



“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41). (Alvin Gittins, © 1959 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.)

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MANY people who have led a Latter-day Saint life see Church government, as I do, as a marvel, perhaps a miracle. How can congregations function so well without professional leadership? How can we release bishops every five years and invariably find another person in the congregation to take on the assignment? Why do people work so hard in their Church jobs? Why do we trust our leaders as we do—with our money, our time, and our most confidential problems? We move from ward to ward all over the Church, and the system functions in much the same way. How can we account for the success of this lay-led church that seems to run against all expectations? What is the source and nature of its power?

The Church has been compared to a variety of organizations. When I was growing up, the Church was sometimes compared to the

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German army. In the early thirties, before the Germans became our enemy, their army was considered the epitome of efficiency, and the Church seemed similarly effective. But that was not a convincing comparison. The Mormon Church may have been efficient, but it was voluntary, not professional, and not disciplined through extensive training. If not an army, is the Church like a monarchy, as some say, with a king to whom the people owe allegiance? The comparison does not seem quite right because the Church is run by a president, a democratic office. Or alternatively, since Mormonism grew up under American democracy, does its lay priesthood constitute a basically anti-elitist, democratic form of government as historians of American religion have argued?¹ We immediately think of objections. But if not any of these, what is the Church form of government?

CHARISMA

The German sociologist Max Weber categorized the various forms of government according to their sources of legitimacy. Why is it, Weber asked, that people submit to a government? What gives it legitimacy such that people feel they ought to obey? Of his various answers, the category that applies best to early Mormonism is charismatic authority. Weber defined *charisma* as “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”² Charismatic leaders, in most cases, rule by virtue of their divine power. The description seems to fit Joseph Smith with his unusual revelatory powers.³ It casts light on why converts considered his leadership legitimate. They followed him because of his divine gift.

Weber considered charismatic authority the least stable of the three major types of leadership that he investigated in his classic 1922 treatise *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. In addition to the charismatic, Weber noted the traditional (monarchs) and the rational or bureaucratic (modern business corporations). People submit to a monarch because his authority descends through the legitimate lineage—he is the bearer of the royal

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family's right to rule. In a bureaucratic government, people obey because the ruler occupies an office that he acquired through a rational process—in a democracy, through election or appointment.

In comparison to traditional and bureaucratic government, charismatic authority is fragile. It falters if the divine gifts or exceptional powers of the leader are brought into question during his lifetime, and after he dies a struggle may ensue among his successors who are less gifted charismatically. Moreover, charismatic government often lacks structure. Charismatic leaders collect followers; they rarely form organizations. Their successors have to devise another foundation for their authority to replace the gifts of the departed leader which they may lack. If the movement is to persist, the followers must routinize the charisma, that is, turn supernatural powers into customary roles for leaders and followers. In other words, they must create a bureaucratic or rational government; otherwise, the movement will disintegrate. Under bureaucratic government, authority comes with the office. Charismatic government must evolve into bureaucratic government or the movement will disintegrate. Charisma must be routinized.⁴

Is any of this applicable to Mormonism? Weber's analysis has naturally been applied to Joseph Smith, who was by all accounts a charismatic leader of the first order. If this label suits the Prophet, what about the evolution of authority after Joseph? Was it routinized? It is commonly said that Brigham Young's role was to routinize authority in the Church. Joseph Smith led by his prophetic gifts, we sometimes say, and Brigham Young led by his administrative genius. Young took in hand the pulsing, energetic, but somewhat chaotic young Church under its charismatic prophet and made it into a smoothly run corporate body with well-defined offices and a fixed hierarchy of power—the epitome of bureaucratic government.

