

## Mormon Prophets and Fallibility

Living prophets and modern revelation are a unique and wonderful aspect of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the "Mormons"). Some people misunderstand the role of prophets and think that if they are legitimate, everything they do should be supernaturally wise and correct. This makes an easy target for critics who can point to flaws and mistakes from prophets in their effort to dismiss the claims of the Church. This LDSFAQ page is intended to clarify the role of prophets and help people avoid unreasonable expectations. Copyright © 2013 by [Jeff Lindsay](#). This page is solely the work of Jeff Lindsay and is not officially endorsed by the Church.

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## On the Fallibility of Inspired Human Leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

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- [Fallible Prophets--A Scriptural Truth](#)
- [The Analogy to Families](#)
- [My Experience as a Bishop](#)
- [On Those Who Depart](#)
- [Other Resources](#)

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## FALLIBLE PROPHETS--A SCRIPTURAL TRUTH

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Many critics of the Church, and some critics within, ridicule the concept of revelation in the Church. They object to the idea of a living prophet, and mock the prophets because of their human failings. Inherent in much of the criticism is the notion that a real prophet should be infallible. There is no hint of such a doctrine anywhere in the Bible or in the LDS scriptures. Moses and other prophets made mistakes and were even chastised by the Lord at times for their failings. In the LDS volume of scripture called the Doctrine and Covenants, almost from the beginning we have a powerful warning about the fallibility of the Prophet Joseph Smith, for in Section 3 he is sorely chastised for his mistake of being tricked into letting the first part of the Book of Mormon--the 116 pages of initial translation--be stolen. Joseph prayerfully made the decision to lend the 116 pages to Martin Harris, but in spite of his prayers, he followed his own will, not the Lord's, and made a mistake that would cost millions of people access to sacred words and details that I imagine could have provided much additional significant evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. This was no minor mistake, but a devastating tragedy for the whole Church, and the fallible Joseph Smith was sorely rebuked by the Lord. Here is an excerpt from Doctrine and Covenants 3:

3 Remember, remember that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men;

4 For although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him.

5 Behold, you have been entrusted with these things, but how strict were your commandments; and remember also the promises which were made to you, if you did not transgress them.

6 And behold, how oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men.

7 For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words--

8 Yet you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble.

9 Behold, thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall.

Ouch! That's pretty strong language. (And so much for the theory that Joseph Smith was a megalomaniac who felt he could do no wrong. Here he is recording a royal--no, a divine--chewing out that leaves him looking pretty guilty and foolish, and he puts this dressing down

near the very beginning of his collection of revelations.) But if Joseph could make a mistake like that, we surely can't expect other mortal leaders to be free of other embarrassing failures. Another prophet, Lorenzo Snow, understood this when he acknowledged the human limitations of Joseph Smith:

I can fellowship the President of the Church, if he does not know everything I know. . . . I saw the . . . imperfections in [Joseph Smith]. . . . 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[es], and I thought there was a chance for me. . . . I thanked God that I saw these imperfections.

(As cited by Neal A. Maxwell, "Out of Obscurity," *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, p. 10; also *Conference Report*, Oct. 1984.)

A few sections later in Doctrine and Covenants 10:37, the Lord again points to the limited human abilities of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

But as you cannot always judge the righteous, or as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto you, hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter.

Ponder that: God tells the Prophet by revelation just how limited the gift of revelation is. Joseph is not able to always discern who is righteous or wicked, meaning that he can be deceived. Being a prophet does not mean that one gains continuous access to the knowledge of God. That's an utterly unbiblical concept that is also not part of LDS doctrine.

