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October, 2008

Common Consent within the Historical Tradition of the Church:  
“That Delicate Balance”

“Common consent” as a style of governance within the Community of Christ today is deeply rooted in church tradition and must be studied carefully in the context of its evolution through the three eras of the church story—the Era of Restoration, the Era of Reorganization, and the Era of World-wide Community. This position paper focuses on how decision makers and the membership used common consent to work toward a standardization of beliefs and practices—no small accomplishment in a denomination that places such great emphasis on being non-dogmatic.

My search for understanding common consent leads me to divide the term into its component parts. I suggest that beliefs and practices held in “common” refer to the church membership in general. Unanimity is neither expressed nor implied in the term common, but the term does suggest that beliefs and practices are embraced widely enough across the membership as to guide church function and to form church identity. The term “consent” suggests compliance with issues legislated in world conference assembled or initiated through administrative pronouncement by World Church officers either directly or indirectly as a matter of practice. Consent also suggests a willingness to act in concert in the greater good and forward movement of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The two-fold purpose of this position paper is to analyze the interpretation and application of common consent as initiated during the formative years of our movement and then assess its expression in the church story more recently. Clearly, the meanings and usage of common consent have evolved through the generations. Understanding the historical context of its use in the first two eras of church history is important especially as we launch the third—the Era of World-wide Community. In all three eras the key common denominator of *trust* of the members for their leaders and of the leaders for the members will become quite evident.

Greater relevance of common consent to the Community of Christ can be found in detail from its practice in the Reorganization Era rather than the Restoration Era. However, a brief look at the earlier context is necessary to understand why the Reorganization saints felt this style of governance was so important and continued it today.

**Origins of Common Consent in the Restoration Era**

Considering the reality of authoritarian decision making by Joseph Smith Jr., it is possible to assume a diminution of common consent’s importance in that era. That is, however, an inaccurate assumption. In fact, common consent was very important to the Restoration saints. Joseph Smith’s expression of common consent in his early

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<sup>1</sup>For a further discussion of “common consent” definitions, see the excellent analysis of M. Richard Troeh and Marjorie Troeh, in *The Conferring Church* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1987), 62-67.

revelations expressed a foundational idealism where through the promptings of the Holy Spirit followers would act in complete harmony to accomplish the demands of being God's people.<sup>2</sup> In practice, however, the "process" was more that the Prophet would receive divine direction and through obedience the membership demonstrated their consent. For the Restoration saints, the process of common consent did not necessarily provide for assent through voting but through an obedient response to the divine will as discerned by Joseph Smith Jr.

I do not argue that the democratic tradition was totally absent from the Restoration Era. Indeed, Joseph Smith Jr. provided a strong scriptural foundation in the Book of Mormon for the "voice of the people" to express their opinion.<sup>3</sup> Also, early entries into the Doctrine and Covenants raised hopes that "common consent" would prevail in the decision making process.<sup>4</sup>

One instance where democracy prevailed to establish church policy stands out. The people actually voted to establish a section for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants. In the crucial August 7, 1835, general assembly in Kirtland, Ohio, the saints voted unanimously to include a statement of monogamy in the Doctrine and Covenants that defined the position of the church on the issue of marriage. It is important to understand, however, the context for their decision. Rumors were rampant throughout the Kirtland area of Joseph Smith's alleged affair with Fanny Alger. That the conference addressed this issue in terms of marriage rather than illicit sexual relations suggests that the legislation had a sacramental dimension. Church history scholar Todd Compton argued that the foundations of Nauvoo polygamy could be found in Kirtland.<sup>5</sup> However, Compton's speculation attempts to sacralize what was probably an amorous indiscretion between the prophet and his teenage servant.<sup>6</sup> Placing the Statement on Marriage in the Doctrine and Covenants served well the dual purpose of formally declaring the church's

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<sup>2</sup> See Book of Doctrine and Covenants 25:1b; 27:4c; 101:12e-f and 101:13f. Hereinafter, this book of scripture will be referred to as the Doctrine and Covenants.

<sup>3</sup> "Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe, and make it your law to do your business by the voice of the people. And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you..." Mosiah 13: 35-37. The expression "voice of the people" was in popular use during Smith's generation. The concept of democracy was known in the Greek city-states. The term "democracy" has Greek derivation, from *demos* referring to "people" and *kratis* referring to "vote." Thus, literally, democracy means "people vote." Put together, *demos* and *kratis* form the Anglicized term. There is little evidence that the different cultures of the Book of Mormon would have known the Hellenistic world and democracy. The expression "voice of the people" can be found in Mosiah 5:12, 10:2, 13:4, 13:40; Alma 1:56, 1:57, 1:60, 2:23, 8:28, 15:22, 15:23, 23:7, 23:8, 23:18, 23:20; Helaman 1:5, 1:6, 1:38 (LDS Mosiah 7:9, 22:1, 29:2, 29:25, 29:26, 29:26, 29:27; Alma 2:3, 2:4, 2:7, 4:16, 10:19, 27:21, 27:22, 51:7, 51:7, 51:15, 51:16; Helaman 1:5, 1:6, 2:2).

