

The Theology of Councils

Richard L. Bushman

Truman Madsen and I have long shared an interest in Joseph Smith. His writings and tapes on the Prophet have affected thousands of people. Time and again when I say I am writing a biography of Joseph Smith, I am asked if I have read Truman Madsen's works about Joseph. Fortunately, on this particular topic there is plenty to go around. Joseph's thoughts, his character, his work, his struggles confound our attempts to fully comprehend them. For example, although I have long been familiar with Joseph's achievements, I was surprised to find how much attention he paid to church organization. Joseph has so long been thought of as a "dreamy visionary" who needed a Brigham Young to whip a vital but inchoate movement into shape that Joseph's involvement in church structure may come as a surprise. After examining this dimension of the Prophet's work, I am now inclined to consider Joseph the "organizer" and Brigham the "administrator" rather than to give all the organizational credit to President Young. I suppose that if Truman and I keep searching Joseph's life, many more surprises await us.

We have been content, presumably, to let Joseph originate theology and leave organization to Brigham because in our hierarchy of values, we tend to rank thought and belief above governance. We think that neglect of organization does not diminish Joseph's achievement so long as his revelations are acknowledged as the source of doctrine. What people think and believe—their inner thoughts—are more important, we assume, than the system of governance. But unless translated into action, theology has little impact. Organization, we know, affects everyday practice. It regulates lives of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints day by day and not just in theory. The organizational routines of the religious life may reach as deep into our minds and hearts as doctrines transmitted by words. In Joseph's case, I have come to believe, the form of ecclesiastical government turned some of the most fundamental doctrines of the restoration into habits of living. Belief and practice converged in church governance—hence the title of this essay: "The Theology of Councils."

In addition to commenting on doctrine and practice, I wish to offer a narrative of organizational development in the early years. I propose that church governance goes from more to less autocratic—the opposite of the usual story. Scholars have claimed that a loose, democratic structure gradually gave way in the church's first years to concentrated hierarchical authority.¹ I am saying, by contrast, that prophetic authority was highly concentrated at first and was dispersed as the years went by—into councils.

The Church of Jesus Christ among the Churches

The centralized nature of governance during the first year or two of the church's history is best seen against the background of other Christian churches and their modes of organization. For two hundred years before the Church of Christ was organized in 1830, the types of church government ranged along a spectrum from episcopal to congregational. The most centralized churches, like the Roman Catholic and the Anglican, concentrated authority in bishops—the *episcopus*—who held the ultimate authority to appoint and ordain and also exercised great influence over doctrine. The bishop ordained priests and appointed them to their parishes. He had the final word in disciplinary cases and controlled the properties of the church. Authority flowed downward from the bishop to the people.

At the opposite extreme from centralized rule by bishops was the congregational church order, in which people in the congregation selected their own ministers, disciplined their members, and controlled finances. The congregation was the seat of church government. Authority flowed upward from the congregation. Everything else was mere superstructure, erected on the congregational base. Congregationalism in church government corresponded to democracy in the state.

In Joseph's time, the congregationalist impulse prevailed in America, especially among the new churches. The Universalists, for example, met first in little societies where they heard a preacher or read scripture. They were slow to organize formal churches requiring the adoption of disciplinary rules and a profession of faith for fear of encroaching on the free worship of individual believers in their congregations. Eventually, the Universalists did organize and create a modest hierarchical structure of associations to work out common policies, but they adamantly insisted on the independent sovereignty of individual congregations.² Like all congregational churches, they were wary of sharing authority with higher bodies. If Joseph had been looking for ideas on church governance, extreme congregationalism would have been the dominant model for his time and social class.

Where did the budding Church of Jesus Christ fit within this spectrum in 1830? Did it incline toward episcopal centralism or congregational democracy? If early church government had been democratic, in the spirit of other denominations, the congregation would have been the seat of power. But it seems obvious to me that authority in Joseph's time did not rest in local congregations, the key unit in the democratic Protestant churches. In fact, congregational organization hardly figured at all in the early church. Congregations did have the authority to approve priesthood officers and to license elders, but nothing more (see D&C 20:65). Section 20, the constitution of the church, made no provision for appointing pastors to lead local churches, the starting point of organization in other denominations. The revelation said only that elders were to take the lead of meetings, and if no elder was present, then a priest or teacher took charge. The words imply informal worship without a preestablished authority. Whoever happened to have the highest authority rose to lead the meeting (see D&C 20:44, 45, 49, 56).