Critics and disaffected Mormons often point to human weakness and even genuine blunders by leaders of the Church as evidence that they were not called of God. This expectation of supernatural goodness in prophets and other leaders is common, but unfortunately, neither realistic nor scriptural. At the beginning of the modern volume of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, we have this vital passage that defines the role of God's chosen servants. Note the language carefully:

6. Behold, this is my mine authority, and the authority of my servants....  
 24. These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.  
 25. And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known;  
 26. And inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed;  
 27. And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened that they might repent;  
 28. And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high and receive knowledge from time to time. (D&C 1:6, 24-28)

God's servants, with His authority, are called in weakness. They may lack understanding. They may err. They may need to repent. Yet they can be made strong and blessed with knowledge

from God from time to time--not 24/7, not every moment for every decision. We have imperfect leaders made of the same imperfect cloth from which we are cut. Let's not fall to pieces and shout accusations when some weak seams occasionally give way in their fabric.

In spite of his mistakes and errors in judgment, Joseph Smith was a prophet of God--not because he was free of error, and not because he could see the future at all times and make miraculous, inspired decisions every moment of his life, but because he was called of God and given authority from Jesus Christ to serve as the prophet and President of the Church. His divine calling as prophet was not based on his error-free track record or supernatural judgment, but was based on the fact that God made him prophet and put him in that office of the Church. The Book of Mormon is but one powerful piece of evidence confirming his divine calling as a prophet, but even that shows human influence (grammatical and spelling problems, awkward phrasing, typographical errors), as do all manuscripts and translations of the Bible.

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## FURTHER PERSPECTIVES ON THE FALLIBILITY OF CHURCH LEADERS

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In February of 1843, Joseph Smith corrected a couple who thought that "a prophet is always a prophet," instead explaining that "a prophet was a prophet only when acting as such," making it clear that not every word and deed would be determined by God (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1958), Vol. 5, p. 265; see also Vol. 2, p. 302 and Vol. 6, p. 366).

Regarding the human weaknesses of Joseph Smith, the prominent LDS General Authority B.H. Roberts had this to say:

It is but just also to the Prophet to say that he made no claim for himself of either impeccability or infallibility.

"Where is the man that is free from vanity?" he asked on one occasion. "None ever was perfect but Jesus," he continued; "and why was he perfect? Because he was the Son of God, and had the fulness of the Spirit, and was greater than any man."

Referring to this subject upon another occasion he said:

"I do not think there have been many good men on the earth since the days of Adam; but there was one good man, and his name was Jesus. Many persons think a prophet must be a great deal better than any one else. Suppose I would condescend--yes, I will call it condescend!--to be a great deal better than any one of you, I would be raised up to the highest heaven; and who should I have to accompany me? I love that man better who swears a stream as long as my arm yet deals justice to his neighbors, and mercifully deals his substance to the poor, than the long, smooth-faced hypocrite. I do not want you to think that I am very righteous, for I am not."

The sentence "many persons think a prophet must be a great deal better than anybody else," will bear further consideration. President Smith relates that once when he was in conversation with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that "a prophet is always a prophet," he told them to the contrary. "But I told them," are his words, "that a prophet was only a prophet when acting as such."

These two remarks linked together, disclaim for the Prophet impeccability; and limit his words and actions to which sanctity and inerrancy are to be attributed, to his official or ex cathedra actions and utterances.

Again in disclaiming perfection for himself, the Prophet said:

"Although I was called of my Heavenly Father to lay the foundation of this great work and kingdom in this dispensation, and testify of his

### **PRES. HINCKLEY ON FALLIBLE LEADERS**

"We have critics who appear to cull out of a vast panorama of information those items which demean and belittle some men and women of the past who worked so hard in laying the foundation of this great cause. They find readers of their works who seem to delight in picking up these tidbits, in chewing them over and relishing them. . . . My plea is that as we continue our search for truth . . . we look for strength and goodness rather than weakness and foibles in those who did so great a work in their time.

"We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes. . . . There was only one perfect man who ever walked the earth. The Lord has used imperfect people in the process of building his perfect society. If some of them occasionally stumbled, or if their characters may have been slightly flawed in one way or another, the wonder is the greater that they accomplished so much."  
 ("The Continuous Pursuit of Truth," *Ensign*, April 1986, p. 5)

revealed will to scattered Israel, I am subject to like passions as other men, like the prophets of olden times." [*History of the Church*, Period I, vol. v, p. 516.]