<sup>4</sup> "And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith; for all things you shall receive by faith." Doctrine and Covenants 25:1b; "neither shall anything be appointed unto any of this church contrary to the church covenants, for all things must be done in order and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith." Doctrine and Covenants 27:4c.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1998), 4. In his fascinating study, Compton estimated that Joseph Smith experimented with plural marriage as early as the opening months of 1833.

<sup>6</sup> Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1998), 4.

position on marriage as a sacrament (rather than a civil ceremony)<sup>7</sup> and also to end rumors circulating throughout the Kirtland area about Joseph Smith Jr.'s marital problems. With this formal statement and unanimous vote the church pronounced their monogamous position publicly in the language of Section 111. Conspicuously absent from that Kirtland conference was Joseph Smith Jr. who was on a mission to Michigan. Thus, Section 111, although it represents the law of the church, is not revelatory in nature since William W. Phelps provided the language.

Numerous votes were taken during that August 1835 Kirtland general assembly, especially during the creation of the Doctrine and Covenants. Here the saints voted unanimously to accept the affirming statement from spokesmen for each council, quorum, and order of the church.<sup>8</sup> Voting also occurred during the many different committee deliberations during this era. In numerous cases the democratic process occurred at Smith's command. In so doing, Joseph Smith demonstrated trust in his church leaders and followers to make the right decisions that would hopefully lead to common consent.

#### *The Impress of Contemporary Culture*

The Mormon religious tradition rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the Burned-over District in upstate New York during the 1820's.<sup>9</sup> When organized in 1830, the denomination was thoroughly imbued with secular cultural influences. Perhaps the most important was the influence of Andrew Jackson and the rise of the common man. There is little space here to discuss in depth this influence. Suffice it to acknowledge the establishment of a lay priesthood absent of sophisticated seminary training, a quintessential "American theology" complete with thoroughly American scriptures (the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants), a belief that "only in America" could God have placed the actual Garden of Eden, the launching site for Noah's Ark, and the site of the Second Coming (Independence, Jackson County, Missouri), where Cain killed Able (Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri), and where opportunity existed for a plebeian, self-taught prophet to discern the mind and will of God. These are just a few examples of how contemporary culture shaped Mormonism during its opening fourteen years making it the quintessential American religion.

Even though these characteristics reflected the times, circumstances did not prevent these followers from being perceived as a "peculiar people." A decade of religious persecutions followed by forced evacuation from gathering place to gathering place put considerable stress on the process of common consent. The early Saints compared their travails to the Children of Israel, and their leader, Joseph Smith Jr., as

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<sup>7</sup> Some denominations contemporary to this era such as the Congregationalists and Anglicans saw marriage as a strictly civil ceremony. Other denominations considered marriage as a sacramental experience such as the Methodists and Baptists. The Statement on Marriage placed early Mormonism within the sacramental tradition. Joseph Smith Jr. extended the sacrament to last for both time and eternity. However, it is clear that these ideas had not yet fully developed by this early Kirtland date. That the saints in conference assembled voted, unanimously on this issue, strongly affirmed their commitment to common consent.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the introduction to the 1908 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Editors to the current 1990 Doctrine and Covenants chose not to include this list of statements and votes of approval.

<sup>9</sup> The best discussion of this found in Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982). Also see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

their modern-day Moses. Few reputable Biblical scholars have ever attributed democratic tradition and practices to Moses leading the Jewish captives out of Egypt. Thus, it should not be surprised that, with time, total allegiance to authoritarian rule became the test of membership by the end of the Restoration Era.

*Common Consent in the Latter Days of the Restoration Era*

Any hopes of common consent as a product of a truly democratic process, although an altruistic goal, were dashed by the evolution of a Mormon culture of obedience sealed in priesthood authority. When church members challenged the decision and direction of church leaders, the usual result was discipline, disfellowship, and even excommunication. Punishments could happen at all levels of church membership. Most noteworthy are the summary excommunications at Far West, Missouri, where numerous church fathers paid the price of protest.<sup>10</sup>

Not always did Joseph Smith Jr. get his way during the Restoration Era however. During the fall of 1843, the Seer believed rumors that his counselor in the First Presidency, Sidney Rigdon, conspired with John C. Bennett earlier in the year to have the prophet arrested and extradited to Missouri to stand trial for treason. Smith narrowly escaped incarceration and certain execution and held Rigdon responsible. The prophet could only repress his emotions temporarily. During the October conference Smith levied charges and called for Rigdon to be removed from his position of church leadership. Smith spoke forcefully and accusatorily but could not convince the saints. Rigdon's oratory and supporting statements from Hyrum Smith, Almon Babbitt, and William Law, carried the day for Rigdon's defense.<sup>11</sup> As a very rare example of Smith not getting what he wanted one must wonder why he chose not to use his prophetic trump card to remove his counselor. This episode exemplified the important two-way nature of common consent: the people follow the leadership, but the leadership must also follow the people.

