The Restoration and History: New Testament Christianity

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THE RESTORATION MOVEMENTS have tended to elevate historical claims to the level of theological dogma. But in our defense of historical beliefs we have often denied the reality of historical process by asserting that ideas, institutions, social relationships, and even written texts drop out of a timeless heaven rather than emerging from the historical process of human struggle. The very term, *restoration*, points to one major expression of this ahistorical tendency: the claim that the "true church" consists of an eternal (nonhistorical) priesthood structure and authority. We claim that the historical Jesus established this structure in New Testament Christianity, and that it was restored to earth by Joseph Smith, Jr., just as it was in the beginning, free of the taint of human, historical process.

We cannot examine extrahistorical realities, if there be such. But we can ask whether the New Testament justifies the historical claim that Jesus established a priesthood structure and authority similar to one which now exists in one or more of the Restoration churches. The answer, in my opinion, is no, on the grounds that Jesus apparently established no priesthood structure at all.

When we turn to the New Testament to examine such a claim, it must be understood that we have no documents at all written by Jesus and none by any of his original disciples. All of the texts attributed to the Twelve are probably pseudonymous and of late date. Further, there is compelling evidence that several letters attributed to Paul — definitely 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus and probably Colossians and Ephesians — are pseudonymous and come from at least the third generation of Christianity. The Gospel of Mark is commonly dated about A.D. 70 and the other Gospels between A.D. 80–95. Thus we must begin with the letters of Paul if we are looking for the earliest reliable informa-

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tion. What information we do have, however, is overwhelmingly against the traditional Mormon view of early Christianity.

Because only a small portion of the evidence can be examined here, I will propose four basic claims about New Testament Christianity for which I believe the supporting evidence is compelling. Then I will suggest a rough summary of how the early Christian communities may have moved from a loosely knit ecclesia to the early stages of becoming an institution, and discuss some implications of this for the LDS churches. The main argument of this paper presents a standard view held among many New Testament scholars, but what is well known in one community may be news to another. Thus I share it for its relevance to the LDS communities and suggest further readings for those interested in pursuing the topic further.

Claim One: Twenty years after the crucifixion, the Jerusalem church was still predominantly, perhaps entirely, Jewish.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, written about A.D. 53–54, is the earliest document we have which gives concrete information about the nature of the community of disciples in Jerusalem under its original leaders. Perhaps the most passionate text of the New Testament, it contains Paul's own wrathful account of his conflicts with "James, Cephas [Peter] and John, who were reputed to be pillars" (2:9; all New Testament quotations are from the Revised Standard Version).

Of central importance for us is the clear fact that James, Peter, and John were insisting that gentiles had to be circumcised and obey the Mosaic law — had to become Jews — to be accepted as disciples of Jesus. Paul was by this time preaching a different gospel. His own conversion experience had led him to conclude that gentiles could become Christians without becoming circumcised Jews. The conflict had immediate impact. Paul had already made converts among the gentiles. What would happen to these new members if the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem rejected them?

Hoping to solve this problem, Paul traveled to Jerusalem and "laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preached among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (2:2). He thought his diplomacy successful, for James, Peter, and John "gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (2:9). What happened in Jerusalem to squash this brief vision of ecumenism is lost to us, but

> when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, for he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity (2:11–13).

We can imagine Paul feeling abandoned and even betrayed, yet fighting fiercely in his letters to preserve his mission. We need not belabor the details of the letter further to identify a virtually certain bit of historical data: twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the leading disciples in Jerusalem were still Jews, and their perspective dominated the community of disciples there.

What could have led even Barnabas, Paul's closest companion, to abandon Paul and his gospel of grace? The reasons should be obvious. Jesus was a Jew, and so were all of the original "pillars." There is no reason to doubt that they all lived according to Mosaic law, including circumcision, obedience to dietary laws, celebration of Jewish holidays like Passover, and observance of the Sabbath. They worshipped in synagogues and in the temple. Jesus is portrayed not as rejecting the Mosaic law but as engaging with others in interpreting it. We are told that he sought to cleanse the temple, not to reject it. In general, there is every indication that Jesus criticized Judaism, its priesthood, and its law, not as an apostate standing outside them, but as a reformer standing within. We have no record of Jesus telling anyone not to be Jewish.

