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## "We Did Magnify Our Office unto the Lord"

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# *“We Did Magnify Our Office unto the Lord”*

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Richard O. Cowan

Latter-day Saints generally think only of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants as a source of information about the Church’s mission and organization. Obviously these latter-day revelations contain the most detailed instructions concerning how the restored Church is to function, but the Book of Mormon also contains valuable insights into how God’s church was organized in ancient America. There is much we can learn from the Nephites because the true church of the present and earlier dispensations has always had similar objectives. The sixth article of faith affirms: “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.”

In Joseph Smith’s day, the phrase “primitive church” was understood to refer specifically to the organization among New Testament Christians. In a broad sense, however, this declaration may be applied to God’s church in any dispensation. Even though organizational structure may have varied and different ecclesiastical titles were often used, there have always been those in every dispensation those who, like the Apostles, were special witnesses for the Savior (D&C 107:23), “prophets” who were God’s authorized spokesmen, “pastors” or shepherds to care for the flock, “teachers” to inform the people, and “evangelists” to expound the gospel. Today, for example, stake presidents, bishops, priesthood

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leaders, and others are "pastors." Similarly, today's patriarchs are "evangelists," as they reveal and apply the gospel to individuals through inspired blessings (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 151; hereafter *TPJS*).

## Church Organization in the Old World

A review of what the scriptures teach about the Church in the Old World will provide perspective for what the Book of Mormon reveals about the Church in ancient America. From the time of Adam to Moses, the Lord's people were organized along family lines and were presided over by worthy bearers of the High Priesthood. Ideally, this position of patriarch was handed down from father to first-born son. The authority held by these leaders came to be known as the "Melchizedek Priesthood" (D&C 107:2-4).

Following the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the Lord inaugurated a separate order of priesthood when he called Aaron and his sons to serve as "priests" (Ex 28:1). Latter-day revelations clearly set forth the relative power of these two orders of priesthood: "The Melchizedek Priesthood holds the right of presidency, and has power and authority over all the offices in the church in all ages of the world, to administer in spiritual things" (D&C 107:8). The lesser priesthood, on the other hand, has a specific responsibility for temporal affairs and administers "outward ordinances" (D&C 107:13-14).

By divine assignment the tribe of Levi assumed the duties of the lesser priesthood, and this authority came to be known as the Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood (Palmer 61-62). Aaron's direct descendants, generally known as "high priests," held the presiding keys and exercised authority comparable to today's bishops, at least so far as their Aaronic Priesthood responsibilities are concerned. The rest of the Levites, also known as "priests," functioned under their direction and had lesser assignments comparable to today's teachers and deacons (McConkie 10). In Old Testament times the term "elder" was applied to at least two

different groups: (1) older and more experienced men in a community, not necessarily holding a priesthood office; and (2) those ordained to this Melchizedek Priesthood office (Ex 24:9; LDS BD 662).

When the Savior organized his church during the meridian of time, he called the Twelve Apostles and the Seventy to spread the gospel (Matt 10:1, 5-6; Luke 10:1). The New Testament mentions other priesthood officers including deacons and bishops (1 Tim 3:1, 8).

In these last days the Church's organization was not established all at once. It was restored piecemeal as conditions required and as the Saints were prepared. From Peter, James, and John, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received the authority of the Apostleship (D&C 18:9; 20:2-3). In 1830 the initial Church structure included elders, priests, teachers, and deacons. Bishops and high priests were added the following year. By 1833 there were patriarchs and a First Presidency. The first stake was established in 1834, and quorums of the Twelve and Seventy were added the following year. The process of restoration has continued, with wards, missions, auxiliaries, regions, and areas becoming part of the ecclesiastical structure. The Book of Mormon record suggests that the Church also grew in a step-by-step manner among the Nephites.

## A Patriarchal Family Organization

As Lehi and Ishmael led their children from Jerusalem into the wilderness, the group may have numbered about twenty (1 Nephi 7:6). Lehi as patriarch received revelation concerning their spiritual and temporal welfare in the desert. He also took the lead in offering sacrifices for the family (1 Nephi 2:7; 5:9). Not long after the family had left Jerusalem, the Lord promised Nephi, then the youngest son, that "inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Nephi 2:22). Nevertheless, Nephi continued to

show proper deference to his father as head of the family. For example, when Nephi broke his steel bow with which he hunted game, the group feared they might starve. Even Lehi murmured. Nephi fashioned a new bow of wood, and respectfully asked his father to inquire of the Lord for direction as to where he should hunt (1 Nephi 16:18-26).