During the last days of the Restoration Era, "common consent" mostly referred to the willingness of church members to sustain the leadership in whatever decisions they made. After 1843, the church leadership provided very few opportunities for the general membership to make substantive decisions on the future direction of the church. Even most non-theological issues such as emigrant passage, modes of transportation, and settlement patterns, stood beyond individual or even collective decision-making. Simply stated, the common consent process involved communication of the will of the leadership, and through trust and concern for their salvation, the members responded with obedience to those decisions.

**Common Consent as Historical Lesson During the Interregnum**

The years that followed the assassination of Joseph Smith Jr. and his brother, Hyrum, were ones of theological reflection and search for meaning for church members. The death of their prophet provided the membership an opportunity to reassess their commitment to the movement and responses varied. For those who followed Brigham Young to the Salt Lake Valley few changes in their understanding of common consent were required. However, variations on the Nauvoo understanding of common consent

<sup>10</sup> These expulsions occurred in early 1838 and not only included the Missouri Church Presidency of David Whitmer, W. W. Phelps, and John Whitmer, but also the Second Elder Oliver Cowdery.

<sup>11</sup> See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 322-24.

were seen among the followers of James Jesse Strang, Lyman Wight, and Charles Blanchard Thompson. These leaders did not have well-established common consent practices that Joseph Smith Jr. and Brigham Young enjoyed in their respective movements. Thus, common consent became a crucial test on the durability of the splintered factions. One lesson of the interregnum is rather clear: when factional leaders achieved and maintained common consent, the movement endured; when they could not, then their movement failed. Of course, many other factors—theological and financial, for example—also impacted the longevity of the separate movements that emerged after the Carthage murders. Nevertheless, the ability of the various factional leaders to sustain the common consent process signaled whether or not their movement had a future.

### **“Corrective Measures”: The Role of Common Consent In the Reorganization Era**

Families were torn apart because of the inability of factional leaders to coalesce under one person to lead. Some communication lines remained open even among these scattered saints. After the Carthage murders, a small group of Mormons, geographically located in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, reflected carefully on their religious future. They put great hopes in prophetic succession through the lineage of the Seer. But they also assessed critically what emerged during the Nauvoo years as theological radicalism. These saints became “moderate Mormons”<sup>12</sup> and provided the foundation for church reorganization. From the “prairie experiences” of Jason W. Briggs and Zenas H. Gurley in 1851, came assurances they needed to re-establish Latter Day Saintism free from the administrative abuses and theological heresies of the Nauvoo church. They sought not to create a new church but to “reorganize” the old one without the liabilities.

For these saints, the style of governance became an important tool to prevent the mistakes of their recent past. During these last days of the Restoration Era the trust relationship between leaders and followers had been broken. The members witnessed many abuses in what they saw as one-man rule (even though that man had prophetic authority) and determined that the New Organization would have a more democratic style of governance. Decision making through common consent became an imperative. Joseph Smith III received this message clearly even before his journey to the Amboy, Illinois, conference. In March 1860, in response to Young Joseph’s letter to leaders of the New Organization informing them about his willingness to accept the prophetic mantle, a delegation of William Marks, Israel L. Rogers, and William W. Blair visited Joseph III and Emma Hale Smith Bidamon in Nauvoo, Illinois. Their visit was to encourage the Smiths to attend the Amboy conference but also to ensure that Young Joseph understood the conditions upon his acceptance of the church presidency. At the conclusion of the visit, Marks stated: “We have had enough of man-made prophets, and don’t want any more of that sort. If God has called you, we want to know it. If he has, the Church is ready to sustain you; if not, we want nothing to do with you.”<sup>13</sup> Implied in

<sup>12</sup> Historian Alma R. Blair coined this term in his landmark essay “The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormons,” in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, rev. ed., Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1992. See pages 201-224.

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Joseph the Prophet* (Plano, Illinois: Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1880), 372. Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri. This reminiscence comes from Joseph III who added it to the book after the RLDS Church purchased the publication rights of the book from the author.

this statement was a needed statement of affirmation from Joseph of the divinity of his call, but just as important was his understanding that the source of his authority would be from the consent of the followers.