As Hans Conzelmann wrote in the *History of Primitive Christianity*, "The first Christians are Jews, without exception. For them this is not simply a fact, but a part of their conscious conviction. For them their faith is not a new religion which leads them away from the Jewish religion, but the confirmation of the promise to Israel" (1973, 37).

Claim Two. Early Christianity was dominated by the expectation that Jesus would return in the immediate future.

"The heart of the preaching of Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God," wrote Rudolph Bultmann, one of the major New Testament scholars of this century (1958, 11). The literature of the New Testament consistently presents Jesus as calling persons, not primarily to belief in doctrines, rituals, or ecclesiastical authority, but rather to decision — for or against the kingdom (or reign) of God.

Bultmann expressed what is a very widely held consensus of New Testament scholars in the following description of Jesus' teaching: "God will suddenly put an end to the world and to history . . . Jesus expected that this would take place soon, in the immediate future" (1958, 12–13). We cannot be certain what Jesus said, but there is no doubt that a number of New Testament texts support Bultmann's view.

> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14–15).
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> And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1).
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> But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.
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> From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place (Mark 13:24–30).
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> These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' . . . I say unto you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of man comes (Matthew 10:5–7, 23b).

Of course, this is a picture of Jesus presented by the authors of Mark and Matthew and written long after Jesus' death. For an earlier look at the thought of the church we must go to Paul's letters. Here we also find abundant evidence that Paul expected the world to end and Jesus to return in the near future — certainly during his own lifetime.

In his earliest extant letter, 1 Thessalonians, written about A.D. 50, Paul confronted the problem that some Christians in Thessalonica had died, an event apparently unexpected by the disciples there. Like Paul, they had expected the return of Jesus so soon that death would not be a problem. Notice Paul's use of "we" as he sought to reassure them:

> But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. . . . For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:13–17).

The same theme is sounded in the familiar words of 1 Corinthians:

> Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed (1 Cor. 15:51–52).
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> The appointed time has grown very short; from now on let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29–31; see also 1 Thess. 1:9–10; 2:19; 3:11–13; 1 Cor. 1:7; 10:11; 16:22; Phil. 3:20–21; 4:5; Rom. 13:11–13; 1 Peter 4:7; and James 5:7–8).

Virtually every New Testament author struggled with this expectation in some way or another. Apart from the hints of imminent expectation in 6:2 of Luke, its author tried to put the kingdom far off in the future and to emphasize the need to apply Christian values in this world. Notice, for example, that Luke drops Mark's opening proclamation that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15) and replaces it with Luke 4:18–19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor." Also, Luke has moved Mark 1:15 to the apocalyptic discourse and has put it into the mouth of the false prophets! "And he said, 'Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, "I am he!" and "The time is at hand!" Do not go after them'" (Luke 21:8). The Gospel of John, though heavily edited, also includes an effort to set aside concern for a return of Jesus (3:16–19; 4:23; 5:21–24; 12:31–2; 17:1–3). But the expectation persisted. It is evident throughout the book of Revelation, which opens with the words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servant what must soon take place; . . . for the hour is near." The closing chapter is equally

clear: God "has sent his angel to show his servant what must soon take place." "And behold, I am coming soon . . . for the time is near. Behold, I am coming soon. . . . I, Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches" (Rev. 22:6, 7, 10, 11, 16). Such passages abound in the New Testament literature. It is obvious why Bultmann concluded: "The eschatological expectation and hope is the core of the New Testament preaching throughout" (1958, 11–12).

Bultmann's stance is representative of a standard position of responsible biblical scholars. The diversity and complexity of the ways in which various New Testament authors struggle with the failure of Jesus to return only reinforce the evidence that this expectation of his imminent return permeated early Christianity. As Ernst Käsemann insists:

> We can and must determine the various phases of earliest Christian history by means of the original imminent expectation of the parousia [second coming], its modifications and its final extinction (1969, 236–7). I can acknowledge as earliest Christianity only that which still has its focus in an eschatology determined by the original imminent expectation in its changing forms (1969, n. 1, 236–37).

Claim Three: Early Christian ministry was charismatic rather than institutional.

