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Authority and Worldwide Growth

Roger R. Keller

Although Davies stands outside the Latter-day Saint tradition, he stands outside with respect. The tools he uses are those of the anthropologist, sociologist, and theologian. Being from outside the Latter-day Saint tradition gives him a perspective that those within the tradition find hard to replicate, and that is precisely Davies's strength. He sees things "Mormon" in a slightly different way than those within the tradition and raises interesting questions that should be answered.

On the other hand, this strength is also a weakness. I know the limitations of his approach, having tried to be fair to the Mormon tradition when I stood outside of it myself at one point in my life. No matter how hard I tried then to be fair to Joseph Smith and Mormonism—or for that matter to Islam or Hinduism or Taoism today—as an outsider I can never articulate another's tradition quite the way that a practitioner of that particular faith could or would. I might come close, but there will always be something I overlook or do not completely comprehend. Similarly, Davies has served all readers well in his thoughtful paper, but a few things he has said bear reevaluation from the standpoint of a practicing Latter-day Saint.¹

A Personal View of Priesthood Authority

When my wife, Flo Beth, and I were considering becoming members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Flo Beth had the opportunity to meet with one of the members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. In that meeting, he told her that we could join the church because we enjoyed the fellowship and the spiritual support. However, until we understood the concept of authority, we should not join. After that meeting, Flo Beth was puzzled, for she was confident that I already had authority as a minister in the Presbyterian Church.

And in one sense I did have authority. It stands to reason that God does not call persons to do something on his behalf without giving them the authority to do what he has called them to do. He had called me to the Presbyterian ministry; I know that as surely today as I knew it thirty-five years ago. Thus, I had the authority to bring people to Christ through the spoken word and the sacraments of the Presbyterian Church. That was the limit of my authority, however. When I saw that I did not have the authority to administer the saving ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the priesthood of God restored by Joseph Smith, that made all the difference for us, and we became Latter-day Saints.

In a similar vein, Latter-day Saints have often said to me, “We are so glad that you found the gospel.” My response has always been, “I knew the gospel long before I was a Latter-day Saint. What I have found is the fullness of the gospel.” The essence of that fullness is that the authority of the priesthood is found only within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is this authority that gives power to the taking of the sacrament on Sunday and to every ordinance within the temple.² As Joseph Smith stated: “All the ordinances, systems, and administrations on the earth are of no use to the children of men, unless they are ordained and authorized of God; for nothing will save a man but a legal administrator; for none others will be acknowledged either by God or angels.”³

This understanding of authority is absent from Davies’s paper, and this absence colors what he has said about the dynamics and constraints

of Latter-day Saint church growth. The return of the authority to administer the saving ordinances of the gospel is the heart of the Restoration. Likewise, the loss of that authority, with the loss of the original Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, is the heart of the Apostasy or “falling away” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) that made a restoration necessary. This concept of authority affects the way Latter-day Saints understand the first principles of the gospel, the organization of the church, and what it will mean for Mormonism to be a world religion. My comments will focus on these three headings.

First Principles of the Gospel

Davies has suggested that Mormonism is an achievement-based religion, and that is true to a certain degree.⁴ But that is the “thin” understanding of the Latter-day Saint religion. The first principles and ordinances of the gospel are a better measure of Mormon theology than any superficial “achievement”-based identity.

The first principle of the gospel according to Joseph Smith is “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Article of Faith 4). In Joseph Smith’s words:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.⁵

In other words, everything about Mormonism is Christological to the core. The focal point is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because Christ worked the atonement.⁶ We are saved only by the atonement of Jesus Christ (Article of Faith 2)—not by faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, or the temple. Each of these is a channel of grace provided by the Lord so that one may tap ever more deeply into the Savior’s atoning sacrifice. Each channel that people refuse creates a diminution in their ability to fully appropriate the atonement into their lives. Thus, having met Jesus Christ, believers see the need to repent and reorder their lives. With that realization, they comprehend the need for the essential saving ordinance of baptism

by immersion, which can be administered only under the hands of one holding the authoritative priesthood of God (Articles of Faith 4 and 5). Baptism then leads to the ordinance of confirmation, by the laying on of hands by one holding the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, with the command to receive the Holy Ghost.⁷ These public ordinances are then followed by the private ordinances of the temple, which deepen one's relation with and knowledge of the Savior and his Father, ordinances again administered by persons holding the priesthood of God. None of these ordinances or rites, as Davies calls them,⁸ would have any eternal effect, divine validity, or salvific power if they were not administered by priesthood authority to act in the name of God.

