

There is much evidence that as religious organizations grow older, a sharp cleavage develops between doctrine and actual practice. Are the gospel principles one thing, and church practice another? As organizations develop and expand they accumulate the baggage of years: official personnel with their own habits and outlook; properties; customs; ways of procedure; institutional habits. Any organization has to constantly examine its institutional behavior in order to correspond principle with practice. Correspondence of the two may never be perfect. But the church, as other institutions (such as government and the Constitution), needs to take care that day-to-day operations reflect gospel principle and not the convenience of organizational vested interests. In these times, modern society is agitated by questions of freedom versus organization, of authoritarianism versus democracy as principles of organizing social life. Our principles on this subject seem quite clear. But dare we ask ourselves the question, what of our organizational practice?

In modern society, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claims to stand for free inquiry, freedom of conscience, and the doctrine of the inalienable rights of man. Such a claim imposes a heavy burden of responsibility upon us.

The writer has been challenged with the view that these principles together with the principle of common consent have become principles only; that modern church practices tend to reflect mere lip-service to them, especially to the doctrine of common consent as a revealed principle of church government.

According to the Doctrine and Covenants and early church history, the statement is made that: "The justice and law of God for church government, as revealed to Joseph Smith and accepted by vote of the Church, thus reveal an essential democracy." This statement is now challenged to the effect that the system revealed to Joseph Smith and taught by him did embrace an essential democracy, but that one hundred twenty years later, today, Church practice reflects only lip service to the principles.

This challenge seems worthwhile to consider in all candor and honesty. The real concern in world affairs over the question of freedom and the rights of man makes it timely. The professed position of the Church as the conservator and protector of human liberty makes it vital. Quotations from our literature as to our concern for liberty would fill volumes. But do the quotations come to life in daily conduct of the organized church? Could our Church practices in management and operations stand the same scrutiny that the government, for example, is given? Or would outside critics say as some of us say about American politics, that our church government has "departed" from our "constitution."

The "Mormon" people have always, as an active core, insisted on harmonization of precept and example, of principle and practice. If, as alleged, we talk about liberty, criticize foreign governments, domestic institutions, deplore "socialistic" trends in American government, etc., etc., as infringing on human liberty, and at the same time ourselves act in an organized capacity like a totalitarian instrument, then our lot is an unhappy one and ripe for speedy repentance and change. This is a difficult subject, even for student of Church history who is somewhat prepared to view with suspicion all professed statements and observe with caution all activities. But let us try to review the situation.

First, let us dispose of the past as a means of justifying the present. The record of elections and voting in the church 1830-1844 is well-documented in the Documentary History and will not be cited. The remainder of the nineteenth century record, replete with examples of "President B. Young calling for the vote," will also remain as a record — including that tremendous occasion in the old Parowan stake tabernacle when with President Young himself on the stand, the people of that stake rejected the motion to make Jesse N. Smith their stake president.

But what of today? Is the law of common consent an active, working principle in the church today? What would happen if a modern William C. McGreger stood up in a conference and spoke out against a motion, as that doughty Scotsman did in Parowan eight decades ago?

Second, let us note a commonly-observed and commonly-recognized human phenomena. Latter-day Saints are human, all of them. All the Presidents of the Church, as well as the rest of us, have admitted it! That phenomena is to the effect that authority has more tools, commands more influence, by its sheer nature, than consent. Tom Paine wrote many years ago that in any struggle 'twixt King and Commons, King has most of the immediate advantages. A system of authority is unified, compact, disciplined. Consent is rarely organized, has difficult ways, but in the long run enjoys tremendous popular strength. That is why dictatorships always enjoy initial advantages in modern war and diplomacy, while democracies rally slowly, but in the end, triumph if they organize successfully in harmony with the principles of free agency.

When people speak of "authority" in our organization, it is the general authorities that are referred to as the effective power, centralized and compact. Especially is this true in fiscal matters

which are the heart of national government. That our general authorities are particularly overburdened with organization details is a common topic.

