

Chapter 16: Church Organization and Apostasy

by Robert M. Bowman Jr.
Copyright © 2010 Institute for Religious Research

“We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth” (Articles of Faith 6).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims that the loss of the organization and offices of the first-century church reflected the church's corruption and apostasy, and that the LDS Church alone has that organization and those offices restored and operating today. However, this claim does not bear close examination. This study focuses on the two issues of church organization and apostasy. We may summarize the points to be made here as follows:

- A. The LDS Church organization is radically different from the New Testament church, and the LDS offices typically bear little or no resemblance to ministry offices in the early church.
- B. The LDS explanation of the so-called Great Apostasy is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament and makes no sense when one considers the facts about the history of the church in the years following the New Testament era.

A. Church Organization and Offices

1. Jesus Christ did not create an organization.

The LDS doctrinal manual *Gospel Principles* asserts, “The Church of Jesus Christ was a carefully organized unit” (89). The evidence of the New Testament does not support this claim.

Contrary to popular misunderstanding, Jesus Christ did not establish an organization. He founded his *church* (Matthew 16:18), but the church is not an organization (though it may *express* itself in *organizations*). Jesus created no organizational hierarchy, instituted no organizational structure, and left no organizational blueprint for others to follow. He gave the church no official name (referring to it simply as “my church”). The church is not an organization, but a *covenant community*—an association of people who publicly gather together under the terms of the “new covenant” that Jesus Christ made between God and humanity through his sacrificial death on the cross. (On this “new covenant,” see our response to [chapter 15](#) of *Gospel Principles*.)

“The early church had bold, servant-hearted leaders who loved Christ and were led by the Holy Spirit. It did not have one religious organization to impose unity on all Christians from the top down. There should be no question as to which is more valuable.”

The only ministry position that Jesus instituted, according to the Gospels, was that of the apostles. (I will comment on the LDS office of the “Seventies” a bit later.) According to *Gospel Principles*, “That there might be order in His Church, Jesus gave the greatest responsibility and authority to the Twelve Apostles” (89). The New Testament, however, says absolutely nothing about church order as an essential function of the apostles. It is common for people to refer to the “office” of apostle, and the term if used loosely or informally is fine. However, technically speaking, the position of apostle was not an office. That is, Jesus did not appoint the apostles to function as officers in an organization (like members of a board of directors, for example, or generals in an army). They were, rather, authoritative witnesses to Jesus Christ, through whom God revealed the gospel and whom the Holy Spirit empowered to explain and testify to the truth of the gospel of Christ, both in words and miraculous deeds (Mark 3:14-15; Acts 1:2, 8, 21-26; 2:42-43; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12; Ephesians 3:5; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11).

The information that we have in the Book of Acts and in the rest of the New Testament shows that the church of the first century never had a formal, uniform organizational system. Naturally, in the very beginning of the church, the apostles performed leadership functions, primarily as authoritative teachers (Acts 2:42). The assignment of specific ministry duties to other believers took place as the need arose and typically in an informal fashion. For example, the twelve apostles instructed the local church in Jerusalem to choose seven men to administer the distribution of food so that the apostles would be free to focus on prayer and teaching. The apostles themselves played no role in choosing those seven men, but only prayed and laid hands on them after the congregation had chosen them (Acts 6:1-6). One of those seven, Philip, later went to Samaria and preached the gospel there, then went to the desert road to Gaza to preach to an Ethiopian (Acts 8:5, 26-27). Philip's movements were apparently neither

initiated nor directed as part of an organized mission.

The lack of any formal organization “running” the church is especially clear in the case of Saul of Tarsus—better known as Paul. He became an apostle as a result of the Lord Jesus appearing to him directly, with the group of existing apostles playing no role in his receiving that commission. Indeed, the believers in Jerusalem were initially afraid of Saul because they did not believe he was one of them (Acts 9:1-28). Saul later joined with Barnabas in teaching at the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). The two men were part of the Antioch church’s group of “prophets and teachers,” which under the prompting of the Spirit sent them on an evangelistic mission (Acts 13:1-3). We know this mission was not conducted under the direction of the Jerusalem church because later the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas to travel to Jerusalem to defend the ministry to uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 15:1-2). As the rest of Acts 15 makes clear, the leadership of the Jerusalem church had not yet taken a position on the matter (see 15:6-7).

