

Testimonies Anchored in Christ

Our Relationship with Jesus As the Core of Our Faith

Prologue

The purpose of this writing is twofold: to protect and strengthen testimony, and to illuminate the freedom that flows from faith anchored in a personal relationship with the Lord, and a true understanding of life in Christ. Let it be stated at the outset that my foundational conviction is that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is Christ's Church. Established by Him, led by Him, and sustained by His living presence today through covenantal relationship, priesthood authority, and continuing revelation.

I began this writing in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. If these words are ever read by anyone beyond myself, my prayer is that they will help safeguard faith and testimony from confusion, doubt, and distortion, while inviting the reader to come unto Christ with greater personal confidence and trust. My focus is singular: a deep, and living relationship with the Lord. One that is marked not by fear, anxiety, or performance, but by love, trust, and freedom grounded in the assurance of His grace.

Chapter 1 — Theological Dissonance

“I know the Church is true.”

This simple declaration is the most familiar phrase heard during Fast and Testimony meeting. Nearly always spoken with sincerity, it reflects the sacred presence of faith. Faith is more than mere knowledge; it is belief that moves a person to act. Elder James E. Talmage described faith as “the result of conscious choice”. It is the deliberate choice to accept truth as it is confirmed by reason, experience, and the direct witness of the Holy Spirit.

Faith is never something we earn. While it requires our agency, it remains a divine gift. The things of God cannot be understood by mortal reasoning alone. As Saint Paul taught, “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him.” Faith comes by the Spirit, and thus it is bestowed as a divine gift from God.

Because faith, and our resulting testimonies of the truths regarding Christ’s gospel and His church, are sacred gifts from our loving Father in Heaven, they must be cultivated, nourished, and protected. Latter-day Saints are taught from childhood to seek a testimony and to ask God directly for their own witness of divine truth. For many members of the church, the foundational spiritual truth they seek is the knowledge that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “true”. In our vocabulary, this is often referred to as “the truthfulness of the restored gospel.” For many, this assurance becomes the foundation of their spiritual identity.

This is good and pleasing to our Lord. Yet it carries an important hazard if misunderstood. Faith must be rooted first and always in Jesus Christ. He is the foundation, and the living center of all truth. Everything else, including the Church that bears His name, is an appendage to the greater reality of the Risen Christ, His infinite love, and His redeeming presence in our lives.

There are times in the lives of all Latter-Day Saints where we struggle with doubts, questions, or spiritual challenges. These arise not because the Church is untrue, but because the adversary is skilled at obscuring what is true. Satan’s intent is always the same: to distance our hearts from Christ.

One of the adversary’s most effective and destructive tools in undermining faith is what I will call theological dissonance.

Theological dissonance occurs when a person’s faith (and testimony) is shaken because their understanding of God, doctrine, and spiritual authority no longer aligns with their lived experience. It occurs when a person’s beliefs about God, how He works, and what He requires begin to conflict, (either internally with one another, or externally with what a person encounters in the life of the Church. In simple terms, it is the distress that emerges when what a believer has been taught no longer seems to align with what they are living.

Over time, every believer constructs a framework for their faith. A person's testimony is in fact a theological structure composed of doctrines, assumptions, and expectations about God and their relationship with Him. This framework provides us with meaning, stability, and spiritual orientation. When experiences arise that seem to contradict that framework, the result is confusion, anxiety, and spiritual strain. If the tension is not addressed honestly and theologically, it does not remain neutral; it gradually erodes confidence and eventually weakens testimony. This is a technical description of how many members of the church have lost their testimonies and have fallen away from the church due to painful experience or disagreement.

Among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, theological dissonance often emerges around questions of revelation, obedience, priesthood authority, expectations to conform to cultural norms, and Church leadership. When these doctrines are misunderstood (often due to being absolutized beyond their intended scope) sincere disciples can find themselves trapped between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to systems, between personal revelation and institutional and cultural expectation. It is within this unresolved tension that theological dissonance takes root and begins its quiet work of destabilization.

Importantly, theological dissonance does not arise because Christ fails His people. It arises when church members look to the church to function in the place of Christ.

Misunderstandings in these areas can place sincere disciples under significant spiritual strain. These moments are often painful and disorienting. Yet they can also become sacred turning points. I can testify from personal experience that when a believer turns directly to the Lord in such circumstances in private prayer, with sincerity, faith, humility, and devotion, Christ will use these moments not to diminish faith, but to deepen it. Through such encounters, Christ invites us into clearer understanding, greater trust, a more mature discipleship, and a closer personal relationship with Him and with our Father in Heaven.

Why Theological Dissonance Feels Spiritually Threatening

A Latter-day Saint's faith rests upon several foundational assumptions, often held implicitly rather than consciously. Together, these convictions form the theological framework through which believers understand God, His church, their place in His church, and their relationship to our Lord Jesus Christ.

These foundational assumptions include that the Church reflects Christ; and that Church leaders represent Him.

When any one of these assumptions appears to be in doubt, such as when a Church decision, policy, or church leader seems unlike Christ, the resulting tension is not isolated to that single idea. Rather, the mind and spirit experience a threat to their entire testimony. The person's

entire theological structure which gives shape, stability, and meaning to their faith becomes unstable. This reaction is natural and involuntary, because foundational beliefs do not exist independently; they stand or fall together.

Saint Thomas Aquinas expressed this principle simply: truth is one and cannot contradict itself. When contradiction is perceived, either something has been misunderstood or a faulty assumption has been introduced. In either case, resolution does not come through denial or suppression, but through careful, faithful spiritual reflection.

For Latter-day Saints (whose theology uniquely weaves together divine authority, priesthood structure, personal revelation, and covenant belonging) unresolved tension in any one of these areas will ripple outward, quietly destabilizing an entire testimony.

Doctrinal Tension and “*Scandalum Fidei*”

Among the foundational doctrines of Latter-day Saint theology are the convictions that Christ personally leads His Church, that Church leaders act as His representatives, and that the Church is the divinely appointed steward of ordinances, covenants, and priesthood keys. These beliefs shape not only how members understand authority, but how they interpret the presence and activity of Christ in the world.

Subsequently, when the teachings or actions of a bishop, stake president, General Authority, or a Church policy appear to contradict the nature or teachings of Christ, the believer may experience profound doctrinal tension. Questions arise immediately and involuntarily: *Did Christ lead this decision? If not, what does that imply? If Christ leads His Church, how can this occur within it?*

If such tension remains unresolved, it can become what ancient Christian tradition calls “*scandalum fidei*”: a stumbling block to faith created when actions or teachings attributed to church leaders appear to stand in opposition to the character or teachings of Christ.

For many, the result is not a sudden collapse of their testimony, but a painful progression of doubt: first in Church leaders, then in Christ’s involvement, then in the nature of revelation itself, and eventually in the Church, or even in Christ.

This truth is foundational, and in fact the very essence of Christianity itself:

- Faith is not merely assent to doctrinal propositions; it is trust placed in a Person.

For this reason, our faith must ultimately rest upon a private and personal relationship with Jesus Christ Himself.

Yet this also explains why doctrinal tension arising from those presumed to speak or act in Christ's name can cut so deeply. Such moments do not simply challenge ideas; they strike at the very location where trust resides, and they can inflict real and lasting spiritual wounds.

Why This Tension Can Be Especially Intense for Latter-day Saints

Unlike many Protestant Christian faiths, which see the Church as helpful but not salvific, Latter-day Saints understand the Church to be essential to salvation. The Church is held to be the steward of covenants and administrator of essential ordinances. Church leaders are also held to be the bearer of Christ's authority through priesthood keys, and the channel of continuing revelation.

This means that when leaders err, or when church policies seem inconsistent with our Lord, many members of the church feel their entire path to Christ has been shaken.

This arises often among Latter-Day Saints due to common cultural assumptions that all teachings and decisions by church leaders reflect divine will, and that all church institutional policies always align with, and reflect the mind and will of Christ.

These assumptions can unintentionally place members' testimonies at risk. When faced with painful realities such as harmful decisions, doctrinal inconsistency, policy reversals, or historical errors, many struggle to reconcile these experiences with their idealized expectations.

Some then conclude that perhaps God is inconsistent, God tolerates harmful behavior, revelation is unreliable, or perhaps Christ is not actively leading this Church.

This is the most dangerous outcome of all: we begin to reshape God according to our dissonance.

This document seeks to address these issues systematically. A deeper and more accurate understanding of how the Lord leads and guides His Church, the true role and limits of Church leaders, the nature and scope of priesthood keys, the primary power of personal revelation, and the true role of the Holy Spirit, will provide both freedom and protection during times of spiritual strain.

