Revelation can go upward in the Church, upward through a hierarchy at its top or bottom, or even from non-hierarchical to hierarchical positions.

**COUNTER-HIERARCHICAL REVELATION**

*By Todd Compton*

This paper deals with revelation and how it is sometimes received. Specifically I will address a process of revelation in which revelation is received by someone comparatively low in a hierarchy, or not in the hierarchy, and is eventually accepted by someone higher in the hierarchy. I have noticed this pattern in the scriptures and in Church history—in fact, this article is a direct outgrowth of my teaching Sunday School for two years, trying to read the New Testament and Book of Mormon carefully.

While Church leaders can be inspired, they are still human and fallible. We find this fact exemplified all through the scriptures and Church history: Moses disobeyed God at Meribath-Kadesh (Numbers 20:11-12, 27:12-14); as this paper will show, according to Paul, Peter acted hypocritically in response to social pressure; Lehi joined Laman and Lemuel in murmuring against the Lord; Jonah did not want to save the repentant city of Ninevah. As President J. Reuben Clark said, “Even the President of the Church has not always spoken under the direction of the Holy Ghost, for a prophet is not always a prophet. . . . In our own Church, leaders have differed in view from the first.”

Some might think that an emphasis on this idea is overly critical of prophets and Church leaders, even anti-Mormon. Actually, emphasizing the fallibility of inspired leaders is the only possible defense against simplistic anti-Mormon critics. Otherwise we have to run around in a state of paranoia covering up well-documented failings of Church leaders in an unconvincing—and seemingly dishonest—way. And as we try to cover up past mistakes, we add a whole new layer of failings to Church history for the next generation of leaders to deal with.

While some might make a strong distinction between revelation and inspiration, in this paper I will treat them as if they are closely related, different in strength, but on the same continuum, and will consider inspiration, including moral insight, to be a sort of revelation. For instance, in an 1892 speech, President Wilford Woodruff seems to use revelation and inspiration as more or less interchangeable terms.

**Peter and Paul at Antioch**

My first test case is the confrontation of Paul and Peter at Antioch, which Paul describes in Galatians 2. Unfortunately, we don’t have Peter’s version of this event and some interpreters of this passage have viewed Peter with some sympathy. But for the purposes of this paper, in true fundamentalist fashion, I will assume that Paul’s version is substantially true. It is worth noting that the idea of a fallible Peter was so troubling to Patristic commentators that this passage became a model case of “polemical theology,” Kontroverstheologie, in the Middle Ages. In fact, Augustine and Jerome had a famous epistolary dispute concerning it. While Augustine denounced Jerome’s simulation theory (in which Paul and Peter stage their dispute as a kind of teaching tool) because of the necessary truth of every word of scripture, he also tried to harmonize the two apostles. Later scholars also would be troubled by the dispute between Augustine and Jerome, and would propose harmonization theories to explain this dispute.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were
not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile, and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? (Galatians 2:11-14, New International Version.)

As we try to reconstruct the background to this incident, we see that Peter is something equivalent to the president of the primitive Church—the leading member of the twelve original apostles selected by Christ. Earlier, Peter had received an important vision relaxing the dietary laws of the Old Testament and encouraging gentiles to become Christian. Paul was an apostle who had received a personal visitation from Christ, but was not one of the Twelve. In Mormon terms, on one hand we have a president of the Church and on the other, a junior apostle, not even a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Peter, in line with his revelation and Paul’s perspective, eats with gentile Christians—a highly symbolic act of Christian unity, since generally Jews were revolted by the idea of eating in common with gentiles; it was probably also a ritual act linked with the early celebration of the sacrament.5

But as Peter eats with Gentiles in the purity of Christian fellowship, visitors arrive from James, the leader of a conservative faction of the primitive Christian church concerned with preserving Jewish ritual practice. Peter immediately withdraws; Barnabas and other Christians follow him. To Paul, this is an act of moral cowardice, and he denounces Peter publicly “to his face,” “in front of them all.” “He was in the wrong”; “he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.” Peter, along with others, “played the hypocrite” [in Greek, sunuphrēthēsan]; “they carried Barnabas away with their hypocrisy” [tel hupokrēsei]; “they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.” This hypocrisy language is strong, especially since hypocrisy was the central accusation Christ leveled against the Pharisees.