It should be clear by now that the earliest disciples were Jews who were responding to the call of one whom they believed to be the Messiah and whom they expected to return soon to usher in the Kingdom of God. As Jews they continued to worship within Judaism, including the observance of sacrifices conducted by the temple priesthood. But as followers of Jesus they had no separate organization and certainly no separate priesthood. While the early Jerusalem community eventually faded into obscurity (perhaps dispersed or killed in the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in A.D. 70), Christianity survived because Paul and others transplanted it into the larger gentile world. These gentile Christians had no direct allegiance to Judaism or its priesthood, and thus seem to have formed their local groups without using the framework of a hierarchical priesthood structure.

One of the New Testament words for these groups, which we translate, perhaps misleadingly, as "church," is *ecclesia.* Its Greek origin is significant. When an official entered a city to make a decree, those who gathered to hear the proclamation were called the ecclesia — the "called-out" or the "assembled." The New Testament writers adopted and transformed this word to refer to those who were called out by the Lord Christ and who had responded to his word. As a self-designation, "ecclesia" reveals much about their self-understanding. Like its secular counterpart, the ecclesia of Saints was essentially structureless apart from the natural leadership of those who had been closest to Jesus. It had no priesthood, no formal offices. The Saints were united by their common awareness of having been called out by Christ, whose proclamation they continued in their own work of ministering to each other and preaching, both to themselves and others. Through the letters of Paul we are able to discern something of the theology and practice by which ministry and leadership were maintained in the structureless ecclesia.

Ernst Käsemann writes of the Apostle Paul, "The Apostle's theory of order is not a static one, resting on offices, institutions, ranks and dignities; in his view authority resides only within the concrete act of ministry as it occurs" (1964, 83). The letters of Paul provide clear evidence of this charismatic view of ministry. Paul saw every Christian as having received gifts from God to be used for the community. He obviously made no distinctions between what we might call natural versus spiritual gifts. In Paul's mind every good ability a person has is spiritual because it comes from God:

> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4–6).

Paul then lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, and tongues as some of the gifts of the spirit. After presenting his famous analogy of the body, he continues in 12:28 by saying:

> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, then helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.

Paul then reminds us that while not all may have these particular gifts, we should all seek the higher gifts. And what is the highest gift of all? Paul tells us in his magnificent chapter 13: "The greatest of these is love."

It has been common for apologists in the LDS and RLDS movements to cite the first half of 1 Corinthians 12:28 to show that the early church contained the offices of apostle, prophets, and teacher as in modern LDS churches. But the context shows this to be the worst kind of proof-texting. Paul was not talking about offices at all, but about various gifts of interpersonal service which were manifested in the community.[1] Note that the list includes helpers, administrators, and speakers in tongues. And compare this with the similar list in Romans 12:4–8 where Paul includes acts of generosity and mercy among the spiritual gifts which rank with prophecy and teaching:

> For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

There is no justification here for assuming that these are formal offices which were believed to constitute the nature of the church. It was *ministry*, the will-