I feel it important to state explicitly that these truths do not minimize the reality or severity of the pain or the seriousness of spiritual wounds. Things happen that should not happen. Church leaders sometimes make errors which cause painful experiences which leave real and lasting emotional and spiritual scars.

But Christ's truth provides His disciples with power. Power not only to endure such moments, but to emerge with stronger testimonies and deeper communion with our Lord.

Chapter 2 — Legalism: The Root Distortion

Legalism is the belief that one's standing before God is secured and maintained primarily through personal obedience, rule-keeping, or strict adherence to ecclesiastical directives and cultural norms. At its core, legalism shifts trust away from the grace of Jesus Christ and places it onto human performance. It replaces faith in Christ with confidence in compliance, and confuses loyalty to the Savior with conformity to policies, programs, and cultural expectations.

Among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, legalism is one of the most common, and most damaging, spiritual traps. It frequently gives rise to theological dissonance and plays a significant role in crises of faith.

For many, legalism manifests as an excessive focus on compliance with every instruction issued by the Church or its leaders, particularly those who hold delegated priesthood keys. Teachings and directives are sometimes treated not as pastoral guidance, but are assumed to have come directly from Christ, inherently salvific, and universally applicable in all circumstances. In practice, this collapses the distinction between divine commandment and human administration.

The origins of legalism are rarely malicious. Faithful Saints rightly desire to obey God, live righteously, and sustain those who are called to lead. These impulses are good and honorable. The danger arises when obedience to rules, policies, or loyalty to mortal leaders becomes the measure of one's standing before God. This shift is often revealed through the misuse of the language of "worthiness," which is pressed into service as a spiritual scorecard rather than understood within the gospel of grace.

When "worthiness" is detached from the grace of Christ and redefined as institutional compliance, it ceases to function as a gospel term and instead becomes a mechanism of control. The result of this shift is not a deeper relationship with and devotion to Christ, but fear-driven discipleship marked by anxiety, perfectionism, guilt, and, over time, spiritual exhaustion and defeat.

Latter-day Saint theology, however, is foundationally relational in nature. This is due to the fact that LDS theology is fundamentally covenantal. Throughout history, God has related to His people through covenants. These sacred covenants have served as relational bonds between God and His people, and provided for them the means of living and progressing through life grounded in His love and sustained by His grace. Through the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the fullness of this covenantal pattern has been reestablished. Through divine authority and sacred ordinances, individuals and families are invited into personal and enduring covenant relationships with God which bind them to Christ and open their lives to His transforming power. This covenantal relationship with Christ is not merely one important aspect of the Restoration. It is in fact its most profound and beautiful gift.

Alongside this truth stands the doctrine of continuing revelation through prophets and apostles. Yet even this foundational principle can be distorted. At times, loyalty to Christ is implicitly equated with unquestioning obedience to church authorities. Leaders and their teachings may become idealized, and in some cases, effectively idolized. The result again is that trust is shifted away from Christ Himself and onto human intermediaries.

To be clear: legalism is not the same as obedience. Legalism is obedience severed from a living, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the attempt (whether conscious or not) to save oneself by the law. The gospel calls us to something far better. Jesus Christ does not ask for fear-driven performance. He calls us to covenant faithfulness: to love Him, trust Him, rely wholly upon His infinite atonement and perfect love, and to express that love by making and keeping sacred covenants with Him.

Jesus Christ is the living head of His Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is truly His. Yet it is essential to remember that those who lead His Church are His servants, not His substitutes. We worship Christ, not the institution that bears His name. Our ultimate loyalty belongs to Him alone, not to any mortal leader, office, or system. Covenant loyalty is never owed to bureaucracy; it is owed only to God and to those with whom we have entered into sacred, eternal covenants: our Lord, and our families.

For this reason, Christ's invitation is both clear and personal: "*Come unto me.*" He does not summon us to a list of rules, but to Himself. We are bound by covenant to the living Christ: not to policies, programs, or administrative structures. When this order is reversed, discipleship is distorted. When it is preserved, faith remains centered upon the rock of Christ, and is therefore resilient, and free.

When we fall into the great trap of legalism: we've painted ourselves into a corner of believing that if we don't do everything a church leader says, we've disappointed our Lord and diminished our "worthiness." We now feel that in order to qualify for the love and blessings of our Lord, we must always be perfectly obedient to every church policy, directive, or teaching of every church leader. This inevitably leads to feelings of pressure and anxiety. A constant pressure to feel "good enough" or "worthy." Far from finding freedom in Christ, the disciple can now find themselves feeling like the gospel and the church are a weight and a burden.

When Christ said, "Come unto me all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He was specifically addressing those who feel their religion and church to be burdensome. When we find ourselves feeling that God's love for us fluctuates based upon our performance, and our obedience flows from fear rather than love, we know that something is amiss. Living in Christ is defined by love and freedom, not fear and anxiety.

The Lord desires, and rightly expects, that we love and sustain those He has called to administer the affairs of His Church and to lead, teach, and guide us. However, we must never find our actions being motivated by fear of displeasing a church leader. We should fear the Lord, not church authorities.

When we treat every policy, handbook guideline, administrative decision, general conference admonition, or directive of a church leader as an immutable divine decree, we are indeed undermining the Church's own truth claims by attributing the inevitable limitations and fallibility of mortals to Christ Himself.

This confusion becomes fertile ground for doctrinal tension. If left unresolved, it matures into theological dissonance capable of weakening, or even destroying, a person's testimony.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must always remember that the Holy Spirit is our primary, most invaluable, and vital resource. It is the personal voice of Christ to every one of His followers.

In order to protect our testimony from this form of theological dissonance, we must develop an understanding of the true role and limits of Church leaders.

Chapter 3 — How the Lord Leads and Guides His Church

Before proceeding further, a foundational question must be confronted directly: *Does the Lord Jesus Christ personally lead and guide The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today?* The answer is unequivocally yes. This is not merely a comforting sentiment; it is a central and non-negotiable doctrine of Latter-day Saint theology.

Yet clarity is essential regarding how Christ exercises that leadership. Jesus Christ does not govern His Church solely through institutional structures or inspired leaders. He also leads His people individually, directly, privately, and personally through revelation given by the Holy Spirit. Any theological framework that elevates institutional guidance while marginalizing personal revelation inevitably produces distortion and confusion.

It must therefore be stated plainly: not every teaching, statement, directive, or policy issued by Church leaders constitutes a direct expression of divine will. This is an uncomfortable assertion for many Latter Day Saints. Yet acknowledging this truth does not threaten or weaken priesthood authority. Quite the opposite. It protects it. Scripture consistently demonstrates that God works through fallible human servants. When this truth is ignored, authority and trust shift away from Christ Himself and is instead placed upon human agents. Such a shift cannot preserve faith; it endangers it.

Therefore, we are led to the most pressing question of all: *How does a believer discern what God has truly commanded?* That is the question! To answer it, we must begin with a careful and truthful examination of the hierarchy of revelation and authority within God's covenant order. The true order in which Christ remains supreme, the Holy Spirit remains active, and the believer is not reduced to a passive recipient, but is called to hear, discern, and respond.

Hierarchy of Authoritative Teaching

(from most to least binding)

1. Canonized Scripture

The scriptures (referred to in the LDS Church as the Standard Works) constitute the word of God given in divine love to disclose His nature, His will, and His law. Canonized scripture is the only voice of God that speaks with equal authority to every Saint: past, present, and future. As such, canonized scripture is the one source of divine revelation that is universally binding.

Unlike talks, essays, statements, directives, or Church policies that arise from particular times and contexts, the scriptures bear a permanent commission from heaven. They are God's enduring gift to the whole household of faith, binding each of us into a shared covenant and rooting us in the same sacred story across generations.

Because the scriptures are canonized by the sustaining vote of the entire Church, they anchor us in truths that do not drift with culture, leadership transitions, or individual perspectives.

Canonized scripture is the supreme standard by which all other teachings are weighed, and the steady light by which disciples discern the will of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

2. Official Proclamations of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Official proclamations represent the united and formal witness of the senior leadership of Christ's Church. While not canonized, these declarations carry significant authoritative weight because they express the collective prophetic voice of those ordained to hold and exercise all priesthood keys on earth.

Proclamations articulate doctrine, clarify the Church's stance on essential matters, and guide the Saints in moments of cultural or ecclesiastical significance. Their authority is derived from the unanimity of those who issue them, yet they remain interpretive and contextual, and therefore are subordinate to scripture.

The believer is responsible for seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit to understand and to apply them, and this must always be done in harmony with scripture.