This sequence of ordinances shows how Mormon theology is a priestly and sacramental theology. In this way, Latter-day Saints are very much like the Catholics or the Anglicans, who observe sacraments or ordinances as special points in their lives, through which divine grace may be encountered and appropriated. Grace may be seen and appropriated in other ways, but Joseph Smith held out the prospect that only in and through the ordinances administered by priesthood power can people know that they will meet Christ and "obtain celestial thrones."⁹

Where then does the concept of achievement enter of which Davies spoke? It lies in a life of Christian discipleship. I do not know any thinking Christians who do not realize that their lives have to change if they are going to follow the Savior. Unfortunately, too many Christians today try to live with one foot in the church and the other in the worldly arena. The word of God found in the scriptures has, for many, become relative. Modern principles of tolerance for almost anything take the place of scriptural principles.¹⁰ The sense that there is a divinely revealed truth and lifestyle is becoming lost, and sadly that is true even among some Latter-day Saints. But the gospel, revealed in and through Jesus Christ and subsequently through his prophets, demands certain standards of behavior and works. People must respond to God's grace with discipleship, or to put it another way, grace without works is dead.

There is a synergy or cooperation between the Christian and God, which concept many Evangelicals may find offensive, but both the Old and New Testaments demand response and responsibility from people of faith.¹¹ Most of the Christian world understands this synergy, particularly those of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Humans do participate in their own salvation through following the commandments of God and accepting the ordinances that he offers to all. However, some Latter-day Saints have lost the balance between grace and works. Some feel they must work out their own salvation. That is incorrect Latter-day Saint doctrine as both Stephen E. Robinson and Robert L. Millet have shown in their respective writings on the relationship between grace and works.¹² Discipleship is works. It is the outgrowth of our encounter with the Savior, and anyone who claims differently stands outside the biblical tradition. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, discipleship is the application of priesthood to daily life.

But can Latter-day Saints ever know how they stand with the Lord? Are they not always wondering if they are good enough, as Davies suggests?¹³ Some do wonder, but that may be because they do not understand the atonement well enough. To a Latter-day Saint, the presence of the Holy Ghost in his or her life is God's personal witness and assurance that that individual is acceptable before the Father, because he or she has put on Christ. In God's eyes, he or she is perfected because of Christ.¹⁴

Having said this, however, the Holy Spirit will never permit people to stay where they are but will shove and push them to grow. That, too, is part of discipleship; there should always be some discomfort with where we are in our Christian lives. Out of discomfort comes growth, and the Spirit is good at creating that discomfort, a discomfort, however, which should never overshadow the basic assurance that is rooted in Christ and his atoning work. Are Latter-day Saints, therefore, an achievement-oriented people? Yes, but not in the way that Davies states it, but rather as a natural product of discipleship that has been a part of historic Christianity from its inception. For many people in the world, the opportunity to work authoritatively together with

God in bringing to pass the eternal lives of human souls is a strong dynamic of attraction and growth.

Church Structure

Davies seems to feel, however, that the hierarchical priesthood structure of the Latter-day Saint church may stand in the way of its becoming a world religion.¹⁵ Again, this overlooks an essential aspect of authority as seen by those within the Latter-day Saint tradition. Authority must flow through channels. For Latter-day Saints, this flow begins with the living Prophet of God and proceeds through the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, the Quorums of the Seventy, Area Presidencies, stake presidents, bishops, and other priesthood and auxiliary leaders. Thus, the worldwide church lives on the same page. As Joseph Smith taught on April 6, 1836, priesthood orders and offices are necessary, just as in the human body “which has different members, which have different offices to perform; all are necessary in their place, and the body is not complete without all the members.”¹⁶

Does that limit dissent? Yes, especially when church members believe that there is on the earth today a living prophet who is just like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, or Peter. Those who would challenge that basic, fundamental principle will find themselves marginalized by the church.

Ours is a revealed faith, not one derived from rational reflection. Ours is a theology not generated in the academy, but a theology given through and derived from revelation given to living prophets. The church structure is the vehicle of transmission, and that will not change. The church has what no other Christian tradition has except perhaps the Roman Catholic Church, that is, a clearly defined magisterium to which one can turn for answers to questions on faith and morals.

Given this hierarchical structure, will members feel divorced from the leadership as the church grows? No, and I am sure of that, having experienced the priesthood training sessions that have been conducted by the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve over

the last three years. The entire Latter-day Saint church was connected together by the miracle of satellite. Each of us participated personally as President Hinckley spoke to us from Salt Lake City, Elder Dallin H. Oaks from the Philippines, and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland from Chile. Just as the world is shrinking, so is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on a worldwide basis. Priesthood power can flow more easily through the church today than it could in the early years of the church as we take advantage of the miracles of modern-day transportation and communication.

Mormonism: A World Religion?