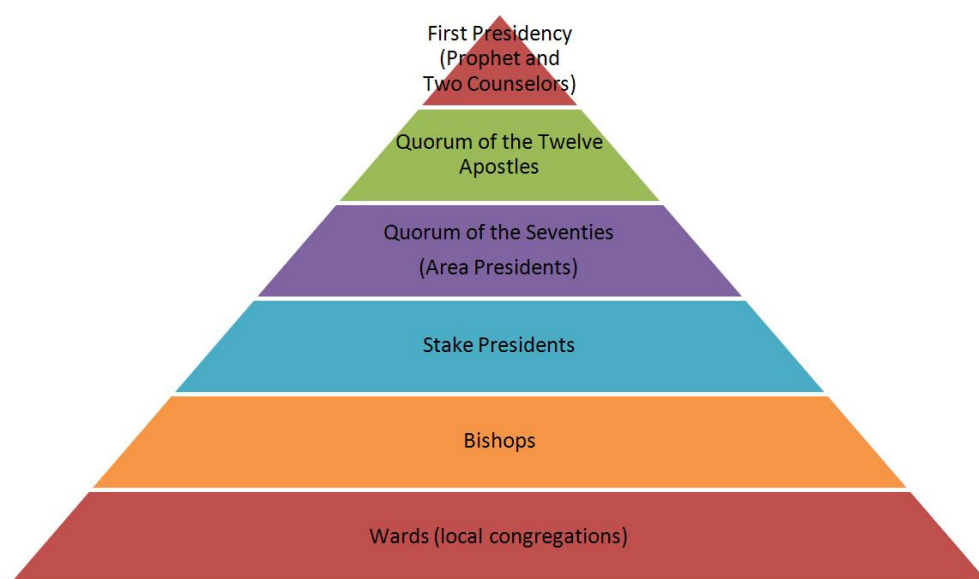
For his part, Paul did not consider himself to be subject to the Jerusalem apostles. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul says that he and the Jerusalem apostles (particularly Peter) had an understanding that they had their different fields of ministry, and they endorsed each other’s work, but the Jerusalem apostles had no authority over him (Galatians 2:1-10). Indeed, in one meeting Paul actually confronted Peter about his hypocritical behavior because it was inconsistent with the gospel (Galatians 2:11-21).

The early church had bold, servant-hearted leaders who loved Christ and were led by the Holy Spirit. It did not have one religious organization to impose unity on all Christians from the top down. There should be no question as to which is more valuable.

2. The LDS Church organization differs radically from the New Testament church movement.

In contrast to the New Testament church, the LDS Church is organized in a strict pyramidal or hierarchical structure that promotes religious uniformity and control (see graphic). At the top is the man who is both President and Prophet, and who has two “Counselors” associated with him. The three men together are called the First Presidency. Under them are the rest of the apostles; the fifteen men together function as the international leadership of the entire organization. Under the apostles are the “Seventies,” with a “Quorum” of 70 men who serve as area presidents to direct the church’s affairs in the different geographical areas of the world. Each area is divided into smaller territories called “stakes,” each of which is run by a stake president, and each stake is divided into “wards,” local congregations that are each headed by a “bishop.”

Although the terminology is very different, the structure of the LDS Church is similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, which is headed by a Pope who has a group of cardinals associated with him in the governing of the Catholic Church worldwide. The worldwide church is divided into territories called dioceses, with each diocese run by a bishop (which is more like a stake president in LDS religion). In turn, each diocese has some number of local congregations, called parishes, each of which is run by a priest. If anything, the LDS Church has an even more elaborate and finely structured hierarchy than the Catholic Church.



The Hierarchy of the LDS Church

It should be obvious to anyone who has read the New Testament that there was nothing like this ecclesiastical hierarchy in the first-century church. As I have already explained, the early church lacked any formal organization or centralized administrative bureaucracy. The LDS Church claims otherwise, notably in its Sixth Article of Faith: “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.” As Robert E. Wells put it, “We have, in original form, everything that has ever been brought to earth that is part of the great Plan of Salvation—nothing altered, nothing modified. We believe in the same priesthood authority held by the ancients; the same organization as the primitive Church, headed by Apostles and prophets; the same spiritual gifts; the same ancient scriptures as well as new latter-day scriptures—the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price” (*Ensign* [conference report], Nov. 1995, 65). The facts simply do not support this claim.