3. General Conference Teachings and Church Policy (e.g., the Church Handbook)

General Conference teachings and official Church policies provide the ongoing, timely instruction of living prophets and apostles as they guide the Saints in the practical and spiritual demands of daily discipleship. They also ensure order and consistency in the administrative life of a global church.

While they possess real authority, they are not universally binding in the same absolute way scripture is. Their purpose is pastoral, situational, and administrative. They are a blessing from the Lord to His church in the present age. However, they are not the establishment of eternal law.

Thus, General Conference addresses and Church policies must be always interpreted and applied through, against, and within the framework of scripture.

The Holy Spirit enables each disciple of Christ to discern application, priority, and scope, ensuring that policies and present-day instruction serve the eternal truths revealed in scripture.

4. Statements and Writings of Church Leaders Outside of General Conference

Teachings from Apostles and Prophets given in settings outside General Conference can be genuinely uplifting and deeply insightful. Yet these expressions are theologically least binding because they lack the formal, united, and officially recognized setting through which the Church declares doctrine.

These teachings reflect the wisdom, experience, and spiritual perspective of inspired leaders, but they are shaped by the context, audience, and pastoral purpose of the moment.

Consequently, they must be received with gratitude but interpreted with care, always through the clarifying lenses of scripture, official proclamations, and the Holy Spirit.

Because many Latter-day Saints unconsciously treat all church teaching as equally binding, misunderstanding this hierarchy has become one of the primary sources of doctrinal tension in the Church. Modern prophets and apostles provide inspired guidance that helps the Saints live Christ's doctrine in their daily lives and circumstances. However, when every word spoken by a church leader (and every church policy or handbook directive) is treated as the declared divine will of Christ Himself, confusion becomes unavoidable and contradictions are manufactured where none actually exist.

Chapter 4 — Church Leaders: Calling, Stewardship, and Limits

Having discussed how legalism distorts church authority by turning leadership into control, we can now better understand the divine truth that church leaders are divinely authorized stewards whose role is to guide God's people toward Christ; not to replace Christ in our spiritual lives.

Misunderstanding the nature, scope, and limits of Church leadership is one of the primary sources of doctrinal tension (and, if left unaddressed, theological dissonance) among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A clear and truthful understanding of these principles allows members to genuinely sustain Church leaders while protecting their faith, honoring personal revelation, and remaining firmly anchored in Christ.

Throughout history, God has led His people through His authorized servants. The familiar phrase "follow the prophet" reflects an ancient and modern truth: God calls men and women to represent Him, and faith often requires recognizing and responding to that calling. This pattern is neither new nor uniquely Latter-day Saint.

At the same time, God has never presented His servants, including prophets and apostles, as anything other than flawed mortals. Scripture consistently affirms this reality. Moses, Peter, Jonah, and Alma the Younger stand as just a few scriptural examples of both divine calling and human fallibility. To impose an expectation of infallibility upon modern prophets and apostles is not only scripturally unfounded; it is unfair to them and ultimately destabilizing to the very authority they are called to exercise.

Church leaders hold real authority, but it is delegated authority. They are called to represent Jesus Christ, not to replace Him. They lead with inspiration, faith, experience, judgment, and sincere love. Yet they remain mortal and fallible disciples themselves. The Church has repeatedly acknowledged this truth. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught, "*With all their inspiration and greatness, prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general.*" Likewise, Elder Neal A. Anderson affirmed that Church leaders are "*honest but imperfect men,*" inviting members to learn wisdom through their acknowledged limitations.

In spite of acknowledging the reality of the mortal flaws of the Lord's prophets and apostles as a principle, many members nevertheless believe that every teaching, directive, and policy issued by church leaders represents the express divine will of Christ. However, in reality, it is only in those rare instances when church leaders are explicitly and collectively conveying formally declared revelation from the Lord that they are speaking directly and authoritatively for Christ. Such moments are exceptional, and rarer still are those revelations presented for canonization as scripture.

This truth does not diminish prophetic authority; it safeguards it. Properly understood, it allows members to receive inspired guidance from church leaders without placing upon it a theological weight it was never intended to bear. Many faith crises arise not from rejecting prophetic

counsel, but from assuming that every statement, policy, or directive carries the same authority as revealed divine law.

One illustrative case study of this tension emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The circumstances surrounding the pandemic were highly politicized and deeply polarizing. Strong convictions existed on nearly every aspect of the crisis, particularly regarding the vaccine developed toward the latter part of the pandemic.

When President Russell M. Nelson urged Church members to receive the vaccine, many faithful members experienced genuine internal conflict. Some held sincere personal reservations (medical, ethical, or circumstantial) about receiving the vaccine themselves or allowing it to be administered to their children.

Yet because the admonition came from the President of the Church, many felt they were being forced into a false and painful dilemma: either obey what they believed to be a divine command from God, or act contrary to their own sincere judgment and personal conviction. For some, this produced anxiety, guilt, and spiritual confusion.

This situation illustrates the consequences of misapplying prophetic authority. President Nelson was speaking as a loving Church leader and as a world-renowned physician, offering guidance informed by his experience, expertise, and concern for the well-being of the Saints. His counsel was sincere and earnest. However, it was pastoral guidance, not declared revelation. It was never presented as a commandment from the Lord.

The confusion arose not from what was said, but from what was assumed. Many members instinctively treated the counsel as though it carried the full weight of a direct command from Christ, simply because it was spoken by the prophet. That assumption transformed pastoral advice into perceived divine mandate, and in doing so, created unnecessary doctrinal tension and spiritual distress.

This case demonstrates how theological dissonance is often born: not from defiance of Church leadership, but from the mistaken belief that every admonition from a Church authority must be received as the express will of Christ for every individual circumstance. When prophetic counsel is elevated beyond its intended scope, it places an unbearable burden on the conscience of the disciple and obscures the role of personal revelation, which Christ Himself has ordained as essential to faithful discipleship.

Therefore, how should members of the Church respond when they hold sincere concerns in situations such as this? First, they should receive the counsel of the prophet with an open mind and an honest heart. Prophetic counsel deserves to be taken seriously, weighed carefully, and approached with humility.

Second, they should take the matter to the Lord in prayer. They should speak with Him privately, sincerely, and honestly. In prayer, they should openly express their concerns, their fears, and their convictions. They should ask, in faith, for personal guidance from the Holy Spirit. When they do so, the Lord will respond.

Personal revelation is not an exception in discipleship; it is the means by which discipleship is lived.

Having received that guidance, they should then act in accordance with the direct and personal direction given to them by Christ through His Spirit. They should move forward with faith, confidence, and trust in the Lord who knows them individually and governs their lives personally.

If that course of action differs from the counsel given, it must not be hastily labeled as disobedience. Rather, it may represent faithful discernment: the sincere effort to honor prophetic counsel while ultimately submitting one's conscience to Christ alone. This is not rebellion. It is lived faith.

Prophetic counsel informs and blesses. But, personal revelation governs. Christ alone must remain the Rock of our faith.

Again, it must be stated plainly: not every teaching, statement, directive, or policy issued by Church leaders constitutes a direct expression of divine will. Acknowledging this truth is not rebellion or disobedience. It is an acknowledgement of truth which protects testimony, and allows members to more fully sustain their leaders while remaining anchored in Christ.

Concerning this point, Doctrine and Covenants 1:38 is frequently raised in rebuttal: "*Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.*" As canonized scripture, this verse rightly carries divine authority. The difficulty lies not in the verse itself, but in how it is often misapplied.

This scripture is frequently treated as an absolute claim: that everything spoken by a Church leader, in any setting and at any time, carries the same authority and infallibility as the direct voice of Christ. However, such a reading cannot be sustained theologically. When interpreted this way, the verse generates immediate contradictions with other scripture, with the lived history of the church, and with the everyday experience of faithful members.

The most vital aspect of proper scriptural interpretation is always context. Who is speaking? To whom? On what subject? Doctrine and Covenants Section 1 is the Lord's preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, and is a declaration concerning revealed word and divine law. Its scope does not encompass every teaching, act of administration, policy decision, personal opinion, or cultural expectation within the Church.

In D&C Section 1, the Lord is declaring the principle that when He speaks to us by divine revelation, whether that be directly to us or through His authorized servants, that revealed word has divine authority.

Doctrine and Covenants 1:38 does not teach that every statement by a priesthood holder constitutes revelation, that all Church policies are divinely mandated, or that leaders cannot err, revise, or retract. To insist otherwise immediately introduces doctrinal tension by contradicting scripture, prophetic admissions of error, the command to discern, and the very principle of continuing revelation.