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[1] I have not included Ephesians 4:11–14 here because I am personally convinced that it was not written by Paul, but by "Deutero-Paul" and should be dated somewhere between Paul and the Pastoral Epistles. However, I do not see that this text is really very helpful for our purposes. It certainly says nothing which would significantly challenge my claims, and it could very well be seen as simply another example of the already-given lists. Notice also, that Ephesians 2:20 supplies no real support for the standard LDS position. This passage is entirely consistent with what I have said elsewhere about the state of the churches around the early second century A.D.
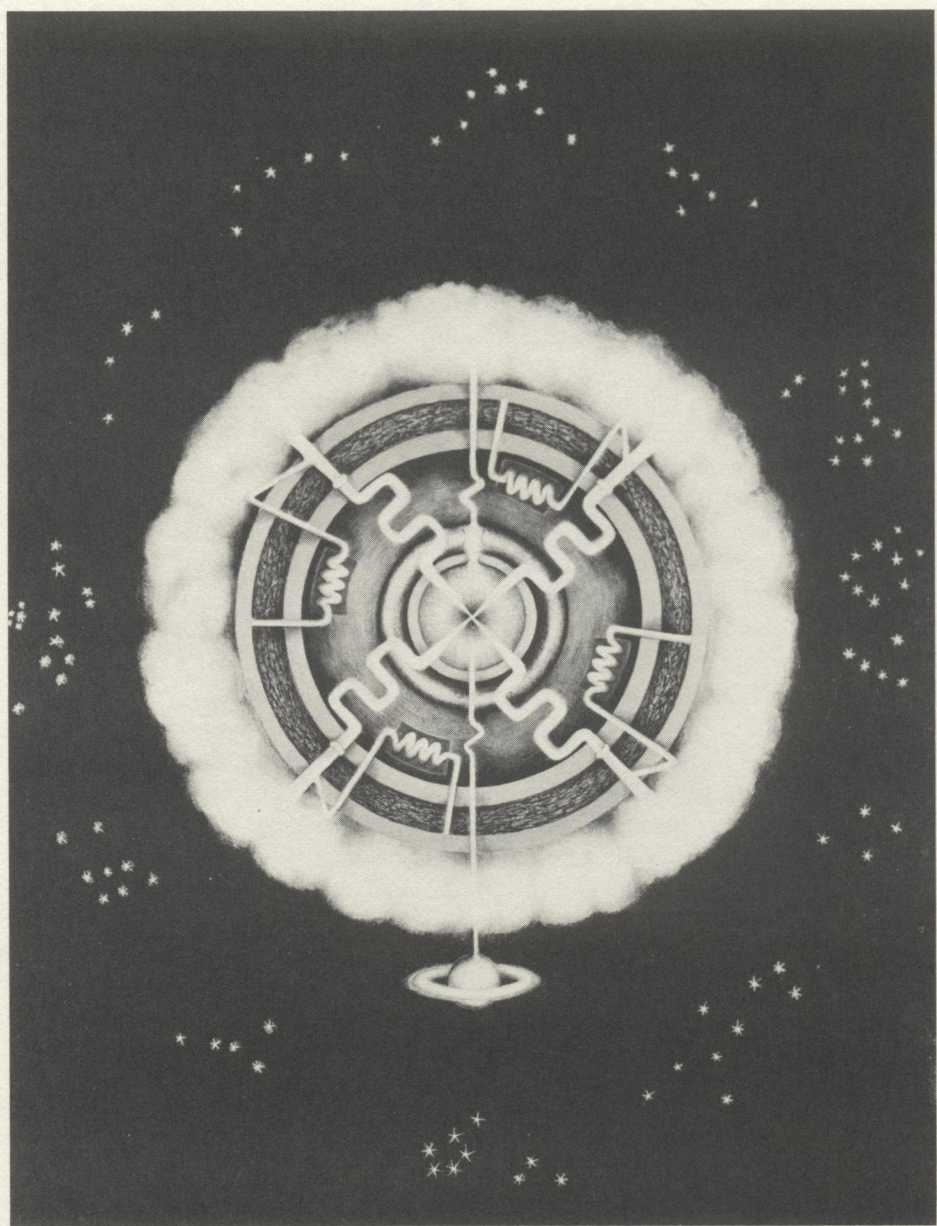
ingness to serve others, which constituted the ecclesia, not institutional offices.

Furthermore, the Gospels and the book of Acts also seem to describe an office-free group life. The Gospels give no indication that Jesus established a church structure apart from Judaism. Nor does the book of Acts give any hint that the post-crucifixion disciples had any interest in or knowledge of a complex hierarchy of priesthood offices. Acts only confirms what we already expected on the basis of Galatians. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers . . . Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts (2:42–46).

Of course, the Gospels and Acts are less reliable as sources about the events they describe than they are as indicators of how their authors understood those events. Thus what they seem to be telling us is that these authors, writing between about A.D. 70 and 95, did not know any tradition of Jesus establishing a priesthood structure and also did not themselves think of the church as having any ecclesiastical offices of theological significance. If they had, they very probably would have presented Jesus as having instituted those offices.

Certainly I would not argue that the New Testament church never developed any structure. Indeed, it seems quite clear that while no specific structure was imposed by Jesus, structure did develop — but gradually, in the historical lives of the various congregations. This brings me to my fourth claim.

Claim Four: Gradually, Christian congregations began to institutionalize varying combinations of offices under three names: *Episkopos* (overseer, or bishop), *Diakonos* (servant, or deacon), and *Presbuteros* (elder).