Not only in these personal disclaimers of perfection, and of unusual sanctity or inerrancy may we see the admitted defects of deportment and character in the Prophet, but in the revelations he proclaimed are frequent reproofs of the Prophet. In these revelations he is never shielded, never justified when he steps aside from the path direct; reproof, chastisement, and warnings are administered to him. God in these revelations deals with him indeed as with a son whom he loves, if it be true--and we have warrant of holy writ that it is--that "God chasteneth whom he loveth, and scourgeth every son he receiveth."

Because of these reproofs and corrections of the Prophet in the revelations, however, or because of the disclaimers of unusual sanctity made by himself, it must not be thought that there was any act of great unrighteousness, or deed outrageously wicked in his life; much less that any habit of sinfulness is here admitted. None of these things can be successfully maintained against him. His defects, such as they were, may be gathered from the reproving revelations themselves, and from the facts set forth in this History.

(B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), Vol. 2, pp. 356-358 [footnotes omitted].)

From George Q. Cannon, we have this statement about the fallibility of prophets (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 24, Aug. 12, 1883):

Now, was not Joseph Smith a mortal man? Yes. A fallible man? Yes. Had he not weaknesses? Yes, he acknowledged them himself, and did not fail to put the revelations on record in this book [the Book of Doctrine and Covenants] wherein God reprov'd him. His weaknesses were not concealed from the people. He was willing that people should know that he was mortal, and had failings. And so with Brigham Young. Was not he a mortal man, a man who had weaknesses? He was not a God. He was not an immortal being. He was not infallible. No, he was fallible.

Joseph Smith was as mortal as any of us, though he was a great and often inspired man. He saw God, he translated sacred scriptures with the power of God, he was ordained under the hands of angels, and he made many true prophecies of the future--but he was a mortal man who lacked omniscience.

Should errors in his views on some topics, or mistakes in his judgment on some issues, be cause for rejecting him as prophet? Should we leave the Church when we determine that past or present Church leaders have understood some things incorrectly, or said things that proved

to be incorrect, or let personal biases determine their decisions in some matters? Joseph Fielding Smith felt that man would never go to the moon. When he was proven wrong, he acknowledged that his opinion was wrong and that he was glad they made it. This should pose no problem for anybody: his opinions on the moon were his opinions, and were never canonized as official doctrine that members were required to accept. The same applies to so many of the things that fuel anti-Mormon attacks, from unclear Brigham Young quotes about Adam and God to views of modern leaders on a host of topics (the Lamanites, former limitations on the Priesthood, forged documents from Mark Hoffmann, etc.). (As useful resources, please see "[What is Official Doctrine?](#)" by Stephen Robinson and "[Are Brigham Young's Sermons Scripture?](#)" by John Walsh.)

I have heard many critics rail against Gordon B. Hinckley for his business decision to purchase a document that was later proven to be a forgery. According to the critics, a real prophet would not have been fooled. (I also suppose they think that a real prophet would never buy a defective product, and would always be able pick the box of cereal with the "instant winner" prize.) Their standard is completely unbiblical. Perhaps they forget that the real Old Testament prophet Joshua was fooled by a false report from the Gibeonites in Joshua 9? Was he any less of a prophet than the blind patriarch Isaac, who was fooled by his son Jacob into giving a blessing meant for his brother (Genesis 27:12, 35)? (See also 1 Kings 13 for an example of a prophet being fooled by the lies of others.) When President Hinckley purchased the forged document from Mark Hoffmann, he was making a business decision based on the best available information. It was a document of apparent interest to the Church, and though it appeared embarrassing, he acted in good faith to make it available for analysis and evaluation. He made no official Church declaration regarding the authenticity of the document. He apparently did not fast and pray for days to obtain revelation about which documents to buy. No First Presidency statements were made purporting to convey divine revelation about Mark Hoffmann. But tragic events would soon bring the revelation that it was a forgery, thwarting many enemies of the Church who tried to use the forged document to "shake the foundations of Mormonism."

