; and uphold them by their prayers, which they assented to by rising.”<sup>30</sup> Beginning with this dedicatory session, it appears that members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have continually been sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators.

Earlier, on 5 December 1834, Oliver Cowdery had been ordained as “assistant-president to the high and holy priesthood.”<sup>31</sup> At a meeting held two days later, “the propriety of ordaining others to the office of Presidency of the high priesthood was also discussed, after which High Counsellor Hyrum Smith was ordained <to> the Presidency under the hands of President Smith, and High Counsellor Joseph Smith sen. under the hands of President Rigdon.”<sup>32</sup> It appears that these individuals were included among the presidency that were sustained as prophets, seers and revelators during the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.<sup>33</sup> In 1841, when Hyrum Smith was called to take Oliver Cowdery’s place as assistant president and as Joseph Smith Sr.’s place as patriarch of the Church, he was again appointed as a prophet, seer, and revelator (D&C 124:94). In addition, at various times, individuals were called as counselors to or in the First Presidency that were also sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators. For example, at the April 1968 General Conference three additional counselors in the First Presidency—Joseph Fielding Smith, Thorpe B. Isaacson, and Alvin R. Dyer—were sustained along with the members of the First Presidency, the

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the Patriarch to the Church as prophets, seers, and revelators.<sup>34</sup>

During other times, counselors were called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who also were sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators. Such was the case in 1877 with John W. Young and Daniel H. Wells, who both previously served as counselors in the First Presidency with Brigham Young. Following Brigham Young’s death, they were released since a new First Presidency was not organized and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was the presiding quorum of the Church. They were instead called as counselors to the Twelve and were presented by President John Taylor for a sustaining vote as prophets, seers, and revelators.<sup>35</sup>

In 1902, John Smith, older brother of President Joseph F. Smith and the Presiding Patriarch of the Church, was sustained as a prophet, seer, and revelator, as were, for a time, individuals subsequently called to serve as Patriarch to the Church.<sup>36</sup> This practice ended in November 1979 with the designation of the Church Patriarch to emeritus status.<sup>37</sup> Thus, recognizing and sustaining individuals as prophets, seers, and revelators of the Church has been expanded in the past. It may be wise to have an open mind as to what the Lord might reveal in the future regarding his will concerning those he would have sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators in his Church.<sup>38</sup>

## Prophets, Seers, and Revelators Counsel Together

Having more than one individual sustained as a prophet, seer, and revelator necessitated clarification regarding how revelation is received for the Church and who may receive that revelation. A little over a year following the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, on 6 April 1837, Joseph explained that “the Presidents, or Presidency, are over the church, and revelations of the mind and will of God to the church are to come through the presidency.”<sup>39</sup> The First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles form two separate administrative quorums (see D&C 107:22–24). However, they have conferred upon them the same keys of the kingdom with regard to administrative keys of the priesthood as well as keys of revelation for the Church. Even so, the Twelve have a president that presides over that quorum; the First Presidency presides over the Twelve; and the President of the High Priesthood is sustained

as the President of the Church and presides over the First Presidency. This includes presiding over both the administrative and revelatory affairs of the Church. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland explained, “The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve are commissioned by God and sustained by you as prophets, seers, and revelators, with the President of the Church sustained as *the* prophet, seer, and revelator, the *senior* Apostle, and as such the only man authorized to exercise all of the revelatory and administrative keys for the Church.”<sup>39</sup> President J. Reuben Clark Jr. wrote, “Some of the General Authorities [the Apostles] have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and 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.” He then added, “Only the President of the Church, the Presiding High Priest, is sustained as Prophet, Seer, and Revelator for the Church, and he alone has the right to receive revelations for the Church, either new or amendatory, or to give authoritative interpretations of scriptures that shall be binding on the Church.”<sup>41</sup>

Unlike many biblical or Book of Mormon prophets, whose ministry was relatively solitary, today Latter-day Saints recognize and sustain several individuals as prophets. The Lord directed that these prophets sit in council together in making decisions. The quorum of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve are often referred to as the Council of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that “every decision made by either of these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions. . . . Unless this is the case, their decisions are not entitled to the same blessings which the decisions of a quorum of three presidents were anciently” (D&C 107:27–29).

President Nelson recently explained the revelatory process of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in making decisions as prophets, seers, and revelators:

Some may question why the Church does some of the things that it does. . . . We sustain 15 men, who are ordained as prophets, seers, and revelators. When a thorny problem arises—and

they only seem to get thornier each day—these 15 men wrestle with the issue, trying to see all the ramifications of various courses of action, and they diligently seek to hear the voice of the Lord. After fasting, praying, studying, pondering, and counseling with my Brethren about weighty matters, it is not unusual for me to be awakened during the night with further impressions about issues with which we are concerned. And my Brethren have the same experience.