The same cadre of about twenty-six officials operate the Church in the mid-twentieth century as in the early nineteenth--but with a much larger central staff. "Bureaucracy" comes to be a feature of any large scale undertaking, public or private. It would be only natural to discover that, due to the sheer weight of routine in running the organization, that more attention is given to the problems of authority in getting work done at headquarters than to the problems of organizing an active consent in the field. This is contradictory, because getting work done in the Church means winning acceptance,--hence consent, in the field. But this becomes the point at issue: Is consent actively nourished (it is a very tender plant, with occasional weeds in the patch to be sure!) and consciously utilized in the work of getting things done? Or is it given mere lip-service and more or less lost sight of in the midst of exhortations to do what is right let the consequence follow? If it is, we should remember that in the doctrinal plan of church government, the right way includes common consent as an active principle. The Great Council of the Gods utilized it. And, according to our beliefs, that council and the entire scheme of earth life rests upon acceptance, by God and man, of the principles of free agency and common consent. Is it used? In your auxiliary? quorum? ward? stake? the church generally? These questions are for answer by every officer and member of the church. The writer here can only report the record of his own experience and that available in the printed record. That experience is mixed.

To report that the experience is mixed is to state a fact. But, like Adam in the garden obeying and disobeying in the same act, it is a fact common to all human experience. It is mixed, first, in a general way. By

that I mean that my own personal experience as a member in three missions, five stakes, seven wards, four Aaronic and six Melchizedek quorums, and various offices in them all--honestly reflects a general, deeply-felt concern and going assumption that everything operated, and was to operate by common consent. Only in one situation, and that momentarily, did I ever feel that "amen to the priesthood" had taken place because of unrighteous "domination". And upon reflection I am willing to admit that I was young and over-sensitive.

I have lived to see the day that I am glad to have kept my hush and counsel as a result of the many good things that have come to me as a result of what I felt at the time was edging towards my being "priest ridden." My conversations with others and observations force the same conclusion--that the spirit of church practice, if we may use the phrase, is one of genuine democratic feeling. I have usually found concern for the rights of others exhibited to the breaking point. Feeling for the general doctrine of "common consent" has always been evident.

On the other side I have to report that in a general church sense, I am disappointed that so important a matter as the Welfare Plan, in the published reports of the general conference held in April 1936, since harked back to as tremendously inspirational and significant, was not formally presented as a matter of record, motion, and acceptance. The same is true of many lesser items in my experience as a mature member of the Church. I am conscious of this perhaps because in my extensive researches in church literature, many items over the years in the past were placed before the general conferences for sustaining vote. In recent years, with minor exceptions, the only motions put before the conferences have been motions to sustain the general authorities and officers of the church. It could be assumed that a motion to sustain the authorities of the church includes a motion to sustain everything they do and propose. However, to me, speaking as a private member influenced by my studies of our organizational procedures since 1830, this is sacrificing a great principle to the exigencies of organizational detail. I would think

it preferable to present large issues as special, separate motions, including the annual general Church, and Welfare plan, budgets, etc.

As a means of winning support in "getting things done" nothing is quite so effective as this device. Why? Note the care with which officers' names are presented for sustaining vote. If other matters of large import were to be presented in the same way it would mean:

(1) That the matter had been most carefully prepared and reduced to statement-form. This automatically enhances administration.

(2) The matter, in statement-form, would be presented in understandable, clear style, readily picked up by both listeners, the press (for later thought and reflection), and as a matter of conference and historical record. A speech or a sermon is recorded and is historical. But a record of a motion and its acceptance is even more emphatic, as an examination of the twenty-six volumes of the Journal of Discourses and the semi-annual conference reports (the latter since 1897) will indicate.

(3) The earnestness of seeking an active response from the people entails the essence of all that modern science has discovered concerning human motivation in organized form, including here what we will call the judicious use of free agency.