By the time forty years had passed, the group had crossed the ocean to America and were established in their new promised land. It is likely that Lehi's and Ishmael's great grandchildren were then being born, and the colony perhaps numbered even as many as 200 souls. Following Lehi's death, a great division occurred. Nephi's older brothers resented his ruling over them and threatened to kill him. The Lord warned Nephi to take all the righteous who would follow him and flee into the wilderness. This group called themselves "the people of Nephi," or Nephites (2 Nephi 5:1-9), and these circumstances provided the setting for the first expansion beyond the simple family organization.

### Ecclesiastical and Secular Officers Appointed

Nephi provided his people with both spiritual and temporal leadership, but when they wanted him to become their king, he declined but provided whatever leadership he could. This fulfilled the Lord's earlier promise that Nephi would become "their ruler and their teacher" (2 Nephi 5:18-19).

As the spiritual leader of his people, Nephi consecrated his younger brothers, Jacob and Joseph, to be "priests and teachers over the land of my people" (2 Nephi 5:26). Elder Joseph Fielding Smith explained that "the fact that plural terms *priests and teachers* were used [in recording the ordination of only two people] indicates that this was not a reference to the definite office in the [Aaronic] priesthood in either case, but it was a general assignment to teach, direct, and admonish the people. Otherwise the terms *priest and teacher* would have been given, in the singular" (Smith 1:124; emphasis in original). As will be shown

hereafter, the Nephites were operating under the Melchizedek Priesthood rather than the Aaronic. Hence, Jacob and Joseph could well be described as “priests/teachers.”

Following Nephi’s time, religious and secular leadership responsibilities were separated. Near the end of his life, Nephi appointed his younger brother, Jacob, to record significant preaching, prophecies, and revelations on the small plates (Jacob 1:1-4). This appointment meant that Jacob also assumed the spiritual leadership of the people. Another man was appointed to be king. He and his successors were known as “Second Nephi,” “Third Nephi,” etc., in honor of their first great leader (Jacob 1:9-11). However, responsibility for keeping the small plates passed down through the family for several generations to Amaleki. Having no posterity and knowing king Benjamin to be “a just man before the Lord,” Amaleki gave the plates to him (Omni 1:25).

This brought the ecclesiastical and civil leadership once again to one man. Benjamin exercised this dual authority near the end of his life when he designated his son Mosiah to succeed him as king and also appointed priests to teach the people (Mosiah 6:3). Mosiah was likewise acknowledged by the people not only as their king, but also as a seer, revelator, and prophet (Mosiah 8:13-18). With his ecclesiastical power, Mosiah authorized Alma to establish churches throughout the kingdom and to ordain priests and teachers (Mosiah 25:19).

Alma had served as a priest under the evil king Noah, who reigned over a colony of Nephites. Through the preaching of the prophet Abinadi, Alma and about 450 others were converted to the true faith. After fleeing for their lives, the converts were organized by Alma and called the “Church of God” or “Church of Christ.” Mormon later stated that this was “the first church” among these people “after their transgression” (3 Nephi 5:12). He undoubtedly meant that this was the first church after the transgression of Noah, not the first church among the Nephites in general.

As he baptized the converts, Alma affirmed that he had authority from "Almighty God" (Mosiah 18:1-17). As Nephi had done centuries earlier, Alma also declined the people's invitation to become their king (Mosiah 23:6-7). As the founder of their church, however, he did assume the office of "high priest" (Mosiah 23:16). In this capacity as spiritual leader Alma consecrated just men as priests and teachers to "watch over their people" and to "nourish them with things pertaining to righteousness" (Mosiah 23:17-18). By the time Alma and his group reached the heartland of the Nephites in Zarahemla, a new challenge faced the Church—numbers.

