



The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ (D&C 20) are the basic foundation for the government of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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THE ARTICLES AND COVENANTS: A HANDBOOK FOR NEW BRANCHES

THE Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ (D&C 20) are the basic foundation for the government of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The importance given to the revelation is reflected in early publications of the Church. This revelation guided early Church members in organizing and directing branches of the newly restored Church in the 1830s and continues in that function within the basic unit program today. A brief review of its early history gives insight into its importance and use. The value of the revelation today is demonstrated in the answers it provides to many basic questions regarding Church government, ordinances, record keeping, and expectations for Church members.

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WRITING AND REVEALING THE ARTICLES AND COVENANTS

Students of the Doctrine and Covenants easily discover that section 20 does not read like most of the revelations of the Restoration. That is, the Lord does not speak in first person, but rather, this revelation was written under the inspiration of the Lord from the perspective of two individuals, the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. Declarations and instructions in the Articles and Covenants include such phrases as “the Lord has spoken it; and we, the elders of the church have heard, and bear witness” (D&C 20:16) and, multiple times, “we know that . . .” (D&C 20:17, 29, 30, 31, 35). As an inspired foundational document for branches of the Church, the Articles and Covenants might be likened to an early document in American history: the Constitution of the United States. The Lord did not dictate the words of that document. Nevertheless, he declared that he “established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose” (D&C 101:80). Similar to the Constitution of the United States, the Articles and Covenants of the Church required several written drafts from Oliver Cowdery and the Prophet Joseph Smith as the Spirit of the Lord worked within them to produce the final copy. On the other hand, distinct from the Constitution, there is sufficient evidence that much of the Articles and Covenants came by direct revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith.¹

In June 1829, the Lord gave Oliver Cowdery instructions to write a document that would serve as the Articles and Covenants of the Church.² Oliver sought further information from the Lord as to what should be included in that document. In response the Lord taught Oliver: “Behold, I have manifested unto you, by my Spirit in many instances, that the things which you have written [as scribe for the Book of Mormon translation] are true; wherefore you know that they are true. And if you know that they are true, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that you rely upon the things which are written; for in them are all things written concerning the foundation of my church, my gospel, and my rock” (D&C 18:2–4). Thus the manuscript of the soon-to-be-published Book of Mormon served

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as a primary source for the Articles and Covenants of the Church. In addition, through the Holy Ghost, the voice of the Lord guided Oliver Cowdery and later the Prophet Joseph Smith in writing this revelation.

It had long been assumed that the Articles and Covenants were written for and possibly read at the initial organizational meeting of the Church on April 6, 1830, held in the Peter Whitmer Sr. home in Fayette, New York. However, the manuscript of the printer's copy for the Book of Commandments and Revelations dates the Articles and Covenants to April 10, 1830.³ In addition, it appears that the first reading of the document was three months later at the first Church conference. Further, the document contains information that meets the needs of newly organized branches of the Church rather than the general organization overseeing the various branches. Thus it may be better to reference this revelation as the handbook for branches of the Church, which is supported by the manner in which it was used in the early days of the Restoration and in which it continues to be used today.

PRIORITY GIVEN TO THE ARTICLES AND COVENANTS IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE RESTORATION

The table of contents in the manuscript for the Book of Commandments places the Articles and Covenants between current sections 38 and 39 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which date to early January 1831, the same time that a third conference of the Church was held. In the printer's manuscript of the Book of Commandments, there is no number assigned to the revelation, unlike most other commandments. However, the title "Church Articles and Covenants" is the heading given to the revelation. The Book of Commandments (1831) placed the current section 20 following section 22. However, in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (1835), the revelation is placed prominently as section 2, the first section following the preface (D&C 1). Further underscoring the prominence of this section is that it was the first canonized revelation of the Restoration and the first revelation to be printed. The record for the June 9, 1830, conference states, "Minutes of

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the first Conference held in the Township of Fayette, Seneca County, State of New York. by the Elders of this Church, June 9th 1830. according to the Church Articles and Covenants. . . . Ezekiel 14th read by Joseph Smith jr. and prayer by the same Articles and Covenants read by Joseph Smith jr. and received by unanimous voice of the whole congregation.”⁴

This pattern was repeated at the second conference of the Church held September 26, 1830, which was also held at the Peter Whitmer Sr. home. Minutes from the conference indicate, “Articles and Covenants read by br. Oliver Cowdery and remarks by Brother Joseph Smith jr.”⁵

