

AM I STILL A MEMBER OF CHRIST'S CHURCH IN HEAVEN?

by Max B. Skousen

In the Church, we honor the priesthood because, as the Lord told Peter,

I will give unto thee the *keys of the kingdom of heaven* and whatsoever thou shalt *bind* on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt *loose* on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19)

This power to bind and loose in heaven as well as on earth has always been a substantial burden of responsibility on the shoulders of those holding the priesthood for if this power is improperly handled, it can become a two-edged sword which cuts both ways.

It is for this reason that modern revelation spelled out in great detail how a Disciplinary Council, as it is now called, must be conducted. In Section 102 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a total of 25 verses spell out the exact procedure so that the hearings will be even-handed in loving equity and justice. (D&C 102:12-33) In contrast to our Constitutional judicial system, it is made clear that the High Council does not sit as a jury which holds the authority to make the final decision. Their position is one of advice and consent. It is the Stake President who is responsible for the decision and the council's responsibility is to support him in that decision. As the revelation states:

The president shall give a decision according to the understanding which he shall have of the case, and call upon the twelve councilors to sanction the same by their vote. (D&C 102:19)

If some council members disagree, they may ask for further consideration, but after more discussion, whatever the final decision of the Stake President may be, they are all to "sanction" that decision. An appeal by a dissatisfied defendant is to go ultimately to the First Presidency. Only in very rare occasions, of course, has a decision been reversed.

I have had two experiences with an invitation to appear before a Disciplinary Council, one in 1970 and one in 1996. Both were on the question of my apostasy. With the first, I totally agreed, because at that time I had discovered enough skeletons in our historical closet to convince me that Joseph Smith was not what he thought he was.

Then seven years later, the Lord gave me a surprising and thrilling two hour experience in which I was shown that His hand was in all of it and what the future of the Church would be as the Brethren take the Church through a spiritual transformation. With my testimony restored 1,000%, I was finally allowed to rejoin the Church and joyfully choose to come under authority. So the first challenge for apostasy was accurate at the time and was subsequently wonderfully healed.

The second time, although I totally disagreed that I was now an apostate, which was in 1996, I saw the hand of the Lord working with both my Stake President and myself. I could see that he was doing what he felt in his heart the Lord wanted him to do, but it was obvious to me that in doing so, he was exercising unrighteous dominion as defined in the 121st Section of the Doctrine and Covenants. If that is true, as I believe it is, then the heavens would have "withdrawn themselves" from that act, and thus, it would not be binding in heaven even though it would be binding on the records of the Church here on earth.

This distinction between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven is very important since we recognize that the ordinances of the priesthood, from baptism, to laying on of hands for the gift of Holy Ghost, to the washing and anointing, endowment and eternal marriage, are annulled when one is excommunicated. Thus, such an event would have extreme consequences for the eternities to come. Imagine the heavy responsibility of a Stake President who is required to make such a decision. In turn, one can realize the effect on those accused if they feel deep in their hearts that such a decision is not justified. They could easily become disillusioned and bitter, but they need not do so.

The Lord has given clear information by which they do not have to worry about misjudgment in the least. As stated above, it is included in the revelation given to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail and is found

in the 121st Section of the Doctrine and Covenants.

I covered this whole subject in detail in my little 32 page booklet, *Let Them Govern Themselves*, in which I included three chapters. The first chapter deals with the question of whether or not the Church is under the Lord's condemnation. I quote President Ezra Taft Benson, who is no longer a living prophet, and Dallin Oaks, who is a living prophet, to show that, in both of their opinions, the Lord's condemnation announced in the Revelation on Priesthood, Section 84, Verses 54 to 59, has not been removed.

In contrast, most of the Brethren seem to believe that, even if it is true, it is counter-productive to dwell on the subject. I agree that it ordinarily does little good to emphasize the negative if we don't know how to correct the problem. However, at the same time, there should be no rejection or condemnation for those who remind us that, even so, our being under God's condemnation is an important fact that should be studiously addressed, as President Benson pled, to find ways to solve it so that each child of Zion and the Church can receive a *blessing hitherto unknown*. The second section of my book deals with a candid talk by President Boyd K. Packer, in which he stressed that, as a Church, we have been guilty of over-regimenting the *spiritual lives of the Saints*. As he said:

In recent years we might be compared to a team of doctors issuing prescriptions to cure or to immunize our members against *spiritual diseases*... It is time...to change our mind-set and realize that a reduction of and a secession from that constant programming must be accomplished. The hardest ailment to treat is a *virtue carried to the extreme*... "Teach them correct principles," the prophet said, "and then LET," let - a big word, "them govern themselves." Our members *should not*, according to the scriptures, need to be *commanded in all things*...