William Marks's admonition reflected the practice observed in the eight-year New Organization that gave the membership considerable voice in decision-making. This was the result of the power vacuum created by an overriding belief in prophetic succession from the "seed of Joseph's lineage." The perceived absolutism and the theological radicalism brought by Brigham Young into the Salt Lake Valley added to their demand for common consent as a check against leadership abuse. Even with the powerful ingredients of believers' faith in "the seed of Joseph," the rightness of the cause, and optimism for the future, still some had lingering doubts that only common consent could check. Thus, the modern-day process of common consent as a "corrective measure" was established in the first generation of the Reorganized Church where it became indelibly stamped in their character.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Common Consent in Action in the Early Reorganization*

The history of the early Reorganized Church is replete with examples of how important common consent was in the decision making process. Certainly, Joseph III's pragmatic style of leadership<sup>15</sup> demonstrated clearly his confidence in the voice of the people to help guide the church. A view of how Young Joseph addressed this duality of his administrative leadership amidst the demand for common consent is instructive.

After his ascension to presidential leadership, Joseph III quickly realized the demands of the saints for substantial voice in the forward movement and direction of the church. Yet he also knew that for the church to be viable he had to assert administrative leadership. To find the appropriate mix of his presidential prerogative and common consent, Smith used at least four tools at his disposal: creating order in church conferences, establishing a fair editorial policy in the *Saints' Herald*, encouraging voice through church publications, and empowering other church leaders through strategic administrative appointments.<sup>16</sup>

With his acceptance of the presidency, Joseph III found a church where eight years of independent thinking and the absence of a prophetic presence resulted in general conferences afflicted with highly emotional floor debates and bickering. With the power of his personal presence, the young prophet gradually asserted his presidential prerogative to institute parliamentary rules of order. In 1876, he with Apostle Thomas W. Smith compiled new rules of order to be used in legislative church gatherings.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>14</sup> For a more complete discussion of the emerging RLDS character, see Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, 2 vols. (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1992-1993), I: 81, 82; 341-355.

<sup>15</sup> This choice of description comes from persuasive argument of Roger Launius in *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. The author's informative discussion of common consent can be found on pages 146 through 159.

<sup>16</sup> Launius argued that Smith used these tools with moderation always adhering to the twin themes of "pragmatism" and "legalism." See *Pragmatic Prophet*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Smith III and Thomas W. Smith, comp. *A Manual of Practice and Rules of Order and Debate for Deliberative Assemblies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, Lamoni, Iowa, Board of Publication of the Church of Christ, 1876. Private Collection, Leonard M. Young, Independence, Missouri. In the introduction to this work, the compilers stated the following purpose: "[*Rules of Order and Debate*] is designed to aid the Saints, officers and members, to a unity of thought and manner, in their efforts to comply with the declaration, 'Let all things be done decently and in order....' Order promotes peace.... To

manual provided the needed deliberative structure to implement common consent and reduced the circumstances where that the loudest voices drowned out the popular will.

On May 1, 1865, Joseph III officially took editorial responsibilities for the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* from its former editor, Isaac Sheen. Smith rooted his editorial philosophy in his understanding of the journal's purpose. He felt the *Herald* belonged to the entire church and should thus reflect its voice. Thus, to a certain extent, he created an open policy for articles reflecting a wide variety of views. However, this created some confusion in the minds of its readers as to what they could expect from the church's official publication. Editor Smith responded to this concern by stating: "The Editors do not assume dictatorship nor the censorship of the *Herald*, and will not be responsible for any doctrine or theory presented in its columns, unless in the regular editorials, or over their signatures."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, this policy did not offer total access to the *Herald's* reading public, as again, Smith exhibited moderate controls over what was printed on its pages.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the membership felt empowered by having access to the church official journal and many wrote letters and offered editorial opinions.

Church leaders provided other opportunities besides the *Saints' Herald* to gain voice and provide opportunity for expressions of common consent. Periodicals such as *Autumn Leaves*, *Zion's Ensign*, *Zion's Hope*, and *The Saints' Advocate* empowered the membership to place before the readers their views on topics important to the church's values and future direction. Although these journals were not "official" in their status with the church administration as compared with the *Saints' Herald*, their coming from church presses and their widespread distribution made them effective tools of communication with empowering effect.

Opportunities to express common consent also came through administrative appointment. Because of the heavy burden and pressures as president of a growing church, like his father, Joseph III had to delegate responsibilities. Throughout Joseph III's fifty-four year tenure as church president, numerous pamphlets, tracts, and Sunday School curricula, were prepared by various church members who stood outside the official leading quorums of the church. Of course, these materials were reviewed carefully for their content and consistency with church doctrines.