Thus, when Peter had abdicated his position of moral leadership, Paul, though hierarchically inferior to Peter, assumed it and felt it was even necessary to denounce him publicly. Imagine that scene transferred to a Mormon setting—an equivalent might be a recently-called apostle denouncing the president of the Church in a regional conference. Extraordinary as the situation was, the pattern is clear: moral leadership and inspiration flowed from below to above.

Significantly, a passage like this found its way into the scriptures and survived. Obviously, God wants us to ponder the fact that our leaders, prophetic as they may be, have faults. (However, it is interesting that the confrontation between Peter and Paul is not mentioned in Acts. “Correlating” is not a uniquely modern practice.)

A Church leader who seeks to wield his ecclesiastical authority in an area in which he has little or no expertise perhaps runs the risk of overstepping his bounds.

NEPHI’S SUBTLE REBUKE OF LEHI

A second example comes from the Book of Mormon with Lehi and his clan in the desert on the way to the Red Sea: we have the “good,” prophetic Lehi and Nephi, versus the “bad” Laman and Lemuel. But, as often happens in the Book of Mormon, things are not quite that simple. Lehi, the chief prophet of the group, who had complete hierarchical and genealogical seniority, has a moral lapse (1 Nephi 16:18-20). We have a moment of crisis: Nephi broke his bow and there was inadequate food for the exhausted desert travelers. Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael murmured “exceedingly,” and Lehi, surprisingly, joined them and “began to murmur against the Lord his God.” Then they all “were exceedingly sorrowful” and murmured against the Lord together.

What might have started out as a moment of discouragement for the elderly Lehi ended up as a virtual group rebellion against God. Of course, it was Nephi who assumed moral leadership at this point. His reaction to Lehi’s lapse was quite different from Paul’s reaction to Peter’s. But before he approached Lehi, he denounced his brothers (who were above him in normal family status, if not in religious hierarchy) for hardening their hearts to the extent of murmuring against God. There is an implicit reproach to Lehi here, for Lehi had been doing the same thing. Nephi then made a new bow and arrow, and, instead of denouncing his father, asked him for guidance: “And I said unto my father: Whither shall I go to obtain food?”

It is interesting that Nephi did not attack hierarchical structure or try to place himself above Lehi, just as Paul wasn’t trying to tear down Peter’s authority in an absolute way. In-
stead, Nephi tried to strengthen his father in his prophetic mission. As quiet and constructive as this response was, it was nevertheless a subtle but telling rebuke to an erring prophetic leader.

Lehi inquired of the Lord and was strongly and overtly rebuked by God “insomuch that he was brought down into the depths of sorrow.” Lehi consulted the Liahona and received further chastening so that he “did fear and tremble exceedingly.” But the instrument gave direction for Nephi’s hunting, and he found and killed game. The crisis was averted. Once again, the scriptures offer an example of a serious lapse in the chief prophet of a group and of moral inspiration going from a hierarchically lesser figure to the higher.

EMMA AND THE WORD OF WISDOM

My third example is a delightful anecdote from modern Church history, the circumstances behind the bestowal of the Word of Wisdom revelation. Joseph Smith, in February 1833, held the School of the Prophets in a room above the kitchen of his house. According to Brigham Young,

the first thing they did was to light their pipes, and, while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom, and spit all over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give the school instructions he would find himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke.6

Emma complained at “having to clean so filthy a floor,” and according to Brigham Young, this in part “made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the elders in using Tobacco, and the revelation known as Word of Wisdom was the result of his inquiry.” David Whitmer adds a bit more, telling us that Emma actually suggested a revelation on the subject:

Some of the men were excessive chewers of the filthy weed, and their disgusting slobbering and spitting caused Mrs. Smith . . . to make the ironical remark that “It would be a good thing if a revelation could be had declaring the use of tobacco a sin, and commanding its suppression.”7

According to Whitmer, the men suggested the banning of tea and coffee in this proposed revelation as a counter-dig against the women. Curiously; this proposed revelation came, and it discouraged use of both the men’s tobacco and the women’s tea and coffee, though it was originally a word of counsel, not an absolute ban.8 Emma’s complaint “made the Prophet think upon the matter”; moral inspiration came first to a technically non-hierarchical person, then moved upward to the head of the Church. We also have the important pattern of revelation coming through a husband-wife combination.