To absolutize this verse is to transfer trust from Christ to systems, to marginalize personal revelation, to silence conscience, and to transform obedience into mere compliance. Doubt becomes morally suspect rather than spiritually formative, and faith is weakened, not strengthened.

Doctrine and Covenants 68:4 provides important clarification: *“Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture.”*

The implication is unmistakable: sometimes they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and sometimes they are not. Joseph Smith himself taught, *“A prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.”* Acknowledging the reality that not every word spoken by church authorities constitutes divine will is not dissent; it is foundational Latter-day Saint theology.

We must never lose sight of the truth that no priesthood office, leader, or institution replaces Christ’s direct lordship over the soul. Christ speaks personally and privately to His people through the Holy Spirit. Each member must discern, through personal revelation, how divine instruction applies to their own life.

The voice that ultimately governs the disciple is not the abstract authority of an institution, but the living voice of Christ. The Church exists to point us to that voice, never to replace it.

The true nature of local church leaders

Local Church leaders are called to serve in positions that are primarily administrative in nature. Their responsibility is to ensure order, consistency, and faithful administration within the affairs of Christ’s Church. While they may offer instruction and guidance to the Saints they serve, their role is not principally pastoral. Local leaders do not regularly preach or expound doctrine in congregational worship, nor are they charged with the primary work of individualized spiritual care, which is intentionally distributed among the body of the Saints.

Local Church leaders function as stewards, entrusted with delegated authority to administer the affairs of the Lord’s church in their designated area. They serve both the Lord and His people faithfully in this capacity. Yet stewardship must never be confused with supremacy. Christ alone is Lord of the conscience and Shepherd of the soul.

The Lord rightly expects local leaders to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they carry out their callings, and He blesses their sincere efforts to do so. However, many members mistakenly assume that all instruction or guidance given by Church leaders (including local leaders) always reflects the direct will of Christ. In doing so, they extend the definition and role of priesthood authority beyond its intended scope, attributing divine mandate to counsel that may be administrative, situational, or shaped by human limitation.

There are many ways in which this misunderstanding manifests. Church callings are one of the most common. Local leaders prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and rely on their knowledge of the needs and abilities of their congregation when extending callings. And the Lord's hand is indeed present in this process. Without question, He loves and blesses the countless members who faithfully and sacrificially strive to magnify the callings they receive. It is precisely this love, faith, and willingness to serve that allows the Church to function and through which the Lord accomplishes much of His work on the earth today.

Every Christian has a ministry. A disciple of Christ is not merely a believer. A disciple of Christ has something to give. Truth to the unbeliever, and hope, and encouragement to fellow Saints. In the Lord's wisdom, much of this ministry is organized and expressed through Church callings, as members willingly consecrate their time and gifts in service to others.

The danger arises when Church callings are interpreted as direct, individualized commands from Christ in such a way that members feel morally or spiritually forbidden to decline, pause, or step away from a calling. In this framework, prioritizing family needs, personal health, or prayerfully seeking personal revelation about one's capacity to serve can feel like disobedience. Discernment is mistaken for rebellion, and guilt becomes the governing force. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you can be assured that if your motivation is guilt or fear, something is amiss. This confusion stems from collapsing administrative delegation into divine command.

There are circumstances in which declining a calling, or stepping down from one, is not only appropriate, but faithful. No member should be made to feel ashamed or fearful for responding honestly to their circumstances before the Lord. God judges the heart, not the appearance. Declining a calling out of apathy or unwillingness to serve is categorically different from doing so out of spiritual discernment, exhaustion, family necessity, or obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

At times, the Holy Spirit may indeed prompt a member to step aside from a calling or to decline one altogether. Though this reality unsettles some, it introduces no theological contradiction. Such moments are not evidence of diminished faith, but of lived faith. It comes from living in Christ through a faith that trusts Christ's active and personal involvement in the believer's life. While these situations should be rare, they are real, and they must be acknowledged without suspicion or shame.

Every disciple who has encountered the love of Christ feels a natural desire to serve Him by serving others. That love transforms sacrifice into joy and labor into worship. Church callings are therefore rightly received as blessings and sacred opportunities. Yet this truth must not be distorted into the belief that faithfulness requires unquestioning acceptance of every calling under all circumstances. Such a belief diminishes Christ's personal lordship, suppresses personal revelation, and replaces freedom in Christ with fear-driven obligation. The Lord does not call His people into bondage, but into faithful, discerning service rooted in love.

While church callings are one common way in which misunderstandings about the role and nature of local church leaders manifest themselves, it is far from the only way. Another

pervasive error is the belief (often implicit rather than stated) that local church leaders stand in judgment over a member's standing before God.

It is true that one of the primary responsibilities of local church leaders is to safeguard the sanctity of sacred ordinances, including baptism, the sacrament, and the ordinances of the temple. In fulfilling this responsibility, local leaders prayerfully apply both the gifts the Lord has entrusted to them and inspiration from the Holy Spirit to determine whether a person is qualified to participate in those ordinances. Yet over time, qualification has frequently been misinterpreted as "worthiness". Although the Church has wisely distanced itself from that terminology in recent years, the historical use of phrases such as "personal worthiness" and "worthiness interviews" has lent credibility to a deeply consequential and dangerous misconception.

This truth is uncompromising: no one is worthy before God. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." None are righteous by their own works, obedience, or morality. And yet, with equal power and truth, the gospel of Christ is in its essence the declaration that all may stand worthy before God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His infinite atoning sacrifice. Worthiness before God is not earned; it is granted. It is not administered; it is bestowed. It is certainly not conditional upon ecclesiastical approval; it is rooted entirely in Christ.

Moreover, the only one who can judge a person's standing before God is Christ the Lord Himself. To believe that any mortal possesses the authority to declare a person forgiven, condemned, reconciled, worthy or unworthy before God represents a grave misunderstanding of the gospel of Christ. Yet while rarely stated explicitly, this belief quietly governs the assumptions and behaviors of many church members. It is most evident in personal interviews with local leaders and especially in the church membership council process.

There are circumstances in which a bishop may determine that a member should be temporarily restricted from participating in certain ordinances. The purpose of such restrictions is not punitive, nor are they declarations about a person's standing before God. Their sole function is to protect the sanctity of sacred ordinances and to assist the member in turning fully and freely to Christ. A member does not go to a bishop to obtain forgiveness. And yet, many behave as though they do.

In practice, this unintentionally mirrors Catholic theology and confession. Members often seem to assume that they are required to confess certain sins to a local authority, receive a prescribed penance, and are then pronounced forgiven upon completion of that penance. This is not, and has never been, the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness comes directly, and only, from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He employs no intermediary in this sacred transaction. When members confess their sins, seek counsel, and follow the guidance of local leaders while sincerely turning their hearts to God in prayer and repentance, the mighty change of heart they receive is wrought privately and personally by the power of the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness is not administered publicly; it is received personally.

In fact, it is often the receipt of forgiveness that enables a member to move forward in the formal processes of the Church with faith, humility, and hope.

I myself serve as a case study in this matter, and can testify to this truth personally. The Lord Jesus Christ found me when I was lost. He saved me. He healed me. And He forgave me: personally, powerfully, and directly. It was the overwhelming reality of His forgiveness and love that compelled me to initiate the formal process of a church membership council. I did not seek forgiveness through the process; I entered the process because I had already been forgiven. The love of Christ which then filled my heart also filled me with desire to worship and serve Him for the remainder of my life, and to do so as a member of His holy and restored church. Therefore, I sought out the formal church administrative process of the church membership council.

Having completed that process in its entirety, I testify that it is divinely inspired. It strengthened and deepened my relationship with Christ in ways that remain foundational to my discipleship today. I experienced real spiritual breakthroughs, and I was profoundly blessed by local church leaders who sought sincerely to guide and support me. Yet at no point did I look to them for a declaration of my forgiveness or my standing before God. I knew where I stood with the Lord. I understood my local leaders to be inspired administrators of the Lord's order within His Church, but never as arbiters of my salvation, or declarers of my standing with our Lord. They administered the process faithfully, but all forgiveness, healing, and transformation occurred personally and privately between myself and Jesus Christ.

Local church leaders do not mediate salvation, forgiveness, or our standing before God. Their authority is primarily administrative and in some cases pastoral. But not judicial or salvific. Christ alone judges; Christ alone forgives; Christ alone reconciles. No leader has the authority to claim what Christ alone has purchased with His blood

Having established that no mortal stands as judge over another's standing before God, we must now examine a phrase that is frequently cited to suggest otherwise: the bishop as a "judge in Israel." Doctrine and Covenants 107:72 states, "*The bishop is a judge in Israel; he may judge in Israel, according to the laws of the kingdom, by the assistance of his counselors, whom he has chosen or will choose among the elders of the church.*" This is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied scriptures in modern day LDS church member experience. In order to properly interpret and apply this scripture, one must distinguish carefully between judicial administration vs. moral judgment.