ORGANIZATION

This account of administrative development, however, overlooks an important fact: Joseph Smith's preoccupation with organization. From the beginning, he did not just institute a movement; he organized a church

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with officers and structure. The revelation given at the organization of the Church, Doctrine and Covenants section 20, said more about offices than about doctrines (D&C 20:17–37; compare to vv. 38–84). Joseph considered the development of Church organization one of his major achievements. He thought of himself as an organization man. “This shall be your business and mission in all your lives,” one revelation said, “to preside in council” (D&C 90:16). Besides his titles as seer, translator, and prophet, he was called to be an Apostle and elder of the Church (D&C 21:1). The major features of Church administration—save for wards—were in place by the time Joseph died. Brigham Young did not have to invent the office of Apostle that enabled him to assume leadership of the Church in 1844. Joseph Smith’s revelations foreshadowed Apostles before the Church was organized, and he brought the Council of the Twelve into existence nine years before his death. Church organization was his mission. He was restoring, he believed, the “order of heaven in ancient councils.”⁵

The most startling feature of the organization Joseph formed was its merger of the charismatic and the bureaucratic. In contradistinction to Weber’s categories, the Church combined two forms of legitimacy. Joseph did not reserve prophetic gifts to himself as a person; he assigned them to an office. At the organization of the Church, he did not simply manifest the gifts of prophecy; he was appointed to that calling. He was called to be “a seer, a translator, a prophet” in the records of the Church (D&C 21:1). That was how he was to be designated in the minutes—and what is more bureaucratic than minutes? When Joseph claimed special authority for himself in the September 1830 conflict over charismatic, or revelatory, gifts, the main argument against Hiram Page’s revelations was that “these things have not been appointed unto him” (D&C 28:12). Page did not occupy the prophetic office. A display of a divine gift was not enough. “All things must be done in order,” a revelation said (v. 13). Joseph exercised the gifts because he had been appointed to that office: “I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed” (v. 7). Were Joseph to fall or to die, God said, “I shall *appoint* unto them another in his stead” (v. 7; emphasis added). The gifts were not personal

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to Joseph, invested in him as a chosen agent of the divine. The gifts resided in the office by appointment. The minutes of the September 26, 1830, meeting quietly recorded this revolutionary transformation: “Brother Joseph Smith jr. was appointed by the voice of the Conference to receive and write Revelations & Commandments for this Church.”⁶ Those are startling words: the Church elected Joseph Smith to be their prophet. In the course of the very first challenge to his prophetic gifts, Joseph effectively bureaucratized charisma.

Although this event centralized revelation in the Church, Joseph also democratized the gifts. He seemed to claim a near monopoly in the Hiram Page revelation, but Joseph’s impulse was to distribute charisma widely. Scarcely a year later, a revelation proclaimed that every priesthood holder was to speak by the gift of the Holy Ghost and that “whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture” (D&C 68:4). The founding minutes of the first high council said it was the privilege of each council’s presiding authority to seek revelation. When problems of interpretation arose, the president was “to inquire and obtain the mind of the Lord by revelation” (D&C 102:23). Revelation went with the office. Joseph admonished the Twelve Apostles to keep careful minutes since their “decision[s] will forever remain upon record, and appear an item of covenant or doctrine.”⁷ Eventually charisma, the gift of revelation, was invested in virtually every officer in the Church. In modern practice, thirteen-year-old deacon’s quorum presidents are enjoined to seek revelation for their callings. Up and down the Church organization today, charisma and bureaucracy blend. Mormons have altered Weber’s definition of *charisma* as pertaining to “exceptional powers” and have instead striven to make them common. Every Church officer at every level is to seek the gift of revelation.

These developments in Church structure laid the groundwork for Brigham Young’s succession. In the crisis of 1844, Brigham Young did not have to claim prophetic gifts to undergird his claims to Church leadership. He based them on the keys of the apostleship, that is, on his office in the organization. Brigham could not have won the loyalty of the people if Joseph Smith had not created the office Young occupied. One of my favorite

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illustrations in *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* is of a needlework piece stitched in the years immediately after the Prophet's death. In my mind it depicts Joseph Smith's legacy as understood by ordinary Mormons. It features two items. In the center is the "Temple of Nauvoo," and around the border are the names of the Twelve Apostles with "President Brigham Young" at the top center.⁸ That is what the seamstress calculated to be Joseph Smith's legacy: the temple and the Apostles. Without the widespread loyalty to the Twelve as holders of a divinely appointed office, Brigham Young would not have succeeded. Joseph Smith is the one who restored that office.