3. LDS Church offices generally have no precedent in the New Testament.

According to [chapter 17](#) of *Gospel Principles*, “The Church was organized with the same offices as were in the ancient Church. That organization included apostles, prophets, seventies, evangelists (patriarchs), pastors (presiding officers), high priests, elders, bishops, priests, teachers, and deacons. These same offices are in His Church today” (97).

As we saw in some detail in our [response to chapter 14](#) of *Gospel Principles*, most of these “offices” bear little if any resemblance to church ministry roles in the early church. Setting aside apostles and prophets for the moment, let’s review quickly the facts about the other offices:

- There is no office of *patriarchs* ever mentioned in the Bible, nor is evangelism the primary function of LDS “patriarchs.” (Their primary function is to give so-called “patriarchal blessings” to LDS Church members.)
- There is no office of *seventies* in the Bible. On one occasion, Jesus during his earthly ministry appointed seventy disciples to go out in pairs to villages and towns in preparation for his own arrival there (Luke 10:1). Seventies in current LDS organization are regional administrators.
- The New Testament ministry positions of *pastors*, *elders*, and *overseers* are somewhat analogous to that of bishops in the LDS Church, though not quite the same thing. No clear line can be drawn biblically between pastors, elders, and overseers (translated “bishops” in the King James Version). All are mature believers responsible for the spiritual care of the congregation. Bishops in the LDS Church are primarily administrators of the wards (local congregations), though they typically also exercise spiritual responsibility.
- There is no New Testament precedent for *stake presidents*, either in word or in concept.
- The New Testament Christian churches had no offices or positions of *priests* or *high priests*. Those were part of the old covenant religious order that became obsolete when Jesus Christ offered the final, ultimate sacrifice for sins and ascended to heaven as our one and only, eternal high priest (Hebrews 7-8).
- *Teachers* in the New Testament were adult Christians especially gifted to impart to others accurate understanding of biblical truth—not, as in the LDS Church, 14-year-old boys charged with helping to prepare the sacrament or visit the homes of other church members.
- *Deacons* in the New Testament were adult Christians who took the lead in the church’s works of service, especially for the poor, widows, orphans, and others in similar need—not 12-year-old boys passing the sacrament and taking care of church properties.

Again, not only do these LDS offices generally not correspond with Christian ministry positions in the New Testament, but the interrelationships of these offices in the LDS Church are structured in a hierarchical order with no precedent in the New Testament church.

4. No one prophet or apostle, or even group of apostles, ruled over the worldwide church in New Testament times.

The early church had apostles and prophets, but no one man ruled over the whole church. The apostle Simon Peter was, of course, the leader of the apostolic band, especially in its beginnings, and in his ministry he opened the door, as it were, to Gentiles (non-Jews) to become part of the church. This is probably what Jesus meant when he said that he was entrusting “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” to Peter (Matthew 16:19). However, as the church grew and expanded, Peter does not seem to have functioned as a ruling figure over all Christians or all churches. This can be seen clearly in the Jerusalem Council, a meeting that took place about AD 49. At this council, Paul and Barnabas reported to their colleagues “the apostles and elders” of the Jerusalem church about their efforts and fruit in evangelizing Gentiles. Acts reports speeches by both Peter (Acts 15:7-11) and James (15:13-21) in support of the Gentile mission. Neither of these two men seems to have functioned as “the prophet,” but James likely functioned as the presiding leader in the Jerusalem church, with the rest of the apostles and elders agreeing with his “judgment” of the issue (15:19). In later years, Peter traveled away from Jerusalem, while James is known from other historical sources to have continued as the lead apostle in the Jerusalem church. Neither of them ever claims or is treated as the earthly head or ruling prophet of the worldwide church.

The letter from the Jerusalem Council's apostles and elders to the Gentile churches (Acts 15:22-29) is the only example we have from the apostolic era of the leadership of one church issuing any sort of directive to other churches. It was natural and appropriate for new churches to look to the Jerusalem apostles for leadership and direction on controversial matters. The event is not, however, an example of bureaucratic direction from the top down. The emphasis of the letter is on assuring the Gentile believers of acceptance and asking a minimum of cooperation from them in respecting Jewish sensibilities. The Jerusalem church obviously had not had any sort of hierarchical system in place before the crisis addressed in the Jerusalem Council, or the controversy would not have arisen in the first place. Nor did the Jerusalem church establish such a hierarchy or centralized system of controls after the Council. They simply sent a letter with Paul and other men to the Gentile churches, and that was the end of it.