The verse says "*according to the laws of the kingdom*", not according to personal discernment. This scripture defines an administrative role, not a salvific one. Christ alone is the distinguisher of moral judgement. The scriptures are exceedingly clear on this. One example is John 5:22 which reads, "*The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.*"

If bishops were judges of worthiness in a salvific sense, the scriptures would be false. They are not. The role of a Bishop is to oversee ordinances. This includes protecting the sanctity of those ordinances by striving to discern those participating to be properly qualified to do so, and to facilitate the ongoing process of sanctification through the atoning sacrifice of Christ in the lives of the church members by maintaining order within the covenant community.

In scriptural language, judging means governing, deciding disputes, or administering law. Examples include Old Testament judges who governed Israel; they were not moral arbiters of souls, and Moses who appointed judges to settle matters (*Exodus 18*)

The term judge in a scriptural context is a magistrate not a sentencer of souls.

Thus we can see that a bishop judges cases, not persons.

The role of the Bishop in such cases is to determine whether a member is qualified to participate in certain communal ordinances at a given moment, and if they are not, how to best guide that person through Christ to a position where they have achieved a level of spiritual growth necessary to become qualified to do so. To confuse stewardship of the protection of ordinances with judgment of worthiness is to place upon bishops an authority that scripture reserves exclusively for Christ.

The bishop's calling exists to protect the sanctity of the Church, not to replace the judgment seat of Christ. The soul stands accountable to Christ alone, and that truth is not diminished by priesthood authority but safeguarded by it.

When rightly understood, the role of local church leaders is neither diminished nor inflated, but properly ordered. They are not judges of souls, mediators of forgiveness, or arbiters of divine favor. They are shepherds, stewards, and administrators of sacred ordinances within the Lord's Church. Their authority exists to point souls to Christ, not to stand in His place. When members understand this distinction, fear gives way to faith, guilt yields to grace, and obedience is no longer driven by anxiety but by love. In this proper ordering, both leaders and members are freed to fulfill their callings, not as gatekeepers of salvation, but as fellow disciples, standing equally dependent upon the mercy, forgiveness, and sustaining power of Jesus Christ.

Personal interviews provide another context in which a truthful understanding of the nature and role of local Church leadership is essential. Because many members implicitly interpret the guidance and admonitions of local leaders as the direct and expressed will of Christ Himself, personal interviews can easily be misunderstood. When pastoral counsel is received not as guidance but as divine decree, such admonitions are given undue weight, and the fallibility of local leaders is functionally ignored. In these moments, the human limitations of those called to lead are no longer accounted for.

When this occurs, inaccurate (or simply wrong) counsel can place a profound and unnecessary spiritual burden upon a member, and the result can be confusion, fear, spiritual harm, and the weakening of one's testimony.

A case study that powerfully illustrates this principle comes from an example set by my father. In his early adulthood, he faced serious and unusually complex marital difficulties. The circumstances were severe, and divorce appeared inevitable. Under the weight of that trial, my father turned first to the Lord. He entered a season of extended fasting and prayer, seeking wisdom and direction personally from Christ. After doing so, he arranged a personal interview with his Stake President, hoping for counsel and guidance.

During that meeting, the sole guidance offered to my father was this statement: *“If you get divorced, you will lose your priesthood and never get it back.”*

At first glance, one is tempted simply to say, “That isn’t true.” But upon reflection, the statement does not even rise to the level of being meaningfully false. It is theologically incoherent. What does such a remark even intend to assert? What doctrine of priesthood, repentance, or redemption could possibly sustain it? The statement does not invite disagreement so much as it resists comprehension altogether.

Needless to say, this counsel was not helpful. What a disappointment it must have been to receive this guidance from his Stake President after such a period of fasting and prayer. Had my father lacked a strong personal relationship with the Lord, and had his faith been dependent primarily upon institutional mediation rather than personal communion with Christ, this interview could have resulted in devastating spiritual consequences. Instead, my father rightly understood this “admonition” for what it was: a deeply flawed attempt at pastoral guidance, not a directive from the Lord.

My father pressed forward in faith, relying upon his own covenant relationship with Christ. He allowed Christ to prevail in his life by acting in accordance with the direction he personally received through prayer and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Did he follow the counsel given by his Stake President? No. And rightly so! The counsel was wrong. He recognized it as such and chose to be led by the Spirit rather than governed by fear.

It is critically important to observe that this experience did not diminish my father’s faith in the Lord’s Church. He understood that a Stake President can be called of God, serve faithfully, and still, at times, simply be wrong. His Stake President was a man entrusted with delegated authority to administer the affairs of the Church within a particular stewardship. That delegated authority did not supersede the Lord’s direct authority in my father’s life, nor did it nullify Christ’s desire to personally lead, guide, and strengthen him in his most difficult decisions.

Though harmful and theologically ridiculous, the Stake President’s remarks were not a reflection of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. They did not cast doubt on the reality that Christ personally leads and guides The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They did, however, clarify *how* He does so.

In truth, no ecclesiastical office can ever displace Christ’s direct Lordship over His disciples. Authority in the Church is derivative, not original. No mortal possesses the authority to forgive sins, to redeem souls, or to declare another person ultimately “worthy” or “unworthy” of the love and blessings of Christ. Church leadership exists under Christ, never in place of Him.

When leaders are mistakenly treated as replacements for Christ, both leaders and members are spiritually harmed. Leaders are burdened with an authority they were never meant to bear, and members are deprived of the personal communion with Christ they were meant to enjoy. Church leaders are divinely authorized stewards whose sacred role is to guide God’s children *toward* Christ, not to replace Him in their spiritual lives.

The Nature and Scope of Priesthood Keys

A proper understanding of Priesthood Keys is essential to sound theology and a resilient testimony. Priesthood keys are not simply part of the mechanics of church government. They are in fact foundational to the Lord's administration of His covenantal work. Through ordered priesthood authority, Christ governs His Church and safeguards the covenant relationship into which each of us is personally invited. Priesthood Keys therefore stand at the living center of the Lord's work, both in this time and in eternity.

A comprehensive treatment of Priesthood Keys lies far beyond the scope of this work. Their historical development, doctrinal foundations, and ecclesiastical applications deserve sustained and careful study. My purpose here is narrower, though essential to the aspects of Theological Dissonance which I seek to address..

Priesthood Keys shape the way Church leaders function in the lives of the Saints. And when their nature is misunderstood, serious theological distortions follow. Misconceptions about priesthood keys often generate functional misunderstandings about local leadership. Over time, those misunderstandings can become assumptions, and these assumptions reinforce performance-based faith, diminish personal revelation, and create theological dissonance. If left unresolved, this dissonance will become destabilizing to one's testimony.

It is precisely which I wish to illustrate and protect against here. A true understanding of priesthood keys and their role in local church leadership allows order to be preserved without suffocating revelation, and authority honored without marginalizing the personal covenantal relationship each disciple is invited to enjoy with our Lord.

The church defines Priesthood Keys in the following manner in the General Handbook Section 3.4:

"Priesthood keys are the authority to direct the use of the priesthood on behalf of God's children....Jesus Christ holds all the keys of the priesthood. Under His direction, priesthood keys are given to men to use in specific callings to help accomplish God's work...Priesthood keys ensure that God's work of salvation and exaltation is accomplished in an orderly manner"

Priesthood keys grant a person delegated authority to act in the name of the Lord in the administration of His Church. They are stewardship. A man who receives priesthood keys receives authority that is real, binding, and sacred, but also defined and limited to a specific sphere of responsibility. Within that sphere, he bears both the authority and the obligation to see that the Lord's work is carried out according to divine order.

Historically and doctrinally, priesthood keys have never been understood to confer exhaustive theological insight or infallible discernment in every matter within a priesthood leader's calling.

They do not transform a mortal administrator into an oracle, nor provide mystical endowments of omniscience. And yet, in practice, many members (and at times, church leaders themselves) seem to treat priesthood keys as though they do.

One manifestation of this misunderstanding is what I refer to as the “worker bee” mentality.

Consider a Ward Council and its function for example. A Ward Council represents the Lord’s ordered administration within a defined portion of His vineyard. The Bishop, who holds priesthood keys, presides. Alongside him serve his counselors and the presidents of the ward organizations (Relief Society, Elders Quorum, Young Women, Sunday School) and others. Each of these leaders is set apart and charged before God to magnify a specific stewardship.

