

1 Background History and Definition of Terms

INASMUCH as this book is concerned with the history of the building of the Great Mormon Tabernacle and some of the buildings which preceded it in Mormon history, it is desirable that the reader be briefly informed of the meaning of the terms which will be used and of the background of the people who built the Mormon Tabernacle.

The term *Mormon* is a name applied to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This Church was organized April 6, 1830, in the state of New York, by Joseph Smith and five other people. The events leading up to the establishment of the Church are unique.

Church Beginnings

According to Mormon history, in 1820, when Joseph Smith was fourteen years of age, he became greatly perplexed by the conflicting claims of the various religious sects. It was a time of great

religious excitement and fervor in upstate New York, where the Smith family resided. Presbyterians, Methodists, and others were conducting revival meetings with great zeal. Young Joseph Smith was caught up in the spirit of the times and attended the various revivals. But the more he listened, the more uncertain he became because of the various interpretations placed on the scriptures by the different ministers. One day, while reading the Bible, he came upon the passage in the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." The passage deeply affected the fourteen-year-old boy, for certainly he lacked wisdom as to which religious sect to join.

Deciding to take the counsel of the scriptures literally, Joseph Smith went to a grove of trees near his home and prayed for guidance. In answer to his prayer, two heavenly personages appeared to him in a pillar of light: God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. In answer to his query as to which of the many sects he should join, he was advised that he should join none of them, for their creeds were an abomination in the sight of God. When young Smith reported his remarkable experiences to the people of the area, he was at first ridiculed and then maltreated for his continued affirmation of the vision.

In September of 1823, Joseph Smith again appealed to God for counsel and guidance. In answer to this supplication, an angel appeared and told him that God had a special work for him to do. The angel's message continued to the effect that there was a book buried in a nearby hill, written upon golden plates, which gave an account of the former inhabitants of the American continents. If Joseph would follow instructions and remain righteous, these golden plates would be delivered to him at the proper time. Four years later, in 1827, the angel's promise was fulfilled. Joseph Smith received the plates and proceeded to translate from them the Book of Mormon, a history of the people which inhabited the Americas

in days before modern American history began. The Book of Mormon, according to Joseph Smith's claim, is a record of God's dealings with His children in the Americas, just as the Bible is a history of God's dealings with the Israelites. Joseph Smith received several other heavenly visitations and many revelations, and throughout his life he was regarded by his co-religionists as a prophet of God.

This remarkable man gained followers. In 1830, along with five others, he organized a new church under the name of "the Church of Christ"¹ with the Book of Mormon taking its place beside the Bible as accepted scripture and a new witness for God. Because of their belief in this new scripture, the members of the newly established Church were soon nicknamed "Mormons," and the name has carried on to the present time. The group also became known as "Saints," an abbreviation of "Latter-day Saints." Other names designating The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are LDS Church and Mormon Church. Since this book deals only with the one church, wherever the term *Church* is used it will indicate the Mormon, or Latter-day Saint, Church.

Almost immediately after the organization of the Church, missionaries were sent out to preach the newly restored gospel. In some areas, these missionaries met with little success. This was true in the immediate area of the founding of the Church in New York State. In that locality, few people received the message kindly. Many were upset by the claims of the new religion and proceeded to show displeasure by persecuting its members. However, there were other areas in which the message of the new gospel was most kindly received. The area around Kirtland, Ohio, was one of these, and within a short time many converts joined the new church. This friendly reception in Kirtland, combined with the increased persecution in New York, were



1. The thesis originally said the Church was organized under the name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but that name was given by revelation in April 1838 (see D&C 115:4).

probably major factors in the decision of the Prophet Joseph Smith to move from New York and, in 1831, establish the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kirtland. It was in Kirtland, therefore, that many of the operating procedures and customs of the Church were developed and the early fruits of its missionary endeavors were visible.

One of the principles preached by the missionaries was “the literal gathering of Israel” (Articles of Faith 1:10). This teaching urged, among other things, that all who joined the Church should migrate to its headquarters. Thus, throughout much of Mormon history there is found a great migration from all parts of the United States and Canada and the various nations of the world to the immediate area of the Church headquarters. This gathering meant that a large body of members was concentrated in a single locality. Ample Church facilities were, therefore, required.

Gathering Places

A brief review of the organization of Church leadership will be helpful in understanding the terms used in this book. The head of the Church is known as President, and he is assisted by two counselors. The three of them make up what is known as the First Presidency of the Church. They are in turn assisted by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the members of which are called Apostles. The senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is its president and succeeds to the office of President of the Church when the death of the Church President makes such succession necessary. There are numerous other offices in the central governing organization of the Church, but no mention of their duties is necessary. The President and other central governing authorities are known as the General Authorities of the Church.

The areas in which Church members reside are divided into administrative districts known as stakes. The chief Church official in a stake is known as the stake president, who has two counselors to

assist him. The area of the stake is subdivided into wards. Each ward has definite geographic boundaries and is headed by a bishop with two counselors. Wards are the fundamental administrative units of the Church.

In order to carry on its activities, the Church builds three main types of buildings: ward chapels, tabernacles,² and temples.