The earliest known printed copy of section 20 “appeared in the non-Latter-day Saint press just a year after church organization, antedating known Latter-day Saint printings and manuscripts by about a year: *Painesville* [Ohio] *Telegraph*, 19 April 1831, p. 4.”⁶ The first known printings by Latter-day Saints are those in the *Evening and Morning Star* in 1832 and again in 1833. In the initial issue of the Church newspaper, the lead article under the heading of “Revelations” was “The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ.”⁷ It seems fair to surmise from the priority given to them as the first article, on the first page, of the first issue of the paper, that the most urgent revelation to put into the hands of Church members at that time was the Articles and Covenants of the Church. A second printing of the Articles and Covenants carried the following explanation: “We have again inserted the articles and covenants according to our promise in a previous number, for the benefit of our brethren abroad who have not the first number of the first volume. As there were, some errors which had got into them by transcribing, we have since obtained the original copy and made the necessary corrections.”⁸

EARLY MEMBERS’ RELIANCE UPON THE ARTICLES AND COVENANTS

Although there is not an abundance of evidence from historical documents and records regarding the availability of the Articles and Covenants, those few references in Church publications point to the likelihood that the Articles and Covenants were accessible to new members and were used in

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organizing and regulating branches. Missionaries sent to spread the message of the Restoration often baptized a few individuals in a given locality and moved on to other locations. Without uniform instructions, the Church organization in any given area could have soon become very independent and distinctive from other branches of the Church. It is evident that early members of the Church recognized the need to follow the instructions and explanations provided in the Articles and Covenants as published in the Church newspaper, and subsequently, when it was published as a section of the Doctrine and Covenants. This appears to be especially true of small branches that were organized according to the directive in the revelation. For example, the editors of the *Evening and Morning Star* shared the following letter from Robert Cullertson, an early Church member, along with a prefacing explanation:

New churches are continually rising as the light spreads, and it is our peculiar privilege to hear, frequently, from different individuals, calling themselves our brethren, of whose names we have before never heard, and whose faces we have never seen, and learning of saints where we had not heard that the gospel had been preached. The following letter was received a few days since, and though the writer is a stranger, he will pardon us for taking the liberty of copying it into the Star.

“May 2, 1834. Dear Brother—I take this opportunity of writing to let you know what the Lord is doing for the children of men in these last days. Last winter, one year ago, brother Simeon Carter came through our section of country, preaching the everlasting gospel of our blessed Savior. . . .

“The church I spake of is on Sugar Creek, Shelby county, Indiana.—One brother and myself, with our families, moved into Kentucky, seven miles from Cincinnati, last month, and are trying to serve the Lord according to the Articles and Covenants of the church of Christ. We have established a church of eight members,

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who agree to serve the Lord with full purpose of heart. Last Lord's day but one, I baptized two, and there is a prospect of more. . . ."⁹

In a later article appearing in the *Evening and Morning Star* titled "The Church of Christ," the Saints were cautioned, "A private member has no authority to preach, neither administer ordinances; nor has a teacher or deacon, authority to baptize, or confer blessings; nor has a priest power to confirm the members, for all things must be done according to the articles and covenants, which are from the Lord."¹⁰ Further reference was made in that same article regarding the duty of members as given in the Articles and Covenants. Members were to "manifest before the church, and also before the elders, by a godly walk and conversation, . . . walking in holiness before the Lord" (D&C 20:69). The editors explained, "When a saint walks in holiness before the Lord, he will love his neighbor as himself, he will pray for his enemies; he will visit the sick, and comfort them; he will feed the hungry, and clothe the naked as long as he has means to do with; and when they are exhausted he will pray for more; and while pitying the poor and strengthening the weak, the angels will rejoice over his acts of goodness."¹¹ Such explanations of required authority of proper priesthood offices and exhortations to members are evidence of efforts to educate members regarding principles recorded in the Articles and Covenants.

Following the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 and the placement of the Articles and Covenants as the first revelation after the preface, members continued to be instructed concerning the specifics of record keeping addressed in the revelation. At a general conference held on Damond's Creek, Calloway County, Kentucky, September 2, 1836, Thomas B. Marsh, President of the Twelve, presided and addressed the conference, "showing the necessity of there being kept by the Tennessee conference, a church record of all names belonging to the several branches of said conference, and also a record of all the proceedings of all courts and conferences held within the bounds of said conference. And that a clerk should be chosen, or appointed, by this conference, to keep the records, and be a standing clerk while the church should remain in this region. And also, that the priests and teachers

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bring from their several branches, the names of such as had been added since the last conference &c. agreeable to the articles and covenants.”¹²

At a general conference held in Philadelphia, April 6, 1841, President Hyrum Smith indicated the continued importance of then Doctrine and Covenants section 2 as new branches were organized and possibly needing regulation or reminders of the government of the Church. Under the direction of Hyrum Smith, the minutes note, “The president then addressed the conference and congregation of the duty of the elders, and on the different orders on the priesthood; the Articles and Covenants were read, and again the president addressed the congregation on the same.”¹³

A REVELATION OF ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON CHURCH GOVERNMENT AND PROCEDURES

A brief consideration of questions that might be asked by missionaries or new members in organizing a branch of the Church and the answers found in the Articles and Covenants emphasizes the value this revelation had and continues to have. The following list of questions with answers from Doctrine and Covenants section 20 may be helpful in better revealing the significance of this revelation.