When priesthood keys are misconstrued as granting the Bishop exclusive revelatory rights over all matters in the ward, a distortion emerges. The Bishop becomes the sole fountain of meaningful revelation. Everyone else becomes an executor of his decisions.

In such a system, other leaders are still encouraged to pray and seek inspiration for their callings. They may fast, ponder, and pray with sincere faith. In such cases, they will undoubtedly receive inspired impressions and personal guidance from the Holy Spirit in accordance with the sincerity of their heart and their faith which is in Christ. The result will be to formulate inspired initiatives. Yet when these sacred impressions are brought forward, they are functionally suspended as the Bishop seeks to independently receive revelation to approve, modify, or reject them. The final word always rests solely in him, not merely administratively, but revelatorily. The others exist merely to implement.

Many Ward Councils operate exactly in this manner. I submit that many members and church leaders would openly state their belief that this is precisely how the Lord intends this system to function, and would even define this as a primary responsibility of the Bishop. .

However, such a model does not withstand theological reflection.

If taken to its logical conclusion, this model renders the personal revelation of every ward council member other than the Bishop to be functionally secondary, and truthfully even unnecessary. In fact, logical examination demonstrates that this approach reduces the process of seeking personal revelation in the magnification of their church calling, for every member of the ward other than the Bishop, to be nothing more than a procedural formality. It becomes a ritual gesture preceding the “real” revelation, which alone resides only with the Bishop. In practice, only one person’s revelation truly counts.

This reduces every other calling in the ward to a kind of spiritual subcontracting. The Elders Quorum President does not truly preside over his quorum under Christ; he executes directives. The Relief Society President does not receive revelation for the sisters; she awaits confirmation of whether her impressions align with the Bishop’s independent revelation. Everyone in the ward becomes, in effect, worker bees: industrious and faithful, but ultimately nothing more than subcontractors..

Is this truly our Lord's divine pattern? Surely not.

The Lord of the vineyard does not bless each of us with sacred church callings merely to create layers of implementation. He calls men and women to stewardship in His vineyard with real spiritual authority within their sphere. Our Lord Jesus Christ desires to guide each of His servants, whom He loves, personally. The promise of divine revelation is not monopolized by priesthood keys. It is extended to every disciple who sincerely and faithfully seeks to receive it: within his or her divinely appointed stewardship.

Indeed, seeking and relying upon personal revelation is not optional in the magnification of a calling. In fact, it is the essence of calling magnification.. Without it, magnification collapses into management. If only one individual receives operative revelation, then the structure of ward organization becomes theologically unnecessary. Why appoint presidents at all? Why set them apart? Why charge them before God to receive inspiration and guidance for their stewardship if their impressions carry no governing weight?

Priesthood keys are not given to centralize all revelation in one man. They are given to preserve order, unity, and doctrinal fidelity in the Lord's work. Priesthood keys safeguard the Church from fragmentation; they do not suffocate the Holy Spirit's operation in others.

However, it is not always such. I have seen a very different model. One that truly reflects this theology.

I once served as a counselor to a Bishop who was nothing short of a spiritual mentor for me. In fact, his leadership serves today as a foundational example in my own discipleship. A truly humble and faithful servant of Christ and a man whose leadership was defined by love. He understood his priesthood keys not as exclusive revelatory ownership, but as sacred administrative stewardship. He invited members of the Ward Council to seek direct inspiration for their callings. He expected it. He honored it. He created space for it.

He once told me privately that he viewed his role as Bishop to be "getting out of the way of the Ward Council." Though not strictly accurate, the statement was a reflection of the humility which defined him and his church leadership. However, the statement did contain profound theological insight. He did not mean to insinuate an abdication of responsibility. He meant that he understood his calling as Bishop was not to replace others' revelation, but to facilitate it. To coordinate it. To ensure that inspired efforts of those in his ward were supported, harmonized, and strengthened for the blessing of the entire ward.

When concerns arose, he addressed them. When correction was needed, he offered it. But he always did so faithfully, humbly, and rarely. His authority was real. His keys were operative. But they functioned as a canopy of order under which the many streams of revelation which were received by the faith and love of Christ in the hearts of the members of the ward could flow, not as a dam restraining them.

In those ward councils, personal revelation was not ceremonial. It was alive. Ward leaders felt empowered with genuine spiritual ownership of their stewardships. The Bishop presided, but Christ led.

That Bishop became a mentor to me. Among the many things he taught me was this: priesthood keys are not the right to receive all revelation. They are the responsibility to ensure that all true revelation is honored, magnified, and gathered into unity for the blessing of the members of the ward and for the glory of Christ our Lord.

Priesthood keys do not make one the sole arbiter of heaven's voice. They make one the guardian of heaven's order.

That truth is far more beautiful, and illustrates a far more demanding, calling.

This example of a Ward Council and the “worker bee” mentality merely illustrates one example of the application of a misunderstanding of priesthood keys. Truthfully, a misunderstanding of this vital doctrine can have far more impactful negative consequences.

It is vital that we understand, and continually reaffirm, that all Church leaders, including those who hold priesthood keys, operate under scripture, not above it.

This may appear to be obvious Yet, in practice, its implications are not always honored.

The law of God, the nature, character, and eternal order of the Father and the Son are made known through scripture. Divine authority is defined and bounded by scripture. Priesthood leaders do not stand outside the revealed word as independent arbiters of its application. They are servants within it.

Scripture must therefore remain our universal anchor, our guardrail, and our measuring rod. It protects leaders from overreach. It protects members from abuse. It protects the Church from drifting into personality-driven authority. Above all, it protects the Lord's covenant order from distortion.

To illustrate the applications of this vital theological principle, consider the following hypothetical case. I present it illustratively only, without asserting that it occurred or implying knowledge of any real individuals.

Imagine a Stake President conducting a membership council. The member under review requests that the principles outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 121 be honored in the process. Particularly those regarding others being allowed to be present to support the member in question.

Suppose the Stake President were to respond by asserting that the priesthood keys conferred upon him grant him the authority to determine whether and how Doctrine and Covenants 121 applies in his stake. Even to the extent of modifying or suspending its application.

Such a claim would be theologically untenable.

Priesthood keys authorize administration within divine law; they certainly do not authorize exemption from it. To assert that a person who holds priesthood keys may set aside revealed scripture in the execution of his stewardship is to destroy the very structure those keys are meant to preserve.

Priesthood keys grant stewardship within the revealed order of God. They do not confer the right to redefine that order.

If priesthood keys authorized a leader to suspend revealed doctrine at will, then the entire concept of revealed scripture would be destabilized. The scriptures would no longer function as governing revelation, but as advisory material subject to administrative override. The very truth claims of the Church itself depend precisely upon the opposite.

Consider the logical implications. If a Stake President has such authority, so does a Bishop. Therefore a Bishop could suspend the clear scriptural prohibitions within his jurisdiction as well. What would prevent him then from authorizing infant baptism despite explicit condemnation of the practice in the Book of Mormon? Baptism lies within a Bishop's administrative sphere. If priesthood keys granted discretionary authority to override scripture, no principled boundary would remain. The result would not be order, but chaos. Precisely what priesthood keys are meant to prevent.

One might attempt to resolve this tension by limiting this supposed authority to a single individual rather than all holders of priesthood keys. But this does not solve the problem; it intensifies it. If the authority to suspend revealed scripture is not inherent to priesthood keys generally, yet is claimed personally by one individual who holds them, then the claim is no longer administrative: it is sovereign! And sovereignty over revealed law belongs to God alone. No servant of the Lord can simultaneously be subject to divine law and sovereign over it.

Priesthood keys exist to preserve unity under revelation, not to create autonomous centers of revelation not subject to scripture.

Now, imagine further that in such a hypothetical case, a decision was rendered to remove that member's church records. The process in doing so disregarded the revealed pattern of Doctrine and Covenants 121. The administrative consequences would be enforceable within institutional structures. Church records could be altered. Privileges could be restricted.

But administrative enforceability does not imply spiritually binding power.

Doctrine and Covenants 121 itself teaches that when authority is exercised in unrighteous dominion, "Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man." Authority severed from righteousness loses divine efficacy. Heaven does not ratify what violates heaven's own law.

This distinction is sobering. It should humble leaders. It should steady members. It reminds us that no mortal church leader, however sincere, possesses lordship over our souls. Only Jesus Christ does.

Even in the painful scenario imagined above, the member's covenant relationship with Christ would not be nullified by this human misapplication. Leaders may err. Councils may falter. Processes may wound. But the Lord does not abandon His own.

