

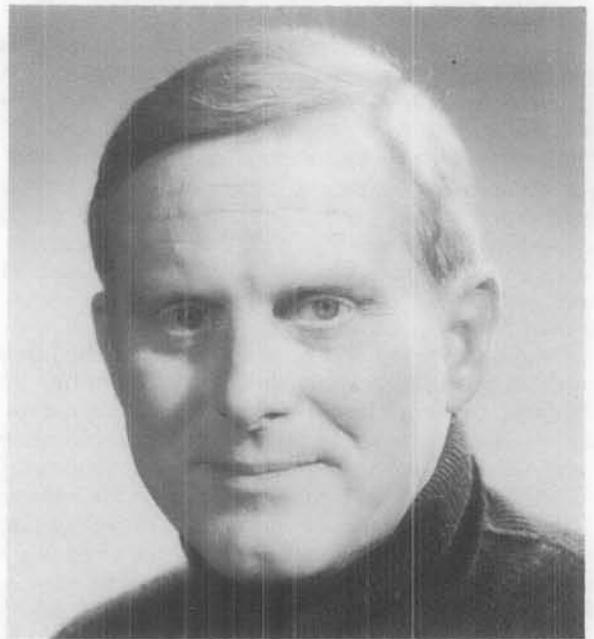
# THE CHURCH

## Editors' Note

Second in a series of lectures sponsored by the B. H. Roberts Society on the topic "The Institutional Church and the Individual." Held 28 May 1981 at the University of Utah.

## IN A DEMOCRACY, CHURCH INTERFERENCE IN POLITICS IS DANGEROUS

J. D. Williams



**T**WO recent events have dented my long-standing opposition to church involvement in politics: (1) the devastating query posed last March during a debate on the topic at Salt Lake's Wasatch Presbyterian Church, "J.D., how do you feel about the silence of the German churches during the Holocaust?" and (2) a political encyclical from the LDS First Presidency on May 5, 1981 that I agreed with—the condemnation of the MX missile.

Add those to the troubles bedeviling this world which are begging for moral judgments and curses, and one can readily see where the *easier* part of the argument on the church in politics lies. It lies with those who contend that the church which stands silent in the face of moral outrage is a church that has lost its soul.

Consider the targets just waiting for pastoral letters as strong as the ones the LDS church issued against the ERA and MX: (1) the current religious holocausts in Northern Ireland and Lebanon ("Blessed are the peacemakers"); (2) The reappearance of antisemitism in France, Argentina, and a number of American communities ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free"); and (3) the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, including a klavern in Salt Lake county, with some Mormon membership reported<sup>1</sup> ("He that hateth his brother is a liar"); (4) some 27 percent of our black people live in poverty (in contrast to 7 percent of our whites), 50 percent of our poor families are headed by women, and those female-headed families earn only 53 percent of male-headed families ("There should be no persecutions among them, that there should be an equality among all men"); (5) a Reagan budget which called for \$49 billion to be cut from social programs and a \$33 billion increase in defense (that means \$1.6 billion less for food and

nutrition programs but \$1.4 billion more for M1 tanks and elimination of categorical aid programs for handicapped children but \$20 million for binary nerve gas) ("They shall beat their swords into plowshares"); and (6) an arms race which now squanders \$500 billion each year of the world's scarce resources ("Turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry").

On any of these issues, a modern-day Amos would thunder in sermon after sermon, "Let judgment run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream." The disciple in me, the First Amendment in me, and the pluralism in me all argue for the right and the obligation of the modern Amoses to do so.

But the Jefferson in me, the democrat in me, and the existentialist in me still argue for a far less active political role for our churches, still "a rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."

In this age of the Moral Majority and the politically active ministers, five concerns still argue for the basic soundness of the separation of church and state (a separation aimed at both): (1) the conviction that God has left politics in our hands to work out, (2) doubts as to the expertise of most religious ministers on the political subjects they address *ex cathedra*, (3) the historical record which reveals so little inspiration in church leaders' political pronouncements, (4) the harmful effect upon democracy from heavy church involvement in politics, and (5) the harm to the churches themselves when they become immersed in Caesar's world.

### God Has Left Politics in Our Hands

The canon law of Mormonism is clear on this issue. Recall first of all the general injunction to work out our

*(continued on page 40)*

# IN POLITICS?



## *A CHURCH CANNOT STAND SILENT IN THE MIDST OF MORAL DECAY*

**Edwin Brown Firmage**

**B**ELIEVE that the Church has a right and in fact an obligation to speak out on issues which affect either the spiritual or the moral well-being of our Heavenly Father's children.

As a constitutional lawyer, I do not believe that the religion clauses of the First Amendment were intended to eliminate religious influence from government. The prohibition against the federal government effecting an established religion was originally intended to do just that: namely, to prevent the Congress of the United States from selecting one church as the national church, thereafter to be supported by taxation and by other compulsory means. Remember that the establishment clause not only forbade a nationally established church but also prohibited Congress from disestablishing or otherwise affecting state-established churches, several of which existed at the time our Constitution was struck. Clearly, the states were expected to provide whatever governance over church-related activities that government was permitted.

Of course, our fourteenth amendment and the incorporation doctrine which followed applied all of the essential protections of our Bill of Rights, originally directed only against the federal government, against state governments as well. Hence, no state now can effect an establishment of religion. But originally this was not so. The framers, I believe, at least the majority, foresaw an active and benign religious influence upon government.

Jefferson, a true son of the Enlightenment who knew his medieval history, saw the religion clauses in part as protecting secular interests against ecclesiastical depredations. It may well be questioned today, however, whether a prime threat to the sovereignty of the state remains from the specter of an episcopal establishment.