Brigham modestly denied that he had Joseph's gifts of prophecy. In an 1852 discourse, he asked the congregation "if they ever heard him profess to be a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator as Joseph Smith was? He professed to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ, called and sent of God to save Israel."⁹ In other words, he governed the Church by virtue of his place at the head of the Twelve, an office, not by personal prophetic gifts. Over and over he insisted he was not Joseph Smith's successor as prophet, but the Latter-day Saints refused to acquiesce in Young's reluctance. They insisted he was a prophet. Elder Heber C. Kimball praised Brigham Young as "a living oracle—the mouthpiece of the Almighty, to communicate line upon line, and precept upon precept . . . [who has] the word of truth constantly on hand."¹⁰ Elder Kimball bore testimony that God would speak through Brigham Young, "and it will be like the trump of Jehovah."¹¹ Regardless of Brigham Young's diffidence, Elder Kimball insisted that President Young had to exercise prophetic gifts because he occupied a prophetic office.

Church members today expect the same of bishops in every ward in the Church. Modern Latter-day Saints live under the conviction that every officer, including themselves in their own offices, can partake of charisma. Charisma was not replaced by bureaucracy on the death of the first prophet; charisma was invested in the bureaucracy from the beginning. Latter-day Saints live within an anomalous and seemingly contradictory structure, a charismatic bureaucracy.

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P O W E R

This peculiar construction recasts the problem of power that has so vexed Church leaders since the beginning. From the viewpoint of modern democracy, charismatic leadership grants altogether too much power to its central figure. Within a few years of the Church's organization, Joseph Smith was accused of authoritarian control. In 1834 he complained that the cry of his critics was "Tyrant,! Pope!! King!!!"¹² And from the point of view of American democracy, the charges were justified. Charismatic leadership almost inevitably involves unchecked power. Because authority originates in the leader's gifts, who can restrain him? The very nature of charismatic governance rules out any criticism of the leader's powers. Neither his followers nor his lieutenants can challenge the charismatic leader's will without undermining the movement. To imply that his gifts have failed and the leader has erred destroys the foundation on which the entire enterprise rests. Everyone must yield to the leader's will because his power supports everything else.

The absence of restraints on hierarchical authority troubles democratic critics of Mormonism. Church members do not seem to understand how threatening the unchecked power of the general authorities is. Why don't Mormons demand a detailed accounting of finances? Why don't they petition, lobby, and campaign for changes in out-of-date Church policies? It is inexplicable to many outside observers that Mormons comfortably reside in two opposing realms, the Church and democracy.

Underlying these accusations is the single most striking difference in church and democratic political cultures: their contrasting attitudes toward power. Democratic society's and Church society's views of power are almost polar opposites. The same person speaking as a member of one society will express contradictory views when speaking as a member of the other society. Power in democratic discourse is an aggressive force, relentlessly expanding, always seeking domination. Perhaps the single most demanding challenge in democratic theory is how to regulate power. Not trusting any kind of authority, democratic government seeks to contain it. The Bill of Rights and constitutional checks and balances are the bulwarks of democracy because

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they constrain power. Perhaps democracy's greatest virtue in the constellation of political forms is its preventive function. Abused power can prevail only until the next election.