The ward chapel, or meetinghouse, is the local church for the regular Sunday meetings and other Church functions. It has a central assembly hall and many classrooms. The Mormons hold two main services each Sunday.³ In the forenoon they have Sunday School, which is conducted on a plan similar to many Christian Sunday Schools. In the afternoon or evening they have their sacrament meeting, which is a preaching service. Since the Church has no paid clergy, the sermons are given by the lay members of the ward. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, consisting of broken bread and a small cup of water, is also blessed and passed to the entire audience.

The stake tabernacle is a central meeting place for all members within the area of the stake. These buildings are designed to provide a large assembly hall to accommodate the Saints when they meet together. The stake tabernacles are most frequently used for stake conference, which is held four times each year.⁴ These conferences are attended by all members within the stake area who wish to go.

In addition to the numerous stake centers, the Church built the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. It is one of the central meeting places for all members of the LDS Church from all parts of the world.



2. The construction and function of stake tabernacles have been assumed by stake centers.
3. This thesis was written before the current block meeting plan, which consolidates meetings into one three-hour block was implemented.
4. Stake conference is now held twice a year.

The Mormon temples are an entirely different type of building than the meetinghouses and serve a different purpose. The temples are designed for the performance of sacred ordinances, such as marriage, baptism, and other Church covenants. Admittance is restricted to Church members in good standing.⁵

The term *conference* will be used frequently in this book and therefore merits explanation. The word refers to a periodic gathering of the members of the Church to hold religious services. These services are distinct from the regular Sunday services. There are three kinds of Mormon conferences: ward conferences, stake conferences, and general, or Churchwide, conferences. It is the general or Churchwide conference that will be referred to in this book.

The general conference of the Church is ordinarily held semi-annually, commencing near the dates of April 6 and October 6. The place of meeting is the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.⁶ The entire membership of the Church is invited to attend these conferences, and under ordinary circumstances representatives will be in attendance from the various parts of the United States and most of the foreign countries where the Church has become established. The conference is presided over by the Church president, and most of the high-ranking authorities of the Church are in attendance.

The general conference serves three major purposes. First, it serves as an instrument of Church government. The Church president requests that all of the names of the major Church officers be read, with their position assignments indicated. This list includes the Church president, his counselors, the Apostles, and all other holders of major Church offices. Each name is included in the list,



5. A member's standing is ascertained through a private interview with the bishop and a private interview with the stake president.
6. In April 2000, the Conference Center was dedicated north of Temple Square, and it now serves as the meeting place for general conference.

regardless of the length of time served; the names of those newly selected for office are read along with those who have served for years. At the conclusion of the reading of the list, the people in the audience are requested to signify, by the raising of the right hand, if they are willing to sustain and support the officers in the discharge of the duties of the offices indicated. The voting is usually unanimous in the affirmative. This affirmative vote, therefore, ratifies the appointment of any new officials which may have been selected by the Church authorities and also serves as a vote of confidence in the officials who have served previously. Immediately after the affirmative vote is taken, those who are not willing to sustain the officers are also asked to signify their opposition by the raised right hand. If there are dissenting votes, the reasons for the dissent are discussed following the conference. If the objections are found to be of sufficient importance, investigation is made and such action as may be thought advisable is taken by the Church officials. The action varies in accordance with the findings. The officer may be left in his position if the charges are unjustified, or he may be removed from office and possibly excommunicated from the Church if the findings prove sufficiently serious.

New doctrines of the Church, major changes in administrative procedure, and the creation or abolition of Church organizations are also voted upon in the same manner. The conference, therefore, serves a general assembly or parliamentary function in Church government.

Second, the general conference serves as a sort of board of directors meeting on the financial affairs of the Mormon Church. The financial state and the growth of the Church and its expanded activities are also reviewed.

The third and most important function of the general conference is to provide religious teaching and exhortation by the LDS Church leaders to the members to live righteously and support

the program of the Church. The governmental and business functions occupy only a small fraction of the time of the conference. The remainder of the time is used for religious preaching.

From the standpoint of the individual member of the Church, the general conference provides not only a chance to participate in Church government but also a deep religious experience, an opportunity to see and hear the leaders of the Church, a social activity in seeing friends and relatives from distant parts, and a break from the usual routine. These general conferences draw huge throngs. The need to have adequate facilities to accommodate these crowds was a major factor in the building of the Great Mormon Tabernacle.

During their early history, the Mormons were driven from their homes on several occasions and were forced to locate in new areas. First, they left New York State and settled in Kirtland, Ohio. From Kirtland, they moved to Far West, Missouri. After being driven from Missouri, they located at Nauvoo, Illinois, where they built one of the largest cities in Illinois at the time. Once again, however, they were forced to leave their homes and made their famous trek westward and settled in the isolated region of Utah in 1847.

The year 1947 was, therefore, the centennial year of the entrance of the Mormon pioneers into the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, and it is appropriate that a history should be written of the most famous building which that pioneer society produced—the Great Mormon Tabernacle. The adjective *great* has been applied to the Tabernacle since its earliest days, and certainly with justification, for it has been a means of spreading worldwide fame of those pioneers as builders. At the time of its erection it was the largest building of its kind in the United States and certainly among the largest in the world. Even today it ranks with the remarkable buildings of all time. However, to appreciate the driving force behind the construction of such a building as the Tabernacle, in an area as remote as Utah, by a people who were short of the necessities of life and

who were struggling to survive in a desert region not then provided with facilities of railroad transportation, it is necessary to go behind the building of the Tabernacle itself and consider briefly the buildings which preceded it.