Jefferson's "wall of separation," remember, is his own metaphor and is not of constitutional origin. As President, Jefferson refused to declare a day of fasting, stating that the religion clauses created "a wall of separation between church and state."<sup>1</sup> It is dangerous to reason from a metaphorical premise.

And this Jeffersonian metaphor must be balanced against another which is close to my own heart. Roger Williams represents the thinking of many who saw the religion clauses primarily as defenses to protect religion against the depredations of the state. The garden of the church must be preserved against encroachment by the barren secular wilderness of the state: "Worldly corruptions . . . might consume the churches if sturdy fences against the wilderness were not maintained."<sup>2</sup>

I believe it to be entirely appropriate, in fact most healthy for our Republic, for churches to be actively engaged in defending moral and spiritual principles. If the Roman Catholic Church believes that a vital principle of spirituality and morality is violated by permissive abortion laws, based upon a doctrinal premise about the timing of the beginning of human life, then the Church is obliged to take up this battle in the political forum. Nothing in the Constitution forbids this. The speech clause and the free exercise clause protect this. Christianity, as Roman Catholics may believe it, would demand this. Any suggestion that a church's tax exempt status might be affected by such activity is abominable to me. I am deeply offended at such a suggestion, and I would fight in unrelenting fashion any such constitutional interpretation.

God Almighty is not confined within an individual's conception of what may appear to be secular or religious.

To him all things are spiritual (D&C 29:34). Metaphorical walls between church and state cannot

contain him. Aslan is not a tame lion. Ask Abraham. Ask Isaac. Ask Brigham.

But more difficult questions arise when one speaks from the perspective of what a church should do on moral and spiritual issues, rather than what the Constitution might allow it to do. That is, what would I



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as a Mormon want my church to do about a particular political issue rather than what I might feel that my church was constitutionally permitted to do.

I believe that the Church is obliged to speak on issues affecting spiritual and moral affairs. To hold otherwise would be to bifurcate the first and the second commandments by which the Lord subsumed the ten commandments which he as Jehovah gave ancient Israel. The author of the commandments given on Mount Sinai is none other than the Christ who spoke again from the Mount of the Beatitudes. Depending upon how one considers the fifth commandment concerning honoring one's parents, as being either spiritually or morally obligatory, the first four or five commandments govern our spiritual lives and the last five or six our moral lives. The first relate vertically to our worship of God; the latter relate horizontally to our relationship with our brothers and sisters.

But Jesus, when questioned by the one good lawyer in scripture as to which was the first commandment, responded: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40.)

Notice that Jesus in response to the lawyer's question refused to isolate the first commandment of all-



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consuming spirituality from the second commandment of all-consuming morality.

Some churches have emphasized in their ministry the worshipful and the spiritual, sometimes to the

denigration of the moral. In our own church I have heard the so-called "social gospel" maligned, as if Christ did not in fact come to the poor, the blind, the halt, the widow, and the aged. To me, such thinking violates the essence of the Master's parable of the final judgment. All people and all nations must be judged before the Son of Man. He will separate us one from another, sheep and goats, on his right and on his left hands. Those on his right hand, to whom he will say, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you," will have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison.

Herein is the moral linked inextricably to the spiritual. For Jesus said that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matthew 25:31-46). Moral works are essential forms of spiritual worship.



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name in vain.*

Other churches preach primarily the social gospel. They do good moral works but they deny the reality of God. Or his fatherhood of all men. Or they deny the divinity of Jesus Christ. Or the miraculous. And the eschatology of the New Testament. This to me is even greater sin. For though Jesus by example and by precept refused to divide the spiritual from the moral, in his ministry to the poor and the sick of this world, and in his response to the lawyer's question as to the first commandment, yet he did in fact recognize that the first was indeed first. That is, we are commanded to love and to worship God Almighty. God exists. Jesus is his divine Son. He died for our sins, was resurrected from the dead, and in so doing brought about the resurrection of us all. And he will come again to rule as Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

A ministry which attempts to limit itself exclusively to things spiritual ignores or defies the second great commandment and the parable of the final judgment. A ministry which deals only with things moral and denies or ignores the reality of the Father, or the divinity of the Son, or the miraculous, the eschatological, the spiritual, cuts its morality off from the Spring of Eternal Life, the Bread of Life, the True Vine. Such morality will wither and die as surely as a branch will die when separated from its source of life. Without Him we can do nothing. Our humanism must indeed be the Christian humanism of Erasmus, of St. Thomas More, of Hugh B. Brown, of Sister Maria Teresa, of Marion Hanks, and Lowell Bennion. Secular humanism ignores the first commandment.

I recognize that a careful path must be followed as the Church speaks out on moral issues in the political forum. The Church must in fact reflect God's will, as manifest in scripture or in revelation. The particular political



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propensities of a man or of a political party must not be followed as if it were God's will when in fact it is not. To do so would be to violate the third commandment. We must not take God's name in vain. I do not believe that profanity demonstrates much beyond a crude and insensitive soul. But to speak in God's name when God has been silent is to take God's name in vain. Vanity would consume humility and unrighteous dominion would result.

The Church speaks legitimately the word of God when he directs that such be done. Or less dramatically but no less authoritatively, the Church speaks the word of God when it accurately interprets scriptural mandate by the influence of the Holy Ghost.

Of course Church leaders, like the rest of us, are not infallible. I know of no Mormon doctrine of infallibility. Our belief in the necessity of continued revelation beyond scripture, together with our belief in the profound and continuing necessity of repentance, belies any such notion. If the Church errs on a particular question, nothing in Mormon doctrine prevents it from open acknowledgment of error and renewed commitment to its ministry of the love of God and of our neighbor.



