

applied to a theocracy. Some also do not understand that faultfinding is spiritually destructive to those who engage in it, and that members who engage in personal criticism of church leaders isolate themselves from the Spirit of the Lord. There are ways to differ with church leaders, but they are the Lord's ways, not the world's ways.

### What If We Differ with Church Leaders?

So what do we do if we feel that our Relief Society president or our bishop or a General Authority is in transgression or is pursuing a policy of which we disapprove? Is there no remedy? Are our critics correct when they charge that Latter-day Saints are sheep without a remedy against the whims of a heedless or even an evil shepherd?

There are remedies, but they are not the same remedies or procedures that are used with leaders in other organizations.

Our Father in Heaven has not compelled us to think the same way on every subject or procedure. As we seek to accomplish our life's purposes, we will inevitably have differences with those around us, including some we sustain as our leaders. The question is not *whether* we have such differences, but *how we manage them*. What the Lord has said on another subject is also true of the management of differences with his leaders: "It must needs be done in mine own way." (D&C 104:16.) We should conduct ourselves in such a way that our thoughts and our actions do not cause us to lose the companionship and guidance of the Spirit of the Lord.

The first principle in the gospel procedure for managing differences is to keep our personal differences private and not allow them to be a source of contention. (See pages 140–51.) In this we have worthy examples to follow. Every

student of church history knows that there have been differences of opinion among church leaders since the Church was organized. Each of us has experienced such differences in our own work in the auxiliaries, quorums, wards, stakes, and missions of the Church. We know that such differences are discussed, but they are not discussed in public and they are not pursued in a spirit of contention. Counselors acquiesce in the decisions of their president. Teachers follow the direction of their presidency. Members are loyal to the counsel of their bishop. All of this is done quietly and loyally, even by members who would have adopted a different policy or pursued a different procedure if they had been in the position of authority.

Why aren't these differences discussed in public? Public debate—the means of resolving differences in a democratic government—is not appropriate in the government of the Church. We are all subject to the authority of the called and sustained servants of the Lord. They and we are all governed by the direction of the Spirit of the Lord, and that Spirit functions only in an atmosphere of unity. That is why personal differences about church doctrine, policy, or procedure need to be worked out privately and without contention. There is nothing inappropriate about private communications concerning such differences, provided they are carried on in a spirit of love.

There are at least five different procedures a member can follow in addressing differences with a leader—general or local, male or female.

1. The first of these procedures—and the most benign—is to overlook the difference. President Brigham Young described how he did this in a circumstance in which he felt “a want of confidence” in the Prophet Joseph’s financial management. After entertaining such thoughts for a short

time, he saw that they could cause him to lose confidence in the Prophet and ultimately to question God as well. He concluded: "Though I admitted in my feelings and knew all the time that Joseph was a human being and subject to err, still it was none of my business to look after his faults. . . . He was called of God; God dictated him, and if He had a mind to leave him to himself and let him commit an error, that was no business of mine. . . . He was God's servant, and not mine."<sup>16</sup>

Elder Lorenzo Snow also observed some "imperfections" in Joseph Smith, but he elected to overlook them and even to draw strength from them: "I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him . . . for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me."<sup>17</sup>

2. A second option is to reserve judgment and postpone any action on the difference. In many instances, the actions we are tempted to criticize may be based on confidences that preclude the leader from explaining his or her actions publicly. In such instances there is wisdom in a strategy of patience and trust.

3. The third procedure, which should be familiar to every student of the Bible, is to communicate our differences privately to the leader involved. The Savior taught: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." (Matt. 18:15.)

This course of action may be pursued in a private meeting, if possible, or it may be done through a letter or other indirect communication. How many differences could be resolved if we would only communicate privately about them! Private communications would remove many ob-

stacles to individual growth and correction. Private communication of differences also removes the inference (present in some public criticism) that the critic is seeking personal aggrandizement rather than public benefit. Some differences would disappear when private communications identified them as mere misunderstandings. Other differences would be postponed with an agreement to disagree for the present.

4. A fourth option is to communicate with the church officer who has the power to correct or release the person thought to be in error or transgression. The Bible calls this "tell[ing] it unto the church." (Matt. 18:17.) Modern scripture, in the revelation we call "the law of the Church," describes this procedure: "And if he or she confess not thou shalt deliver him or her up unto the church, not to the members, but to the elders. And it shall be done in a meeting, and that not before the world." (D&C 42:89.)