Following Joseph Smith to the end of his life, I find it hard to detect in him much interest in congregational organization at any time. The plat of the City of Zion in 1833 identified no meetinghouses for a population of fifteen to twenty thousand. Presumably one of the twenty-four temples at the center of the city could have served for Sunday meetings, but none of them had a title to suggest such usage. The temples were named for various offices in the priesthood, not for wards in the city.³ The names implied they were meeting places for quorums rather than congregations. Although Joseph assembled nearly fifteen thousand people in Nauvoo before he died, he never provided for congregational meetinghouses. People met in houses, in stores, and outdoors. The church's architectural energies went into temples, which only incidentally served for regular Sunday church services. The role of the congregation in church government was not merely diminished within the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ—it was almost totally disregarded. Although the Prophet faithfully attended Sunday worship in Kirtland and Nauvoo, his revelations said virtually nothing about congregational organization.

Actual government in the Church of Jesus Christ began at the next higher level of ecclesiastical organization: the conference. Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants makes provision for quarterly conferences of elders, specifying that "the several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three months" (D&C 20:61). This would have been a familiar form of governance to anyone who was acquainted with Methodism. Methodist conferences, like the conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ, met quarterly to license preachers and exhorters and to conduct church business. Missionaries were sent out by the Methodists' annual conferences. Knowing the Methodists, early church members would have easily accepted the practice of governing through conferences. It would have seemed perfectly natural for the second conference in September 1830 to send missionaries to the Lamanites, as well as to deal with the dispute over Hiram Page's seer stone.⁴ Joseph said the conference of January 1831 conducted "the ordinary business of the Church," and it was as an item of this "ordinary business" that the decision was made to move the headquarters of the church to Ohio.⁵ Later, in June 1831, high priests were ordained for the first time at the quarterly conference of elders.⁶ Looking

back now, it is possible to see the quarterly conference as a comfortable starting point for an organization that was to evolve into a much more elaborate structure within a few years.

While the quarterly conferences had the air of conventional church conferences like those of Universalists and Methodists, they actually differed substantially because of Joseph's presence. Although discussion did take place, decisions were not made by debate and deliberation, followed by a vote. The most significant decisions were made by revelation to the Prophet. The fate of Hiram Page's seer stone, the missionary expedition to the Lamanites, the decision to leave New York, and the bestowal of the high priest's office came as a result of revelations to Joseph Smith. So far as can be told, he presented the revelations to the conferences for their acceptance rather than accepting motions rising from the floor. In some cases, persuasion may have been required; discussion doubtless followed, and votes were taken. But authority lay in the revealed words, not in the democracy of debate and ballot. Underneath the democratic forms, the Lord's Prophet exercised authority vested in him by virtue of his revelations.

The authority of revelation also settled many day-to-day issues that arose in the intervals between the quarterly conferences. People applied to Joseph for a commandment, as they called revelations then, and the Lord gave directions. Authority did not necessarily lie solely in the hands of Joseph Smith, for he did not rule by fiat. Authority emanated from the revealed word, which his followers distinguished from his counsel or wishes. Authority lay in him as revelator or, more properly, in the revelations themselves. This form of governance has been labeled (by Max Weber) charismatic authority, or governance by divine gift—perhaps the most concentrated form of authority imaginable. Joseph probably prevailed by force of his personality too, for he dominated every circle he entered. But ultimately the revelations, not his naturally strong character, gave him authority.

The Rise of Councils

Strangely for one who so readily assumed the leader's role, Joseph began dispersing authority soon after the church settled down in Kirtland in 1831. He adopted the practice of calling interim conferences or—as he later called them—councils to deal with problems arising between the quarterly conferences. Without any prescribed membership or rules of conduct, the conferences included the most experienced priesthood holders who happened to be available when a need arose. Joseph called them together and presented the problem—often a disciplinary matter—and they worked together on a solution.