*A church which failed to speak out on political issues which affected such profoundly spiritual and moral principles as the worship of God and the love of man would be neutered indeed.*

And I do not believe that we are excused from individual accountability if we follow any leader, secular or religious, who guides us in the wrong direction. We must answer for our mistakes and repent. The notion that we are excused if we follow a leader, our "file leader" in Mormon jargon, who leads us into violation of God's law is mistaken. It is based upon statements without foundation in scripture or doctrine. I do not believe that we will be excused by the doctrine of superior orders as we stand before the bar of God any more than were the Nazi war criminals in the dock at Nuremberg. We will be judged for our own sins, and we will be excused only by the mercy and the grace of Christ coupled with our own repentance, which in turn is made possible by the atonement.

Each of us must follow the word of God, whether we receive this directly, or indirectly through another, after we make this our own through confirmation by the Spirit.

Of course matters spiritual or moral may be affected by actions of secular movements or governments, and hence such actions make legitimate the response or the initiative of the Church within the political process.

Would we be correct to suggest that the Church has nothing to say about a nuclear arms race that propels us inexorably toward annihilation of the human race? Has the Church nothing to say about war since some see it simply as the extension of the political process among nations? About crime since by definition it is the violation of positive penal law? About hunger because of its political implications? About racism because civil rights laws are the concern of the state?



*Many abuses will be taken care of, eliminated by formal procedure, bureaucratic institutions, forced upon us by growth if not by our own conscious decisions.*

Should Bonhoeffer not have spoken against Hitler because he was the head of government? Should J. Reuben Clark, Jr., not have spoken out against the use of the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki because we believe in being subject to kings and to presidents?

Nonsense. I am not precisely sure what the Master meant when he talked of becoming eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. But I do know that a church which failed to speak out on political issues which affected such profoundly spiritual and moral principles as the worship of God and the love of man, as do those issues above, would be neutered indeed. It could bear no fruit. Such a barren organization could not produce thistles, let alone figs. An emasculated church cannot bring forth fruit.

Yes, the Church must speak out on moral and upon spiritual issues. I find the suggestion that the Church confine itself to matters spiritual alone a prescription for sterility, for pharisaical spirituality devoid of brotherhood and applied Christianity, curiously illiberal. Such a religion would strain at gnats, welcome the rich man into heaven and reject Lazarus, pay tithes and reject the weightier matters of the law. Christian love must be expressed to our brothers and our sisters, or surely it cannot reach out toward God.

#### Notes

1. Letter of Jefferson to Danbury Baptist Ass'n. (1 January 1802), reprinted in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* 346 (P. Ford ed. 1905).
2. M. Howe, *The Garden and the Wilderness* 6 (1965).

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(continued from page 36)

own problems: "For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; . . . men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves" (D&C 58:26-28).

Next are the specific disclaimers in the 134th section of the Doctrine and Covenants: "We believe . . . that all governments have a right to enact such laws as in their own judgments are best calculated to secure the public interest" (Verse 5, emphasis added). "We do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government, whereby one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the individual rights of its members, as citizens, denied" (Verse 9).

While Joseph Smith's own record was clearly ambivalent on the issue of the Church in politics (he ran for the Presidency of the United States in 1844 while President of the Church, remember), his utterances were reasonably straightforward on the matter:

To the Editor of the Wasp:

Dear Sir: I have, of late, had repeated solicitations to have something to do in relation to the political farce about dividing the county, but as my feelings revolt at the idea of having anything to do with politics, I have declined in every instance in having anything to do on the subject. *I think it would be well for politicians to regulate their own affairs.* I wish to be let alone that I may attend strictly to the spiritual welfare of the Church. Please insert and oblige. (Emphasis added.)

Joseph Smith<sup>2</sup>

A few months later, in August of 1843, he told his parishioners: "I am not come to tell you to vote this way,



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that way, or the other. In relation to national matters, I want it to go abroad unto the whole world that every man should stand on his own merits. *The Lord has not given me a revelation concerning politics*—I have not asked Him for one"<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis added).

Those scriptures and prophetic limitations tell me that we are not to look to God or his oracles for answers to Right to Work laws, affirmative action, the Equal Rights Amendment, protection of wilderness areas, or supply side economics.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Does Ex Cathedra Spell E-x-p-e-r-t-i-s-e?**

If our first proposition is sound that God *only rarely* intervenes in our political affairs, then religious ministers must be "winging it on their own" almost all the time (like the rest of us mortals) when they engage in politics from the pulpit. What weight, then, should be accorded their *political* views?

In one word, *some*. Men and women of the cloth have given much of their lives to the study of God's word. They are thus in a unique position to draw a bead on the moral content of many public policy questions—the sanctity of life in the abortion debate, the violation of the Second Commandment in one's joining the Klan, the undermining of the gospel of peace in the arms race.

Further, ministers are entitled, *like their congregations*, to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost—a gift capable of leading us toward all truth.



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But when the Rev. Jerry Falwell opposes sex education in the schools, the U.S. Department of Education, and gun control,<sup>5</sup> how much credence are his views entitled to? When Elder Ezra Taft Benson commends the John Birch Society as the most effective force against communism in America,<sup>6</sup> condemns the use of federal troops in enforcing school desegregation in a Southern state,<sup>7</sup> and uses Church letterhead to urge the Heber City Council not to apply for a public housing grant,<sup>8</sup> how much credence should be accorded his views?

And when the LDS First Presidency criticized the draft in 1946 (in that period of too early demobilization),<sup>9</sup> opposed the repeal of Taft-Hartley's Section 14B (protecting state right-to-work laws),<sup>10</sup> condemned the ERA in 1976,<sup>11</sup> and proclaimed against MX in 1981, what credence should be granted their pronouncements? Are they prophets, seers, and revelators on these issues, or our fellow mortals?