Indeed, it is often through such crucibles that faith is refined! If that individual pressed forward in faith, clinging personally and privately to Christ Himself, he would in time discover that what was intended for harm became, by the grace of Christ our Lord, a forge. A deeper love for the Savior. A more resilient testimony. A compassion for others who likewise had been wounded by misunderstanding. A faith no longer dependent upon flawless church administration, but anchored in our flawless Redeemer!

This hypothetical example is not an attack on church leadership. It is a defense of divine order.

Priesthood keys are sacred precisely because they are bound to heaven's law. When they function within God's revealed framework, they bless, unify, and protect. When misunderstood as authority above scripture, they become instruments of the very disorder they were given to prevent.

We must always hold in our hearts the truth that the members of Christ's church belong to Christ Himself, not to church leaders or the institution. Church leaders are called by the Lord to care for souls which Christ loves with an incomprehensible and perfect love. They are given delegated authority to do so. However, only our Lord Jesus Christ must forever claim our ultimate allegiance, not any person on earth, including church leaders.

A misunderstanding of this can lead to situations where church life for the member includes feelings of fear, shame, pressure, or guilt as they find themselves living the gospel in a sense of fear based obedience. They worry not only about the law of God, but the expectations of their local church leader. Jesus taught, "By their fruits ye shall know them." The fruit of a healthy relationship between church leaders and members, based in Christ's truth, is trust, safety, spiritual growth, and love.

Chapter 5 — The True Role of the Holy Ghost

During His final discourse with His disciples, on the eve of His great atoning sacrifice, Jesus declared something that must have seemed not only puzzling, but almost unbearable to those who loved Him:

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”
(John 16:7)

How could our Lord’s departure possibly be to their advantage? How could His absence produce something greater than His presence?

What the disciples could not yet comprehend was that Christ’s resurrection and ascension would inaugurate something far more expansive and powerful than even His local companionship. During His mortal ministry, Jesus walked with a relatively small band of followers in a specific place and time. But through His exaltation, the Father would pour out His Spirit upon all the earth. Fellowship with Christ, which was once limited by geography and time would become universally accessible. Every covenant disciple, in every nation, in every age, in every circumstance, would be granted personal communion with the living Christ through the Holy Spirit of God.

Ten days after the Lord’s ascension, that promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. The Spirit descended like a rushing wind. The Christian Church was born. The gifts of the Spirit were poured out upon believers. From that moment forward, the presence of God would no longer be confined to physical proximity. It would dwell within His all of His covenant people.

The Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God. The Gift of the Holy Ghost.

These names all refer to the most essential doctrine in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Certainly no doctrine is more central to the daily life of a Latter-day Saint. And yet few doctrines are more widely misunderstood in practice.

The Holy Spirit is so vital to salvation, sanctification, revelation, and every aspect of life in Christ that no single chapter, or even a volume of work, could exhaust the subject. The formal theological term for the study of the Spirit is pneumatology, and it is a lifelong endeavor. One does not master pneumatology; one lives within it.

In this work, I seek only to examine those aspects of the Holy Ghost most necessary for protecting our testimonies from doctrinal tension and theological dissonance in the lives of Latter-day Saints today. When His role is misunderstood, the structure of our testimony becomes unstable. When His ministry is rightly seen, unity, assurance, and a resilient testimony follow.

A Reduction in Practice

The official teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints affirm the true and beautiful doctrine of the Holy Ghost. He is a divine Personage, a teacher, a sanctifier, and a comforter. He glorifies the Son. He reveals truth. He transforms the heart. He is the agent of spiritual rebirth and ongoing sanctification.

Yet in lived experience, the Holy Ghost is often functionally reduced to something far smaller.

Instead of a divine Person with whom we commune, the Spirit becomes a sort of moral thermometer or a “worthiness” gauge. Though the theology remains intact on paper, it is frequently filtered through cultural and institutional habits that reshape its application. The Spirit is treated less as the indwelling presence of God and more as a mechanism for behavior management.

Church culture, almost inevitably, operationalizes doctrine. Subsequently, teachings regarding the Holy Ghost often emphasize “what we must do to feel the Spirit” or “how to know we are worthy of His presence,” rather than how to abide in Christ daily. This emphasis shifts the nature of our discipleship from relationship to regulation.

When this occurs, our discipleship becomes viewed as transactional rather than relational. Legalism, with its inevitable anxiety, overshadows grace. Communion with Christ is perceived as a reward for obedience rather than a covenant gift grounded in His perfect righteousness.

Many sincere believers begin to feel that the Spirit’s presence is fragile, and that He withdraws frequently because of our mortal imperfections. They believe that His ministry is primarily to confirm major Church-aligned decisions, and that any perceived silence must signal some personal failure.

In practice, the Holy Ghost can even be treated as an administrative instrument: confirming temple worthiness, endorsing mission service, validating tithing faithfulness, reinforcing moral compliance. While the Spirit certainly guides us in matters of obedience, His ministry is far deeper and far more intimate than institutional validation.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who hold the inestimable gift of personal covenant union with Christ, must not reduce the Spirit to an occasional aid summoned in moments of uncertainty, nor merely a warning system or a “worthiness” validator. Yet in many cases of church teaching, His role is often narrowed to precisely those functions.

The implications of this are spiritually dangerous: if spiritual impressions are perceived to be absent, then the fault must lie in our own moral deficiency. If our spiritual confidence wanes, we assume we have fallen out of favor with our Lord.

This truth must be stated plainly: The Holy Ghost does not testify of our personal righteousness. He testifies of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit bears witness of the Son. He assures us of covenant belonging. He magnifies in our hearts the personal application of the saving grace of Christ, and through that grace, He transforms us. When the ministry of the Holy Ghost is rightly understood, obedience becomes joyful rather than anxious, and discipleship becomes communion rather than compliance.

The Gift and Its Meaning

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, baptism inaugurates covenant union with Christ. Immediately thereafter, hands are laid upon the head and the Gift of the Holy Ghost is bestowed with these words, "We say unto you: Receive the Holy Ghost."

We can therefore see that The Gift of The Holy Ghost is more than a blessing. It is a divine charge! It is heaven's commission to live in conscious fellowship with God. The Gift of the Holy Ghost is the divine provision by which every covenant disciple lives in ongoing union with Christ.

Saint Paul taught this beautifully when he wrote, "*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*" (Romans 5:1-5. ESV)

The Holy Ghost does not merely bring us blessings; He brings us to Christ, from whom all blessings flow.

Does the Spirit strengthen us in trial? Does He comfort and sustain us in our times of need?

Indeed it is Christ who ultimately succors, heals, and redeems. As the great prophet Alma taught the people of Gideon, "*And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.*" (Alma 7:12)

Christ suffered in order to sustain us. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to unite us to the living Christ so that His sustaining power becomes operative in our lives.

The voice of the Holy Ghost is Christ-centered, not self-centered. Through the Holy Ghost, Christ teaches, illuminates, and comforts. The Spirit seals truth upon our hearts. Above all, He bears witness of the sufficiency of Christ. He does not draw our gaze obsessively inward toward our imperfections. He directs our eyes outward and upward to the Savior.

Through the Holy Ghost we learn that our standing before God rests not upon our own righteousness, but upon the perfect righteousness of Christ, to whom we are bound by covenant. The righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ is the ground of our confidence, and our personal covenant faithfulness to Him is the fruit of that confidence.

The Holy Spirit's companionship is not a fragile arrangement perpetually threatened by our mortal weakness. Scripture teaches that the Spirit will not always strive with man, but this must not be misread as though His presence evaporates at our every imperfection. His role is not to generate fear. His role is to call us continually back to Christ. At all times. In every circumstance.

The Spirit illuminates and magnifies our spiritual gifts. He facilitates our regeneration. He sanctifies us patiently and progressively. The Spirit assures us that we belong, even as He transforms us into what we are becoming.

The Implication: Spiritual Maturity

As we now understand that the Holy Ghost unites us personally to Christ, then a necessary implication follows: His presence entails responsibility.

Church leaders are called to teach, warn, correct, and testify. Their role is sacred. But the Gift of the Holy Ghost is not given to leaders on behalf of church members. The Gift of The Holy Ghost is bestowed upon each covenant disciple individually and personally.

No church leader can fully interpret another person's covenant life. No institutional instruction can replace personal spiritual discernment.

Christ gives His Spirit so that each member may learn individually, often slowly and imperfectly, to walk with Him personally.