Why is it so hard for critics to understand that neither the Bible nor LDS doctrine claims that true prophets will always be free of human error? All prophets have opinions, views, guesses, biases and many weaknesses. To admit to these problems is to admit to an awful truth: the leadership of the Church is largely populated with mortals. Fallible humans don't always seek and receive revelation from God on each matter before them, nor do they always hear it or act upon it even when they do seek it. Be shocked, if you will, but this is the reality of mortality: humans make mistakes.

The concept of continuing revelation clearly implies that no mortal knows it all yet. Continuing revelation is needed to correct past ignorance, overcome human errors, and provide new truth and knowledge when the Lord sees fit to give it. As long as there are mortal leaders in the Church, their knowledge and views will not all be based on revelation from God, meaning that

they inevitably will have their own human views. The Church fully recognizes this! According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*:

There are many subjects about which the scriptures are not clear and about which the Church has made no official pronouncements. In such matters, one can find differences of opinion among Church members and leaders. Until the truth of these matters is made known by revelation, there is room for different levels of understanding and interpretation of unsettled issues.

(M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, "Doctrine," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols., ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:395.)

Having the Spirit of God move you from time to time does not make you perfect. Being a chosen and ordained prophet does not make every opinion true, nor does it make one superior in every area of knowledge. Reverend J.R. Dummelow (not LDS) described the authors of the Bible in terms that ought to be applied, in all fairness, to Joseph Smith as well (J.R. Dummelow, *One Volume Bible Commentary*, p. 85):

Though purified and ennobled by the influence of the His Holy Spirit, these men each had his own peculiarities of manner and disposition - each with his own education or want of education - each with his own way of looking at things - each influenced differently from one another by the different experiences and disciplines of his life. Their inspiration did not involve a suspension of their natural faculties; it did not make them free from earthly passion; it did not make them into machines - it left them men.

Therefore we find their knowledge sometimes no higher than that of their contemporaries....

Hardly the megalomaniac portrayed in anti-Mormon literature, Joseph told members of the Church that he was but a man and that they could not expect perfection from him any more than he could expect it of them, "but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities" (*History of the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 181). Latter-day Saints do not believe in infallible prophets whose every word must be true.

So what should our reaction be when faced with irrefutable evidence that Church leaders are *homo sapiens* with numerous human limitations? Let me offer my viewpoint with an analogy to family life, and the shocking truth about parents.

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## THE ANALOGY TO FAMILIES ↑

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Even in strong families with loving, dedicated parents, every child eventually makes a terrible discovery: my parents are not perfect. Maybe it was when Dad tried fixing the car himself and



nearly destroyed the poor vehicle, or when Mom burned the pizza for the second time in a week, or when parents were tricked into punishing the wrong child. (Sadly, many children face much more serious issues.) It is a painful reality to know that your parents do not live up to your expectations, and that they have unique and sometimes embarrassing weaknesses. Some children overlook parental flaws and continue obeying and respecting their parents, while others focus on the faults, and may grow more cynical, more negative, and more rebellious. The terminally disenchanted can bring dissension and strife into the family, resisting the unwelcome authority of parents. They may even run away or otherwise withdraw from home. In some cases, much grief and loss could have been avoided if the child had been more accepting of the natural flaws that come ... with mortal parents.

Parents have been given special authority over their children, which also means special responsibility. Their responsibility for the well-being of their children comes from the human government and from God. Parental authority can be withdrawn under some circumstances such as abuse or neglect, but their authority is not contingent on perfection and omniscience. Mortal parents will make many mistakes, some of which may embarrass and disappoint their children. We hope that the love and devotion shown by good parents will be appreciated enough for children to patiently respect and honor the imperfect mortals that preside over them in the most fundamental and divine organization on earth, the family.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is another divine organization which operates according to similar principles, and which experiences similar tensions between its members and leaders. At the head of the Church is our absolutely perfect divine Parent, God the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ. But here on earth, the mortal leader who has been given authority to guide and nurture us is the Prophet, currently Gordon B. Hinckley, President of the Church. Like young children, some naive members of the Church have the illusion that the Prophet and other Church leaders should be virtually perfect, guided directly by God in every word and deed. Then one day comes the terrible discovery: top Church leaders are not perfect (in many cases, this actually means "they don't agree with my views.").