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the lovers of order, the seekers after wisdom, and the laborers in the kingdom, this work is commended.", iii-iv. Evidently, the *Rules of Order* were based in part on the 1844 printing of "*Cushing's Manual*" that lacked effectiveness since it provided wide latitude in conducting meetings and did not address important questions confronting the church for that time. Luther S. Cushing, *Rules of Proceeding and Debate in Deliberative Assemblies: Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, 1844, rev. ed., by Edmund L. Cushing, Boston: Thompson, Brown, & Company, 1877, Private Collection, Leonard M. Young, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>18</sup> *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, 18 (November 1, 1871): 661. An excellent history of the church's official publication is Isleta L. Pement and Paul M. Edwards, *A Herald to the Saints: History of Herald Publishing House*, Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1992. See the authors' discussion of Smith's editorial policy, 59-62.

<sup>19</sup> Even limited control was too much for some church officers. The controversy created by the demands of Jason W. Briggs and Zenas H. Gurley led to open revolt. Three excellent views on the Briggs/Gurley Affair are Roger D. Launius, *Father Figure: Joseph Smith III and the Creation of the Reorganized Church*, (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1990), 142-165; Clare D. Vlahos, "The Challenge to Centralized Power: Zenas H. Gurley Jr., and the Prophetic Office," *Courage: A Journal History, Thought and Action*, vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1971): 141-158; and Alma R. Blair, "The Tradition of Dissent—Jason W. Briggs," in Maurice L. Draper and Clare D. Vlahos, eds. *Restoration Studies I: A Collection of Essays...*, (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1980): 146-161.

The significance of this is that church leaders provided members various outlets, both in gatherings of the church in general conference assembled. Even beyond the legislative setting, for example in church reunions, members received the opportunity to raise their concerns and to express their beliefs on issues before the church. Again, this trusting relationship built between the church leaders and their followers, hallmarked by common consent, is an important reason that the Reorganized Church thrived into the twentieth century.

*Common Consent and Interquorum Rivalry within the Reorganization*

In the years following the lengthy tenure of Joseph Smith III, church leaders used common consent to enhance their administrative prerogatives. Perhaps the most obvious example of this during the Reorganization Era occurred during the six-year period from 1919 to 1925. During these years church president Frederick Madison Smith effectively used common consent as a tool to assert his presidential prerogative with the apostolic quorum and the Presiding Bishopric. Supreme Directional Control became a commonly used term to describe Fred M.'s consolidation of power within the First Presidency, a legacy still observed today.

That this initiative would occur was certainly no surprise to those around Frederick Madison Smith as he ascended to the church presidency.<sup>20</sup> The successor to Joseph III confronted a long-standing tradition of suspicion of presidential authoritarianism particularly by members of the Council of Twelve Apostles. Joseph III intentionally empowered the Council of Twelve to serve as a watchdog over First Presidency excess. Over the decades and with several “timely passings” of those most suspicious, Joseph III carefully consolidated his decision making authority.

Frederick M. Smith felt however that his father's delegation of authority had gone too far. To consolidate his ability to lead the church, Fred M. laid the administrative groundwork first before he moved on the Council of Twelve and Presiding Bishopric—the two quorums whose interference in presidential leadership he felt prevented the church from reaching a higher spiritual condition.<sup>21</sup> Fred M. intentionally pursued a two-pronged strategy to accomplish his ends. First, he needed to acknowledge the principle of common consent as a law of the church. This could be done through addressing the issue of appointment by affirming the right of the membership to nominate individuals at all levels of church administration. This “right of concurrent nomination” was crucial to creating an atmosphere of trust.<sup>22</sup> Second, Smith wanted to affirm the

<sup>20</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, Larry E. Hunt supports this argument by noting that as early as 1896, when F.M. was assistant historian his request in a circular letter that Council of Twelve members submit field reports for historical use was not well-received. At least one member interpreted his initiative as “usurpation.” F. M. Smith to William H. Kelley, December 26, 1896, William H. Kelley Papers, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri. By 1903, with F. M. now in the First Presidency as a Counselor, the eldest Smith son extended his requests for reports to be part of a more elaborate, field ministry-wide reporting system. See Hunt's argumentation in *F. M. Smith: Saint as Reformer*, 2 vols. (Herald Publishing House: Independence, Missouri, 1982), 2: 245-246.

<sup>21</sup> Historian Richard Howard argues that F. M. Smith could not draw distinction between spiritual power and administrative power. See his discussion of this in *Church Through the Years*, 2 vols. (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1993) 2: 223.