5. The apostles were founding witnesses and teachers for the church's first generation, not officer-holders in an ecclesiastical bureaucracy.

As explained earlier, the apostles were not officers in an organization but authoritative witnesses to Jesus Christ. Paul, himself an apostle, describes "the apostles and prophets" as the "foundation" of the church (Ephesians 2:20). By this he does not mean that the church always needs apostles and prophets running a religious organization. Rather, the apostles and prophets of the early church served as its "foundation" by getting the church started—by establishing the church and giving it the essential teaching it needed to continue after their departure. We know this is correct for several reasons:

- The apostles made no provisions for the continuation of the "office" of apostle after their death. The only apostle ever *replaced* (not succeeded) was Judas Iscariot, the traitor who betrayed Jesus and who was replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). *Gospel Principles* is therefore mistaken in citing the example of Matthias as evidence that Christ intended for a "Church organization" governed by twelve Apostles to continue (90). The apostles died out over a period of decades, "one by one," as *Gospel Principles* acknowledges (92), yet no effort was made to appoint successors or replacements for them.
- Both Jesus and his apostles warned *repeatedly* about false apostles and prophets (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1-6; Rev. 2:2; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10), but *never once* expressed concern about the church losing its way with a lack of apostles or prophets. That is, the New Testament associates apostasy with false apostles and prophets, not with a lack of such leaders.
- Peter and Jude, writing toward the end of the apostolic era, urged Christians to persevere in the faith by remembering what the apostles *said* (2 Peter 3:1-2; Jude 17). Their instructions were for believers to guard against false doctrine by retaining and remembering what the first-generation apostles had said, not by listening to living apostles that would succeed them. That is because there were going to be no such apostles.

Paul's description of the apostles and prophets as the "foundation" of the church distinguishes these Christian ministers from the "evangelists, pastors, and teachers" whom he mentions along with them in Ephesians 4:11. Mormons (and others) sometimes argue that apostles and prophets are needed for the church to attain "the unity of the faith" (verse 13) and therefore the church needs these ministries today. However, this way of reading the passage is mistaken because it connects verse 13 directly to verse 11 and passes over verse 12. What Paul says is that Christ gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith" (verses 12-13a ESV). The purpose of the five ministries is "to equip the saints for the work of ministry," and they do this in different ways. The apostles and prophets' role in equipping the saints was foundational (Ephesians 2:20), whereas the roles of the evangelists, pastors, and teachers are ongoing. What Paul says must continue is that the saints do the work of the ministry to build up the body of Christ.

If Paul had meant that the church needed living apostles and prophets at all times in order to function, as the LDS Church claims, he gives no indication that he thought the church was about to lose its ability to function. To the contrary, Paul expected that the church would continue to be built up and that believers would continue to mature in their relationship with Christ (verses 14-16).

That the ministries of apostles disappeared from the earth toward the end of the first century is a historical fact. This fact is difficult to explain if, as the LDS Church claims, Christ intended for the office of apostle to continue. If Christ intended for the office to continue, but it did not, apparently Christ's intention was not realized. *Gospel Principles* struggles to offer a coherent explanation:

"In addition, there was persecution from outside the Church. Church members were tortured and killed for their beliefs. One by one, the Apostles were killed or otherwise taken from the earth. Because of wickedness and apostasy, the apostolic authority and priesthood keys were also taken from the earth" (*Gospel Principles*, 92).

Somehow, *Gospel Principles* actually blames the disappearance of the apostles on *both* persecution by outsiders and apostasy by insiders, concluding that God withdrew the authority of apostles from the earth. This conclusion is very difficult to understand, let alone defend. There was plenty of wickedness and apostasy in the nineteenth century, but these ills supposedly did not

prevent Christ from appointing Joseph Smith and others as apostles during that period. Many Christians during the decades when the apostles were dying off were zealous, committed believers who upheld the teachings of the apostles, loved others sacrificially, and even (as *Gospel Principles* acknowledges) suffered persecution and death for their beliefs. Why didn't the surviving apostles appoint any of these godly believers to serve as apostles for the next generation? When the last apostles died, could Christ really not find anyone suitable to serve as an apostle until the nineteenth century?

