

18 A Personal Responsibility

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Within the Church there is a dichotomy between individual responsibility and the responsibility of priesthood leadership. On the one hand, individuals must *act for themselves* to develop a relationship with Christ. On the other hand, the priesthood has a responsibility to make sure that everything, including authorized ordinances, are made available to assist the individual in their quest for such a relationship. Some members find it hard to separate the two responsibilities. There is a tendency by some who have not established a relationship with Christ to blame the priesthood leadership for failing to provide it.

A Mental Picture

Adam's fall initiated a physical and spiritual death; therefore all are going to die. Let's pretend for a moment that there is a "medicine" that would cure these two deaths:

"if they partake of the fruit, then a Savior shall be provided."

The patent holder of this life-saving medicine is the Savior. He wants all to have the chance to live again so He authorizes a corporation to market and distribute the medicine in order to better succeed in meeting the objective of saving lives. As always, opposing competition appears, offering knock-offs and other products to distract consumers. Ad campaigns are launched with spurious claims targeting the need for and efficacy of the medicine. Websites are created with opposing viewpoints and claims against the purity or quality of the real and pure product. The success of the corporation ultimately depends on educating the public so that they are willing to *give it a try*, placing enough trust in the claims of the corporation to experience for themselves that the medicine works as claimed. Once this has happened their *faith is in the product that saved their lives, not the corporation that administered it*, or the packaging it came in.

What's the purpose of a medicine bottle? The bottle protects the medicine, maintains its purity, and identifies what's in it and how to administer the medicine in the proper manner. The label might explain what the ingredients are, and the benefits of using it and how often to take it. Perhaps the label describes the physical symptoms that would necessitate the use of the medicine, providing warnings against taking it improperly.

If the Atonement and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the life-saving medicine, then Christ is the active ingredient; His Atonement and resurrection is the medicine that will save all from the terminal illness of physical and spiritual death. The instructions and proper dosing are repeated at the Sacrament table every Sunday: "Always remember Him, that you might have His spirit to be with you."

When an illness or disease is recognized, and the medicine prescribed, it is not the bottle that should be swallowed. Rather it is the active ingredients of the medicine that will save the patient.

If you want to become better spiritually, it is up to you to take the medicine—it cannot be forced. The priesthood organization is vital in the administration of this medicine, but it is still up to you to take what is being offered. To refuse it because one does not like the packaging would be foolish, since it's what's in the bottle that saves your life, not the bottle itself.

It's important to remember that the “medicine” presented and ordinances offered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Atonement. This relationship is the healing product that should be sought after. Many of the issues that are leading members to fall away are the result of faith and testimonies being placed in the vehicle of the administration (the bottle), and not in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (the medicine).

Everyone who seeks to progress spiritually through their faith and repentance must eventually become free from the blood and sins of the generation in which they live. This goal establishes the need for the prophet, apostles and other leaders of the priesthood to declare what those sins are. The goal of every prophet has been (and still is) to establish Zion. This can only be accomplished when individuals choose to become pure in heart. This goal has failed in every dispensation (except for the people of Enoch and Melchizedek) because those who should know better (i.e. those who have the gospel) have embraced spiritual Babylon. Zion is character! Zion cannot be established by a command or proclamation from the church office building, but *only* by the change of heart and character of the individual. If it takes a natural or economic disaster for people to have “all things in common”, you can be sure "Zion has fled" from the heart. The desire to live those laws must grow from the seeds of the love of God and man in the good ground of the heart and character, not from the necessity of survival. This may only be accomplished by the use of agency, never by force, be it destructive, economic, or by proclamation or command. If there is no choice but to be good then being good is not a choice. Righteousness cannot exist in this scenario, as Lehi and Alma explain.

The priesthood and church organization work for the individual. The church is organized expressly to facilitate a personal relationship between God and the individual.

The Church is organized for two reasons: to show our love of God and our love of our fellow man. *First*, one demonstrates their love of God through worship and a willingness to *sincerely* participate in the church and in the ordinances of the gospel (the sacrament, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, etc.), in an organized and orderly manner. [Records are kept of specific ordinances a member might participate in to prevent redundancy of performing those ordinances over again, as in relocations (see, D&C 20:64, 84; D&C 72:17, 25).] *Second*, the church is organized so that the individual may have an opportunity to serve other people. Service is the key to developing the character of loving God and loving our fellowman. This is the command of Christ to all believers, and upon these two commandments hangs all of the commandments, all of the law and all that the prophets have taught (and will teach) (Matthew 22:40). The church organization provides the opportunity to serve (minister to) others in the administration of the gospel, thereby helping the faithful develop the necessary character trait of charity, the pure love of Christ.

Everyone should participate in the ordinances necessary for salvation, which will simultaneously develop the traits of love and service. Home teaching and visiting teaching does not exist for the

sole purpose of taking care of others. The more important end result may well be the love that is developed for others in the commission of this service. These assignments provide the individual who is faithful in their home or visiting teaching an opportunity to develop a character required for exaltation: a character that will love all others. Developing this type of love is the real fruit of activity and obedience that can be developed through the gospel and church. No one has the authority to take away the right and privilege of learning to love others. Those who refuse to do their home and visiting teaching harm no one but themselves.

Remember: There is no “church” on the other side—there is only the gospel of Jesus Christ, which will still be taught and administered by a priesthood organization. The Savior did not organize the church when he was in Jerusalem or in Bountiful; He taught His gospel. He then organized the priesthood giving them the authority to administer the Gospel. The priesthood leadership determined that the best way to administer the gospel in an effective manner was to set up an administrative organization (wards and stakes). That is the purpose of the organization: to administer the gospel in an efficient and orderly manner, which includes record keeping. It’s the priesthood organization that creates and organizes the church. That’s why Christ says in 3 Nephi 27, verse 10:

If it so be that the church is built upon my gospel then will the Father show forth his own works in it. (3 Nephi 27:10)

Priesthood leaders (like every individual) have their own opinions, traditions, and interpretations of scripture and doctrines. These exist outside of their authorized responsibilities as ministers and administrators of the gospel. Members of the church should not expect the leaders to expound deep doctrines or reveal mysteries. Nor should they be expected to be correct or perfect in their understanding of scripture or doctrine. Leaders are not called because they know more about the scriptures than anyone else; they are called to administer the gospel and protect the interests of the church. Regardless of what they know or don't know, say or don't say; despite any decision, discussion, discourse, opinion, or interpretation of life or scripture they might make, their primary responsibility is to make sure that the gospel of Jesus Christ and its ordinances are available to all who seek it. The mission of the church and its priesthood leadership is to provide all that is necessary for the individual who desires to come unto Christ to do so. Some have supposed that the responsibility of the priesthood is to *make sure that all members come unto Christ*. This is not so. Leaders, like everyone, may only lead by example and encouragement, not by force.

41 No power or influence *can or ought* to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, [or priesthood position] only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; (D&C 121:41)

As always, the responsibility for the quality of the relationship that is developed with Christ and the Atonement rests solely on the individual, not the church or the priesthood.