



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

Church Discipline in the Book of Mosiah

Author(s): H. Donl Peterson

Source: *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only Through Christ*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1991

Page(s): 211-226



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

Church Discipline in the Book of Mosiah

12

H. Donl Peterson

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the kingdom of God on earth (D&C 65), presided over by divinely called apostles and prophets. Its thousands of wards and branches are made up of baptized believers who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Exemplar. Members of the Church are committed to holy principles and ideals and to a oneness in purpose that will lead them to eternal life in the presence of our Heavenly Father. Among the many things the Church provides are the teachings of Christ, a group of supportive and caring friends, and assistance in time of need. Its priesthood representatives administer the holy ordinances necessary for salvation, and its members are entitled to the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

In light of what the Church is and what it provides for its members, it is important to ask how it responds to those members who do not live the commandments of the Lord. How should Church leaders and members respond when fellow members break their sacred commitments? Throughout history religious organizations have addressed the issue of discipline in a multitude of ways, including toleration, recrimination, ostracism, lampooning, physical punishment, financial reprisals, and even death. These are not, however, the Lord's way.

The Book of Mormon provides some excellent insights into the Lord's method of handling transgression among

H. Donl Peterson is professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

Church members. In Mosiah 26 the Lord reveals to the prophet Alma his pattern of discipline, which is still used in the Church today.

The Setting

We read that during the reign of Mosiah II, king Benjamin's son, many of the younger generation "did not believe in the traditions of their fathers. . . . They could not understand the word of God; and their hearts were hardened" (Mosiah 26:1, 3). They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the coming of Christ. They would not be baptized into nor would they affiliate with the Church. Lacking the Spirit in their lives and rejecting the teachings and mores of their parents, they were in a "carnal and sinful state" (v 4). Early in Mosiah's reign, these wicked people, who had not been "half so numerous" as the faithful, became more numerous "because of the dissensions among the brethren" (v 5). With flattering words the wicked enticed many Church members to abandon their standards and join with them in their sins.

These errant members of the Church needed to be admonished by their leaders, so they were brought before the priests. The priests, apparently concerned by the magnitude of the problem, brought the unfaithful members before Alma, the high priest, whom Mosiah had authorized to administer all the affairs of the Church. Many witnessed against the sins of the accused members (Mosiah 26:9).

With numerous members involved in various iniquities, Alma was "troubled in his spirit," for "there had not any such thing happened before in the church" (Mosiah 26:10). He brought the matter before king Mosiah and explained: "Behold, here are many whom we have brought before thee, who are accused of their brethren; yea, and they have been taken in divers iniquities. And they do not repent of their iniquities; therefore we have brought them before thee, that thou mayest judge them according to their crimes" (v 11). Alma received

little direction or consolation from Mosiah because it was a religious, not a civil matter: “Behold I judge them not; therefore I deliver them into thy hands to be judged” (v 12). Mosiah apparently was reminding Alma that, as the high priest, he had the stewardship over the Church and was therefore the person entitled to receive revelation for this dilemma.

Having this heavy burden of responsibility caused Alma to turn to the Lord in prayer, “for he feared that he should do wrong in the sight of God” (Mosiah 26:13). After Alma “had poured out his whole soul to God” (v 14), the Lord answered his faithful servant’s pleadings. The revelation Alma received, recorded in Mosiah 26:15–32, contains the divine paradigm for Church disciplinary action. Because of the eternal nature of the gospel plan, we know that the principles revealed to Alma are as relevant now as they were then.

Only Converts Should Be Baptized

After commending Alma for his “exceeding faith” and devotion to the work of the ministry, the Lord taught him that prevention is the best way to handle transgression. The best prevention comes from baptizing only those who are converted. The Lord explained: “He that will hear my voice shall be my sheep; and him shall ye receive into the Church, and him will I also receive. This is my church; whosoever is baptized shall be baptized unto repentance. And whomsoever ye receive shall believe in my name; and him will I freely forgive” (Mosiah 26:21–22). Only repentant converts who had accepted Jesus as the Christ were to be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ. Alma had to judge whether or not the prospective member was truly a repentant believer committed to a Christ-like life.