I quickly admit that there are risks involved when we simplify instructions or loosen up on regimentation. It is no different than what we face when our own children begin to mature and venture out into the world. Wise parents loosen the apron strings and help children to leave the nest to start anew the cycle of mortal life... If we indulge them too much, or make them too dependent, we weaken them morally, then they will be compelled by nature itself to find the wrong way. (Special Regional Representative Seminar, Friday, March 30, 1990, underlining in the original transcript, italics added.)

The third section of my booklet was an analysis of the Lord's warning to the priesthood about "unrighteous dominion." The Lord has cautioned those who are called to positions of authority to be careful how they use the "big stick" of eternal consequences in their power to loose on earth and it will be loosed in heaven. So the Lord warns:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only be persuasion [rather than outright commanding, with threat of excommunication] by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned... Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproofed... (D&C 121:40-41)

Joseph Smith joined the Lord in acknowledging that such restraint is easily and often forgotten when men are given such awesome authority. He states:

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and the disposition of *almost all men*, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to *exercise unrighteous dominion*. Hence many are called, but *few are chosen*. (D&C 121:39-40)

So what is unrighteous dominion which can so easily beset those who are given even a little authority? The Lord explains very clearly in these words:

The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. That they may be conferred upon us, it is true, but when we...exercise *control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness*, behold, the *heavens withdraw themselves*; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man

[i.e., in that act]. (D&C 121:36-37)

According to these instructions, if my Stake President was exercising unrighteous dominion, then the heavens would not have sanctioned his act of excommunication and I would still be a full member, with all blessings, sealings and ordinances in tact, on the records of the Lord's Church in heaven. But was he?

Well, first of all, I want to make it clear that I certainly detected no absence of love from this good man. For three years, he had been a friendly counselor. When he first became our Stake President in 1994, I gave him a copy of my book, *A Blessing Hitherto Unknown, Book I, Looking Beyond the Mark*. He promised to read it. A month later, I met with him at my request and he confessed that he had not been able to read my book. President Melvin D. Knott, an engineer by profession, said that every time he picked the book up, he would be filled with darkness and had to lay the book down. From those experiences, he said that he knew it was an apostate book. The main reason, he said, is that he had a personal testimony, confirmed by those presiding over him, that the *Church was not under condemnation*. As I tried to comment, he stopped me and insisted that as my Stake President, the Lord had revealed to him that my book was not of God. He did not want me to try to discuss it further. At the time, his only action was to ask for my temple recommend, which I willingly surrendered to him. He did not tell me that I must stop distributing the book nor cease giving trainings involving members of the Church where I taught, as explained in my book, how to move from the tree of knowledge to the tree of life.

A year later, he called me in to tell me that I was to no longer do workshops where I taught the gospel in any way, even if I were to do them for free, which I had been doing. His objection was that I was not under direct priesthood control, and the Church cannot tolerate that because, whether I abused it or not, others might see my example and do so. I accepted his instructions and stopped doing any gospel oriented trainings or firesides. Then a year after that, he told me that I must also stop distributing my book. I was shocked but agreed. As one will note, I make it very clear on the back of the title page, that "the views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Church at this time." As I emphasize throughout the book, as I quote continually from the scriptures, that these are my own insights as I have continued to seek for greater fulfillment of my commitment to the Lord.

I challenge anyone to show me where anything I have written in *Book I* or the subsequent volume, *Book II*, is actually apostate. Many can and have disagreed with my views, but since I totally support those presiding over the Church in doing and teaching exactly what they are, which is to keep emphasizing the preparatory gospel which comes from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is it apostate to remind ourselves that the Lord says we "say and do not do" what we say? But I found it very easy to follow President Knott's commands. After all, I had chosen to come back into the Church and found joy in being under authority. Therefore, although I was not allowed to regain my temple recommend, there was no question about my remaining a member of the Church as long as I obeyed his restrictions, and for two and a half years, I had continued to peacefully accept the increasing limitations upon my efforts to teach repentance as I understood it.