(4) The people feel better. Everyone feels better when he participates. We preach this. We could, in all honesty I believe, practice it more.

Going this far leaves open the question, "Supposing some one dissents?" We will examine this point later.

Personal local experience in the church is also "mixed", like the foregoing. The mixture is sharper and more pronounced. In one quorum, the Presidency instead of announcing that "next Tuesday we are going to Joe Turner's lot and plant corn for a Welfare project" always thought out the project carefully in advance and came to a united decision. Then, instead of merely reporting that decision to the next quorum meeting and asking everybody "to please come out," a spokesman for the Presidency would:

- (1) carefully outline the problem;
- (2) report the consideration and resulting decision of the Presidency;
- (3) ask the brethren what they thought;
- (4) after discussion present the project to the group.

"All who are in favor of sustaining us in undertaking to plant two acres of sweet corn on Joe Turner's lot, please indicate by raising the right hand." And similarly, all opposed were invited to indicate. There was never a dissenting vote. The lack of dissent did not indicate lazy minds, a too-ready acquiescence with whatever the Presidency proposed. It was an active consent and it worked. The corn was planted and harvested.

In sharp contrast, another quorum operated in the following way. With no minutes nor records of previous decisions or business, a quorum meeting would finally get under way (as soon as the officers decided whose turn it was to conduct.) Then the announcement would be made: "Two men are needed down at Welfare Square next Tuesday. Anybody available who goes will certainly be appreciated. Brother Johnson will now take the lesson." Of course, nobody ever showed up at Welfare Square. Common consent was ignored! What is the lesson, the deep, deep lesson? The Lord is wise. He learned a great deal about human nature before the Great Council, during the Great Council, and since the Great Council. One lesson is apparent. It is also the unwritten but very real meaning of the revealed doctrine of common consent. It is that common consent is a device for keeping authority on its toes, making it vital, alive, and above all, RESPONSIBLE! How can authority which ignores its members be responsible, either in its duty to God or its duty to man? The principle emerges that the real test of divine authority-in-practice lies in authority's recognition of and compliance with the doctrine of common consent.

In one ward, the bishop, a great and good man, never did ask for the support of his ward priesthood in undertaking to fulfill the ward welfare assignments, running into thousands of dollars annually. In another ward, the bishop always presented such items in ward priesthood meeting. I even

remember him calling for the vote on the purchase of a loud-speaker system).

In both cases the assignments were always met. But I entertain, in my own free agency and freedom of choice, my own opinion as to which ward had the best spirit, and which one was doing the best job both for the church and for its arduous mission as it relates to liberty and law in modern society!

Such examples could be multiplied endlessly. The net conclusion is that we will always be on solid ground in harking back to the church "constitution", its recognition and usage, and the steady development of the law of common consent as set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants.

My "mixed" experience is somewhat unified by personal experience in quorum and local church councils. Among Presidencies, organization officers' meetings, and local church councils, my experience is one of utterly frank, honest discussion as a method and procedure of church government. Free agency and common consent are not only alive, but in my experience are accorded formal recognition. A limited knowledge of general church councils today, plus the evidence of the written record, bears this out. The rule of unanimity found in section 107, as practiced in the general church councils, has borne in on my personal experience as a tremendous fact. Even the free agency of a single member of the First Presidency or Twelve, may halt an important proposal or plan until full agreement can be reached. The future suggests that in this busy world all concerned could be more conscious of extending this same practice, as well as its spirit, when all presidencies and councils consult and report to their member-constituencies. There are even some phrases in the Doctrine and Covenants couching the language of common consent practices which could be vitalized, for example, conferences. Are they preaching sessions exclusively, or, as stated, for the purpose of transacting church business? I have to report honestly, that one or two verses appear to be dead-letters judging by deserved practices. Reasons for this? Of course there are and more rational ones than exist in everyday politics. If these old verses have become obsolete new practices and their supporting reasons could be made a matter of motion



and acceptance in the spirit and practice of modern revelation.