Anyone who has come to recognize the growth and healing which comes through the love of family and friends knows that there can be ministry without priesthood. Common human experience also shows that there can be leadership without formal structure. Just as Paul speaks of preachers, teachers, and healers, he also speaks of helpers and administrators (1 Cor. 12:28). It may be in the same sense that he refers to Phoebe as a *diakonos* (servant) and sends greetings to the *diakonoi* and *episkopoi* (overseers) in Philippia (Phil. 1:1). The general consensus of scholars regarding these references is expressed by Conzelmann (1973, 106–7) in his study of primitive Christianity: "As persons of special position Paul names bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Of course the bishop is not yet the monarchical priestly church leader of a later time; this is already shown by the plurality of 'bishops' in a congregation. . . . There was not yet any authority of office, but only authority of service" (See also Käsemann 1964, 81–83). Consider, in support of this, Paul's remark in 1 Corinthians 16:15–16 regarding the household of Stephanas: "They have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer." Here, as always, Paul sees authority residing in the concrete act of ministry.

But if neither the earliest disciples in Jerusalem nor the Saints in Paul's churches had any Christian priesthood structure or interest in one, how did it develop? Early Christian priesthood developed because the kingdom did not come, because history and its forces continued to surround the early ecclesia.

As Bultmann observed: "No human society can have permanence in history without regulations. Hence, it is self-explanatory that regulations gradually developed in the primitive Christian congregations" (1955, 2:95).

Specifically, there appear to be two major reasons why leadership positions crystallized as priesthood offices. First, there were practical concerns of daily community life, as suggested in Acts 6. When they met for table fellowship, the food had to be distributed, tables had to be set and cleared, and other basic jobs had to be done. While these could be handled as needed for a while, it gradually became more efficient to assign these tasks to people who were willing to handle them over a long term. The tasks of overseeing these practical jobs slowly formalized into organized structures and identifiable positions. At first, such positions had no religious significance for the churches; they simply helped to keep things going. But they slowly acquired theological importance as they merged with the positions developed to meet the second set of problems.

Theological disputes and social conflicts, often creating schisms, were almost inevitable in the ecclesia. With so many people — many of whom traveled from city to city — preaching and teaching divergent, if not contradictory, understandings of the gospel and different views of the morality implied by the gospel, the unity of the churches was in constant jeopardy. Paul's passionate battle with the leadership in Jerusalem is one striking example of this. But after the dispersion of that special congregation there was no clear touchstone or locus of authority to whom people could appeal for definitions of the orthodox faith. Surrounded by a hostile world, the early Christian churches had to find some way to overcome these disputes and to retain the unity of the Body of Christ.

They seem to have used a two-fold process. First, charismatic preachers, prophets, and leaders whose views were judged divisive (according to the prevailing view of the local church) had to be excluded. Second, persons with "sound" views and community respect had to be given authority and office to preach and discipline regardless of whether they had the "gifts" of preaching and leading. As service in practical matters merged with leadership in theological and moral discipline, the concept and structures of priesthood began to emerge in early Christianity.

It is not until the second century A.D., however, that we have textual evidence for deacons and bishops as formal officers. Although 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus were written in Paul's name, there is virtually universal agreement among non-fundamentalist scholars that they were not written until long after his death — possibly as late as A.D. 135. The author of these letters describes the qualifications needed by one who aspires to be a bishop or deacon. Notice, however, that 1 Timothy 5:9–14 also gives similar qualifications for a select group of widows who are to be "enrolled" — apparently as congregational workers.

One of the most striking evidences of the two-fold process of restricting charismatics while developing local officers is found in a document called the Didache, written in the early second century. The author expresses respect for apostles (traveling preachers) and for prophets but also shows considerable

suspicion regarding them: "Now about apostles and prophets: Act in line with the gospel precepts. Welcome every apostle on arriving, as if he were the Lord. But he must not stay beyond one day. . . . If he stays three days, he is a false prophet. . . . If he asks for money he is a false prophet" (Richardson 1970, 176).