In the Church, by contrast, power is trusted, even beloved. Latter-day Saints want to maximize the prophets' power, not limit it. They obey the prophets as they obey God, reverently, humbly, gratefully. Latter-day Saints feel blessed to have guidance and direction from God through the Church President. What could be better for themselves and their children than to conform their lives to the revelations? Church members are scarcely conscious of the dangers of Church power. Occasional abuses are thought of as anomalies to be quickly corrected, not as indications of power's invariable corruptions. No one talks of erecting systematic checks on power to prevent its certain abuse. Power is thought of as redemptive, not oppressive. The word *rights* rarely appears in Church discourse.

Church members are no less aware of the dangers of governmental power than other Americans. Many have libertarian tendencies. The preponderance of Latter-day Saint politicians fall on the conservative side of the spectrum. They expound on the threat of big government along with all their compatriots on the right. Their Mormonism does not numb them to the dangers of concentrated authority in the state. Yet these same individuals exhort their fellow Latter-day Saints to follow the prophet without concern for his immense power. They do not criticize Church leaders for refusing to open the financial records to inspection or call for open debate on Church policies or ask for a greater voice in Church governance. They happily embrace policies handed down from above and accept onerous Church assignments without questioning the programs they are asked to administer. They bestow a degree of confidence on Church government they would never show to the United States. How can Latter-day Saints reconcile these opposing attitudes?

If queried, Church members protest that there are checks on Church power. They refer to the sustaining vote when each officer is periodically presented to the general membership for approval. At the annual general

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conference in Salt Lake City, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are named individually, and the audience is asked to raise their hands in approval. At every level, virtually every officer's name is presented for similar approval. A revelation to Joseph Smith specified that "no person is to be ordained to any office in this church, where there is a regularly organized branch of the same, without the vote of that church" (D&C 20:65). Is that not democratic?

But this is a ritual without teeth. The congregation is not given a choice in these votes. The authorities select all names in advance and offer only one choice. There is no debate, no campaigning, no examination of qualifications, not even advance knowledge of the proposed officers. Usually the vote is unanimous. This is definitely not an election. It indicates community support for the authorities who called the person to office as much as for the nominees themselves. In effect, the sustaining vote says, we are behind all of you who manage our congregation. We trust you and support each other in our callings. If sustaining turned into an election, it would be a sign of community decay.

I would argue that the preeminent check on Church power is charisma itself. Paradoxically, the very factor that seems to underlie authoritarianism in the Church is also the chief restraint on power. Church leaders at every level from top to bottom are believed to act on behalf of God. In the minds of the people, that is the source of their legitimacy. They are not elected to office, nor do they inherit their positions; they receive a call from the heavens. Their authority, therefore, is essentially godly.

The foundation principle of Church government is that godly power must be exercised in a godly manner. This conception gives the words of scripture a potency they would not otherwise command. Joseph Smith's meditation on power in Liberty Jail in 1839 has surprising practical impact. After months of contemplating his situation—the loss of many leaders, the unyielding hostility of the surrounding population, and the failure to establish the City of Zion, not to mention the likelihood of his own execution for treason—Smith wrote a long letter to the Saints gathered in Illinois. He

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grew angry when he considered the abuse of his people and the betrayals of his associates, but he was also hopeful and philosophic. Near the end he reflected on what he had learned about power in the preceding months.

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.

Hence many are called, but few are chosen.

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem these to be his enemy;

That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death. (D&C 121:39–44)

This passage frustrates the modern reader in search of a theory of government. The statement opens so knowingly with a theory of human nature we can recognize. Power corrupts virtually everyone—and quickly. “They will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.” Here we have the premise of James Madison in *The Federalist* no. 10. Interest will prevail in government. What then is Joseph Smith’s answer to match Madison’s proposals for a large republic and many layers of elections?

To our dismay, Smith lapses into sentimental comments about the priesthood ruling by gentleness and meekness and love unfeigned. What good is that? These are precisely the human virtues, rare in the first place, that are totally unreliable in rulers. Mere words, the democratic critics will scoff. How can such sentiments regulate what the Mormon scriptures

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themselves admit is the very nature of humans: when they get a little authority, they will immediately “exercise unrighteous dominion”?