<sup>22</sup> This term should not be confused with “concurrent jurisdiction” which is an administrative reference to interquorum relationships. Maurice L. Draper called into question the legitimacy of the right of concurrent jurisdiction. In his oral history he claimed that Section 104 is deficient in its explanation concerning the relationship between the three presidencies of the church, and thus cannot be used to justify scripturally an

membership in their right to ratify all general officers. Delegates passed resolutions during the General Conference of 1923 to prepare the way for his move on the Presiding Bishopric.<sup>23</sup> Following the editorial initiative established by his father, F. M. allowed both sides argued their viewpoints in the *Saints' Herald* throughout 1924.<sup>24</sup>

With this preparation, in the 1925 General Conference Fred M. placed his own arguments before the church membership and then allowed them through common consent to render a decision on his leadership. He had confidence in the voice of the people and his ability to communicate his desires to place final decision making in the hands of the First Presidency. Ultimately, the people sustained his position in the General Conferences from 1919 through 1925. At one point Fred M. tendered his resignation as an expression of his commitment to his beliefs. Such an extreme measure as placing at stake his career signaled F. M.'s uncompromising commitment to, and certainly the volatility of, this issue as well as the primacy of the delegates' role, through common consent, in resolving the most important crisis of church governance in the middle years of Reorganization Era. To be sure, the Supreme Directional Control initiative and the integral role of common consent was a watershed event in the life of the church.

#### *Council of Twelve, Common Consent, and Presidential Transition*

The Supreme Directional Control crisis afforded Fred M. Smith the opportunity to replace many in the leading quorums of the church.<sup>25</sup> There is some irony that the Council of Twelve, who lost a portion of their administrative authority to the First Presidency with the resolution of the Supreme Directional Control issue, would reassert that authority to choose Fred M.'s successor upon his death on March 20, 1946. The issue of succession created considerable confusion since Fred M. had not publicly named his successor. Three eligible ministers were logical candidates: Presiding Evangelist Emeritus Frederick A. Smith, Presiding Evangelist Elbert A. Smith, and First Presidency

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equality of the three quorums. See *An Oral History Memoir by Maurice L. Draper*, The History Commission, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2 vols. (1989), 1: 283-92, located in the Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>23</sup> See Resolutions 834 and 839 in *Rules and Resolutions, 1990 Edition* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1990), 26. Also see the 1923 General Conference Minutes, Tuesday, October 9<sup>th</sup> Session, 3462-65 and October 11<sup>th</sup> Session, 3491.

<sup>24</sup> F. Henry Edwards, then a member of the Council of Twelve, actually measured the coverage of the dispute by counting the columns for both sides. He found seventy-eight columns during the year in favor of granting Smith supreme directional control and 112 columns against the proposal. This exercise signaled two important conclusions about the issue for the church at that time: the *Saints' Herald* was truly open in its coverage of the issue, and how deeply the issue divided the church. See *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 8 vols. (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House), 7: 599.

<sup>25</sup> By 1925, when the Supreme Directional Control (SDC) issue was resolved, F.M. Smith appointed eight new apostles and replaced all three members of the Presiding Bishopric, including his younger brother, Israel A. Smith, who left the Presiding Bishopric and temporarily church employment, as well. Five of the eight apostles who received their Council of Twelve appointments as a result of the SDC controversy selected Israel A. Smith as F. M.'s successor. Only Apostles John W. Rushton and Paul M. Hanson were survivors of SDC and still on the Council at the time of F. M.'s death. It should be noted that Rushton resigned from the Council of Twelve as a result of SDC but was reinstated by F. M. Smith on April 14, 1932, and served in the apostolic office until April 7, 1947. Rushton played a leading role in presenting Israel Smith's name before the 1946 General Conference.

Counselor Israel A. Smith. In the absence of formalized protocol<sup>26</sup> to replace Fred M., the Council of Twelve proposed to the 1946 Conference that Israel should succeed his older brother. Through common consent delegates sustained the apostolic recommendation, just as they sustained First Presidency during the Supreme Directional Control controversy twenty-one years earlier.

### **Common Consent in the Era of World-wide Community**

The last half of the twentieth century has seen an extraordinary interplay between the church leadership and the membership in the balance of common consent. The pastoral leadership of Israel A. Smith provided the church a well-deserved reprieve from the exhaustive prophetic demands of Frederick M. Smith and the difficult circumstances of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Three interesting tests of common consent emerged during the 1960's, the first relating to delegate representation at World Conferences, the second concerning the prophetic word choice through revelation, and the third by changing the standing rules of representation in conference voting procedures.