Along with his cautions about the charismatic apostles and prophets, the author of the Didache encourages the congregations to choose local leaders who can provide the same ministry but whose character and orthodoxy can be known in advance. "You must, then, elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are a credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful and well tried. For their ministry to you is identical with that of the prophets and teachers. You must not, therefore, despise them, for along with the prophets and teachers they enjoy a place of honor among you" (Richardson 1970, 178).

Obviously, the author did not see apostles or prophets as the highest officers in a priesthood hierarchy governing all of Christendom. Indeed, the evidence is clear that different Christian congregations were developing their own structures of leadership at different paces and in different ways. But in most places, the churches still did not think of themselves as constituted by their offices.

The earliest extant statement of the view that certain offices are essential to the church is found in the letters of Ignatius, dated about A.D. 110–117. Ignatius constantly insisted upon the need for members to be obedient to their bishops, presbyters, and deacons. He wrote, for example:

> Let the bishop reside in God's place, and the presbyters take the place of the apostolic council, and let the deacons (my special favorites) be entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ (Richardson 1970, 95).
>
> Flee from schism as the source of mischief. You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would God's law. Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval (Richardson 1970, 115).

Most important of all, however, is Ignatius' clear declaration: "You cannot have a church without these [offices]" (Richardson 1970, 99). In contrast to the earlier texts studied above, Ignatius' insistence is profoundly, perhaps heretically, new, for it is a clear rejection of the free charismatic spirit of the Pauline ecclesia.

Some commentators have observed that the very vehemence with which these authors insist upon the dominance of the hierarchy may make us suspicious. As one writer suggests, Ignatius "describes less an established order than one which he will move heaven and earth to establish" (Gealy 1955, 11:346). But whether this institutional situation be fact or hope, Ignatius has expressed what is found *nowhere* in the literature of the New Testament — a view of the church as dependent upon priesthood offices.

Although this summary oversimplifies a complicated process, my real concern is not with the details of the process. I simply want to point out that the development of institutional priesthood offices was the result of a long and natural historical process.

For this very reason the concept of a "restoration of the New Testament church" has little meaning if it is understood to refer to specific offices, structures, and doctrines. At what point in its development will we arbitrarily break in and label it the *true* New Testament church? The more highly structured it is, the more easily we can define and reconstruct it, but the further it is from its original nature. The closer we come to its "calling out" the more impossible it becomes to identify what it is we are supposed to restore. Thus it seems clear that one of the major errors in Restoration thinking is the belief in a given priesthood structure and authority, ordered by the historical Jesus, which could be lost and then restored. This belief, in my opinion, contradicts the clear sense of the New Testament and reflects ahistorical thinking.

Though I am not a social historian, it seems obvious that there is nothing unique in the general process by which the ecclesia of early Christianity became an institution. It must surely be common for groups to develop structure, doctrine, and a sense of institutional identity only after gathering together. The movement founded by Joseph Smith, Jr., awaits a historian who will examine its emergence along these lines.

Although I am not qualified to say how accurately they reflect the actual process, early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants seem to suggest the general outline of a movement from ecclesia to institution. In July or August of 1828, Joseph presented as revelation what stands, so far as I know, as the first definition of the church in LDS scripture: "Behold, this is my doctrine: whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church; whosoever declareth more or less than this, the same is not of me, but is against me; therefore, he is not of my church" (D&C, LDS 10:67–8; RLDS 3:16). For such an ecclesia, only a priesthood of all believers would be appropriate: "Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day; therefore, if ye have desires to serve God, ye are called to the work . . . and faith, hope, charity, and love, with an eye single to the glory of God qualifies him for the work" (LDS 4; RLDS 4:1, Feb. 1829). And for such a group of missionaries — untrained, uncensored, unstructured — there would have to be only a simple, clear message: "Say nothing but repentance unto this generation" (LDS 6:9, RLDS 6:4b, April 1829).

If Joseph's 1841 history actually reflects some of his early experiences at revivals, it would be easy to see this emphasis on repentance as arising out of those experiences. He paints a picture of harmony existing when ministers from different denominations gather to preach the common theme of repentance. But he also writes of bitter conflict arising when those same preachers fall on the repentant souls with conflicting claims for doctrinal and ecclesiastical authority, with "priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and contest of opinions" (JS-H 1:6). If indeed such experiences shaped Joseph's thought, we can well imagine him seeking to transcend this unchristian division by insisting that true disciples limit

themselves to a fundamental message upon which all can agree and in which all can join in preaching.