Davies's principal question is whether we can see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a worldwide church, either today or in the future. He uses an interesting definition for a world religion. He states:

This appraisal is based on a definition of world religion as involving a distinctive process of the conquest of death, a conquest rooted in ritual practice, explanatory doctrine, and an ethical pattern of life involving the generation of merit for soteriological ends. Crucially, it is also required that the movement develop from its original cultural source by engaging creatively with the cultures into which it expands and, in the process, generate diversifying textual, symbolic, and historic traditions.¹⁷

It is clear from this statement that numbers alone do not define a world religion. Certainly, Mormonism has a clear answer ritually and doctrinally to the problem of death, as Davies notes. There is also a well-defined ethical pattern for life, which does have bearing on our ultimate destiny. The issue over which Davies wonders whether The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can ever be a world religion is its ability to engage with other cultures. Here, as with the other issues I have addressed, the unifying force will be authority.

From Davies's point of view, a world religion seems to be one in which there is not only cultural diversity but also diversity in doctrine, organization, and opinion. Protestantism certainly has that diversity; there is little unity to it. Roman Catholicism has a much

stronger worldwide organization, but due to a long history when communication was limited, Catholicism has immense diversity. Buddhism is quite diverse with its three major schools of thought—which are also internally diverse. Islam is unified by the Five Pillars, but true Qur’anic principles have not always permeated cultures as the varied treatment of women or the various attitudes toward jihad would indicate.

What then of the possibility that Mormonism might be a burgeoning world religion? Can it adapt to new cultures? I know that this cultural question was of particular concern to Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who worked with others to determine what was essential to the gospel message and what was merely American culture that did not need to be exported. I think we are still working on that issue, and we will learn over time how to address it more adequately.

That which will never be changed, however, is the concept of central authority flowing down from the living prophet through the priesthood channels of the church. But those channels are becoming more and more composed of persons from the cultures into which the church has entered. The church has now established the Seventh and Eighth Quorums of the Seventy. The former is in Brazil, and the latter encompasses part of Asia and the Pacific Islands. In other words, a majority of the church’s general officers now live among the people whom they serve. They do precisely so that practice and doctrine remain unified worldwide. The Restoration first and foremost means unity in doctrine, organization, and attitude—not diversity.

What areas of life can be open to diversity? Music would be one. Our western musical forms are not the only ones available with which to praise the Lord. Some of the traditional hymns of the Restoration will cover the globe, but I can see a day when a portion of the hymnbook in Thailand is different from that in India or Japan, not only in words but also in music. I believe we will also see variety in diet. Converts to the church in India or south Asia may choose to continue vegetarian diets, which are probably more in harmony with the Word of Wisdom and what will be eaten in the Millennium than are our traditional western diets of today. I am sure there are many areas of cultural accommodation that can be made. But that accommodation will not be at the expense of central authority.

Conclusion

Davies's paper seems to be a critique rooted in the failed, decentralized Protestantism of Western Europe. Davies disagrees, saying that his view of a world religion is rooted in a broad survey of those faiths that are recognized today as world religions, namely, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Be that as it may, my critique still holds, for Davies's worldview is that of decentralized faith traditions. It appears that from his perspective, if Latter-day Saints wish to become a true world religion, they must become like his decentralized, diverse models. Obviously, that will never happen, because the heart of the Restoration—restored authority to administer the saving ordinances of the gospel through a divinely revealed structure—will not permit us to do so. We will maintain structure, order, and unity in doctrine and organization, while at the same time permitting regional and cultural diversity when that diversity does not violate the principles of the revealed order of things. In my view, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will indeed become a world religion, but it will be like none before it, because it will have a central authority and cohesion unknown in the rest of the religious world. Those will be the parameters of this growing world religion, and in the end, I am happy to leave its expansion in the hands of God.

Notes

1. Davies recognizes that the issues he raises are not simple. To use his word, they are “thick,” a fact too many commentators on the Mormon tradition do not recognize. Too often Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint scholars alike couch their comments in much too simplistic terms. If one of the aspects of being a world religion is “thickness,” then we qualify along with several others. Douglas J. Davies, “World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints,” in this volume, 253–54.

2. See Doctrine and Covenants 107:8, 20.

3. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 274.

4. Davies, “World Religion, Dynamics and Constraints,” 259, 260–61.

5. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 3:30.

6. See Douglas E. Brinley, "Faith in Jesus Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:483–85.

7. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 94–106.

8. Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 259.

9. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 362.

10. For example, Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996); and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

11. See the story of David and Goliath in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel 17, or the instruction given by Jesus to the rich young ruler who sought eternal life in Matthew 19:16–26.

12. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991); Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003); Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998); Robert L. Millet, *By Grace Are We Saved* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989).

13. Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 262.

14. Bruce D. Porter, "Gift of the Holy Ghost," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:543–44.

15. Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 262–63.

16. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 112.

17. Davies, "World Religion: Dynamics and Constraints," 255.