As early as 1881, Joseph Smith III grew concerned about fair and equitable representation during the General Conferences. The considerable numerical expansion of the church and ordinations to the Melchisedec priesthood through the decades created an imbalance causing disproportionate representation. The inequities grew from *ex officio* voting privileges.<sup>27</sup> For example, in 1963, men were being ordained at a rate of one for every forty members, while delegates at church conferences were apportioned at a rate of one for every one hundred members. Also, approximately sixty-three percent of the total ministerial manpower of the church were Aaronic priesthood members. In mutual concern, both the church leadership and delegates determined to eliminate *ex officii* from delegate seating in order to preserve fairness. It should be pointed out that an organized opposition exerted pressure to maintain the *status quo*. Their protests were joined by many in the central stakes who, for years, filled the *ex officio* seating in General Conferences and voted by authority of their priesthood.

In 1964, conference resolutions were submitted from Blue Valley Stake and Center Stake inveighing for the rejection of any legislation that would change conference representation. The geographic location of the General Conference in Independence gave a decided advantage to the large numbers of "elders in Zion," who could easily attend General Conferences business sessions. Thus, proximity gave them a very loud voice in decision-making. Although vocal in their protests, ultimately *ex officio* representation was eliminated.<sup>28</sup> Common consent assisted the church to resolve an eighty-year-old dispute.

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph III's now famous "A Letter of Instruction" identified F.M. as successor by invoking his prophetic authority and insight. The aging prophet testified: "...that the Spirit of revelation and wisdom has manifested to me that such choice should be made as directed by the Spirit of the Masterbuilder." Joseph Smith III, "A Letter of Instruction," *Saints' Herald* 59 (March 13, 1912): 248.

<sup>27</sup> *Ex officio* rights were requested by various jurisdictions and quorum for Aaronic ministers through the 1880's and 1890's. These were printed in the *Saints' Herald* for consideration by the church at large. A compilation of these requests is found in "Conference Rules of Representation," First Presidency Papers: World Conferences 1964-1978, 1964, fl. Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>28</sup> For example, an Independence, Missouri, based group of eighty individuals created the Committee for Basic Law, and on March 7, 1964, sent a letter of protest "To All Pastors, Elders, High Priests, and Conference Delegates." The Committee included with the letter a twelve-page discussion tracing the

Another interesting test of common consent occurred during the 1968 World Conference and the introduction of Section 149 and 149A.<sup>29</sup> After receiving the confirmation of the Spirit of God, W. Wallace Smith presented to the conference a document to “[clarify] relationships between ministerial programs and direction of the use of temporalities.” He used language concerning the bishopric that was unacceptable to the delegates asking them to accept his interpretation that

“since the office of bishop is a ‘necessary appendage’ to the high priesthood and members of the Order of Bishops are charged with the ministry of temporalities, they will act in support of leadership given by the spiritual authorities for the achievement of the purposes of my church. Temporal officers are to be supported in their rightful place, but must be guided by the needs of the field in their work of helping to furnish the means to finance my program.”<sup>30</sup>

Many considered this statement to relegate the Order of Bishops, as “a necessary appendage,” to secondary priesthood status. Even with his best attempts, the prophet could not allay the concerns of the Order of Bishops, thus requiring him “to seek further light.” In the early morning hours of April 4, 1968, the prophet received the further instruction that he presented to the conference to clarify the meaning of his language earlier in the week. This “added light” became Section 149A. The insistence of the Order of Bishops for prophetic reconsideration of Section 149 emerged from the prerogative of common consent that inhered from the councils, quorums, orders, and membership of the church.

The evolution in common consent continued in the 2000 World Conference when the First Presidency prevailed upon the delegates to permit proportional voting in legislative matters. This standing rule, requiring a two-thirds majority approval, extended full voting strength to delegations that were unable to elect a full slate of representatives from their national jurisdictions. The proportion was based on “a ratio . . . established by dividing the number of delegates registered and certified by the total number of delegates the region is entitled [to].”<sup>31</sup> The conference approval of this decision, as much as any made during the earlier Reorganization Era, revealed two important late twentieth century realities—the changing face of an international denomination, and the ability of the world church, through common consent, to provide full voice to ensure equality of representation.

The enormously successful move to internationalization, launched during the closing years of Israel A. Smith and continued to the present, has had a profound impact on church identity. Today, for example, more church attendees—both church members

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history of conference representation titled the “Responsibility of Elders in World Conference.” They protested the Committee on Conference Organization report arguing that to enfranchise other portions of the church population is to disfranchise the eldership as specifically stated in the Doctrine and Covenants 17:13. “Committees and Proposed Legislation,” First Presidency Papers: World Conferences 1964-1978, 1964, f1, f2. Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

<sup>29</sup> There is a definite need for a critical historical study of this important event in the history of the church. Until that study occurs, only limited analyses such as this will have to suffice to inform the church on the assertion of the membership’s will upon the church leadership.

<sup>30</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 149:3.