Note the caution that this remedy is to be private — "not before the world." This is not done in order to hide the facts, but rather to enhance the opportunity for reform so that any correction can serve as a basis to improve the life of a brother or sister.

President John Taylor described these last two remedies when he taught how we should sustain a leader:

"But supposing he should . . . be found lying or cheating, or defrauding somebody; or stealing or anything else, or even become impure in his habits, would you still sustain him? It would be my duty then to talk with him as I would with anybody else, and tell him that I had understood that things were thus and so, and that under these circumstances I could not sustain him; and if I found that I had been misinformed I would withdraw the charge; but if not it would then be my duty to see that justice was administered to him,

that he was brought before the proper tribunal to answer for the things he had done; and in the absence of that I would have no business to talk about him."<sup>18</sup>

Also speaking of what should happen when a church member is in transgression, Elder James E. Talmage related these principles to the contrasting duties of church members and church judges:

"The Lord hath declared that there must not be iniquity in his Church, and he has provided officers whose specific and specified duty is to hunt out iniquity, to run it down, so that every case may be dealt with, and the afflicted ones perchance, be saved. He has not told us to cover up sin in the Church. That is not the Lord's will, nor purpose nor plan. He has told us that we should avoid gossip and slander and all kinds of misrepresentation, and speaking ill against our brethren, whether we regard them in their official capacity as officers of the Church, general or local, or otherwise. I have no right to speak in condemnation of my brother, unless I do it in an official capacity, in the exercise of the authority of the Holy Priesthood, and then I should do it in love and with yearning for him."<sup>19</sup>

5. There is a fifth remedy: we can pray for the resolution of the problem. We should pray for the leader whom we think to be in error, asking the Lord to correct the circumstance if it needs correction. At the same time, we should pray for ourselves, asking the Lord to correct us if we are in error.

A person who approaches a difference with a church leader by praying about it keeps himself or herself in tune with the Spirit of the Lord. That person also goes directly to the One who can resolve the problem. It may be resolved by inspiration to the leader or by communication of added

understanding, strength, or patience to the person who prays.

All five of the above are appropriate options for members who differ with their leaders. The preferred course depends upon the circumstances and the inspiration that will guide those who prayerfully seek. By following these procedures, members can work for correction of a leader or for change of a policy. Members who do so in the correct spirit will not grieve the Spirit of the Lord. They will not alienate themselves from their leaders or their brothers and sisters in the Church.

Despite the commandments and counsel I have reviewed, some members persistently and publicly criticize church leaders. What about them?

Throughout our history we have had members who have criticized the Church and its leaders. Church disciplinary action against such members has been rare or nonexistent. Persistent, public critics punish themselves. By deliberately separating themselves from those the Lord has called as leaders of his church (local or general), critics forfeit the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. They drift from prayer, from the scriptures, from church activity, and from keeping the commandments. They inevitably lose spirituality and blessings. As the prophet Nephi observed, those who succumb to pride and "works of darkness" are on the way to spiritual destruction, "for the Spirit of the Lord will not always strive with man." (2 Ne. 26:10-11.)

Another consequence of the divine warning against criticizing leaders is addressed to those leaders themselves. It stresses their special responsibility in the exercise of their authority. In contrast to government and corporate officers, who have the power and privilege to be high-handed and authoritarian in the use of their powers, church leaders have

strict limits on the way they can exercise their authority. The Lord has directed that the powers of heaven can be exercised only "upon the principles of righteousness" — that is, "by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned." (D&C 121:36, 41.) And this command is enforced:

"When we undertake to . . . gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man." (D&C 121:37.)

### Conclusion

Just as a church leader's source of authority is different from that of a government or corporate leader, so the procedure for correcting a church leader is different from the procedure used to correct leaders chosen by popular election. But this contrast is appropriate to the way in which our leaders are called and released. By following approved procedures, we can keep from alienating ourselves from the Spirit of the Lord.

Those who reject the authority of the scriptures or of latter-day prophets cannot be expected to agree with what is said here. Those who see freedom or truth as absolutely overriding principles in all human actions cannot be expected to be persuaded by the scriptures that teach that "knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth." (1 Cor. 8:1.) I urge those who are troubled by this counsel to consider it in terms of the teachings of the scriptures rather than in terms of their personal preferences or the canons of their particular profession.