children of God in the premortal existence: “In the first place being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling ... on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren. Or in fine, in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren; thus this holy calling being prepared from the foundation of the world for such as would not harden their hearts, being in and through the atonement of the Only Begotten Son” (Alma 13:3–5; emphasis added). The “first place” here refers to one’s first estate or premortal existence.

The doctrine of foreordination suggested in the above passage is understood to mean that many may come to earth with preassigned callings and responsibilities. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “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, p. 365). Abraham was shown the noble and great premortal spirits, and the Lord said to him, “Thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abr. 3:22–23). The apocryphal book of Tobit also suggests the concept that in a premortal life there were assignments that could affect mortality (6:17). However, even though some may be foreordained to special missions on earth, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith stated that “no person was foreordained or appointed to sin or to perform a mission of evil” (DS 1:61). Foreordinations and appointments do not proscribe one’s agency or free will.

The character of one’s life in the spirit world probably influences disposition and desires in mortal life. From among those who were the noble and great ones in that former world, the Lord selected those to be his prophets and rulers on earth in the second estate, for he knew them before they were born, and he knows who will be likely to serve him in mortality. Characteristics of the spirit, which were developed during experiences of the former existence, may play an important part in man’s progression through mortal life (cf. DS 1:60). “Even before they [the prophets] were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of souls of men” (D&C 138:56).

This concept that God’s spirit children developed some characteristic capabilities, but yet come to earth in forgetfulness, is similar to that expressed in Wordsworth’s “Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”: “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: ... Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home” (verses 58, 64–65). Elder Orson Hyde, an apostle, declared that lack of memory does not mean that mankind did not have a premortal life. He explained that many people leave their homeland to live in another country, yet after a number of years memory of that earlier country can be almost obliterated as though it never existed. “We have forgotten! ... But our forgetfulness cannot alter the facts” (JD 7:315).

Thus, to Latter-day Saints premortal life is characterized by individuality, agency, intelligence, and opportunity for eternal progression. It is a central doctrine of the theology of the Church and provides understanding to the age-old question “Whence cometh man?”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


GAYLE OBLAD BROWN

PRESIDENCY, CONCEPT OF

The administrative/leadership calling of presidency is part of the presiding structure at all levels in virtually every unit of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A presidency generally consists of the president (or bishop) and two counselors, with assistance from secretaries and/or clerks. Presidencies are responsible for all members and programs within their organizational jurisdiction and range from the first presidency of the Church to a presidency of a small priesthood quorum or class.

Presidents are usually called by the next higher level in the organization, and their calling is “sustained” by common consent of the group over which they will preside. Counselors are
then nominated by the president, but are likewise approved and called by the higher level. They are designated first and second counselors to establish relative AUTHORITY and areas of responsibility. The president makes specific assignments to counselors, but in general they assist and support the president in gathering information, analyzing problems, making decisions, and implementing programs.

Decision making in a presidency is not a democratic voting process. The counselors sit in council with the president and give counsel, but the president is responsible to make decisions and to work for unanimity if it has not already been reached. Counselors are similar to a vice-president or assistant administrator except that they do not have independent decision-making power for organizational subunits. The two most common presidencies in the Church, the STAKE PRESIDENCY and the ward BISHOPRIC, call or release all individuals in positions under their jurisdiction, usually in consultation with the appropriate PRIESTHOOD QUORUM or AUXILIARY presidency. When a president is released, the counselors are automatically also released.

A statement representative of the responsibilities of a president contained in the DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS includes sitting in council with members, teaching them, edifying them, and presiding over the organization (D&C 107:79–95). The LDS presidency model ensures that no one administrator is responsible alone but always has others who share the burden and perspective of the office and in most matters can act in the president’s absence. The authority of the president is clear, but the shared responsibility adds strength and assistance and provides an opportunity for individual development, which is helpful for future leadership.

J. Bonner Ritchie

PRESIDENT OF THE CHURCH

The President of the Church is the PROPHET, SEER, AND REVEALOR who is authorized to direct the affairs of the Church throughout the earth. He speaks and acts under divine guidance from Jesus Christ, who is the HEAD OF THE CHURCH. Presidents of the Church to 1901 have been Joseph SMITH, Brigham YOUNG, John TAYLOR, Wilford WOODRUFF, Lorenzo SNOW, Joseph F. SMITH, Heber J. GRANT, George Albert SMITH, David O. MCKAY, Joseph Fielding SMITH, Harold B. LEE, Spencer W. KIMBALL, and Ezra Taft BENSON.

In principle and practice, no other office or calling elicits the same love and respect from Church members as the President of the Church. The President is the PROPHET and, as such, is revered by the members of the Church. He is the only person in the Church who may direct and authorize all uses of the KEYS OF THE PRIESTHOOD. He is the chief administrative officer in the Church, assisted by his counselors in the FIRST PRESIDENCY and the members of the QUORUM OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES. They direct the work of other GENERAL AUTHORITIES and the lay leaders of the Church serving in hundreds of callings.

The Doctrine and Covenants specifies that the President’s duty is “to be like unto Moses” (D&C 107:91–92), relaying the will of God to his people and teaching them the gospel. His work is somewhat analogous to that of PETER, who presided over the APOSTLES and the early Christian Church. In response to Peter’s affirmation that Jesus was the son of God, Jesus pointed out that the testimony had been divinely revealed to Peter, saying, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Latter-day Saints understand the “rock” to be the divine REVELATION through which ancient and modern prophets have directed the membership of Christ’s Church (TPJS, p. 274).

Latter-day Saints believe that there is need for revealed knowledge from God to direct the affairs of the Church and provide insight into God’s will today just as there was anciently. Revelations to the President of the Church may include declaration or clarification of doctrines or direction concerning theological issues, organizational matters, moral conduct, and practical administration. The unity of the Church worldwide is enhanced by the prophet of the Church as God’s spokesperson. As such, the President may speak authoritatively on such matters as scriptural interpretation, spiritual concerns, and temporal issues. His official statements in his time may take precedence over revelations in scripture pertinent to other times or over statements by previous presidents of the Church, though in fact these rarely are in conflict (cf. Benson, pp. 27–28).

The President possesses the inspired capacity to discern between truth and error for the Church. Consequently, he may recognize and denounce