What the critics fail to recognize is the constraining effect of the moral terms of power. All power operates within a moral framework, that is, a sense of what values legitimize a particular authority. The king must be a protector of his people or they will turn against him, as George III learned in 1776. The democratic politician must use his office for the good of the people or he will be forced to resign, as disappointed officeholders caught in graft learn when they are forced out of office. The CEO must serve the interests of shareholders or soon be displaced, as business executives who fail to improve their company’s stock price know all too well. The moral terms of power set up limitations that invisibly fix the channels of action open to officeholders in any organization.

In the Church, the bishop must act as an emissary of God. Those are the moral terms of power. The people expect it of him, as anyone thrust into this office knows. They may not set these terms vocally, but the stake president does when the call is issued. Actually, little has to be said because the person called immediately knows what is expected. “I am not worthy” is often the response when a call is issued. The moral demands of the office are higher than most men feel they can meet. They operate in the bishop’s own mind without a word being uttered. He also knows they work in the minds of his congregation. They expect him to receive revelation on their behalf, to visit them when ill, to counsel them during marital trials, to inspire their young, and to watch over their moral development. The implicit moral demands are immense, and everyone, most of all the bishop, knows this. If he falls down, he will have failed in his office as surely as a CEO whose stock drops. Those expectations act as a far more powerful check on authority than any constitutional limitations. One need only compare the record of abuses of power in the Church to the same record in any branch of civic government to recognize the effectiveness of the moral terms of power.

The secret ingredient in the recipe is the expectation that leaders and people both feel. Leaders are called of God. They receive the gifts that attend

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their offices from heaven. The recruitment of new bishops and Relief Society presidents by the thousands every year attests to the deep understanding of these principles. Newly ordained bishops immediately assume the manner of a bishop. The ward members speak of the mantle of the office falling upon them. No one can explain exactly how the change comes about, but in actuality the transformation comes out of group wisdom. Latter-day Saints know in their bones that only leadership based on righteousness and spirituality will work, and the new officeholder knows it too. A bishop must assume the virtues of a bishop to function as one. The godliness of the office requires it.

Charisma, the gift of divine power saturating the organization, thus creates the ethos in which Church government operates. Joseph Smith had no idea of the sociology of the Church he organized. He knew only that he had a commission from God to form an organization led by revelation and priesthood. He had great confidence in his own gifts, and, remarkably, he wanted to share them with the Church. His urge was to grant the power to speak and act for God, even to see God as he had, to all. Although he lacked the Weberian language to describe what he had done, he knew he had imposed an obligation of godly behavior on those who assumed office. The result was a bold experiment in organizational form that has passed the test of time surprisingly well.

NOTES

1. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
2. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 358.
3. Weber classified Joseph Smith as a charismatic, adding that he “cannot be classified in this way with absolute certainty since there is a possibility that he was a very sophisticated type of deliberate swindler.” Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 359.

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4. Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 324–72.
5. Kirtland High Council Minute Book, February 17, 1834, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Weber said of the organization that forms around charismatic leaders: “There is no such things as ‘appointment’ or ‘dismissal,’ no career, no promotion. There is only a ‘call’ at the instance of the leader on the basis of the charismatic qualification of those he summons. There is no hierarchy. . . . There is no such thing as a definite sphere of authority and of competence.” *Social and Economic Organization*, 360. Joseph Smith’s organization was a hybrid.
6. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 3.
7. Kirtland High Council Minute Book, February 27, 1835.
8. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), gallery following p. 230.
9. Brigham Young and others, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 6:319. My information comes from Josh E. Probert, “‘A Good Hand to Keep the Dogs and Wolves out of the Flock’: Nineteenth-Century Mormon Thought on Brigham Young as Prophet,” Archive of Restoration Summer Seminar paper, 2006, in author’s possession.
10. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:86.
11. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:275.
12. Joseph Smith to Lyman Wight and others, August 16, 1834, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 348.