The better explanation for the disappearance of living apostles from the church, by far, is that Christ intended all along that their presence would be temporary. Once they had accomplished their function of serving as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), Christ allowed the apostles to die or be killed until no more apostles were alive on the earth. Since Christ never intended that apostles function as the leaders at the top of a pyramidal religious organization, their absence did not remove an essential element of the ongoing Christian church movement.

B. Church Apostasy

1. The New Testament predicts a partial apostasy of people in the church, not a complete apostasy of the church itself.

The "Great Apostasy" in LDS terminology is a complete apostasy in the sense that the church completely ceased to exist on the earth. *Gospel Principles* explains:

"More and more error crept into Church doctrine, and soon the dissolution of the Church was complete. The period of time when the true Church no longer existed on earth is called the Great Apostasy" (92).

While Mormons acknowledge that some Christians during that period of time still knew some truth and still sincerely worshipped God as best they could, these concessions do not change the fact that according to LDS doctrine "the dissolution of the Church was complete" and "the true Church no longer existed on earth." This is what LDS doctrine means by the Great Apostasy.

The New Testament does speak of *apostasy*, a term that means falling away. However, nowhere does it speak of a complete or total "Great Apostasy" as the LDS Church teaches. In the New Testament, apostasy is something that *people* do, never something that was to happen to the whole *church*.

Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sower and the soils presents a useful model for understanding apostasy. One group of professing believers, represented by rocky ground, "falls away" because of troubles or persecution (Mark 4:16-17). Other professing followers of Christ do not apostatize or abandon their faith overtly, but the cares of this world are more important to them than the gospel and they are "unfruitful" (4:18-19). However, another group of professing believers accepts the gospel message and become fruitful (4:20). The parable expresses Jesus' optimism that despite the falling away and unfruitfulness of some professing believers, the gospel would produce fruitful believers as well. Jesus expressed this same perspective elsewhere:

"And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:10-13 ESV).

Notice here that Jesus says that "many will fall away" or be led astray by false prophets (not, by the way, as a result of the lack of prophets), but not all—because some will "endure to the end" and be saved. The falling away is predicted of people who follow false prophets (see also verses 23-24), not of the church itself ceasing to exist.

Paul taught the same view. He explained to the church in Thessalonica that the day of the Lord would not come until after "the apostasy" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), but instead of expressing pessimism he thanks God for the Thessalonian believers and urges them to stand firm (2:13-15). He told Timothy that "the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith" (1 Timothy 4:1 ESV)—*some* people in the church, not all of them and not the church as an institution. According to the Book of Acts, Paul told the elders in the church at Ephesus that savage wolves would attack the flock and false teachers would draw disciples away after them (Acts 20:29-30). Yet he also commended the Ephesians to God's grace in the confidence that they would inherit the promises of the gospel (20:31-32).

The rest of the New Testament reflects the same perspective. The Book of Hebrews warns that those who "have fallen away" after experiencing the blessings of the Christian faith cannot be renewed again to repentance, but expresses confidence that the readers will not fall away (Hebrews 6:4-10). Peter warned that "many" would follow false prophets (2 Peter 2:1-2) but spoke of his readers' "sincere mind" and encouraged them to be diligent and grow in their relationship with Christ (3:1, 14-18). John warned that "many antichrists have arisen" who "went out from us," that is, who left the church, and at the same time spoke highly of his readers' faith (1 John 2:18-27). In the Book of Revelation, Christ speaks to seven churches in Asia, condemning false teaching and immorality in six of them (all but the church in Philadelphia) but also acknowledging faithful believers in each of them (Revelation 2-3).

Throughout the New Testament, then, warnings of apostasy are directed to individuals, never to the whole church. The New Testament knows nothing of a worldwide “Great Apostasy.”

2. The church will exist on the earth until Christ’s return.

Not only does the New Testament issue warnings only of partial apostasy by some or many people and never of the whole church, but it also makes it clear that the church will continue to exist on earth until Christ’s return.

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18 KJV).

