

Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto withdrawing official support for new plural marriages, now renamed "Official Declaration 1."⁴⁷ The new edition also added President Woodruff's explanation of the revelatory process in his promulgating the Manifesto on plural marriage. Inclusion of these three new items undergirded the Church's claim to continuing revelation.

Infallibility

A special problem attended the great respect accorded to statements by Church presidents. Elaine Cannon, president of the Young Women, told the women's general meeting in 1978 that "when the prophet speaks, the debate is over," and President Tanner quoted this comment in his message in the August 1979 *Ensign*.⁴⁸ It was a sentiment that many members of the Church accepted without question but that troubled others.⁴⁹ A distinction does exist between formal decisions communicated authoritatively and publicly to the Church membership as a whole and views expressed casually or privately, or even publicly, which reflect individual judgment or opinion. Indeed, the much-cited articulation of the idea in 1945 says, "When our leaders speak," . . . suggesting their collective action.

In 1954 J. Reuben Clark Jr., counselor in the First Presidency, spoke to Church religious educators about the authoritativeness of General Authority statements:

They must act and teach subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. . . . Sometimes in the past they have spoken "out of turn," so to speak

There have been rare occasions when even the President of the Church in his preaching and teaching has not been "moved upon by the Holy Ghost." You will recall the Prophet Joseph declared that a prophet is not always a prophet. . . .

47. 1980 *Church Almanac*, 29.

48. Elaine Cannon, "If We Want to Go Up, We Have to Get On," *Ensign* 8 (November 1978): 108; N. Eldon Tanner, "The Debate Is Over," *Ensign* 9 (August 1979): 2. The statements were made in the context of ratification of the ERA, among "many issues under debate." Elaine Cannon indicates that President Kimball agreed with the sentiment, although he would not have been so blunt. Elaine Cannon, interview by author, January 19, 1998. A much-cited 1945 home teaching message published by the Church said, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan—it is God's plan." "Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church," *Improvement Era* 48 (June 1945): 354. In a private letter to Unitarian Minister J. Raymond Cope, December 7, 1945, President George Albert Smith asserted that the statement was not doctrine. Reprinted in *Sunstone*, no. 123 (October 2002): 80. However, no public retraction of the statement ever followed.

49. One might call it "virtual" or "presumptive" infallibility. President Benson said to his grandson, "Stand by the Brethren. Even if someday they are proven in error or inaccurate, it will be attributed to you for righteousness and the Lord will bless you. This is a basic principle." Benson, "Grandson's Remembrance," 32. Elder Packer, in 1965 at BYU preached strongly that members should "follow the brethren." Jeffrey O. Johnson, "Change and Growth: The Mormon Church and the 1960s," *Sunstone* 17, no. 1 (June 1994): 29. While no one objected to this as a general statement, some felt it should not be considered a call for every faithful person to adopt "the brethren's view" as his own without any independent consideration. McConkie to England: "Prophets are men and they make mistakes. Sometimes they err in doctrine. This is one of the reasons the Lord has given us the Standard Works. . . . It is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent. . . . If I lead the Church astray, that is my responsibility, but the fact still remains that I am the one appointed with all the rest [of the apostles] involved so to do." Compare Thomas G. Alexander, "'To Maintain Harmony': Adjusting to External and Internal Stress, 1890–1930," *Dialogue* 15, no. 4 (winter 1982): 49: "Even today, a preemptive public statement or leak of a public position by a senior General Authority may, in the interest of harmony, dictate the public position of the Council on a particular question." Some members of the Council of the Twelve told James Allen and Glen Leonard that they liked the general history of the Church Allen and Leonard had written, but for some years the book was not used in the seminaries or institutes because a few senior General Authorities disliked it. Alexander, "'To Maintain Harmony,'" 56 n. 21; James B. Allen, interview, June 2004.

This has happened about matters of doctrine (usually of a highly speculative character) where a subsequent President of the Church and the people themselves have felt that in declaring the doctrine, the announcer was not “moved upon by the Holy Ghost.”