The Savior explained to Alma why repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are essential prerequisites to membership in the Church:

For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world; for it is I that hath created them; and it is I that granteth unto him that believeth unto the end a place at my right hand. For behold, in my name are they called; and if they know me they shall come forth, and shall have a place eternally at my right hand. And it shall come to pass that when the second trump shall sound then shall they that never knew me come forth and shall stand before me. And then shall they know that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer; but they would not be redeemed. And then I will confess unto them that I never knew them; and they shall depart into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Therefore I say unto you, that he that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church, for him I will not receive at the last day. (Mosiah 26:23–28)

If people are truly committed to the Savior's ideals when they join the Church and then become wayward, reactivation is primarily a matter of "re-membering" the peace, hope, and purpose they once knew. But if people are baptized without conversion, they will not have that sacred time to reflect upon—that time when the Holy Spirit whispered peace to their souls and spoke of eternal life through the atonement and teachings of the Savior. Alma was reminded that conversion must precede baptism into the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Judgment Must Be Commensurate with the Violation

Next, the Lord told Alma that "whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed" (Mosiah 26:29). Church officers today—bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, and general authorities—are appointed to be judges in Israel. The scriptures clearly establish guidelines for them to follow. For instance, Doctrine and Covenants 134:10 states:

We believe that all religious societies have a right to deal with their members for disorderly conduct, according to the rules and regulations of such societies; provided that such dealings be for fellowship and good standing; but we do not believe that any religious society has authority to try men on the right of property or life, to take from them this world's goods, or to put them in jeopardy of either life or

limb, or to inflict any physical punishment upon them. They can only excommunicate them from their society, and withdraw from them their fellowship.

These guidelines leave Church officers today with several options in judging “according to the sins which [a member] has committed.” The present *General Handbook of Instructions* mentions two alternative forms of discipline—informal and formal (10:2–5).

In informal circumstances, a bishop, stake president, or mission president may feel a need to initiate counsel with a member who could potentially face unusually strong temptations. This is called “preventative action,” part of the “Private Counsel and Caution” approach mentioned in the *General Handbook* (10:3).

When appropriate, a Church officer may “restrict a member’s privileges” or place him or her on “informal probation.” “Such restrictions may include suspending the right to partake of the sacrament,” function in a church calling, or enjoy temple privileges. When the member makes sufficient progress, the informal probation is lifted. If the member does not adhere to the guidelines given, further action may be required (*General Handbook* 10:3).

In present Church practice, formal discipline is necessary only for more grievous infractions. A disciplinary council (formerly called a Church Court) *must* be held when a member is accused of murder, incest, or apostasy (*General Handbook* 10:3–4). Likewise, when a prominent Church leader commits a “major offense against morality,” when the transgressor is a “predator,” when one has habitual patterns of improper conduct, or when the misconduct is widely known, a disciplinary council *must* be held (10:4). It may also be necessary for Church leaders to convene a disciplinary council for other conduct unbecoming a member of the Church (10:4). Judicially, a disciplinary council has four options: (1) no action, (2) formal probation, (3) disfellowshipment, or (4) excommunication (10:5). The objective of the council is not to expel

members, but to help them become Saints. Saving souls is the Church's primary aim. Only under extreme circumstances are members excommunicated from the Church. In fact, discipline is not just intended to protect the Church, but to help sinners in the healing process. In a powerful general conference address on this subject, Elder Robert L. Simpson stated: "Priesthood courts of the Church are not courts of retribution. They are courts of love" (32).

Confession—A Necessary Step

The Lord further instructed Alma: "As often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me" (Mosiah 26:30). The Lord wants to forgive. However, Alma was explicitly told under what circumstances he was to forgive those who had transgressed the commandments of God: "If he confess his sins before thee and me, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall ye forgive, and I will forgive him also" (v 29). Thus, although the Lord is very willing to forgive, the sinner must meet certain conditions. Transgressors must confess before God and, when appropriate, before a Church leader.

When transgressors have truly had a change of heart, the Lord, who knows all things, once again bestows the Holy Spirit. But repentant members need, in addition to blessings from the Lord, the blessing of the Church. The judges in Israel have been commissioned by the Lord to judge members' personal worthiness before extending various Church callings to them, allowing them to receive their endowments, be sealed in the temple, go on a mission, or receive a patriarchal blessing. Thus, confession is in harmony with the biblical statement wherein the Apostle James counsels, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another" (James 5:16).