Elder Benson's reply is unequivocal: "The Prophet is not required to have any particular earthly training or credentials to speak on any subject or act on any matter at any time. . . . If there is ever a conflict between earthly knowledge and the words of the prophet, you stand with the prophet and you'll be blessed and time will vindicate you."<sup>12</sup>

But the Rev. Billy Graham is not so sure: "We as clergy know so very little to speak out with such



*Church interference in politics threatens two fundamentals of democracy—personal responsibility for our political decision making and majority rule, not rule by an elite.*

authority on the Panama Canal or superiority of armaments.”<sup>13</sup>

His rejoinder has particular relevancy for the First Presidency’s 1981 condemnation of the MX in Utah and Nevada. While all three of the First Presidency have intimate acquaintance with life styles in these states and their religio-cultural values (and thus could speak with authority on those aspects of the impact of MX), none of them is a national defense specialist; none of them has the background to evaluate a land-based mode versus airborne or submarine-borne modes. That means that the statement of May 5, 1981, had to be written for the First Presidency by others, and that is something less than revelation, less than *ex cathedra*.

### How Inspired Have Past Political Pronouncements Been—The Record of History

In raising the question of how much credence to attach to political utterances of Church officials, we should find an answer in two closely related questions: (1) Does God regularly speak through his prophets on political matters? (2) Do subsequent events confirm a level of inspiration in those political pronouncements clearly superior to mortal knowledge (which is often



*The perfecting of the saints, that is the business of the Church; let our religious bodies concentrate on spiritual affairs and leave politics to others.*

“muddling through”) on public policy questions?

The scriptural review discussed earlier strongly suggested “no” to very much direct revelation in politics. But now, what does the crucible of history reveal?

At least five political pronouncements by LDS leaders in the last fifty years seem to me to have been sound, confirmed by events of the times or by subsequent developments: (1) the condemnation of communism in 1936, (2) the repudiation of the tactics of the John Birch Society in 1963,<sup>14</sup> (3) the declaration in support of civil rights for all people in 1963,<sup>15</sup> (4) the criticism of political extremism in 1966,<sup>16</sup> and (5) the rejection of the MX basing mode in 1981.<sup>17</sup>

That record of “hits,” while perhaps not fully comprehensive, pales by comparison with the string of “misses” in the long annals of pulpit politics in Mormonism: (1) the tragic temporizing on slavery (from the twelfth verse of the 134th section of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 until the Civil War);<sup>18</sup> (2) Joseph Smith’s plan in 1844 to pay Congressmen two dollars per day (plus board)<sup>19</sup>—revealing no awareness on his part that if the taxpayers don’t pay them, the special interests will; (3) Brigham Young’s prophecy in Brighton, Utah, 1857 that “at no distant time he would himself become President of the United States or dictate who should be President.”<sup>20</sup> (Heber C. Kimball added that “I am the Vice-President and Brother Wells is the Secretary of the



*Nothing said will deter for a moment the compulsions in Mormonism from Nauvoo to the present to involve the Church in politics.*

Interior—yes, and of all the armies in the flesh.”<sup>21</sup>; (4) President J. Reuben Clark’s isolationism and opposition to the United Nations in the 1940s;<sup>22</sup> (5) the campaign directed by the Political Affairs Committee of the Quorum of the Twelve (chaired by Apostles Moyle and Lee) to secure one Senator per county reapportionment of the Utah state legislature, employing the ad hoc Salt Lake Valley Stake Presidents Committee as their campaign organization. (This was a calculated effort to transfer control of the state senate in perpetuity to the heavily Mormon rural counties of Utah. The voters defeated the plan in 1954; had they not done so, the U.S. Supreme Court would have struck it down ten years later under *Baker vs Carr* and *Reynolds vs Sims*).<sup>23</sup>; (6) President David O. McKay’s publicly announced preference for Richard Nixon in the 1960 Presidential election<sup>24</sup>—neither an inspired nor an inspiring choice; and (7) the “spare-no-effort” campaign of the Church nationwide against ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, a campaign in my judgment that was wrong on the merits, sad in terms of the public relations image it gave the Church as anti-women, and tragic schism that the effort generated among the members of the Church—a fight the Church simply did not need to pick.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these acts of unwise commission, there have been so many episodes of omission where the Church’s voice might have been helpful, if expressed. They too are a part of the record of little inspiration in the Church’s political decision making.

One such episode occurred in 1965 when the Church mounted a massive lobbying campaign in the legislature against a liberalizing of Utah’s liquor laws. A picket line in front of Church headquarters petitioned Church leaders to raise their voices in the same legislature for a nondiscriminatory housing bill. The effort was in vain—liquor control was more important than fair housing.

The second episode came just three years later on the occasion of Martin Luther King’s death. It was the Sunday of April conference, 1968, and while a thousand of us quietly walked down Main Street in mourning, not a word was said inside the Tabernacle during the conference sessions, in prayer or sermon, about the tragedy the nation had just experienced. As President Hugh B. Brown commented privately afterward, “We really missed the boat,” pointing to the stack of protest letters on his desk.

The historical record on this issue is clear: a singular lack of inspiration in the political pronouncements of the Church.

## The Harmful Effect on Democracy of Church Involvement in Politics

Democracy and theocracy do not good bedfellows make. And while theocracy may be on its way ("the final days," when "the government shall rest upon His shoulders"), we live *now* under a democracy, the only tolerable political system I know: where people are the end and government is the means; where citizens are regarded as politically equal (still the enduring quest); and where political power resides in the people, government rests upon their consent, and decisions are made by majorities, either through the citizens acting directly or through their freely elected representatives.<sup>26</sup>

Our commitment to that kind of political system, at the very minimum, requires sensitivity and active support for two fundamentals of democracy—personal



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responsibility for our political decision making and majority rule, not rule by an elite.