Jesus’ expression “the gates of hell” (literally, “the gates of Hades”) echoes similar Old Testament expressions and is a metaphor for death (Job 17:16; 38:17; Psalm 9:13; 107:18; Isaiah 38:10). His meaning, then, is that death would not prevail against or overcome the church—in other words, that *the church would never die*. Matthew confirms this understanding of Jesus’ words when he reports that after his resurrection, Jesus made the following promise to his disciples:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Here, the Lord Jesus announces that his disciples will begin a process of making disciples from all the nations of the world, a process that will continue with Christ’s backing and presence “to the end of the age.” Not only does Jesus not envision a seventeen-century hiatus in this process, but his promise explicitly states that he will be with his disciples “always” until the task of evangelizing the nations is complete and the end of the age comes. Mormons cannot reasonably deny that Jesus is speaking of the church here, because the disciples are to engage in preaching the gospel, baptizing people, and teaching them to obey his commandments, all of which Mormons agree can take place only in the church. Thus, Jesus’ words in this Great Commission passage clearly lead to the conclusion that the church would continue to exist until the end of the age, when Christ returns.

The apostle Paul also definitely expected the church to continue existing until Christ’s return. We have already commented on this point in relation to Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 4:11-16. Later in the same epistle, Paul wrote:

“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27 KJV).

Having died for the church to make it holy and ready it for him as his “bride,” it is inconceivable that Christ would allow the church to die just a few decades after he founded it. The church for the past twenty centuries has been far from perfect, but that is because Christ is not finished with it yet—not because he gave up on it and let it die while it was still in its infancy.

The church, then, never ceased to exist after Christ established it in the first century. Heresies have come and gone and come again, people have fallen away from the faith, and far too many professing Christians are Christians in name only, producing no fruit and showing no evidence of their supposed faith. The church, however, has never ceased to exist. Christ has always had his faithful disciples, those represented by the fruitful ground in his parable, those who have risked their lives if necessary to make disciples.

3. The church’s existence is based not on offices held by men on earth but on the “offices” held by Christ in heaven.

According to *Gospel Principles*, the church cannot perform its essential functions without “the priesthood,” which it claims was taken from the earth because of apostasy: “The ordinances and principles of the gospel cannot be administered and taught without the priesthood” (89). Once God took “apostolic authority and priesthood keys” from the earth, the church “no longer existed” (92).

However, as we saw in our responses to chapters 13 and 14 of *Gospel Principles*, the New Testament knows nothing of a Christian priesthood on earth. The church’s existence does not rest on the authority of an institutional priesthood held by men on earth; such a priestly order was a feature of the old covenant that had been superseded by the new covenant instituted by Jesus Christ. Rather, the church’s existence rests on the authority of Christ’s supreme “offices” in heaven, where he rules over the church as its King or Lord and intercedes on behalf of the church as its High Priest (Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20-23; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 1:3; 4:14; 6:19-20; 7:23-8:6).

Since, of course, Christ, the church's head, has never lost these offices or functional roles, the church has never lost them, either. We have always had them in Christ. And since the church never had an earthly priesthood, it never lost the authority to be the church and carry out the Great Commission.

4. The church has not always been what it should be, but it never completely lost what was essential to the Christian faith.

It is easy to paint a dark picture of Christianity in any period of its history by making broad generalizations or by focusing on select problems or shortcomings of the church. *Gospel Principles* does this in its brief account of the history of the "Great Apostasy," focusing on what an unnamed "Roman emperor" (presumably Constantine) supposedly did to the Christian religion. The LDS Church claims that "pagan beliefs dominated the thinking of those called Christians," that they changed many of the ordinances, had no spiritual gifts, and no longer had the priesthood or the original organization and offices of the church (92). As we have already seen, the church never lost the priesthood because it never had one in the LDS sense, and there was no original "organization" along the lines claimed by the LDS Church. We will examine the LDS understanding of ordinances and spiritual gifts in our responses to later chapters of *Gospel Principles* (especially chapters 20-23), but the claim that Christians had no spiritual gifts in the period following the death of the apostles is simply false.

Contrary to the dark picture that the LDS Church paints, the church during the two or three centuries immediately following the death of the New Testament apostles simply does not bear the signs or marks of a general apostasy. The church in the second, third, and fourth centuries was renowned for its charity toward the poor and needy, its care for the sick and infirm, and its members' love for one another (as documented, for example, in sociologist Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity*). It was also renowned for its members' expressions of hope and even joy in the face of persecution and martyrdom. In the Bible, judgments on apostate people bring mourning, grief, and bitterness among those people (e.g., Amos 8:7-10). In contrast, the church after the passing of the apostles experienced suffering in the form of persecution but *rejoiced* in it, confident that God was with them and blessing them despite their suffering. The church's experience during those early centuries was *not* an experience of judgment on apostasy, but blessing in the midst of persecution.