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counsel together and share all the Lord has directed us to understand and to feel individually and collectively. And then we watch the Lord move upon the President of the Church to proclaim the Lord’s will.<sup>42</sup>

This principle is perfectly illustrated in the occasion of President Spencer W. Kimball’s receiving the revelation declaring that all worthy men may receive the priesthood:

On Thursday, June 1, 1978, President Spencer W. Kimball, while meeting with his counselors in the First Presidency and the Twelve in the Salt Lake Temple, indicated that for months he had been giving prayerful consideration to the matter of conferring the priesthood upon those of all races and that he felt the need for divine guidance. He explained that he had spent many hours in the upper room in the temple pleading with the Lord for counsel and direction. He indicated his hope that the Lord would give a revelation and resolve the matter. He further stated that if it was the mind and will of the Lord that the Church continue in the present course, he was willing to sustain and support that decision and defend it to the death. He said he hoped for a clear affirmation so there would be no question in anyone’s mind.

All present were invited to express their views on the matter, which they did. A strong spirit of unity existed. At the conclusion of this discussion, President Kimball asked his counselors in the presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve to join with him in prayer. President Kimball then importuned the

Lord with great fervor and faith. The prayer offered by President Kimball was dictated by the Holy Ghost.

“On this occasion,” recalled one of those who was present, “because of the importuning and the faith, and because the hour and the time had arrived the Lord in his providences poured out the Holy Ghost upon the First Presidency and the Twelve in a miraculous and marvelous manner, beyond anything that any then present had ever experienced. The revelation came to the President of the Church; it also came to each individual present. There were ten members of the Council of the Twelve and three of the First Presidency there assembled. The result was that President Kimball knew, and each one of us knew, independent of any other person, by direct and personal revelation to us, that the time had now come to extend the gospel and all its blessings and all its obligations, including the priesthood and the blessings of the house of the Lord, to those of every nation, culture, and race, including the black race. There was no question whatsoever as to what happened or as to the word and message that came.”<sup>43</sup>

## Mortal Men Called of God

The education of prophets is founded upon the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and study of earlier prophetic writings and revelations. Three months following the organization of the Church, the Lord further clarified Joseph’s role as a prophet: “Thou shalt continue in calling upon God in my name, and writing the things which shall be given thee by the Comforter, and expounding all scriptures unto the church” (D&C 24:5). Thus, prophets, seers, and revelators not only receive the word of the Lord but also expound and clarify scripture that has already been given. The Lord commanded Joseph, “Let your time be devoted to the studying of the scriptures, and to preaching” (D&C 26:1).

The Lord only has imperfect individuals whom he can choose from to call as prophets, seers, and revelators. The qualification is that they are appointed, commissioned, and admonished to do as the sons of Mosiah, whom Mormon described as individuals who “had waxed strong in the

knowledge of truth; for they were men of sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God. But this is not all; they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting; therefore they had the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and when they taught, they taught with power and authority of God” (Alma 17:2–3).

It is evident that the Lord expects those called as presiding officers to know and understand those inspired words he previously gave to earlier prophets and that they often cite the teachings of former prophets in their own messages. Their inspired understanding of the Lord’s will is built upon their study of the scriptures, teachings of earlier prophets and apostles, and the inspiration of the Spirit. Examples of this principle are the documents “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” and “The Living Christ.” Each as proclaimed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and each were built upon scripture previously revealed as well as inspiration to those penning the documents. In addition, personal experiences and application of the scriptures provide each prophet, seer, and revelator with unique insights. This allows for the different strengths and weaknesses that each brings to his calling and the inspired synergy that results from their actions and deliberations.

Prophets are no more than mortal men, but they are also no less than prophets of God. Far from diminishing prophets in our view, knowing that God has called mortals to move his work forward ought to give us a deep sense of gratitude and hope. With the eyes of faith, prophets’ mortal weaknesses can be seen as evidence that their wise counsel and powerful witness come not from the strength of a man but from the power of God. Elder David A. Bednar bore his testimony of this truth in these words: “The Lord’s revealed pattern of governance by councils in His Church provides for and attenuates the impact of human frailties. Interestingly, the mortal limitations of these men actually affirm the divine source of the revelations that come to and through them.”<sup>44</sup>

Elder M. Russell Ballard explained, “During my nearly 40 years of close association, I have been a personal witness as both quiet inspiration and profound revelation have moved to action the prophets and apostles, the other General Authorities, and the auxiliary leaders. While neither perfect nor infallible, these good men and women have been perfectly dedicated to



leading the work of the Lord forward as He has directed.”<sup>45</sup> President Dieter F. Uchtdorf bore a similar witness:

I suppose the Church would be perfect only if it were run by perfect beings. God is perfect, and His doctrine is pure. But He works through us—His imperfect children—and imperfect people make mistakes. . . . As an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and as one who has seen firsthand the councils and workings of this Church, I bear solemn witness that no decision of significance affecting this Church or its members is ever made without earnestly seeking the inspiration, guidance, and approbation of our Eternal Father. This is the Church of Jesus Christ. God will not allow His Church to drift from its appointed course or fail to fulfill its divine destiny.<sup>46</sup>

We can have confidence that while not perfect or infallible, those that we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators are called and inspired of God. They declare the truth as a united voice.