It seems easier for most people to confess their sins to God, whom they do not see, than to confess them face to face to a Church leader. Some members reason that they have sincerely repented because they have taken the matter to God. But

Mosiah 26:29 refutes that reasoning and says that confession to a Church leader may also be necessary. President Spencer W. Kimball explains that

many offenders in their shame and pride have satisfied their consciences, temporarily at least, with a few silent prayers to the Lord and rationalized that this was sufficient confession of their sins. "But I have confessed my sins to my Heavenly Father," they will insist, "and that is all that is necessary." This is not true where a major sin is involved. Then two sets of forgiveness are required to bring peace to the transgressor—one from the proper authorities of the Lord's Church, and one from the Lord himself. (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* 179; hereafter *Miracle*)

The Lord reemphasized the importance of confession when he told the Prophet Joseph Smith, "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43). The Lord further revealed to Joseph Smith the importance of members' confessing their "sins unto [their] brethren, and before the Lord" (D&C 59:12). In *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, President Kimball explained how confession to the bishop can help the confessor:

The bishop may be one's best earthly friend. He will hear the problems, judge the seriousness thereof, determine the degree of adjustment, and decide if it warrants an eventual forgiveness. He does this as the earthly representative of God, who is the master physician, the master psychologist, the master psychiatrist. If repentance is sufficient, he may waive penalties, which is tantamount to forgiveness so far as the church organization is concerned. The bishop claims no authority to absolve sins, but he does share the burden, waive penalties, relieve tension and strain, and he may assure a continuation of church activity. He will keep the whole matter most confidential. (182)

The Importance of Honesty in Confessing Sins

Because confession before Church leaders is an essential step in the repentance process, it is important that members be open and honest in confession. President Kimball wrote that when "they are in sweet attunement, Church leaders are entitled ' . . . to have it given unto them to discern . . . lest there shall be

any among you professing and yet be not of God' (D&C 46:27.)" (*Miracle* 184). He also explained the seriousness of lying to an authorized servant of the Lord:

Those who lie to Church leaders forget or ignore an important rule and truth the Lord has set down: that when he has called men to high places in his kingdom and has placed on them the mantle of authority, a lie to them is tantamount to a lie to the Lord; a half-truth to his officials is like a half-truth to the Lord; a rebellion against his servants is comparable with a rebellion against the Lord; and any infraction against the Brethren who hold the gospel keys is a thought or an act against the Lord. As he expressed it: "For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth my Father." (D&C 84:36–37.)

And he made it explicit again when he said: "What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, *whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.*" (D&C 1:38. Italics added. See also 3 Nephi 28:34.) (*Miracle* 183)

What Repentant Sinners Must Confess to Church Leaders

Sometimes those desiring to repent ask what they must confess to their Church leader. Must they confess that they are lazy in their employment, or that they are not as friendly as they ought to be, or that they have not shared equally in responsibilities around the home? President Marion G. Romney stated that we need only confess those sins to our Church leaders that may affect our standing in the Church. He explained:

Where one's transgressions are of such a nature as would, unrepented of, put in jeopardy his right to membership or fellowship in the Church of Jesus Christ, full and effective confession would, in my judgment, require confession by the repentant sinner to his bishop or other proper presiding Church officer—not that the Church officer could forgive the sin (this power rests in the Lord himself and those only to whom he specifically delegates it) but rather that the Church, acting through its duly appointed officers, might with full knowledge of the facts take such action with respect to Church discipline as the circumstances merit. (125)

President Brigham Young stated:

I believe in coming out and being plain and honest, with that which should be made public, and in keeping to yourselves that which should be kept. . . . If you have sinned against the people, confess to them. If you have sinned against a family or a neighbourhood, go to them and confess. If you have sinned against your Ward, confess to your Ward. If you have sinned against one individual, take that person by yourselves and make your confession to him. And if you have sinned against your God, or against yourselves, confess to God, and keep the matter to yourselves, for I do not want to know anything about it. . . .

For the sins you commit against yourselves and your God, unless repented of and forgiven, the Lord will hold his private council and judge you according to the degree of guilt that is upon you; and if you sin against others, he will make that public, and you will have to hear it. . . .

Keep your follies that do not concern others to yourselves, and keep your private wickedness as still as possible. . . .