Question: When should Church members meet? Why?

Answer: “It is expedient that the church meet together often to partake of bread and wine in the remembrance of the Lord Jesus” (D&C 20:75).

Question: What will they do in their meetings, and who will preside at the meetings?

Answer: “The elders are to conduct the meetings as they are led by the Holy Ghost, according to the commandments and revelations of God. [The priest’s] duty is to take the lead of meetings when there is no elder present; but when there is an elder present, he is only to preach, teach, expound, exhort, and baptize” (D&C 20:45, 49–50).

Question: Who has authority to administer the sacrament?

Answer: “An apostle is an elder, and it is his calling to baptize; and to administer bread and wine—the emblems of the flesh and blood of Christ.

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[Also,] the priest's duty is to . . . administer the sacrament" (D&C 20:38, 40, 46).

Question: What is the proper way to bless the sacramental emblems, and what words will you use in the sacramental prayers?

Answer: "It is expedient that the church meet together often to partake of bread and wine in the remembrance of the Lord Jesus; and the elder or priest shall administer it; and after this manner shall he administer it—he shall kneel with the church and call upon the Father in solemn prayer, saying: O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them; that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen" (D&C 20:75–77). The words for the blessing of the wine or water also follow in the revelation.

Question: How will you determine if investigators, who request baptism, qualify for baptism?

Answer: "*And again, by way of commandment to the church concerning the manner of baptism*—All those who humble themselves before God, and desire to be baptized, and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits, and witness before the church that they have truly repented of all their sins, and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received of the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins, shall be received by baptism into his church" (D&C 20:37; emphasis in original).

Question: Who has authority to baptize?

Answer: "An apostle is an elder, and it is his calling to baptize. . . . [Also,] the priest's duty is to . . . baptize (D&C 20:38, 46, 50).

Question: How will you administer baptism?

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Answer: “Baptism is to be administered in the following manner unto all those who repent—the person who is called of God and has authority from Jesus Christ to baptize, shall go down into the water with the person who has presented himself or herself for baptism, and shall say, calling him or her by name: Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Then shall he immerse him or her in the water, and come forth again out of the water” (D&C 20:72–74).

Question: Who can confirm baptized individuals as members of the Church and confer the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands?

Answer: “An apostle is an elder, and it is his calling to . . . confirm those who are baptized into the church, by the laying on of hands for the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, according to the scriptures” (D&C 20:38, 41).

Questions: Do you confirm individuals as members of the Church immediately after baptism or do you wait?

Answer: “*The duty of the members after they are received by baptism.*—The elders or priests are to have a sufficient time to expound all things concerning the church of Christ to their understanding, previous to their partaking of the sacrament and being confirmed by the laying on of the hands of the elders, so that all things may be done in order” (D&C 20:68; emphasis in original).¹⁴

Question: Who can ordain new elders, priests, teachers, and deacons?

Answer: “An apostle is an elder, and it is his calling . . . to ordain other elders, priests, teachers, and deacons; . . . [a priest] may also ordain other priests, teachers, and deacons” (D&C 20:38–39, 48).

Question: What contacts will Church members have with each other outside of Church meetings, and who will make that contact?

Answer: “The priest’s duty is to . . . visit the house of each member, and exhort them to pray vocally and in secret and attend to all family duties” (D&C 20:46–47).

Question: How should you handle problems that might arise such as backbiting and hurt feelings?

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Answer: “The teacher’s duty is to watch over the church always, and be with and strengthen them; and see that there is no iniquity in the church, neither hardness with each other, neither lying, backbiting, nor evil speaking” (D&C 20:53–54).

Question: When do you hold conferences combined with other branches of the Church?

Answer: “The several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three months, or from time to time as said conferences shall direct or appoint; and said conferences are to do whatever church business is necessary to be done at the time (D&C 20:61–62).

Question: What say do members of the Church have concerning those that are ordained to offices in the Church?

Answer: “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).

Question: Suppose that a new baby has been born to one of the member families. What should be done regarding baptism of the infant, if anything?

Answer: “Every member of the church of Christ having children is to bring them unto the elders before the church, who are to lay their hands upon them in the name of Jesus Christ, and bless them in his name. No one can be received into the church of Christ unless he has arrived unto the years of accountability before God, and is capable of repentance” (D&C 20:70–71).