Church interference in politics threatens both of those pillars, particularly in revealed religions like Mormonism. A 1945 "ward teachers' lesson" dramatizes the problem: "When the leaders have spoken, the thinking has been done." In a theocracy, maybe; in a democracy, never.

The tragedy is that that kind of "follow-the-leader" behavior takes place all too often in the politics of Mormondom. Consider two examples. In the 1954 reapportionment fight (alluded to above), we secured the publication of a letter from the First Presidency which indicated that the Church took *no position* on the issue. A former high school chemistry teacher telephoned to say how grateful he was "that now I can vote my own conscience." What a travesty for democracy (and for the free agency of Mormonism) that he thought he had ever lost that precious right.

The second instance was the dramatic flip flop in public opinion in Utah about the MX missile following the First Presidency's criticism in May 1981. In February, 53 percent of the respondents to a poll in the five most affected southwestern counties in Utah opposed the proposed missile system. The opposition shot up to 76 percent after the Church's statement in condemnation.<sup>27</sup> It seems clear that Mormons in that poll had simply allowed the Church leaders to do their political thinking for them. (I realize that a more charitable conclusion would be that all of those changed minds simply found the First Presidency's logic absolutely convincing.)

Other kinds of Church political activity also undermine democracy. One of them is elitist control over elections. Former Governor J. Bracken Lee relates a summons he received to appear before a hundred LDS leaders in the 1948 gubernatorial campaign. They asked

him for a signed promise to veto any liquor-by-the-drink bill that crossed his desk should he be elected governor. He refused to sign it; and after listening to a tongue-lashing by Apostle Joseph R. Merrill, candidate Lee walked out. Ultimately President J. Reuben Clark worked out a rapprochement: "I got Church support and was elected governor," reported Lee.<sup>28</sup> The whole episode was, of course, a blatant violation of Article I Section 4 of the Utah Constitution: "There shall be no union of church and state, nor shall any church interfere with, or dominate, the functions of the state."

Two years later, a subterranean investigative arm of the Church, the Law Observance and Enforcement Committee, made an attempt to deliver "the Mormon vote" to the Republican party in Salt Lake county. They mimeographed a talk to be given in that most spontaneous of Mormon gatherings, the monthly Fast and Testimony meeting, on the Sunday before the 1950 election.

The message was clear enough: We hope you will vote for candidates who support Church principles in regard to liquor, gambling, and prostitution; and if you don't know who those candidates are, the bishop has a list.

The appended list did not begin with local officials who might have some responsibility for the issues alluded to but rather with the U.S. Senate and House candidates. The names of Democratic incumbents Elbert D. Thomas and Reva Beck Bosone were deleted along with half of the thirty-four Democrats shown; *two* of the thirty-four Republican candidates somehow failed to pass muster and had their names stricken by the Law Observance and Enforcement Committee.<sup>29</sup>

Other examples are too legion to mention of the use of pulpits by stake and ward leaders to influence the outcome of local elections.<sup>30</sup> All of them in recent years are in plain violation of the First Presidency's biennial instruction to keep politics out of Mormon worship services.

Democracy simply cannot survive in theocratic soil. The "revealed will" replaces independent thought; civil leaders, elected by consent of the people, are dictated to by Church authorities; ecclesiastical control subverts constitutional democratic authority in the operation of the state—slowly but inevitably, the church comes to dominate the state. By definition, that is not *separation*.

One of the best antidotes we know of to this threat to democracy is for Mormons to develop the attitude of mind which Seventies President J. Golden Kimball advocated so long ago:

There are not enough Apostles in the Church to prevent us from thinking, and they are not disposed to do so; but some people fancy that because we have the Presidency and Apostles of the Church that they will do the thinking for us. There are men and women so mentally lazy that they hardly think for themselves. To think calls for effort, which makes some men tired and wearies their souls. Now, brethren and sisters, we are surrounded with such conditions that it requires not only thought, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Latter-day Saints, you must think for yourselves. *No man or woman can remain in this Church on borrowed light.*<sup>31</sup> (Emphasis added.)

I submit that democracy is a prize worth preserving.

## Harmful Impact Upon the Church

We began with the admission that a church which stands silent in the face of the world's evils may be an



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institution without a soul. It now becomes important, in this final part of the argument, to assess the significant dangers to a church when it involves itself in politics. Once again, history is the guide. From Catholicism's becoming the state religion of Rome on to the Mormon campaign against the ERA, religions have been tarnished through their immersion in Caesar's world.

Consider first the problem of schism. The Apostle Paul was vehement on the matter: "There should be no schism in the body; the members should have the same care one for another" (I Corinthians 12:25). But that is precisely what was threatened when Elder Benson told a reporter in 1974 that a liberal Democrat could not be a good Mormon "if he was living the gospel and understood it."<sup>32</sup>

Or measure the degree of alienation that is engendered among many members of an LDS ward when their bishop announces at sacrament meeting that an anti-ERA speaker will hold forth that Sunday night in the Relief Society room.

The schisms resulting from this "choosing up sides at church" are so unnecessary, so destructive of the Lord's instructions to us. We expect to differ in our political parties and pressure groups, but at church we are commanded, and expect, to be one "even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:22-23).

The second wound to the Church stemming from its political activities is a truly grievous one: the skewing of the Church's ethics when it should be the model of "straight-arrow" ethics for the whole community in whatever it undertakes to do.