<sup>31</sup> First Presidency, *World Conference Bulletin, 2000*, “C-2 Standing Rules of the 2000 World Conference,” 154.

and friends of the church—speak French than English.<sup>32</sup> Speaking for the motion, Apostle Bunda Chibwe, stated that proportional voting would more accurately reflect the sentiments of the national churches and would reduce the number of actual delegate seats without reducing their vote. Then, he described the difficulty of obtaining travel documents in some nations and concluded with an explanation of how burdensome the financial cost was for delegates from third world nations to attend the conference.<sup>33</sup> By voting their approval, the delegates relinquished their natural advantage based on the cultural realities—an amazing application of common consent that reflected the church’s value of “worth of persons” since their vote provided a more equitable expression for the voice of the disadvantaged in World Conference assembled.

In the opening years of the Era of World-wide Community through common consent, the membership yielded significant decision-making authority to the church leadership. This demonstrated the depth of trust of the people for their leaders.<sup>34</sup> But the most obvious affirmation of common consent as a preferred style of governance thus far in the short life of the Community of Christ is expressed in the acceptance of the new church bylaws approved on April 10, 2002. At the very outset of the bylaws, common consent was introduced as a key characteristic of defining the church as a “theocratic democracy.” This guiding principle of decision-making received full explanation just a few paragraphs later.<sup>35</sup> In the bylaws an elaborate explanation of six specific safeguards were identified to protect the rights of the people. These included their sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, their authority to approve priesthood calls, their prerogative to sustain the church leadership, their protection from previously approved enactments of the church, their ability to correct disorder, and their right to perform their duties free from interference.<sup>36</sup> The elevated position of common consent in the bylaws signaled its importance to the current legislative process as a key component to understanding the primacy of democracy in the very nature of the church.

### Conclusions

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<sup>32</sup> Harry Fielding to Mark A. Scherer, Interview, Independence, Missouri, April 16, 2002. Fielding attributed this development to the success of church missionaries in French-speaking African and Caribbean nations. For an understanding of this reality in its historical context, see my article “Answering Questions No Longer Asked: Nauvoo, Its Meaning and Interpretation in the RLDS/Community of Christ,” in *Sunstone* (July 2002): 28-32.

<sup>33</sup> *2000 World Conference Transcripts*, Legislative Session, Sunday, April 2, 2002: 7-8. A testament to his skillful ministry, Chibwe’s pastoral explanation to the conference did not indict volunteer substitute delegates, usually from the North American church, for voting in ways that overrode the wishes of those they represented.

<sup>34</sup> First Presidency initiated legislation that assumed the responsibility of establishing line-item expenses in the World Church budget. Conference delegates agreed that all pre-legislative discussion and any proposed amendments be expressed in language that recommends consideration of functions, program thrusts, and ministerial emphases rather than in language that mandates specific allocations. By vote, delegates granted to the Board of Appropriations to act on their behalf to approve annual line item budgets. Ceding such important fiduciary authority to church leaders demonstrated enormous confidence in church leaders to determine specific expenditures. Presiding Bishop Larry Norris acknowledged the significance of this responsibility stating: “We feel the rights of the people and the trust relationships that are granted graciously to those of us responsible for the church finances has been met in this method of budgeting.” See World Conference Resolution 1246, adopted April 17, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> “2002 World Conference Actions,” *World Conference 2002 Bulletin*, Sunday, April 14, 2002, 275.

<sup>36</sup> “2002 World Conference Actions,” 276.

Throughout our church story, common consent has been in a delicate balance between the will of the membership and the will of the leadership on issues related to the institution's governance. The tilt and sway of that balance, reflecting a shift in the hegemony of decision-making, is noticeable as the church moved through the Eras of Restoration, Reorganization, and World-wide Community.

This position paper has traced the evolution of common consent through the three eras of church history with particular expression in its church-wide conference setting. Of course, there are many other settings—at lower jurisdictional levels, for example—where common consent can also be seen. Further explorations of common consent need to occur in these arenas as well. At the mission center and congregational levels today, and regional, district, and stake levels in the recent past, the story of common consent thrives. Most notably priesthood ordination has special meaning at these levels because by voting for investiture the World Church requires no further membership approval.<sup>37</sup>

Today, the shared root derivation in “common” and “community” symbolizes the importance of common consent to the Community of Christ. In all aspects of church life trust remains the most important element in the relationship between the membership and leadership, and the church is sustained in its forward movement when one honors the other.

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<sup>37</sup> This statement refers specifically to the Aaronic priesthood offices and the office of elder in the Melchisedec priesthood. Of course, two exceptions to this are the ordination or setting apart of general officers of the church, and other specialized priesthood officers, such as presidents of seventy, all which take place during the World Conference. Also consideration of the office of high priest and seventy occur at higher administrative levels.