In these and other early texts, there is a vision of an ecclesia with a priesthood of all believers, awaiting the return of Jesus to a repentant world. But Joseph's unstructured ecclesia did not last long. Almost immediately Joseph found it necessary to begin specifying who should preach and what they should say. Partly, I think because he shared the popular view that there was a "true" New Testament structure which could be restored, Joseph began formulating structures very quickly (see RLDS 10:8, 10; 16:4e, 5, 6d; 17. LDS 11:15–16, 21–22; 18:22, 27–32, 42; 20).

Whatever the details which emerge as historians study this process of institutionalization and the factors which shaped it, it would be helpful to remember the original definition of the church. An ecclesia which grows very large cannot long exist with any stable sense of identity, but those early texts suggest an approach to the nature of discipleship and ministry which ought to keep us suspicious of "eternal" priesthood structures and open to a more fluid community and ministry.

To the extent that we hide from reality we are asking for trouble. One basic reality is that persons, texts, communities, and institutions are all creatures of history. We are surely better off when we recognize that we live and move and have our being, values, and commitments in history.

The tremendous harm which can be done by an anti-historical perspective was well illustrated at the 1984 RLDS conference in the debate over the ordination of women. No one argued that women are incapable of being effective ministers. The only argument offered on the conference floor against the ordination of women was pseudo-historical: the eternal plan does not include the ordination of women. The evidence offered for this claim was simple: they did not ordain women in the city of Enoch, in Ancient America, or in New Testament Christianity, so why should we? Put simply, the argument denied the reality of the historical process, a denial founded in the concept of Restoration as the recovery of an eternal and unchanging priesthood structure and authority.

The RLDS Presidency was able to make the move to ordain women because they have substantially abandoned this anti-historical claim and have come to recognize the historicity of persons, texts, and institutions. While editing a condensed form of this essay for the *Saints' Herald* (March and April 1985), the First Presidency inserted a comment which ultimately appeared in the article as follows:

> In recent years, for example, church leaders have been led to reinterpret *restoration* as a principle for application in all periods of the church's history, rather than as a claim about only one period of church history. "Restoration" now suggests to many church members that God was not only "in Christ reconciling the world to himself," but also in the body of Christ, continuing that ministry of restoring humanity to God. Thus the work of restoration continues in individual lives, in the church as a whole, and ultimately in society (Mesle 1985, 13–14).

This understanding of "Restoration" as an ongoing redemptive process is universal in its scope and realistic in its historical implications. Reinterpret-

ing, perhaps remythologizing, the symbol of "Restoration" dramatically demonstrates the effort of the Presidency to help the membership reconceive the nature and mission of the church.

An alternative reinterpretation of "Restoration" might try to build directly on the past error. Frankly confessing our anti-historical idolatry of priesthood structures, we might redeem the mistake by drawing forth a lesson. Our study of early Christianity may help us to understand the compelling historical reasons why communities adopt structure. The struggles of early Christianity, compared and contrasted with our own, may help us to see the inevitable tension between creative freedom and effective structure. A freely flowing ecclesia has difficulty sustaining identity and direction as it grows in size, and it may also have difficulty influencing the larger society in some vital respects. Emerging structures can help to solve these problems, but may stifle the free development and exercise of individual gifts and the ability of the community to respond to new insights and needs. Perhaps we could speak of a "restoration principle" which would call us to constantly seek to restore that dynamic and elusive balance between freedom and effective structure.

We may, of course, decide to abandon the symbol of restoration altogether. Provided that we do not abandon its lessons, I prefer this approach. In any case, I am confident that a fresh reading of the New Testament, especially of Paul, can give us valuable and exciting visions for freeing ourselves to discover and exercise more adequately the gifts of every person.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

The list below represents a fairly broad spectrum of New Testament scholarship which deals with one or more of the four claims I made. I do not claim that each text supports me on each point and certainly not that they agree on all vital issues. However, they will provide greater information about New Testament Christianity, and I believe all of them would agree that Jesus did not establish a clearly structured organization that could be "restored."

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