Consider two examples. When the First Presidency wrote every Mormon member of Congress in 1965 to oppose repeal of Taft-Hartley's 14B, the letter bore the signature of President Hugh B. Brown, along with the others'. But President Brown was in Australia and was not even consulted. (Kant said it best: "Treat every man as an end, and no man simply as a means.")

The second episode of skewed ethics involved the questionable tactics employed by the Special Affairs Committee of the General Authorities in engineering the defeat of the ERA in Virginia.<sup>33</sup> Not only did the Committee involve Regional Representatives, stake presidents, and bishops in a political campaign but also had created a *front group* FACT ("Families are Concerned Today"), to raise money for the lobbying effort. (Jeremiah's query of long ago seems very much in point: "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him, saith the Lord" Jeremiah 23:24). For what shall it profit the Church to defeat the ERA and tarnish its own soul?

The third harm to the Church from its going into politics is probably the most serious of all—diverting the Church from its great purpose, the spiritual salvation of its people.

What a travesty when the buses roll up to ward chapels in Missouri to transport the Relief Society sisters to lobby at the state legislature against the ERA.<sup>34</sup> Their mission that morning should have been perfecting themselves for compassionate service, not acting as the advance guard of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum.

Note the strange alteration of discipleship when Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley calls Regional Representatives in California to begin a political fund raising effort to *defeat the ERA in Florida*. In two days' time phone calls from high-placed Church officials to their Mormon contacts raised \$13,000, which helped elect two anti-ERA candidates in the 1978 Florida election.<sup>35</sup>

Had it been citizen to citizen, no questions could be asked. But when it was Apostle to Regional Representative, using the Church (a tax-exempt organization, remember) as a nationwide political action organization, then searing questions must be asked. Are we a church or a political party? Is this the holy calling of the Apostles and Seventies?

My answer is no. And the Apostle Paul explains why: "And he gave some apostles and prophets . . . for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12); and "When I came to you, I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified, that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:1-5).

The perfecting of the saints, that is the business of the Church, and it deserves the single-minded devotion of all who are called as ministers of the gospel. For the churches' sake, for the members' salvation, let our religious bodies concentrate on spiritual affairs and leave politics to others.



*Two of the greatest prizes in this world are God's churches in the spiritual realm and the democracy in political. They thrive best when operating in their own spheres.*

### **The Dilemmas and a Final Plea**

The question of the Church in politics leaves me between the proverbial rock and a hard place. A world full of trouble begs for all the spiritual, social, political, and economic wisdom it can obtain, but there is clear evidence of the heavy costs to democracy and to the churches themselves as a result of their involvement in politics.

The world will little note, President Lincoln, what we write here, nor will the churches. A dozen different imperatives will drive many of them to follow into

politics the Puritan ministers prior to our Revolution, the Walter Rauschenbusches of the social gospel movement, the Rev. Martin Luther Kings, the Jerry Falwells, the Father Drinans, and Ezra Taft Bensons of our own century.

Nothing said here will deter for a moment the compulsions in Mormonism from Nauvoo to the present to involve the Church in politics. Knowing that (regrettably), I cannot do much more than express my wish list when a-politicking they must go: (1) let the Church concentrate its efforts on the spiritual edification of our people, "teaching them correct principles and then allowing them to govern themselves"; (2) abolish the Special Affairs Committee, the political arm of the Church as a giant first step toward withdrawal from politics; (3) ban political discussions from the pulpit or in Church meetings generally, so our chapels can be sanctuaries where the peace of God can be found undisturbed by partisan controversy;<sup>36</sup> (4) when a Church official feels the urge to give political advice, let that person do so from the rostrum of a political party or pressure group, speaking



*The record of hits pale by comparison with the string of misses in the long annals of pulpit politics in Mormonism.*

as a citizen; (5) when the Presidency of the Church feels compelled to take a political stand, let it do so in signed statements in Church publications. Especially let them distinguish two kinds of statements—official, ex cathedra pronouncements on the one hand and pastoral counsel on some current issue on the other.

As to the first, one might contemplate a straightforward ban on Mormons belonging to the Ku Klux Klan or any other hate group, a prohibition (as the First Presidency has issued) on any discussion in Church meetings of candidates or campaigns.

As to the pastoral counseling on politics, one might even wish for the day of a prophetic utterance in behalf of affirmative action, full equality in the market place for women and minorities, and the peaceful integration of our schools, among many others.

But my earnest hope is that, which ever tone they care to strike in giving political advice, the First Presidency would always include this critical proviso from their pamphlet on the ERA: "In this, as in all other matters, members are free to accept or reject the counsel of the First Presidency. Freedom to discuss the merits of any public issue is a legitimate exercise of citizenship, recognized and encouraged by the Church."<sup>37</sup>

Two of the greatest prizes in this world are God's churches in the spiritual realm and democracy in the political. They thrive best when operating in their own spheres. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma understood it so well. With his people beset with deep economic and social problems, he made a fundamental decision about the theocracy over which he presided. He delegated the civil power to one Nephiah, while retaining the spiritual sceptre unto himself "that he

might preach the word of God unto [his people]. . . , seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them" (Alma 4:12-19).

Wise in Alma's day, still so in ours.