How shall the Church know . . . ? The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of the members, . . . and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest.

. . . Not always may the words of a prophet be taken as a prophecy or revelation.⁵⁰

Formal policies (see ch. 29) reflect the leaders’ best collective judgment at that time while teachings, even by the prophet, sometimes constitute personal understanding and emphasis and thus may be influential but not binding. Although leaders seek inspiration, they believe God leaves many things to their sincere but fallible human wisdom. Speaking in April 1970 about President Joseph Fielding Smith, Spencer told a congregation, “I make no claim of infallibility for him [President Smith], but [what] he does need [in order to be an “authoritative person” is] to be recognized of God.”⁵¹

Although the importance of following the brethren has been an important Mormon teaching from the earliest days of the Church, another principle urges the Saints to seek their own spiritual witness and not simply to follow without thought.⁵²

50 . J. Reuben Clark Jr., “When Are Church Leaders’ Words Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?” in *Follow the Living Prophets*, by Brent L. Top, Larry E. Dahl, and Walter D. Bowen (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 232–34. Elder Harold B. Lee said:

Someone has rightly said that it is not to be thought that every word spoken by our leaders is inspired. The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote in his personal diary: “This morning I visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that ‘a prophet is always a prophet’; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.”

It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they write. . . . We can know or have the assurance that they are speaking under inspiration if we so live that we can have a witness that what they are speaking is the word of the Lord. (Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], 540).

And also: “There have been times when even the President of the Church has not been moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” Williams, *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 542.

51. Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 465; Spencer W. Kimball, “The Need for a Prophet,” *Improvement Era* 73 (June 1970): 93.

52. James E. Faust, “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” *Ensign* 28 (September 1998): 4; Dean L. May, “Dissent and Authority in Two Latter-day Saint Traditions,” *Sunstone* 17, no. 1 (June 1994): 20 n.9; compare Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28. Open dissent and open debate are not the LDS way. As historian Dean May explained, Latter-day Saints tend to work around rules they cannot accept. “Their veto is less public and more quiet than in [a congregational society], but it is a veto nonetheless.” Where there is no public debate the surface remains calm, but this is deceiving. What has been achieved is acquiescence rather than agreement. This avoidance of debate tends to avoid hardening of positions, leaving room for individual judgment and personal revelation. May, “Dissent and Authority,” 19. Sustaining votes were originally democratic (compare rejection of Joseph Smith’s request that Sidney Rigdon be dropped from the First Presidency), but now are routine manifestations of loyalty to the institution. D. Michael Quinn, “From Sacred Grove to Sacral Power Structure,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 2 (summer 1984): 16. An example of change is the attitude toward birth control. Tim B. Heaton and Sandra Calkins, “Contraceptive Use among Mormons, 1965–75,” *Dialogue* 16, no. 3 (fall 1983): 106–9; Lester E. Bush Jr., *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 152–57. Elder Maxwell said about abdication of personal responsibility, “There is a tendency among some at Church headquarters to be so obedient that people don’t speak up.” He praised Elder Faust for his willingness to be candid with the Brethren. James P. Bell, *In the Strength of the Lord: The Life and Teachings of James E. Faust* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 146. At least one author has noted the increased use of the title “Prophet” in Church

publications instead of “President,” beginning with David O. McKay. “Prophet” carries with it connotations of divine oversight not borne by the title “president.” Quinn, *Extensions of Power*, 363–67. A study of BYU students in 1935 and 1973 showed an increase from 41 percent to 88 percent who valued “obedience to [church] authority above [their] own desires,” Harold T. Christensen and Kenneth L. Cannon, “The Fundamentalist Emphasis at Brigham Young University: 1935–1973,” *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (March 1978): 55. Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 178, points out that between those dates there was a major change in student recruitment: application to BYU in 1973 required a bishop’s recommendation of worthiness.

Other matters closely related to doctrine are addressed elsewhere—ordination of African blacks to the priesthood (chs. 20-25), ordination of women (ch. 17), abortion (ch.17), Heavenly Mother (ch. 11, 17).