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LICENSING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Donald Q. Cannon

Even in its infant stages The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instituted various procedures which would allow its members to be organized and regulated more effectively. One such procedure was the practice of licensing. Church leaders issued licenses to all men holding priesthood offices and also to all missionaries called to preach the gospel.

Licenses provided a means of regulating the conduct of Church members. Only those with a bona fide license could serve in the Church or engage in missionary work. This custom, however, served another important purpose. The license of an elder provided him with appropriate credentials so that Mormons and non-Mormons could rest assured that he represented the Church.

At first, the licenses consisted of a handwritten statement signed by the appropriate Church authority. Joseph Smith Sr.’s earliest license serves as an appropriate example. (See Joseph Smith Sr. license on page 97.)

Later the Church began to use a printed form which included a space for the elder’s name, the date, the place, the clerk’s name, etc. An example of the early form is the license of Charles C. Rich. (See Charles C. Rich license on page 98.)

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21David McKay to Mrs. James Hood, 16 March 1916, photocopy of holograph, Church Archives. David McKay is the father of LDS Church President David O. McKay.
Joseph Smith Sr. License

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

THIS Certifies that Charles C. Rich has been received into the church of the Latter Day Saints, organized on the sixth of April, in the year of our Lord, one thousand, eight hundred, and thirty, and has been ordained an elder according to the rules and regulations of said church, and is duly authorized to preach the gospel, agreeably to the authority of that office.

From the satisfactory evidence which we have of his good moral character, and his zeal for the cause of righteousness, and diligent desire to persuade men to forsake evil and embrace truth, we confidently recommend him to all candid and upright people as a worthy member of society.

We, therefore, in the name, and by the authority of this church, grant unto this our worthy brother in the Lord, this letter of commendation as a proof of our fellowship and esteem: praying for his success and prosperity in our Redeemer's cause.

Given by the direction of a conference of the elders of said church, assembled in Kirtland, Geauga county, Ohio, the third day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand, eight hundred, and thirty-six.

Chas. Rich

N. W. Dyer

W. Smith

Kirtland, Ohio, April 18th, 1836

Chairman.

Clerk.
By the 1840s and 1850s the forms had become quite elaborate, including a decorative border design, etc. The elders' license of Gibson Smith serves as an example of the more sophisticated form. (See Gibson Smith license, p. 100.)

Although the terms license and certificate were often used interchangeably, particularly in the early days, there was actually a difference. The certificate was used in very much the same manner that membership records are used today, that is, as official evidence of membership in the Church. The certificate was carried by the individual and presented to the presiding officer of the branch of which he desired to become a member. The license, on the other hand, was issued to the priesthood bearer, who carried it as identification both for the benefit of members in other branches and for nonmembers whom he might encounter. That both licenses and certificates were issued can be seen in the case of Gibson Smith. (See Gibson Smith license and certificate, pages 100 and 101.)

In addition to the certificate and licenses issued by the Church, in some cases elders had to apply for licenses from the government officials in the area where these elders were laboring as missionaries. Brigham Young, for example, had a license to preach issued by officials in Preston, Lancashire County, England. (See Brigham Young license, p. 102.)

That licensing was a common practice in the early days of the Church is attested to in the official history of the Church, journals, biographies, and scholarly studies of the Latter-day Saint missionary system—sources that provide useful insight into licensing practices and procedures. The History of the Church makes several references to licensing, including cases of licenses being revoked. The revoking of licenses was tantamount to being disfellowshipped in the twentieth century. In March 1836 the Church leaders concluded that it was necessary to issue a set of resolutions concerning licensing:

Resolutions on Ordinations and Licenses.

Whereas, the records of the several conferences held by the Elders of the Church, and the ordination of many of the official members of the same, in many cases, have been imperfectly kept since its organization, to avoid ever after any inconvenience, difficulty or injury, in consequence of such neglect, your committee recommend:

First—That all licenses hereafter granted by these authorities [sic] assembled as a quorum, or by general conference held for the purpose of transacting the business of the Church, be recorded at full length by a

Gibson Smith License

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Elders Certificate.

We hereby certify that Gibson Smith is an elder of the Rockville Center Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints of the New York Conference, in good standing; and as such we recommend him to any Branch with which he may desire to unite.

Date: October 3, 1859

Francis B. Hurd, President.

Eva L. C. Secretary.

This Certificate is not intended to be shown to the private members of a branch; but should be presented to the presiding officer of the branch of which you desire to become a member.

Courtesy of Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University
THERE are to certify, that at the General Quarter Sessions of the Peace, held by adjournment at Preston in and for the said County, the eighth day of April in the third Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Brigham Young came before the Justices present, and did then and there in open Court, take the Oaths appointed to be taken in the Stead of the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy, and also the Abjuration Oath; and did also then and there make and repeat the Declaration against Popery; and also the Declaration required to be taken by Dissenting Ministers, and subscribed his name severally thereto, pursuant to the several Statutes in that behalf made and provided.

Deputy Clerk of the Peace in and for the said County of Lancaster.