Then half a year after I was commanded to stop distributing *Book I, Looking Beyond the Mark*, I began to realize that although the Church as a whole must stay with the milk gospel, there are many who have already moved into more direct guidance by what they feel is the Holy Ghost and are finding themselves ostracized by the more conservative members and officials. Many of these inspired people are confused. Many are receiving inspiration, even direct revelations, which make them doubt the leadership of the Church. I wanted to write the other three books in *The Blessing Hitherto Unknown* series, particularly *Book II*, to help those people regain their confidence in our Church leaders and the way the Lord is slowly but surely taking the members to a greater understanding of grace. *Book II, Finding the Mark*, has to do with how we are to grow the *tree of life in our hearts*, as Alma explained in his 32nd chapter. Since the tree of life, as Nephi discovered, represents the love of God, i.e., the pure love of Christ, which can be shed into our hearts, and this love casts out all fear, it is directly opposed to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, called the preparatory gospel, which is built upon fear of not earning full exaltation.

So I could see that if I wanted to talk and write to people about receiving Christ's greatest gift, the fruit of the tree of life, that I should not do so under the direct authority of those who were committed and supported by the Lord in teaching the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In other words, I should not be under their authority or they would be responsible for teachings which were in opposition to the lesser law. I could see how the Lord does bless those who are teaching on either level.

So, in November, 1996, I went back to President Knott and informed him that I was going to start distributing my *Book I* again and start giving workshops, informing him that it was my opinion that for him to restrict me from doing so was exercising unrighteous control, dominion and compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, both to me and those who wanted to hear or read what I had to say. Understandably, he disagreed and set up a Disciplinary Council. I assured him that I knew he was acting in love and that I was not trying to cause contention, but merely declaring my views about the deeper levels of the gospel. He accepted my offer not to appear and assured me that he would let them know that, although I disagreed, I was not bitter in any way. The simple truth was that I could see that if I were to teach the Tree of Life Gospel, I needed to step "just outside the gate" of the preparatory, Tree of Knowledge Gospel.

Some time later I noticed an interesting statement given to Isaiah by the Lord in which the Lord spoke of "this people" to whom He was going to do a "marvelous work and a wonder" in the last days when He would bring forth a book that would be given to one who is unlearned. These words of the Lord are of such importance that Nephi quoted them when he was warning the Church in the last days about saying, **"All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well."** (Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi Chapters 27-28) Well, in Nephi's quotation from Isaiah, the Lord warns of those in this day who abuse their callings, as the priests in Israel were prone to do in his day. Here are the words:

The scorner is consumed, and all that look for iniquity are cut off. And they that make A MAN AN OFFENDER FOR A WORD, AND LAY A SNARE FOR HIM THAT REPROVETH IN THE GATE, AND TURN ASIDE THE JUST FOR A THING OF NAUGHT. (2 Nephi 27:31-32)

We all remember, in Lehi's vision, the Israelites who, as the Church of God, were in the great and spacious building, pointing their fingers of scorn at those who were partaking of the fruit of the tree of life. As I show in *Book I*, since we as a Church are still under condemnation because of our vanity and unbelief, and the great building represents the pride of men, then it is not very likely that we, as a people, are the ones being mocked for being over at the tree of life. But let me emphasize, that just as Israel's mission was to be proud enough so that they would crucify the Savior, so we are being prepared in our day to eventually come under rebuke and chastisement, for as the Lord said,

"My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion." (D&C 121:31)

In other words, I see everything working out right on schedule, including what my Stake President is doing and what I am doing, for a wonderful thing happens to our point of view when we truly discover the hand of God IN ALL THINGS!

So each of us must decide which position to take. One way is to join those who make others **"an offender for a word,"** as was done to even real prophets, such as Lehi, Jeremiah, Samuel the Lamanite and especially Christ, none of whom had the Lord's ecclesiastical authority but faced severe condemnation by those who did. The other position is to see such individuals as a possible **"reprover in the gate,"** one who is willing to remind us that we often fail to walk the way we talk, to **"not only say, but to do"** what we say. (Matthew 23:2-3)

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