Between 6 September 1831 and 12 November 1831, Joseph held eight conferences in Kirtland, Hiram, and Orange, Ohio. Near the end of that period, from 1 to 12 November, four conferences came in quick succession, leading Joseph to say he had sat in conference for nearly two weeks.⁷ The participants were not the "elders," narrowly restricted to that priesthood office, but included all priesthood holders. In his report on the conference at Orange on 25–26 October, Joseph noted the presence of twelve high priests, seventeen elders, four priests, three teachers, and four deacons. In addition, "a large congregation attended."⁸ Although the conferences conducted church business, they seem to have been open to the general membership. Emma attended with Joseph sometimes, and in the middle of one disciplinary case, the priesthood called on a woman in the audience to testify. Since regular Sabbath services do not appear in the record for these months, the conferences may have served the purposes of worship for the general membership.⁹

Besides disciplining errant members, forming fund-raising committees, deciding on publications, and sending out missionaries, the conferences were the occasion of revelations. Section 67 begins with the words, "Behold and hearken, O ye elders of my church, who have assembled yourselves together ..." (D&C 67:1). Other revelations seem to have been given at conferences for the purpose of settling matters under discussion.¹⁰ The conferences mixed deliberations and votes on issues with directions from God to the Prophet.

In the spring of 1832, Joseph changed the terminology for his meetings: he began intermixing the terms *conference* and *council*. In April he called “a general council” of the church in Independence to acknowledge him as president of the high priesthood following a confirmation of this office at a “conference of High Priests, Elders, and members” in Ohio the previous January.¹¹ From then on, the word *council* became increasingly common.¹²

Through 1833, the form of these councils/conferences became more regular. Joseph increasingly spoke of “a council of High Priests” meeting to ordain people or to deal with transgressions, as if the council consisted solely of holders of that office. The Word of Wisdom was given for the benefit of a council of high priests (see D&C 89:1). Besides restricting the councils to high priests, other rules developed. In June 1833, a council ordained two additional high priests “to make out the number, (twelve) that the council, or Church court, might be organized.”¹³ I know of no revelation before June 1833 about twelve members of a church court. The practice seems to have developed by customary use, perhaps with biblical precedents in mind.¹⁴

By this time, the councils had become self-sufficient. Joseph’s presence was not required to make them work. Instead of councils relying on him to give the last word, they met, deliberated, and made policy decisions in his absence. In the fall of 1833, Joseph and Sidney’s departure for Canada did not prevent the councils from meeting. Under Frederick G. Williams, who presided in their absence, a council decided to discontinue work on the temple for the winter and made plans to build a printing house. These were not minor matters, and the brethren acted in full confidence, without Joseph to prompt them.¹⁵

By the time of the formal organization of the high council in February 1834, the composition of the council and the procedural rules could be recorded not as a revelation from on high but as a set of minutes. Precedents had been worked out in the previous year, so that the members could agree on organizational procedures. Joseph Smith was appointed president, but the duties of that office were not restricted to him. A similar council was organized in Missouri, subject to the procedures outlined in the Kirtland High Council minutes. A year later, in February 1835, the Twelve were organized as a traveling high council to manage church business outside of the two stakes organized under their own presidencies and without the direct guidance of Joseph Smith.¹⁶

Although Joseph still held the highest offices in the church and took precedence in any situation because of his revelatory power, everyday church governance had largely been transferred to these councils. Joseph’s recorded history of the church for a year after the Twelve’s organization in 1835 consists almost entirely of the minutes of the various councils. He seems to have considered their work to be the business of the church. The councils were making the important decisions, disciplining members, sending out missionaries, raising funds, erecting buildings. In Joseph’s absence, the councils functioned as smoothly as if he were present. In August 1835 a grand council or conference approved the new Doctrine and Covenants while Joseph was absent in Michigan.¹⁷ Though he presided when present, church government was functionally independent of him.

The importance of these councils in forming the young church cannot be overemphasized. Think of priesthood holders sitting in council meetings day after day as transgressors were disciplined and church plans laid. They had a chance to watch the Prophet in action as he organized affairs. As questions arose, they could compare their thoughts to his and learn from his example. Brigham Young would not have been the only one who absorbed lessons from Joseph. No wonder they could work without him after a few years; they had observed him sitting in council on so many occasions before they took over.

Consider also the impact of a council's members sitting through one discipline case after another. Before the council stood the transgressor, whose errors and counterbalancing virtues were reviewed from many perspectives. Point by point, the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior was laid down. As the council member judged transgressors, he also judged himself. How did he measure up to the standards laid down in the court? Observing members being chastised or exonerated, each councilor learned the limits of saintly behavior for himself. By implication the councils defined good and bad saints by common-law tradition, worked out in specific cases involving actual people.

The councils thus created a corps of men who learned through vicarious experience how to conduct themselves as saints. They not only learned the rules of conduct but helped generate them. Council decisions represented a corporate conclusion about the nature of sainthood, giving councilors the confidence to propagate the standards throughout the church.