(Copy in S. Dilworth Young, Here Is Brigham [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964], p. 255.)
clerk appointed for that purpose, in a book to be kept in this branch of
the Church, until it shall be thought advisable by the heads of the
Church to order other books and appoint other clerks, to record licenses
as above; and that said recording clerk be required to indorse a cer-

ificate under his own hand and signature, on the back of said licenses,
specifying the time when and place where, such license was recorded,
and also a reference to the letter and page of the book containing the
same.

Second—That this quorum appoint two persons to sign licenses
given as aforesaid, one as chairman, and the other as clerk of con-
ference; and that it shall be the duty of said persons appointed to sign
licenses as clerk of conference immediately hereafter, to deliver the same
into the hands of the recording clerk.

Third—That all general conferences abroad give each individual
whom they ordain, a certificate, signed by the chairman and clerk of
said conference, stating the time and place of such conference, and the
office to which the individual has been ordained; and that when such
certificate has been forwarded to the person hereafter authorized to sign
licenses as clerk of conference, such person shall, together with chairman
of conference, immediately sign a license; and said clerk of conference
shall, after the same has been recorded, forward to the proper person.

Fourth—That all official members in good standing and fellowship
in the various branches of this Church, be requested to forward their
present licenses, accompanied by a certificate of their virtuous and
faithful walk before the Lord, signed by the chairman and clerk of a
general conference, or by the clerk of a branch of the Church in which
such official member resides, by the advice and direction of such
Church, to the clerk of conference, whose duty it shall be to fill a new
license, as directed in the third article: and that all licenses, signed,
recorded, and endorsed, as specified in the first article, shall be con-
considered good, and valid to all intents and purposes, in the business and
spiritual affairs of this Church, as a religious society, or before any court
of record of this or any other country, wherein preachers of the Gospel
are entitled to special privileges, answering in all respects as an original
record, without the necessity of referring to any other document.

Fifth—That the recording clerk be required to publish quarterly, in
paper published by some member or members of this Church, a list of
the names of the several persons for whom he has recorded licenses
within the last quarter of a year.

Sixth—That this quorum appoint two persons to sign licenses as
chairman and clerk of conference pro tem. for the standing chairman
and clerk, who shall be appointed as named in the second article, and
also to act in their absence, in signing other licenses, as specified in the
foregoing article.

President Joseph Smith, Jun., was nominated as chairman,
Frederick G. Williams, as clerk, and Sidney Rigdon as chairman pro tem.
and Oliver Cowdery as clerk pro tem. Vote from the several quorums
called, in their order, and passed unanimously.

President Joseph Smith, Jun., made some remarks upon the res-
olution offered to the Council on the 12th of February. Followed by
President Thomas B. Marsh, who called a vote of his quorum to ascer-
tain whether they would repeal their amendment of the 13th of Febru-
ary. And nine of the Twelve voted in the affirmative, and three, viz.,
John F. Boynton, Lyman E. Johnson, and Orson Pratt, in the negative.
And the original resolution of the 12th of February was passed.
Dismissed by prayer, half-past nine o’clock.
OLIVER COWDERY, Clerk. 3

From the foregoing resolutions it is apparent that
1. all licenses had to be recorded;
2. all licenses had to be signed by the proper authorities;
3. both licenses and certificates were issued;
4. licenses were valid for all business of the Church;
5. a list of all licensed persons was published quarterly.

Indeed, an intricate system of licensing had developed by 1836.
Licensing had an effect on the holder’s feelings as well as on
nonmembers. The Prophet’s brother, William Smith, expressed his
feelings about the impact of licensing upon his ministry when he
wrote, “This made me feel more and more the importance of my
mission.” 5

Almost all of the scholarly studies of Latter-day Saint missionary
work have come to grips with the practice of licensing. In his pioneer
study, George Ellsworth sees the introduction of licensing as an in-
dication of the transition from a freelance to an organized system. 6
Leonard Arrington, in his biography of Charles C. Rich, explains that
Brother Rich was authorized to act as an elder by virtue of the license
in his possession. 7 Barbara Higdon’s dissertation contains a section
entitled “Credentials of Missionaries” wherein she writes: “The Lat-
ter Day Saint elder might feel that the Lord had ordained and
directed his missionary activities, but the non-Mormon needed tangi-
ble evidence that the poorly-dressed man who stood before him was a
minister. Thus the idea of licensing occurred early in the
movement.” 8 In his study of the Southern States Mission, LaMar C.
Berrett indicates that each missionary had to have the “necessary
credentials” to verify his calling as a missionary. 9

3Ibid., 2:403-05. These resolutions were also published in the Messenger and Advocate, 2:266-77.

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As the system developed, at each conference of the Church a clerk was appointed to record certificates and to issue licenses. Consequently, as an elder moved from branch to branch he could be properly identified, and his license enabled non-Mormons to determine the validity of his calling. Thus the practice of issuing a license to priesthood holders and missionaries enabled the early Church to regulate its internal affairs and control its proselyting system.