There are many critics in and out of the Church who focus on the faults of Church leaders, past and present. These critics begin mocking them and steadily grow more cynical, more negative, and more rebellious. The terminally disenchanted in the Church resist the unwelcome authority of their leaders and may run away, leaving the Church (but some of those who leave the Church cannot leave the Church alone, devoting their energies to continued attacks on the Church). A more realistic and spiritually mature view could have prevented their sad and unnecessary abandonment of faith.

Turning again to the family analogy and my own experience, let me state that I am a mortal parent, blessed with the best wife any man could hope for, and yet I am painfully aware that both of us have flaws that can make life challenging for my kids. I appreciate their patience with us--so far, anyway.

Many parents are not as fortunate as I am. In fact, the first family in Genesis, the family of Adam and Eve, ran into severe problems. One rebellious child did more than just irritate others--he actually killed his brother. What could be more traumatic to the family? Perhaps Adam and Eve, like typical mortals, blamed themselves and wondered what they should have done differently to raise Cain better. Naturally, Cain must have felt that he had good reasons for rebellion. Perhaps he was ashamed of his parents' tastes in fashion ("Animal skins? That's so last century. And what's up with these old fig leaves in the attic?"). Perhaps he was embarrassed by his parents' questionable past. After all, how would you feel if your parents were former residents of a nudist colony--and were even kicked out for shoplifting fruit? Sure, Cain had his reasons for rebellion and violence, though he probably couldn't whine about how much cooler other kids' parents were.

As with parents, the divine authority of the Prophet is not contingent on his perfection. There is no claim to infallibility anywhere in the scriptures. Those members and outside critics who assume that real prophets must be infallible are dangerously naive. As with parents, the Prophet has a divine stewardship and the divinely given right (and responsibility) to receive revelation for those in his stewardship, but it is not automatic and takes effort and patience. We should not be surprised to see prophets making decisions regarding Church administration and programs using human-generated data, recommendations from counselors and other experts, results from pilot studies, and so forth. In fact, the divine pattern of revelation typically requires that we do the best we can with the brains we have and the information available to us--and then turn to the Lord to receive further guidance or confirmation for our conclusions (see D&C 9:7-9). And in some cases, the Lord may not see a need to provide revelation, or it may not be obtained for other reasons, and we may see human efforts flounder or need revision. This is how we learn and grow and live. Welcome to mortality! No need to flee.

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## MY EXPERIENCE AS A BISHOP ↑

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The analogy between families and the Church is especially meaningful to me as a father and former Bishop. From 1996 to 2001, I have served as a Bishop in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints over a congregation that I loved and strived to serve (the Appleton Second Ward, Appleton, Wisconsin, which was formed at the same time I was called). As a Bishop, I was entitled and, in fact, expected to receive revelation from God for the well-being of my congregation. It was a serious responsibility.

I believe that my calling truly came from God, through revelation to my own Church leaders. Over a month before I was called, I had a dream in which a respected authority figure sat next to me in a Church service and explained that I was going to be called as a Bishop. This dream was fulfilled, and brought comfort and courage to me when the call came. That was one of many experiences in which I experienced revelation pertaining to that calling. I learned that it

truly was possible to receive answers to prayer to help me in my calling. There were times when I truly knew that someone needed help, or that a particular person needed a calling or a visit. I saw the hand of the Lord in many small miracles, often associated with His coordination of the timing of events coupled with gentle promptings of the Spirit.