### Increasing Numbers Prompt Organizational Expansion

When the Nephites migrated to the land of Zarahemla, they absorbed a people even more numerous than they. Growth continued as the groups of Limhi and Alma joined the main body of Nephites. These increasing numbers posed a challenge to Alma, the high priest, as he responded to king Mosiah's commission and assumed responsibility for the Church in Zarahemla. There were too many people to hear the word of God in just one congregation, so they were divided into seven groups known as "churches." Nevertheless, they all thought of themselves as belonging to one church. In each congregation Alma appointed priests and teachers (Mosiah 25:20-23). In doing this he was following a precedent established while he and his converts were still in the wilderness. At that time he had ordained one priest for each fifty people to preach the gospel and teach them concerning God's kingdom (Mosiah 18:18). These local leaders were truly pastors or shepherds for their flocks.

Eventually the Nephites adopted a system of elected judges to replace rule by kings. Alma the Younger, who had already succeeded his father as high priest, was the first person elected chief judge (Mosiah 29:42). Hence, at least temporarily, civil and

religious leadership continued to be exercised by the same person. After only eight years, however, Alma resigned as chief judge in order to devote his full time to church service (Alma 4:11-20).

At this point, “elders” are mentioned in the record for the first time (Alma 4:7) as Alma commissioned these local officers to “preside and watch over the church” (Alma 6:1). His successor as chief judge was chosen from “among the elders of the church” (Alma 4:16). Once again, ecclesiastical and secular leadership were exercised by different individuals.

Both Alma and Alma the Younger taught that local church officers should be self-supporting. From the beginning, Alma the Elder insisted that the priests he appointed should “labor with their own hands” to support themselves rather than live off the people. And yet, he explained that Church members should be willing to assist their leaders in case of need (Mosiah 18:24-28). He continued the same policy as he took charge of the Church in Zarahemla—the priests worked to support themselves except in the case of illness (Mosiah 27:5). This brought Alma the Younger into direct conflict with Nehor, who sought to introduce what they called “priestcraft.” Nephi had earlier defined it as the practice of men who “preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Nephi 26:29). Alma denounced Nehor’s idea that all priests should be popular and supported by the people (Alma 1:3). Under Alma’s leadership the humble servants of God freely shared the gospel “without money and without price,” and the priests and teachers did not esteem themselves as being any better than those whom they taught (Alma 1:20, 26).

### The Growing Responsibility of Church Leaders

Alma the Younger as a high priest presided “over the church of God throughout the land” (Alma 8:23). Among other



things he supervised the formation of additional local congregations. For example, "Alma established a church in the land of Sidom, and consecrated priests and teachers in [that] land, to baptize" (Alma 15:13). The sons of king Mosiah played a similar role during their fourteen-year mission; they "went forth from city to city, and from one house of worship to another, establishing churches, and consecrating priests and teachers throughout the land among the Lamanites, to preach and to teach the word of God among them; and thus they began to have great success" (Alma 23:4).

A new intermediate level of Church administration appeared when other high priests were called under Alma's supervision. Ammon, for example, was high priest over the land of Jershon, and Giddonah was high priest in the land of Gideon (Alma 30:19-23). Helaman succeeded Alma as high priest. He and his fellow high priests provided "exceedingly great care" and labored diligently to maintain order among the churches (Alma 46:6, 38). To assist in this process, Helaman and his brethren "did appoint priests and teachers throughout all the land, over all the churches" (Alma 45:22).

Accounts of judicial proceedings shed light on these various levels of church organization. For example, the teachers brought transgressors to the priests to be judged. Difficult cases were then referred to high priests for further consideration. Korihor, for example, was brought before Giddonah, the high priest in Gideon, who heard the case in conjunction with the local chief judge. They in turn referred this matter to "Alma, and the chief judge who was governor over all the land" (Alma 30:21-29).

## The Nephites' Priesthood

In the Old World the Melchizedek Priesthood was withdrawn from the people as a whole, although selected individuals—the prophets—received this authority by divine ordination (*TPJS* 181). Because the Aaronic Priesthood was

assigned to the tribe of Levi, and because no Levites accompanied Lehi's group (they were of the tribe of Joseph), Elder Joseph Fielding Smith concluded that "under these conditions the Nephites officiated by virtue of the Melchizedek Priesthood from the days of Lehi" (Smith 1:124). Anciently this authority was known as "*the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God*" (D&C 107:3). Alma reminded his people that God had called priests "after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son," to teach them gospel principles. He therefore exhorted them to humble themselves as had done the people of Melchizedek, "who was also a high priest after this same order" (Alma 13:1,14).