Gospel Principles also makes the following assertions about the supposedly apostate Christians: "They lost the understanding of God's love for us. They did not know that we are His children. They did not understand the purpose of life" (92). In other words, the church did not believe that we were divine spirits in heaven who became human beings in order to become gods like our heavenly parents. If this had been the teaching of Christ and the apostles, the LDS Church would have a point, but it was definitely *not* their teaching (see our [responses to chapters 1-3](#) of *Gospel Principles*).

Suppose you read about a church that had divided into several factions, some of which were apparently more enamored of Greek philosophy than of Christ. Members of the church were taking each other to court in petty disputes. This church bragged about its tolerance of alternate lifestyles, including a situation in which a man in the church was having an affair with his stepmother. Others in the same church went to the opposite extreme, claiming that sex was bad and that Christians should not get married or if they did should stop living as married people. Women were flaunting their "liberation" and showing disrespect for their husbands. Some people were getting drunk when they were supposed to be observing the Lord's Supper (what Mormons call the sacrament). People in the church were more interested in making a big show of their spirituality than in loving each other. Some of the church's members even denied the future resurrection of the dead! Obviously, you might think, this is a church in name only—an example of the Great Apostasy. However, this is actually the church at Corinth, founded by the apostle Paul! He addressed all of these problems in 1 Corinthians, which he addressed "to the church of God at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1 Corinthians 1:2). With all of its obvious problems, the church at Corinth was still the church, and it still had faithful members who were saints. Paul could still open his epistle with thanksgiving to God for the Corinthian believers and acknowledge that God was truly working in their lives (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). Individuals in the church may have fallen away from the faith, but the church was still the church.

The Great Apostasy, then, is a myth. The New Testament not only does not teach it, what it does teach clearly reveals that the church would continue to exist from the time that Christ founded it until the time that Christ returns. The church is not a religious organization run from the top down by a bureaucracy, but the body of Christ, headed by Jesus Christ alone. It has had and continues to have many failings, but Christ is not finished with the church yet, nor has he ever given up on it. If the Great Apostasy is a myth, then there is no basis for the LDS claim that it represents the "Restoration" of the true church to the earth. We will examine the LDS concept of the Restoration in our response to chapter 17 of *Gospel Principles*.

Questions for reflection:

- *Were the New Testament apostles officers in a religious bureaucracy or hierarchy? If they were not, how does this affect your view of the LDS Church's claim to have the same organization as in the early church?*

- *Given that there was no hierarchical organization running the church in New Testament times, is not the LDS emphasis on organization misplaced? If there was no such organization, how can it be “restored”?*
- *If the LDS Church offices represent the restoration of ancient church offices, why do the terms used for those LDS offices (patriarchs, seventies, etc.) not correspond to their usage in the Bible?*
- *If Christ intended that the church should always have apostles, why did the first-century church leaders make no attempt to appoint new apostles when such men as James, Peter, and Paul were killed?*
- *Read Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11-16 and reflect on whether Paul was teaching that the church would always have living apostles on the earth. If this was his teaching, then why does he seem unaware that apostles were about to disappear from the earth?*
- *According to LDS doctrine, Christ was able to find someone (Joseph Smith) to be his prophet and apostle in the nineteenth century, when the church was in complete apostasy. Does it make sense, then, to claim that he could not find anyone to serve in that way for the previous seventeen centuries?*
- *If the church did not exist between about AD 100 and 1830, as the LDS Church teaches, then Christians throughout those centuries were not authorized to preach the gospel, baptize people, or teach people about Christ. Does this idea have any support in the New Testament?*
- *Do you agree that the New Testament never speaks of an apostasy of the church, but only of some or many people in the church falling away? If so, what does this tell you about the LDS doctrine of the Great Apostasy?*
- *Reflect on the implications of Jesus’ promise in Matthew 16:18 that the church would never be overcome by death. What does this promise say about the claim of Joseph Smith to restore the true church to the earth?*
- *Why does Christ’s headship of the church assure us that the church was to survive and grow until his return? How does this perspective contrast with the LDS claim that human offices are essential to the church’s existence?*

For further study:

Bowman, Robert M., Jr. “[Amos 8:11-12 and the LDS Doctrines of Apostasy and Restoration.](#)” This article (in PDF format) refutes the claim that Amos 8:11-12 predicted the Great Apostasy.