Over and over, I learned that revelation from God is real, but also that it isn't automatic, that it isn't always easy, and that I could easily ignore it or make things worse by relying on my own strength. I sometimes marveled at the workings of the Spirit in the lives of those who strive to come unto Christ. But there were times when I relied on incorrect information or exercised poor judgment, resulting in plain and simple human errors. Sometimes I was too harsh on someone in need of correction, or misinterpreted their actions, or called someone who was simply wrong for a position. In these cases, I often failed to seek revelation carefully, but made decisions based on my logic, my will, or my limited understanding. It takes effort, time, and patience to seek revelation, and listening to the promptings of the Spirit is often challenging enough even when one is consciously trying. It's not an automatic process. As one who has struggled with the challenge, I can affirm that revelation is real and can flow to a Bishop to guide him in his stewardship, just as much as revelation can flow to parents to guide their family, or to an individual to guide his or her life. Revelation from God is a real and powerful thing. But it's not constant, and it doesn't override our own wills and stop us stubborn mortals from making our own mistakes.

I dare suppose that the role of Bishop must be somewhat similar to the role of Prophet. I imagine that the prophet must regularly struggle to access the revelation needed to guide the Church. Fasting, prayer, study, meditation, and hard work are required for both. Like Bishop, it must be a lonely calling with challenges not easily shared with others. I see great humility in the prophets, and do not think we will see them boasting of their gifts and wisdom. But there is a real "mantle" of authority placed on the Prophet, and many have spoken of the reality of the mantle that a Bishop receives, to which I fully agree. But it's a mantle that could slip off my shoulders when I failed to look up. I think I understand what Joseph meant when he said "a prophet is only a prophet when acting as such."

Do I really think that it requires a lot of effort and time for revelation to get through to the living Prophet? Perhaps not always, but there is clear evidence that revelation to the living prophet can require a lot of work and effort. We certainly saw this with the 1978 revelation on the Priesthood, which extended it to all worthy males regardless of race. The Lord didn't just come down unexpectedly and tell Spencer W. Kimball that it was time for a change. President Kimball was seeking revelation on the matter, and was persistent, putting in many hours in his quest. Here is an excerpt from his 1978 statement (*Official Declaration - 2*) regarding the revelation:

Aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us that at some time, in God's eternal plan, all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood, and witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood, with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with his loved ones every blessing that flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple.

Note the last sentence in the first paragraph, "we have pleaded long and earnestly..., spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance."

Revelation to the prophets commonly comes only after the prophets seek it first. Sometimes a simple question is asked, like Joseph inquiring of the Lord about how to deal with the chewing tobacco problem among the men that was so irritating his wife, an inquiry which gave the Lord an opportunity to reveal laws of health and diet ("the Word of Wisdom") that were over a century ahead of scientific findings.

One more thing about my experience as Bishop: I knew as a Bishop I was going to get plenty of things wrong. There is a reason the Lord gives counselors to Church leaders. It's our very fallibility that makes counselors so important. I needed correction. I needed people who could resist my errant wishes, help expose my biases and mistakes, and straighten me out when I was thinking poorly. Being surrounded by "yes men" was the last thing I wanted. To help me, I chose counselors who were outspoken, bold men who could stand up against me when needed. We had some great and vigorous discussions, and I am grateful for the balance and correction they brought.

If I was making a mistake, I wanted to know. I wanted the other perspectives. And I've been on the delivering end as well, going to my own Church leaders to ask for a reversal on a decision, or to complain about what I felt was a mistake. I have taken the same outspoken stand that I have expected from those under me, but through this I have sustained my leaders, even when I strongly disagreed with them, just as I hoped members of my ward would still sustain me and respect my position even when I knew they strongly disagreed with me. None of us are infallible, and we can never afford to pretend we are. I sometimes had members going to higher leaders to complain of my decisions or actions, and I'm OK with that. There need to be checks and balances in the system as long as there are humans in the Church.

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## ON THOSE WHO DEPART

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After years of faithfully attending Church, some Mormons abandon their faith, upset over alleged mistakes of men. How can such a thoroughly human organization be divine?, they wonder. If they cannot rely on the prophet, who can they rely on? Aren't the words of the prophets the ultimate source of authorized doctrine? If they can be wrong, how can we have faith in the Church?