#### Notes

1. Larry R. Gerlach, "Blazing Crosses in Zion," *Utah Holiday* (May 1981):32-47.
2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:259.
3. *History of the Church* 5:526. A few paragraphs later, however, Joseph intimated that his brother Hyrum had had a political revelation (for the people to vote for Hoge), "and I never knew Hyrum to say he ever had a revelation and it failed. Let God speak and all men hold their peace."
4. This will provide absolutely no solace, of course, to the thousands of people who have "lost their testimonies" as to the existence of God because he failed to intervene during Hitler's slaughter of the Jews. Politics, I deeply believe, is our responsibility, including the interdiction of genocide: "No man is an island . . . and Dachau tolls for all of us, not for God" in my view.
5. "A Tide of Born-Again Politics," *Newsweek* (15 September 1980):28-36, esp. 32.
6. "Reed Benson Takes Post with John Birch Group," *SL Tribune* (27 October 1962).
7. *Deseret News* (28 October 1963).
8. "Heber Housing Study Draws Fire," *Deseret News* (9 January 1976):A19.
9. *Deseret News* (3 January 1946).
10. "First Presidency Statement on Taft-Hartley Law," *Deseret News* (25 June 1965).
11. "First Presidency Opposes ERA," *Church News* (30 October 1976).
12. Elder Ezra Taft Benson, "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophets" (26 February 1980, address), press copy, p. 6.
13. Rev. Billy Graham, "America is not God's only Kingdom," *Parade Magazine* (1 February 1981):6.
14. "Church Sets Policy on Birch Society," *Deseret News* (3 January 1963):1.
15. "Give Full Civil Equality to All," *SL Tribune* (7 October 1963):B1.
16. "Politics and Religion," *Church News* (26 March 1966).
17. "LDS First Presidency Issues MX Statement," *Deseret News* (5 May 1981):1.
18. Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (University of Utah Press, 1970).
19. *History of the Church* 6:205.
20. George Bancroft, *History of Utah*, p. 505.
21. *Journal of Discourses* 5:219.
22. P Sigma Alpha address, "Our Dwindling Sovereignty" (University of Utah, 1951).
23. See Kenneth Mitchell, "The Struggle for Reapportionment in Utah," MA thesis, University of Utah, 1960.
24. "Nixon Calls on Pres. McKay for Chat," *Deseret News* (11 October 1960). Note that this was expressed as a personal preference, not ex cathedra.
25. The Church's mea culpa appeared in pamphlet form, *The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue* (February 1980).
26. A quick reading course would start with Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, A. D. Lindsay's *The Modern Democratic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), and Leo Rosten's "A Democratic Manifesto," *Look Magazine* (15 January 1963):27.
27. "MX Opposition Soars Since LDS Statement," *Deseret News* (25 May 1981):B2.
28. Dennis Lythgoe, "A Special Relationship: J. Bracken Lee and the Mormon Church," *Dialogue* (Winter 1978):71-87, esp. p. 76.
29. Law Observance and Enforcement Committee of the LDS Church, "Suggested Talk at Fast Meetings, 5 November 1950," mimeographed.
30. For one case in point see the account of the second counselor in the Salt Lake Stake exploiting the pulpit during stake conference in November 1978 to campaign for conservative Robert Sykes in the area surrounding Capitol Hill in Salt Lake City. Bruce Jensen, "Dirty Work at the Crossroads: Going for the Political Jugular," *Utah Holiday* (January 1979):9.
31. LDS Church, *Conference Report*, 1904, p. 28.
32. "Support for Candidate Possible Some Day, LDS Apostle Says," *SL Tribune* (22 February 1974):B1.
33. Linda Sillitoe, "Fear and Anger in Virginia: The New Mormon Activists (Part II)," *Utah Holiday* (February 1980):12-14.
35. "Mormon Money Worked Against Florida's ERA," *The Miami Herald* (20 April 1980):1. See also "Church Orchestrated Florida anti-ERA Drive Report Details," *SL Tribune* (21 April 1980).

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# THE CHURCH IN POLITICS? FIRMAGE RESPONDS:

**J**D. WILLIAMS has given a wise note of caution in the role of the Church in politics. Let me first reply to several of the specific criticisms J. D. levels at the Church as it has participated in the political arena. First, J. D. has mixed together at least three categories of "Church" involvement in politics without distinguishing between them. (1) Most of the incidents to which he objects were actions by individuals, albeit Church officials. No formal or informal Church action or pronouncement was involved. If misconduct occurred, that is regrettable but clearly less important and distinguishable from formal or informal Church action by the First Presidency, sanctioned by the Quorum of the Twelve. (2) Church conduct, informally accomplished but done, it would seem, with the agreement, however tacit, of Church leaders. This easy informality, without the protections against abuse afforded by formal procedural or administrative check and review, represents perhaps the most disturbing possibility for abuse of position and harm to the Church. And finally, (3) formal Church action taken by the First Presidency and sanctioned by the Quorum of the Twelve.

I have insufficient background with each incident of



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abuse cited to defend or to attack the conduct alleged. But it does seem clear to me that most of the events of which J. D. complains fall into the first category. And while the Church perhaps is responsible in part for the actions of its officers, Church authorities, after all, do not automatically forfeit their civil rights or their individuality when they are sustained. Nor is perfection accomplished by ordination. I am sure that the President of the Church and the President of a given quorum, on occasion, will advise, even direct, and perhaps even chastise individual Authorities. But are we sure that we want to insist that an individual General Authority be prohibited from speaking out individually on a political issue? The example of President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., is appropriate here. I recall well his careful, sometimes

almost elaborate, disclaimer of speaking for the Church, unless he in fact was doing just that.

Though I have offered my opinion on the dangers of the second category, I simply lack any facts to verify these observations. Clearly, when this happens, the Church could be hurt. And harm could be done to others.

But even here, understanding and compassion are in order. We live in a fascinating period in the growth of our church. We are still a young church. We enjoy the easy informality produced not only by a lay clergy barely distinguished from lay membership but also a familial organization with few procedural rules. A number of members of the Church now living have known personally almost all the General Authorities, at least until the very recent expansion of the First Quorum of the Seventy. It is still possible to walk in the Church office building and offer a good morning to our President. Or to drop by his home with a warm, freshly baked loaf of bread. Unfortunately, we abuse these privileges. We run to them with our incidental and personal problems. And we must stop.