In conclusion, let us discuss a hypothetical case, shall we say a modern-day William C. McGregor who rises in meeting to oppose a central motion as the McGregor of the 19th century voiced the opposition of the people of Farowan to the proposal to make Jesse N. Smith their stake president.

One often hears it said that "if" some one did that in general conference "he wouldn't last long." On the contrary, I believe it might prove to be very significant if a constituent in good standing voted "no" and quietly requested a hearing. A member "in good standing," on the record, must include every member not disfellowshipped nor excommunicated. As in a political meeting or anywhere else, it would have to be done with dignity and reason. I cannot visualize a presiding officer in a stake or general conference opening a meeting of thousands to general discussion any more than I can visualize it in the national political conventions of our great political parties. The latter are run strictly and sternly, by iron-handed chairmen. But I can visualize an invitation from the presiding officer to the dissenter to meet with a group of presiding officers after the meeting or at a designated time for a full examination of the cause. Knowing this, any person may bring causes to bear at headquarters any time. At local quorum meetings, ward meetings, discussion can be visualized and most of us have witnessed it. Certainly no member of the church would be "handled," as some wiseacres suggest, for this action. Order has to be maintained. But in any honest struggle between a few officials and the law of common consent, we can be confident that common consent and free agency will hold sway. To do or be otherwise would stand as apostasy.

What about a hypothetical case, often discussed conversationally and in religious classes, where the President of the Church announced (with united support from the general authorities) a revelation from God, and the people refused to accept it? The usual answer is that if such occurred the

the people would then be in a state of apostasy. Granting this, what then would be the duty of the general authorities? To cut the people off and start afresh? The thought occurs to me, from Jesus' teachings, especially the Parable of the Lost Sheep, that the duty of the authorities would then be to labor with the people and win them back with the people's own free willing consent as individuals. They might first be excommunicated. But the obligation of authority would remain to bring them back. And the only way they could be brought back would be by their free, intelligent consent -- the way they got into the church in the first place if converted, or remained active if born in the church. In other words, divine authority and common consent-- free agency are as inseparable as the front and back of the hand. The one cannot exist without the other in the true Christian society, the Church of Christ. And that same pattern must eventually stand for all society. But we are not through with the case! If a President of the Church, with unified authority-support, announced a revelation from God, he would be obligated by the pattern to present the same to the Church for common-consent acceptance. In doing so it would be dishonest to label it as "from God" if it were not from God. It would also be unfair to the people for the President not to label it if it was to be accepted as a revelation. Nowhere does the Doctrine and Covenants authorize the general authorities to play guessing games with the people. On the contrary we are told that the Lord admires and requires, as a test of truth, plainness, simplicity, and understandableness. So, if a revelation from the Lord was presented with such support, there is no doubt but that the people would accept it. No such formal matters have been presented to the Church in many years. The Doctrine and Covenants strictly enjoins us to distinguish revealed word from the opinions of men. The average member of the church applies this test to what he hears in general and stake conference. Opinions, as Plato pointed out in the Meno, may produce the same result as truth when the opinions are right.

The operations of common consent might possibly be enhanced at conferences when, in the absence of direct revelation from God, important matters to be presented were presented as motions based on much deliberation and prayer, and with the united approval of the authorities making the motion. Then a vote of confidence to sustain the proposition could be made, which would be recorded and made official in harmony with the law of the Church. Usually all such suggestions do come with united support. It always helps "consent" if they were labeled as such. Besides, in the final analysis, each man will still have to make up his own mind as to whether or not he conforms to "counsel," to a sustained proposition, or to a revelation. Individual testimony and salvation remain fundamental in the gospel plan.

Like everything else granted to us, we can probably make the law of common consent more real, more effective, and a greater power for good right in our own back yard. A working model of Christian society will be of inestimable value in modern society.