While discussing the nature of the priesthood he bore, Alma also shed light on another important truth. He testified that those so ordained had been foreordained, being "called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works" (Alma 13:3). The scriptures point out that Abraham and Jeremiah were so chosen (Abr 3:22-23; Jer 1:4-5). In fact, the Prophet Joseph Smith declared that "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was" (TPJS 365).

## Priesthood Leaders Were to Teach

The chief role of ecclesiastical officers was to teach. Of forty Book of Mormon references to "priests," fourteen specifically state they were to teach. Another fifteen references link priests and teachers, perhaps in the combined role of "priests/teachers"; and only eleven mention priests without any reference to teaching. When the Lord outlined the duties of officers in his latter-day church, he likewise insisted that they were to "warn, expound, exhort, and teach" (D&C 20:42, 46, and 59). Alma affirmed that those bearing the High Priesthood of God were "to teach his commandments unto the children of men, that they also

might enter into his rest" (Alma 13:6). On another occasion he noted with approval that the priests were out among the people preaching against a variety of evils (Alma 16:18). Because of this key teaching role of priesthood leaders, the people had been warned to "trust no one to be your teacher nor your minister, except he be a man of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments" (Mosiah 23:14).

General Church leaders provided the guidance needed to assure unity in this teaching. Priests and teachers in each local congregation were to preach the word "according as it was delivered to [them] by the mouth of Alma" (Mosiah 25:21). In the present dispensation, Elder Harold B. Lee similarly emphasized the key role of the Brethren teaching in general conferences: "As the Latter-day Saints go home from this conference, it would be well if they consider seriously the importance of taking with them the report of this conference and let it be the guide to their walk and talk during the next six months. These are the important matters the Lord sees fit to reveal to this people in this day" (68).

## The Nephite Twelve

The next major development in Book of Mormon church organization came with the visit of the Savior after his resurrection in Jerusalem. One of the first things the Master did when he came among his "other sheep" in America was to call twelve disciples and to authorize them to build up his church there (3 Nephi 11:18-22; 12:1). Centuries earlier an angel had shown these twelve to Nephi:

Behold the twelve *disciples* of the Lamb, who are chosen to minister unto thy seed. And he said unto me: Thou rememberest the twelve *apostles* of the Lamb? Behold they are they who shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, the twelve *ministers* of thy seed shall be judged of them; for ye are of the house of Israel. And these twelve *ministers* whom thou beholdest shall judge thy seed. And, behold, they are righteous forever; for because of their faith in the Lamb of God their garments are made white in his blood (1 Nephi 12:8-10; emphasis added).

Some have wondered whether or not these twelve were truly apostles. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith concluded that “while in every instance the Nephite twelve are spoken of as disciples the fact remains that they had been endowed with divine authority to be special witnesses of Christ among their own people. Therefore, they were virtually apostles to the Nephite race, although their jurisdiction was, as revealed to Nephi, eventually to be subject to the authority and jurisdiction of Peter and the twelve chosen in Palestine” (Smith 1:121-22). In his “Wentworth Letter,” the Prophet Joseph Smith likewise affirmed that when the Savior visited the Nephites he “planted the Gospel here in all its fulness, and richness, and power, and blessing; that they had Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers, and Evangelists; the same order, the same priesthood, the same ordinances, gifts, powers, and blessings, as were enjoyed on the eastern continent” (*History of the Church* 4:538).

Consistent with the emphasis on teaching as the dominant responsibility of church leaders, the first official act of the Nephite twelve was to instruct the people. After the Lord’s visit on the first day, they divided the huge multitude into twelve groups in order to teach them (3 Nephi 19:4-6). After the Savior reascended to heaven, these disciples took the lead in establishing “a church of Christ in all the lands round about.” In their ministry they performed “great and marvelous works” including healing the sick and even raising the dead (4 Nephi 1:1,5).