## Harkening to Prophets, Seers, and Revelators

The Lord does not intend for his people to be lulled into such a sense of security or blind obedience regarding the teachings and counsels of apostles and prophets that they cease to grow and have individual conscience. President Brigham Young declared, “I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God. . . . Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not.”<sup>47</sup> We must come to know for ourselves to gain an unshakeable testimony of their prophetic calling. President Nelson explained, “You may not always understand every declaration of a living prophet, but when you know a prophet is a prophet, you can approach the Lord in humility and faith and ask for your own witness about whatever his prophet has proclaimed.”<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Prophets and seers have been part of the Lord’s kingdom since Old Testament times. As part of the foundation of the Restoration, the Lord called on Joseph Smith to be a prophet, seer, and revelator. Today, in addition to the President of the Church, we also sustain members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators. Even so, it is recognized that only the President of the Church is appointed to receive revelations for the Church as *the* Prophet, rather than as *a* prophet.

The Lord clarified the uniting of administrative priesthood officers and spiritual gifts in this dispensation. That is, he appointed those in presiding priesthood positions to also be prophets, seers, and revelators for his Church. He and the Saints recognize that these appointed individuals are not perfect nor infallible. However, the Lord is not an absentee master and continues today to guide his kingdom through his appointed servants. These individuals counsel together, teach the gospel, and administer its principles accordingly. Thus, like the Church in the meridian of time, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

## Notes

1. See Exodus 24:4; Revelation 1:19; Ether 4:1; D&C 21:1; Moses 1:40; 6:4–6; Abraham 1:28, 31.
2. Bible Hub, “4396. prophētēs,” <http://biblehub.com/greek/4396.htm>.
3. *Illustrated Dictionary & Concordance of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), 790.
4. B. D. Napier, “Prophet, Prophetism,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:896, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5030.htm>.
5. See D&C 107:91–92; 103:16; 28:2.
6. See Exodus 4:10–16; 33:11.
7. See Isaiah 62:6; Jeremiah 6:17, 31:6; Ezekiel 3:16–21, 33:7–16.
8. See Acts 11:27, 13:1, 15:32, 19:6, 21:10.
9. Bible Hub, “7203. ro'eh,” <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/7203.htm> and “2374. chozeh,” <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2374.htm>.
10. For a detailed discussion of the connection between the terms *prophet* and *seer*, see Napier, “Prophet, Prophetism,” 3:897–98.

11. For a discussion on the connection between seer stones and the Prophet Joseph Smith as a seer, see Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, October 2015, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2015/10/joseph-the-seer?lang=eng>. In addition, it should be noted that Joseph Smith was a type of natural seer. That is, he was a seer before receiving seer stones with the Book of Mormon plates and had exercised that gift before he translated as well as in conjunction with the gift of translation.

12. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, vols. 1–3, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 258.

13. See D&C 77:2; apparently, the first use of the term *revelator* was in 1764 and most likely was familiar to the early members of the Church. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revelator>.

14. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials,” worldwide devotional, 10 January 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/becoming-true-millennials?lang=eng>.

15. Joseph Smith, History, ca. June 1839–ca. 1841, handwriting of James Mulholland and Robert B. Thompson, in Joseph Smith History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, CHL, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2?p=33>.

16. See Joseph Smith—History 1:72; D&C 20:1, 21:10–11, 27:12–13, 65:2, 128:20.

17. In this regard, Richard L. Bushman has noted that “the most startling feature of the organization Joseph formed was its merger of the charismatic and the bureaucratic.” Richard L. Bushman, “Joseph Smith and Power,” in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whitaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 4. Paul indicated that the Church was “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

18. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whitaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historians Press, 2012), 426.

19. *JSP*, H1:436–38.

20. Alexander Baugh noted that “the Doctrine and Covenants contains 138 sections. All but four sections bear the revelatory stamp of Joseph Smith (see D&C 134, 135, 136, 138).” [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/alexander-l-baugh\\_joseph-smith-seer-translator-revelator-prophet/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/alexander-l-baugh_joseph-smith-seer-translator-revelator-prophet/). Additionally, as a brief note of explanation regarding the wording of the revelation, one of the challenges for the modern reader is the use of the word *commandment*. At this time in the Restoration, commandments also referred to revelations and inspired instructions that the Lord gave. This meaning was later reflected in the title for each in the manuscripts printed in the *Book of Commandments*.

21. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 156. See also “Articles and Covenants,” Fayette Township, Seneca Co., NY, ca. April 1830. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/?target=x4904>.

22. See D&C 21:4, 24:5, 28:2–6.

23. JS, History, A-1:101; <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834?p=107>.

24. John Whitmer, History, 1831–ca. 1847, *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, David J. Whitaker (Salt Lake City: Church Historians Press, 2012), 29.

25. Minutes, Geauga Co., OH, ca. 3–[4] June 1831, CHL. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/minutes-circa-3-4-june-1831?p=1#/paperSummary/minutes-circa-3-4-june-1831&p=2>. For consideration of the office of high priest, see McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 597–602.

26. Minutes, Independence, Jackson Co., MO, 26–27 April 1832, CHL, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/?target=X4041>.

27. Also see D&C 107:21–22.

28. JS, History, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, created 1 October 1843–24 February 1845, CHL, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838?p=18&highlight=14%20february%201835>.

29. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers*, vol. 1 of the Journals series (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 203; JS, History, September 1834–2 November 1838, vol. B-1, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838?p=170&highlight=prophets%20seers%20revelators>.

30. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838?p=170>.

31. JS, History, December 1834–May 1836, 19, CHL, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1834-1836?p=19#/paperSummary/history-1834-1836&p=19>.

32. *Ibid.*, 22, CHL.

33. Note that the seating of presidents in the Melchizedek Priesthood pulpits of the Kirtland Temple may have caused some later confusion regarding the distinction of the First Presidency and those serving in other capacities as presidents and counselors. Along with the forenamed presidents, the stake presidency of the Church in Missouri, David Whitmer, William W. Phelps, and John Whitmer, were also seated in those pulpits. Further research may clarify whether these individuals were also sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators at this time.

34. Conference Report, 5–7 April 1968, 70. Those that have served as counselors are John C. Bennett (1841–42), Amasa M. Lyman (1843–44), Joseph F. Smith (1866–77), Lorenzo Snow (1873–77), Brigham Young Jr. (1873–77), Albert Carrington (1873–77), John W. Young (1873–76), George Q. Cannon (1873–77), Hugh B. Brown (1961), Joseph Fielding Smith (1965–70), H. Thorpe B. Isaacson (1965–70), Alvin R. Dyer (1968–70), Gordon B. Hinckley (1981–82). See *1999–2000 Church Almanac*, 16, 47–55.

35. *Deseret News Weekly*, 10 October 1877, 569, <http://udn.lib.utah.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/deseretnews3/id/152487/rec/41>. See also Conference Report, April 1880, 68. At the death of Brigham Young an epistle was sent to the members of the Church from the Twelve and Counselors. In that epistle they explained

that “the two Counselors of President Young—Presidents John W. Young and Daniel H. Wells—were unanimously sustained as one with, counselor to, and associated in action with the Twelve Apostles.” “Epistle of the Twelve Apostles and Counselors, to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in all the World,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 2:300.

36. Conference Report, October 1902, 83. The previous conference John W. Taylor taught, “Patriarchs have the gift of being prophets, seers and revelators, to reveal the mind and will of God and portray unto the faithful their future lives.” Conference Report, April 1902, 44.

37. See “The Sustaining of Church Officers,” general conference, April and October 1979, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1979/04/the-sustaining-of-church-officers?lang=eng>. President N. Eldon Tanner made the following announcement: “Before presenting the authorities for the vote of the conference, President Kimball has asked me to read the following statement: Because of the large increase in the number of stake patriarchs and the availability of patriarchal service throughout the world, we now designate Elder Eldred G. Smith as a Patriarch Emeritus, which means that he is honorably relieved of all duties and responsibilities pertaining to the office of Patriarch to the Church.” “The Sustaining of Church Officers,” general conference, October 1979, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1979/10/the-sustaining-of-church-officers?lang=eng>.

38. Note that a group of early members met in an upper room of the Newel K. Whitney store in Kirtland, Ohio, under the title of School of the Prophets.

39. JS, History, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, CHL, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838?p=209&highlight=april%206%201837#!/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838&cp=210>.

40. Quoted in Jeffrey R. Holland, “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators,” general conference, October 2004, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/10/prophets-seers-and-revelators?lang=eng>.

41. “When Are Church Leaders’ Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?,” Church News, 31 July 1954, 9–10.

42. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials.”

43. McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration*, 1154–55.

44. David A. Bednar, “Chosen to Bear Testimony of My Name,” general conference, October 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/10/chosen-to-bear-testimony-of-my-name?lang=eng>.

45. M. Russell Ballard, “God Is at the Helm,” general conference, October 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/10/god-is-at-the-helm?lang=eng>.

46. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” general conference, October 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.

47. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 9:150.

48. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials.”