We wish to see people honestly confess as they should and what they should. (*Journal of Discourses* 8:362)

Another reason to be open and honest in confessing sins is to help Church leaders make proper judgments. Before a judge in Israel can make a wise judgment he must first have all the facts. Members who withhold information or misrepresent the facts are doing themselves a disservice by prolonging and compounding the repentance process and causing judgments to be inaccurate. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, "Let the Twelve and all Saints be willing to confess all their sins, and not keep back a part" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 155).

Confession to Those Who Are Offended

Often when members sin they not only offend God and jeopardize their standing in the Church, but they also offend other people. To repent fully, people must face those whom they have offended and confess their transgressions. The one who was offended may initiate the contact since the offender may not always know that he or she has caused an offense.

Jesus, during his Palestinian ministry, taught, “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matt 18:15). The Doctrine and Covenants likewise explains, “And if thy brother or sister offend thee, thou shalt take him or her between him or her and thee alone; and if he or she confess thou shalt be reconciled” (D&C 42:88).

Voluntary vs. Involuntary Confession

Voluntary confession is initiated by offenders who desire to put their lives in order; involuntary confession follows after a transgressor is confronted with inquiries and accusations. When members confess their sins, they “cast [their] burden upon the Lord” (Ps 55:22), and bring upon themselves his forgiveness. The Lord pleads with us to benefit from his atoning sacrifice: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Voluntary confession helps lift the grievous burdens of sin from our shoulders and enables the Savior, who is both willing and able, to assist us. In a similar manner, confession to a Church leader helps lift the burden to be shared by one with strong and willing shoulders. Some of the sweetest expressions in the English language are “I’m sorry,” “Please forgive me,” “I was wrong,” “I made a mistake,” and “I will do better.” These voluntary confessions are spiritually therapeutic for both speaker and listener. They are often found at the conclusion of the sorrowful chapters in one’s life story, but they allow subsequent chapters to be more positive and optimistic.

Just as voluntary humility is better than compelled humility, so is voluntary confession preferable to involuntary confession. But involuntary confession is still better than living in sin. “For a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and . . . whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the

same shall be saved” (Alma 32:13). So it is with confession. President Kimball stated:

Even making the admission upon confrontation is better than continuing to lie and evade the truth. In fact, many of those forced sooner or later to admit their sins do come to a full, sincere repentance and a humble desire to receive forgiveness. This again involves the same steps to repentance, with conviction, abandonment of sins, and confession, as fundamental to the process. (*Miracle* 182)

After Corianton had grievously sinned while serving as a missionary, Alma the Younger sent him back to the Church members who knew of his sins, with the admonition to “acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done” (Alma 39:13). Even though his confession was stipulated, it surely had a positive effect upon the repentant Corianton as well as upon the members of the Church who may have assumed that the offense was being concealed or ignored.

The Lord said to Alma the Elder, “If he [a sinner] confess his sins before thee and me, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall ye forgive, and I will forgive him also” (Mosiah 26:29). A present-day bishop who holds the keys to temple privileges, as well as to Church callings and membership itself, has, as did Alma, two things to consider about forgiveness: (1) Has the transgressor confessed and made restitution as far as possible to all offended parties? and (2) Has the transgressor sincerely restructured his or her life upon the gospel foundation? If the answer is yes to these questions, the repentant member can be forgiven.

Forgiving Each Other’s Trespasses

After the Lord explained under what circumstances the prophet Alma was to forgive transgressors in behalf of the Church (Mosiah 26:29), he explained that members should forgive each other’s sins unconditionally. The commandment reads, “And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, he that forgiveth not his neighbor’s

trespasses when he says that he repents, the same hath brought himself under condemnation” (v 31).

The Savior said it well when he gave us a pattern for prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt 6:12; 3 Nephi 13:11). He continued, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14–15; 3 Nephi 13:14–15). In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord explained the importance of forgiving each other unconditionally this way: “Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses, standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin. I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:9–10).

It is inconceivable that one whose heart is full of hatred or revenge or jealousy—or any other unholy passion—could live in God’s presence. President Kimball stated, “To be in the right we must forgive, and we must do so without regard to whether or not our antagonist repents, or how sincere is his transformation, or whether or not he asks our forgiveness” (*Miracle* 283).

It is not always easy to forgive, but it is always possible. Many stories have been told about people who have been grievously wronged, maligned, maimed, abused, or tortured, but who have applied the Lord’s teachings on forgiveness and have once again felt peace and contentment in their lives.