### Moroni’s Parting Instructions

As Moroni completed the Nephite record with his own book, he was prompted to include materials that might almost be regarded as an appendix to the main history that had gone before. These items included some key teachings from his father (Moroni 7 and 8) and his own exhortation to the latter-day readers of his record (chapter 10). In chapters 2 through 6 Moroni set forth basic ecclesiastical procedures that had been taught by the Savior

as he ministered to the Nephites, and hence these chapters are like a short handbook of instructions.

Moroni chapter 2 records the Lord's instructions on conferring the Holy Ghost. Chapter 3 tells how elders were to ordain priests and teachers, apparently referring to specific offices in the priesthood rather than to general titles as used earlier in the record. Chapters 4 and 5 tell how elders and priests were to administer the sacramental emblems of the Lord's supper. Chapter 6 emphasized the responsibility of baptized members to bring forth good fruit. The Church was to maintain records so that the members "might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God." The Saints were to "meet together oft, to fast and to pray, and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls," and these meetings were to be conducted under the direction of the Holy Ghost. Transgressors were to be brought before the elders to be removed from the Church unless they repented (Moroni 6:4-9).

### The Example of Jacob and Joseph

The foregoing sections have reviewed the ecclesiastical structure of the Church among the Nephites. The Book of Mormon also provides valuable insights into how individual priesthood bearers should function. Jacob and Joseph, the youngest sons of Lehi, provide an outstanding example: "For I, Jacob, and my brother Joseph had been consecrated priests and teachers of this people, by the hand of Nephi. And we did magnify our office unto the Lord, taking upon us the responsibility, answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence" (Jacob 1:18-19).

Even as Jacob and Joseph magnified their callings, latter-day priesthood bearers are admonished to do the same. To avoid being responsible for others' sins, one must faithfully perform his own duties. Elder Delbert L. Stapley explained that "to magnify

is to honor, to exalt and glorify, and cause to be held in greater esteem or respect. It also means to increase the importance of, to enlarge and make greater.” We can bring respect to our callings and make them appear greater by faithfully fulfilling them, and taking advantage of all opportunities to bless the lives of those whom we serve. Elder Stapley therefore concluded that for a man to magnify his calling he must faithfully and worthily honor his priesthood, accept callings willingly, abide by gospel standards, sustain those who preside over him, “use his priesthood in righteousness for the blessing and benefit of his fellow men,” and “banish all iniquity from his soul” (424). According to the “oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood,” those who magnify their callings will inherit “all that my Father hath” (D&C 84:33-39).

Jacob especially set the example of teaching the gospel “with all diligence.” In his teachings Jacob emphasized doctrines of greatest importance. In one great sermon, recorded in 2 Nephi 6-10, he taught the people concerning their destiny as part of the house of Israel and emphasized the great blessings made possible through the Savior’s atonement. He also plainly taught important practical facets of gospel living. He advocated the proper use of wealth, denounced immorality, and encouraged setting a good example (Jacob 2-3). Like his older brother Nephi, Jacob “likened” (applied) the scriptures to his listeners (1 Nephi 19:23). After quoting Zenos’ allegory of the tame and wild olive trees, Jacob made sure the people understood their responsibility in light of these teachings:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts. Yea, today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts; for why will ye die? For behold, after ye have been nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire? . . . O then, my beloved brethren, repent ye, and enter in at the straight gate, and continue in the way which is narrow, until ye shall obtain eternal life (Jacob 6:5-7, 11).

Jacob and Joseph took their stewardship to teach seriously. They realized that if they did not fulfil their commission to teach, they must bear the responsibility for the sins of those whom they had not instructed adequately. After Jacob had expounded the gospel with clarity and power, he could state that he had shaken off "your iniquities from my soul, and that I stand with brightness before [God], and am rid of your blood" (2 Nephi 9:44). This was consistent with Ezekiel's teachings that a watchman who fails to sound the alarm will be held accountable for the destruction of his people (Ezek 3:17-21; 33:1-9). In our day the Lord has warned that parents bear the same responsibility for their children (D&C 68:25).

Thus we see that the Book of Mormon not only provides interesting information concerning how the Nephites' church was organized, but it also sets forth worthy examples we should follow in order to "magnify our office unto the Lord" (Jacob 1:19).

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