Please note: the prophets are not the ultimate authority in the Church, nor are their words. Even canonized scripture--the standard we should use to check the teachings of any, including living prophets--is not infallible and is not the ultimate authority. God is the ultimate authority, and we base our faith in Christ, not humans. We worship God the Father and Christ, not the scriptures that have been written, translated, and printed by man.

If prophets make mistakes that need to be corrected by God, God can find ways to bring about the correction, perhaps through a future revelation. But if a prophet has a wrong opinion on a matter of science, such as Moses thinking a bat was a bird, or Joseph Fielding Smith thinking man would never go to the moon, or others not appreciating certain scientific details of the Creation and its timing, then it may be adequate to wait for future advances in human learning to provide the correction. In the event that we believe a prophet's views on some matter are wrong, we must be patient and not fall to pieces. We must not make the immature mistake of treating those views as a deciding factor for the divine authority of that prophet.

Why do I and many others remain firm in the faith? Like some who leave the Church, I, too, see the occasional mistakes of men, and realize that the Church is permeated with fallible humans, yet I recognize that such a thoroughly human organization can be divine (in fact, I know that it IS divine)--not because of who we humans are, but because of Who Christ is, the Leader of all humans who will come unto Him, and the ultimate Leader of the Church. He gives man free agency, and even when we come unto Him and seek His spirit, He does not turn us into mindless robots.

Though individuals may not always seek it or listen to it, God does provide precious revelation to leaders in the Church. Of course His Church is permeated with humans. Every decision, every doctrine, every book goes through human hands and minds. We cannot escape this.

Yes, the Church is led by revelation from Christ. I truly believe this. Yet even the greatest prophets of all were not constantly led by revelation or even remotely infallible in their work. Thank goodness they are NOT the ultimate authority and the source of our faith. Thank goodness that Jesus Christ stands at the helm of His Church, patiently working with us mortals to guide us back to Him. Errors of doctrine and understanding can be corrected, if they need to be, but it will be in His own time. We need to be patient with the Lord's timetable, and be patient with our flawed human leaders, who in spite of their weaknesses, have been called of God to lead us and guide us in the Gospel.

We have prophets, apostles, and other General Authorities, but they are not authorities in

general. They may share some views that will later be revealed to be incomplete or simply wrong. Even the scriptures have some demonstrable [flaws](#) due to human influence. None of this is reason to abandon the Lord and His Church! We must patiently wait for the Lord and stay true to our covenants, and do all we can to remove our own weaknesses and errors, trusting the Lord to take care of essential issues in His Church as we do all we can to follow Him and build up His kingdom in the midst of our fellow mortals.

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## OTHER RESOURCES ↑

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[Questions about Prophets and Prophecy](#) - deals with many issues related to the above discussion.

[Fulfilled Prophecies of Joseph Smith](#)

[What is Official Doctrine?](#) by Stephen Robinson.

[Are Brigham Young's Sermons Scripture?](#) by John Walsh.

[My Turn](#) - a page of tough questions that I would like to ask anti-Mormon critics.

[The Nature of Prophets and Prophecy](#) by John A. Tvedtnes, published at [FairMormon.org](#). Excellent article!

[My answers to common questions about Book of Mormon evidence](#) - including archaeological disputes, geography, and a brief mention of DNA studies. It's one of my [LDSFAQ](#) pages. Other related LDSFAQ pages include [Questions About Alleged Problems in the Text](#), [Questions About Plants and Animals in the Book of Mormon](#), [Questions about Plagiarism](#) (was it based on works of Ethan Smith, Shakespeare, the King James Bible, or perhaps even Tolkien?), [Questions About Changes in the Book of Mormon](#), and [Questions About Metals in the Book of Mormon](#).

[Letters to an Anti-Mormon](#) - lengthy but excellent article by Russell C. McGregor and Kerry A. Shirts (*FARMS Review of Books*, 11/1, 1999, pp. 90-298) responding to some arguments of James White.

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