Gradually we will develop our canon law. Size will eventually force upon us a foreign office, now in embryo in the person of one peripatetic and lovely soul, Brother Kennedy. I know it must come. It is right that it come. But oh, the cost. We have lived with our leaders, eaten with them, loved them, cried with them, even fought with them. We have known them, warts and all, and what a lovely blessing. Already for many, this is not so. And for the coming generation, what I have described will almost disappear. By then, the abuses in the second category will be almost taken care of, eliminated by formal procedure, bureaucratic institutions, forced upon us by growth if not by our own conscious decisions. Almost, I hope I pass on with the old order.

The third category is, of course, the most important. But here I find very few of J. D.'s "parade of horrors." Yes, the First Presidency took a position against compulsory, universal military training in peace time. Hurray! I agree with every word of that statement. We should reread it today most seriously, as we face a concerted effort by many to militarize our Republic.

J. D. says prophets lack credentials and formal training in national defense and, by implication, in things political. Therefore, they should not speak on such matters. Nonsense. Peter and most of his brethren were fishermen. They did very well against the Pharisees, learned men of the law. For the Master "lawyers and hypocrites" seemed to be a hyphenated term. I see absolutely no historical evidence from

prophets of the past that there is any correlation between formal, higher education and the Lord's choice of his prophets. Unless, in fact, there is a negative correlation. A few, indeed, seemed to be superbly trained by worldly standards. Paul, a master of the law (and its most severe critic), is the great example of this. He was chosen and prepared for an awesome and a particular task. But surely he is the exception that proves the rule.

Certainly we need experts too. And nothing stops a prophet from calling on them, asking advice, weighing it, thinking, meditating, praying, and then accepting, modifying, or rejecting. But prophets, or any other leaders, must also reserve the right to reject advice of experts. Prophets do, after all, have another source to rely on.

J. D. argues with great persuasiveness that God and our Constitution leave much room for individual decision apart from Church direction. I fully agree. God leaves a terrifying amount of such room. And it is right that we settle the huge portion of the partisan political decisions of our cities, our states, our nation, with no Church participation beyond statements, usually scriptural of general principle: Be honest. Seek out good men and women. Vote. Obey the law.

Finally, I believe that in many cases, perhaps most, when J. D. advises the Church to stay out of "politics," he means to refer to "partisan politics," issues which break down along party or particular ideological lines. This is, generally, a good rule to follow. But for the Church to stay out of "politics" is first impossible and second undesirable.



*To "follow a prophet" implies that we must on occasion reconsider our own positions on issues. Humility and discipleship to Christ demand no less.*

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate several points. First, I am entirely unpersuaded that the Church should not speak out upon issues of a deeply moral, ethical, or spiritual nature, even given J. D.'s "parade of horrors." At best, one must conclude simply, that the Church, as it carries on its ministry of spiritual and moral concern, must move with greater sensitivity, more spiritually disciplined restraint, as it affects the political process.

The Church, to speak with relevance in our time, must relate God's word to the events of our time. For example: What is the meaning of the principles of Pauline Christianity to issues before us now? What should be our attitude toward would-be converts of other nations, races, and cultures? What is the meaning of Jehovah's injunction against killing and the role of the Christian in war? In an age of monster weapons and mega-deaths? Arms racing toward oblivion? What is the relevance of the teachings of the parable of the final judgment (Matthew 25) to social issues before us today, with a bloated military budget and millions of people in desperate need?



*At best, one must conclude that the Church must move with greater sensitivity, more spiritually disciplined restraint, as it affects the political process.*

The Church must not lose its soul and its relevance through insensitivity to the crying of God's children for peace, for bread, for meaning to life.

Moreover, the admonition to "follow a prophet" is a perfectly defensible and correct general principle. What use would there be to believe in God, in his loving communication to his children, as recorded in scripture and as practiced today, without a general commendation that we follow? This implies that we must on occasion reconsider our own positions on issues. Humility and discipleship to Christ demand no less. We can and we have made mistakes, individually and institutionally. The Church can and has abused its prerogative to speak in God's name. And it almost surely will do so again.

The doctrinal remedy for this immutable fact of our individual and collective fallible humanity is the necessity and the availability of repentance.

We can avoid such errors by carefully determining how and on what issues to speak. This means deep thought and study. Joseph and Oliver's experience in attempting to perceive God's word is instructive. Oliver was told that he had to think, to ponder, to meditate. He had to work it out in his own mind. He must struggle and exert every capacity of mind and spirit. He was told that God would not simply fill him with light without his own exertion. (D&C 8-9.) We must: converse in spiritual Socratic dialogue with the best people available; test the proposition for consistency with God's word in scripture and doctrine; seek God's guidance throughout the process by deep prayer, meditation, fasting; seek His benediction and confirmation upon any final resolution; and finally without his benediction, his affirmation, we must not speak in his name and risk violating the third commandment.

And may I add a final plea. If a Church leader delivers an address that suggests several points for consideration and in your mind does so in an abrasive way, I plead that we not react solely to the element of abrasion. Examine the point made. Can we possibly discover a correct principle within the point? If so, let a particular abrasive phrasing sift like chaff through the fingers of your mind and cling to the principle within the statement. If we resonate simply to an abrasive phrasing that might momentarily jar our souls, we will forever be reacting to the wrong tune. Life is simply too short to spend these precious years in reaction rather than in loving each other. I believe that God would have us hold fast to each other and to the good that we have to share with each other. I know that I must constantly be forgiven by my brothers and sisters for an overly provocative phrasing of a legitimate point. We are commanded to forgive; we are commanded to avoid judgment that we not be judged. I beg that we not caricature each other.