Equally important in the formation of church culture was the provision in section 102 that if the council lacked sufficient knowledge to decide a case, "the president may inquire and obtain the mind of the Lord by revelation" (D&C 102:23). The president of the high council received the revelation whoever he happened to be. In Joseph Smith's absence, Frederick G. Williams could obtain the mind of the Lord. In the Zion High Council, President David Whitmer inquired of God. Revelation on church business was delivered not solely to Joseph Smith but to every council president. The revelations of each president stated the mind of the Lord and carried appropriate weight. After the Council of the Twelve was organized, Joseph told them that the minutes of their deliberations would be important, "for such decision[s] will forever remain upon record, and appear an item of covenant or doctrine."¹⁸ In other words, they would carry the same authority as the commandments or revelations by which Joseph governed the church in the early years.

Joseph Smith took great satisfaction in this dispersal of authority. After the high council was organized in 1834, he told them "that if I should now be taken away, I had accomplished the great work the Lord had laid before me, ... and done my duty in organizing the High Council, through which council the will of the Lord might be known on all important occasions, in the building up of Zion, and establishing truth in the earth."¹⁹

In bringing conciliar government into being, Joseph not only distributed authority to the councils, but he dispensed the divine gift of revelation as well. After the councils were organized in 1834 and 1835, the number of revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants diminished. Joseph still received large doctrinal expositions on baptism for the dead and eternal marriage. He also recorded items of instruction that came to him as nuggets of divine truth. But the day-to-day revelations on how to govern the church disappeared. Their place was filled by the minutes of the councils where the governance of the church went forward. (One exception to this trend was section 124 on the Nauvoo House.)

When Joseph died and confusion arose about his rightful successor, Brigham Young, though lacking explicit instructions, knew that a council could govern the church, and the church members went along with him. Experience had taught them that government by council did not represent a downgrading of divine leadership. They had relied on councils for a long time and knew that guidance from God could come to a council.

In some ways, the formation of governing councils was Joseph's greatest organizational achievement. Working out a hierarchy and an organizational chart did not in itself distinguish him; a modern consulting firm might have recommended a structure for a new church. But investing the church councils with the divine gift of revelation was a unique and wonderful accomplishment. To instill the faith that God would speak to the council leadership upon

inquiry just as he did to the prophet could not have been achieved by mere rational organization. To this day, Latter-day Saints believe that their church organization is infused with revelation—not just at the top, but in every bishopric and auxiliary presidency.

The transfer of power from Joseph to the councils aligned the practice of church government with Mormonism’s most basic doctrine—the belief that revelation leads the church. Instead of revelation being a remote ideal stated in words only, revelation was incorporated into practice. In church government, everyone has a right to revelation for his or her stewardship. Deacon quorum presidents and Young Women’s class leaders are taught to seek guidance in their most minute decisions. In a sense, this belief in organizational revelation is the ultimate democratization of religious authority, conferred upon the Saints by a prophet who believed his gift rightfully belonged to all the Saints.

Notes

1. For many variants of this theme, see D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 38; Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 156; and Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 53. Jason Lindquist discusses the large question of priesthood authority in “Unlocking the Door of the Gospel’: The Concept of ‘Keys’ in Mormonism and Early American Culture,” in *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows’ Papers, 1997–1999* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2000), 29–42.
2. Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770–1875* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), 63–65, 70, 75, 95. For a broader explication of this theme, see Miriam Murdock, “Stepping Stones’ of Understanding: Patterns of the Priesthood in Universalism, Freemasonry, and Mormonism,” in *Archive of Restoration Culture*, 51–58.
3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 1:357–59.
4. *Ibid.*, 109–20.
5. *Ibid.*, 140, 142.
6. *Ibid.*, 176.
7. *Ibid.*, 215–37. The comment on two weeks of conferences appears on p. 235.
8. *Ibid.*, 219.
9. At a council of high priests in Clay County, 7 July 1834, priesthood holders of all ranks were there “together with a number of Members.” Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 71.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 64, 66, 68, 69, 70; section 75 was given at a conference held 25 January 1832.
11. *History of the Church*, 1:267.
12. For interchangeability of council and conference, see *ibid.*, 327.

13. Ibid., 354.

14. Elders' councils did not require this number. Ibid., 355.

15. Ibid., 418.

16. The evolution of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles into a general governing body of the church is traced in Ronald Esplin, "The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership (1830- 1841)" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1981).

17. *History of the Church*, 2:243-46.

18. Ibid., 199.

19. Ibid., 124.