Scripture instructs us to "study it out in your mind." That command is not an invitation to rebellion; it is an invitation to spiritual maturity. True obedience consists in hearing prophetic instruction, studying it prayerfully, seeking communion with Christ through the Holy Ghost, and acting upon the personal revelation received.

When this pattern is lived, our discipleship becomes relational rather than mechanical, and our testimonies become founded upon the rock of Christ and able to withstand any storms, floods, or attacks from the adversary.

The Lord does not lead His Church by speaking only to leaders while members merely execute directives. Jesus Christ desires that all come to know Him. He teaches us personally. He guides us individually. He walks beside us daily.

The Holy Spirit allows Christ to personally lead His people, both individually and collectively.

And this leads us to an unavoidable conclusion:

If the Holy Ghost has been given as the divine witness of Christ, and if His role is to unite us personally to the Savior, then the question is no longer whether personal revelation matters.

The question is whether we will seek it.

Chapter 6 — The Primacy of Personal Revelation

In his inaugural general conference address as President of the Church, President Russell M. Nelson declared, *“In coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”*

That statement was quoted frequently in the months and years that followed. Yet what was its true application? Most often, I heard it framed as a renewed call to increased diligence: greater adherence to prophetic directives, stricter obedience, deeper engagement with *Come, Follow Me*, more consistent daily reading of the Book of Mormon, faithful ministering, temple attendance, and family history work. And indeed, in that talk President Nelson did teach, *“Nothing opens the heavens quite like the combination of increased purity, exact obedience, earnest seeking, daily feasting on the words of Christ in the Book of Mormon, and regular time committed to temple and family history work.”*

For many, this became the central takeaway. Another exhortation to do more. I would submit that many members would indicate that this was President Nelson’s focal point. An admonition to tighten our discipline, and to increase our efforts.

Yet a deeper reading of President Nelson’s address, (*“Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives”* - April 2018), reveals something far more powerful.

I submit that the pivotal sentence of his talk was this, *“My beloved brothers and sisters, I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity to receive revelation.”*

Obedience, scripture study, and temple worship were not presented as ends in themselves. They were presented as means. Means to what end? To receive direct, personal revelation from our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is precisely such revelation (and the process by which it is received, which includes those activities outlined above) that cultivates and defines a living relationship with our Redeemer. And it is that relationship, not mere conformity, which must be the goal of every disciple who loves Him.

President Nelson continued, *“You don’t have to wonder about what is true. You do not have to wonder whom you can safely trust. Through personal revelation, you can receive your own witness... Regardless of what others may say or do, no one can ever take away a witness borne to your heart and mind about what is true... Stretch beyond your current spiritual ability to receive personal revelation... Pray... pour out your heart... and then listen.”*

This inspired address was not merely an admonition to increased activity or stricter obedience, and it was certainly not a summons to institutional dependency. It was a summons to individual communion with Christ!

I believe the Lord inspired His prophet to begin his ministry by making this point unmistakably clear: not only can we turn directly and personally to the Lord Jesus Christ for revelation: we must!

Why, then, will it not be possible to survive spiritually in the coming days without the constant influence of the Holy Ghost? Because only the Holy Spirit can produce a testimony that is firm, steadfast, and immovable. Only the Spirit can anchor our souls in a living relationship with Christ. Only the Holy Ghost can reconcile what appears contradictory, quiet the anxieties of the mind, protect the heart from legalism, and preserve faith amid unresolved theological tension.

Anything less than personally revealed knowledge from God leaves a person vulnerable.

The truths of God are taught. They are proclaimed by authorized servants. They are preserved in holy scripture. All of this is sacred and necessary. Yet as the Apostle Paul taught, “the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”

Divine truth cannot be mastered by intellect alone. It must be revealed.

Mortal instruction, even when true and received from divinely authorized sources, is insufficient by itself. Relying solely upon church leaders, or even upon scripture as text alone, cannot produce the kind of spiritual knowledge that withstands trial, doubt, or pressure.

Personal revelation must not function merely as a secondary confirmation layered onto institutional teaching. It must be primary. The Lord does not lead and guide His Church today simply by giving instruction to leaders, who then relay it to the membership, leaving individuals only to pray for reassurance about what has already been decided. Such a model reduces personal revelation to little more than spiritual endorsement of previously determined compliance.

In that framework, we are not receiving direct and personal instruction from Christ. We are seeking emotional reassurance for a course of action already outlined, and already accepted. Revelation becomes a mechanism for calming conscience rather than communing with the living Lord. It becomes confirmation without conversation.

This is not the Lord’s desire for His covenantal relationship with each of us. Personal revelation is not a supplement to discipleship. It is its lifeblood. True discipleship flows from the heart, not merely from conformity. Personal revelation must not be seen as mere validation of pre-determined blind conformity. It is direct engagement with Christ Himself. Personal revelation is where Christ teaches, corrects, clarifies, and applies truth to the individual soul..

A spiritual life built solely upon external compliance rests upon a deceptively fragile foundation. God desires that His children seek Him personally, that He might reveal truth to them privately. When He does, not only is truth made manifest, His love is revealed. And it is from that love that all true obedience must flow.

Obedience, yes. But obedience to Christ!

The Savior taught, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." He did not say, "In order to be worthy of my love, keep my commandments." Obedience that flows from fear produces bondage. Obedience that flows from love produces freedom.

God reveals truth to an individual through the Holy Spirit in a way that defies human language. And the result is that the individual comes to know not only that something is true, but what that truth means. This knowledge produces action. Not mere compliance, but conviction. Not only performance, but most importantly: transformation!

Such discipleship can never be manufactured through external instruction alone.

Does God lead His Church today? Yes. He does so through living prophets and apostles. But most importantly, He leads His Church by personally leading its members. He governs not merely through hierarchy, but through revelation given to individuals in their hearts and minds.

Epilogue

In this writing, I have attempted to illuminate the subtle ways in which theological dissonance and legalism can threaten our testimonies by distorting both our understanding and our experience of divine authority. It has been my intent to illuminate the reality that Christ alone is the Head of His Church, that priesthood keys exist to order and safeguard His covenantal work, that local leaders are stewards rather than replacements, and that the Holy Ghost is the constant witness of God's truth and our personal guide to individual communion with Christ.

The doctrines of authority, stewardship, and the Holy Spirit all converge in one truth: God desires not mere obedience, but intimate relationship; not ritual compliance, but responsive hearts; not fear of loss, but the freedom that comes from faith rooted in covenantal trust and love.

The Savior Himself taught us to enter our closets, to pray in secret, and to commune privately with our Father in Heaven. And when we do, our Father who sees in secret will reward us openly.

We are all sinners. None of us is worthy of God's blessings. And yet, in Christ, we are made worthy. His love is infinite. His atoning sacrifice is infinite. **His grace precedes our obedience.**

I once heard Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf teach that we must never feel unworthy to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and that all that is required is to try, and to keep trying. I heard those words in a moment of emotional strain and spiritual doubt. And in that moment, it was not Elder Uchtdorf who taught me. It was the Lord Himself who spoke to my heart.

As is always the case when we are taught personally by our Lord through the Holy Ghost, the experience defies description. But the truth was unmistakable, and its power strengthened and lifted me in a way no mortal words could.

That moment occurred sixteen years ago. Yet its power has not diminished. The message came through an authorized servant, but the knowledge and power came from Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ does not intend His Church to function as a system in which members execute instructions in order to prove "worthiness" and thereby earn blessings. Rather, He calls His children to respect, love, and sustain their leaders, to study their teachings with care, and then to seek personal revelation from Christ Himself regarding how those teachings are to be lived in the realities of their own lives.

And having sought Him, He invites us to press forward with and in Him.

This is the lived expression of the prophetic call to "come unto [Him] and be perfected in him," to press forward "relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save," and to fix our eyes upon our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is "the author and finisher of [our] faith."

Our Lord Jesus Christ leads His Church today. He does so not only by blessing us with modern day prophets and apostles, and authorized church leaders, but he primarily does so through communion with men and women who walk privately with Him.

In their homes. In their prayers. In their suffering. In their questions.

This is the Lord's way. This is how He leads His Church today.

In and through this divinely appointed process true testimonies are built, forged, and strengthened. Only in this way can we have and retain true testimonies of Christ and His church. Founded upon our covenantal relationship with Him. The pure love of Christ which flows from that relationship cannot be diminished by the attacks of the adversary nor the trials of life.

I hope that this writing serves not only to illuminate the structure of divine order, but also to invite anyone who might read it into a life of personal spiritual revival. A life marked by reliance upon Christ, attunement to His Spirit, and confidence in the personal revelation He promises to all who seek Him sincerely.