In the book of Moses, Enoch explained “that . . . all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence; for, in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name” (Moses 6:57). Unfortunately, those who refuse to forgive others destroy their own opportunities for peace and happiness, as well as adversely affecting the lives of many others.

Excommunication

The Lord explained to Alma that when all attempts to reclaim an erring member have failed, he was to remove that person from the Church: “Now I say unto you, Go; and whosoever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people; and this shall be observed from this time forward” (Mosiah 26:32). The Book of Mormon explains that under Alma’s leadership “those that would not confess their sins and repent of their iniquity, the same were not numbered among the people of the church, and their names were blotted out” (v 36).

The Savior further explained that those who were excommunicated were not to be cast out of the Nephite synagogues or their “places of worship; for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they shall return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32). Moroni, writing to the modern Saints, reiterated the same policy over three hundred years later: if erring members “repented not, and confessed not, their names were blotted out, and they were not numbered among the people of Christ. But, as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven” (Moroni 6:7–8).

Conclusion

Alma recorded the Lord’s words on Church discipline so that “he might have them, and that he might judge the people of that church according to the commandments of God” (Mosiah 26:33). Then Alma “regulate[d] all the affairs of the Church” (v 37) according to the revealed pattern. As a consequence, “they began again to have peace and to prosper exceedingly in the affairs of the church, walking circumspectly before God, receiving many, and baptizing many” (v 37).

Continuing with the Lord's revealed pattern, Alma and his fellow laborers "did admonish their brethren; and they were also admonished, every one by the word of God, according to his sins, or to the sins which he had committed, being commanded to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all things" (Mosiah 26:39). It is noteworthy that both the leaders and the other members of the Church were "admonished . . . according to [their] sins." In the wisdom of God, all members of the Church, regardless of their callings, are accountable to God, and also to the Church, for serious misconduct. Today even members of the First Presidency may be tried for their membership.

Thus the principles explained in Mosiah 26, together with interpretive statements by Latter-day prophets, help us understand the Lord's way of handling Church disciplinary action:

1. Only true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, meaning those who have repented of all past sins, should be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ (vv 18–28).
2. If members transgress the commandments of Jesus Christ, Church leaders must see that the judgments they receive fit their violations. Church leaders can discipline disorderly members by excommunication, withdrawing fellowship, or limiting privileges, but they cannot impose penalties affecting life, physical well-being, or property (v 29).
3. Church leaders are to forgive transgressors, as far as the Church is concerned, if they confess their sins and repent in the sincerity of their hearts (vv 29–30).
4. Honest and open confession is a necessary step in the repentance process. Confessors must face all whom they have offended: the Lord, Church leaders (if their violations could affect their Church standing), and all others who have been adversely affected by their transgressions. Though voluntary confession is the ideal, there is some merit in involuntary confession (v 29).

5. Members of the Church are to forgive everyone, without any qualifications (v 31).
6. Although it is sometimes necessary to excommunicate transgressors, they should not be treated unkindly. Church members are to welcome into their public meetings those who are excommunicated, disfellowshipped, or placed on probation with the hope that they will repent and return to full fellowship with the Saints (vv 26–39).
7. All members of the Church, regardless of their callings, are subject to Church discipline (v 39).

The more I ponder the great truths in the Book of Mormon, the more I stand in awe of its divine message and importance. Although Church discipline is not a major theme in the Book of Mormon, it is sufficiently explained in chapter 26 of the book of Mosiah to establish parameters for Church leaders responsible for reclaiming transgressors while protecting the sanctity and purposes of the Church. Mosiah also explains to the transgressor what he or she must do in order to return to the fold of God. Disciplinary councils, then as now, were designed to be “courts of love.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Handbook of Instructions. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989.

Journal of Discourses. 26 vols. 1854–86.

Kimball, Spencer W. *Faith Precedes the Miracle*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972.

———. *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969.

Romney, Marion G. “Repentance Worketh Salvation.” *Improvement Era* (Dec 1955) 58:962, 964; also in *Conference Report* (Oct 1955) 123–25.

Simpson, Robert L. "Courts of Love." *Ensign* (July 1972) 2:48–49; also in *Conference Report* (Apr 1972) 30–33.

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Comp. Joseph Fielding Smith. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.