Question: How do you keep track of who the members of the Church are?

Answer: “It shall be the duty of the several churches, composing the church of Christ, to send one or more of their teachers to attend the several conferences held by the elders of the church, with a list of the names of the several members uniting themselves with the church since the last conference; or send by the hand of some priest; so that a regular list of all the names of the whole church may be kept in a book by one of the elders, whomsoever the other elders shall appoint from time to time” (D&C 20:81–82).

Questions: What should happen, if one of the members of the branch chooses to leave the Church or is expelled for misconduct and then they

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move and claim to be good members of the Church? For that matter, what if a faithful member moves to another branch? How do the members of the new branch know that these are faithful members of the Church?

Answer: “If any have been expelled from the church, so that their names may be blotted out of the general church record of names. All members removing from the church where they reside, if going to a church where they are not known, may take a letter certifying that they are regular members and in good standing, which certificate may be signed by any elder or priest if the member receiving the letter is personally acquainted with the elder or priest, or it may be signed by the teachers or deacons of the church” (D&C 20:83–84).

BASIC UNIT PROGRAM

Where the Church is in its beginnings within any given area, the Articles and Covenants are the basis for Church organization. A branch with few members does not need volumes of instructional handbooks and teaching manuals for various age groups. The basic unit program handbooks and publications of the Church today depend and cite liberally from the Articles and Covenants.¹⁵ John P. Livingstone describes the program: “The simplified program now used in many small Church units worldwide was pioneered in the 1970s in response to the needs that had long concerned Church leaders. Beginning among the native North Americans, this approach now serves the Church in many parts of the world.”¹⁶ Similar to the instructions in Doctrine and Covenants section 20, the *Branch Guidebook* instructs members: “Branches where the branch president is the only one who holds the Melchizedek Priesthood or who is a priest in the Aaronic Priesthood hold sacrament meeting and a Sunday gospel instruction meeting for members.”¹⁷ Under the heading “Priesthood Ordinances and Blessings,” the *Family Guidebook* quotes previously cited sections from the Articles and Covenants. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 20:70 is excerpted regarding the “Naming and Blessing of Children”; verse 73 is cited under directions regarding “Baptism”; verse 41 is cited regarding “Confirmation”;

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and verses 77 and 79 are cited concerning the “Sacrament.”¹⁸ Care is given to see that branches are organized and directed according the instructions revealed in the Articles and Covenants of the Church. The organizations of branches throughout the world hearken to the original inspired instructions given at the beginning of the Restoration. As a firm foundation, the instructions in the Articles and Covenants can be built upon and added to as the branch grows to the point of becoming a ward in one of the stakes of Zion.

CONCLUSION

It is a marvel that the foundational revelation of Church government given in 1830, at a time when there were very few members, is still the basis for the Church government today. The guidelines and instructions in the Articles and Covenants have been added to in governing the Church as the Lord revealed offices in the priesthood such as bishop, high councilor, high priest, patriarch, and seventy (see D&C 20:66; 107). However, the revelation itself stands intact without needing to change the basic government of Church branches. From the time that branches of the Church were first organized to the present, leaders of the Church have assured that the government and basic practices and principles of the Church follow the instructions in the Articles and Covenants.

NOTES

1. See Scott H. Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004): 57–91.
2. Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1985), 125, section 20, note 3. See an early draft of section 20, dated 1829 (Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library), which states that Oliver Cowdery was commanded to write section 20.
3. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, vol. 1 of the Revelation and Translation series of *The Joseph Smith*

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Papers, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 74–75.

4. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1983), 1.
5. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 3.
6. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Organizational Revelations," in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. One: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 119n3.
7. "Revelations," *Evening and Morning Star*, June 1832, 1.
8. "The Book of Mormon," *Evening and Morning Star*, June 1833, 98.
9. "Progress of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," *Evening and Morning Star*, May 1834, 156.
10. "The Church of Christ," *Evening and Morning Star*, March 1833, 74.
11. "The Church of Christ," 74–75.
12. "Extract from the proceedings of a general conference . . ." *Messenger and Advocate*, January 1837, 441.
13. Minutes, *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1841, 413.
14. Note that at a later time, when missionaries journeyed to Missouri, they were instructed to "preach by the way in every congregation, baptizing by water, and the laying on of the hands by the water's side" (D&C 52:10).
15. The publications include *Family Guidebook* (1999), *Branch Guidebook* (1993), *Priesthood Leader's Guidebook* (1992), and *Teaching Guidebook* (1994), all published in Salt Lake City by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
16. John P. Livingstone, "Establishing the Church Simply," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 4 (2000): 133.
17. *Branch Guidebook*, 15.
18. *Family Guidebook*, 19–22.