YOUNG JOSEPH F. SMITH DISSENTS

My fourth example is an incident from the life of Joseph F. Smith. This comes from the most conservative source possible, President Smith’s Gospel Doctrine, a Melchizedek priesthood manual.9 President Smith had served a mission in Hawaii as a very young man. Then, after the notorious Walter Gibson had been presiding disastrously as mission president in Hawaii, two apostles, Ezra T. Benson, then 53, and the future prophet, Lorenzo Snow, then 50, accompanied by Joseph F. Smith, then 25, visited the islands to set up the mission again. Smith, not yet an apostle, acted as their interpreter and was left as mission president when the two apostles returned to Utah. However, as they arrived at the islands by boat, there was a tense moment as they tried to land. Their vessel was anchored in a rough channel, and the natives and young Joseph F. Smith knew it would be difficult to get to shore safely.

The natives had built a breakwater, and normally would carefully ferry passengers to shore in their small boats. But, for some reason, the Apostles decided to take the ship’s “unwieldy freight-boat” and try for the shore. Smith strongly disagreed with this decision and warned the very much senior Church leaders that such a course would be extremely unsafe, that the boat ran a great risk of capsizing. The older men refused to listen to him. Smith offered to go ashore alone and bring a safer boat back, but the brethren were insistent on taking the freight-boat immediately. Emotions apparently became heated, and one of the apostles told the young missionary, “Young man, you would better obey counsel.” The party got on the boat; but the strong-minded Joseph F. Smith refused to leave the main ship.

The freight-boat came to the dangerous, rough bit of sea; a great wave overturned it, dumping the two apostles, along with Elder W. W. Cluff and others, into about thirty feet of water. Natives saw the disaster and hurriedly came out in a boat to rescue the drowning men. When they had pulled everyone they could see out of the water, they began to paddle toward land, but Elder Cluff realized that Elder Snow was nowhere to be seen. They turned back, eventually found him, and brought him into the boat, though he looked dead. A messenger went back to Joseph F. Smith, who had helplessly witnessed all this, and told him Elder Snow had died. But fortunately, with a priesthood blessing, Elder Snow was brought back to life on the shore.

This example shows a young man who simply had more experience and knowledge in a limited area than men who, though they were apostles and his ecclesiastical superiors, were newcomers to Hawaii and probably not well acquainted with seafaring, at least in the local area. Further, one of the apostles—who should have bowed to the younger man’s greater experience—demanded his obedience. But Smith “reiterated his impression of danger” and refused to obey.

Thus, a Church leader who seeks to wield his ecclesiastical authority in an area in which he has little or no expertise perhaps runs the risk of overstepping his bounds, despite his ecclesiastical position. For instance, if a Church leader deals with non-ecclesiastical subjects—be they geographic, economic, scientific—he incurs a certain danger if he has only a limited background in those subjects. Joseph F. Smith’s receptivity to an impression coincided with his knowledge and
experience—inspiration and perspiration go together, as they say about genius. For example, a Church leader who has a background in the methodology of history, or has even written history attempting to use the highest standards of historiography, would be best fitted for critiquing historians. Even if a Church leader expresses true principles, as he ventures into matters with a secular dimension he may not be able to make his points as effectively as possible without some measure of expertise.

The story of Levi Savage and the Willie handcart company illustrates this principle. Savage spoke vehemently against starting the westward journey so late in the season, as he had knowledge of the country and its weather. However, he was voted down by the highest Church leaders in the company, and he stoically chose to make the trip with the company despite impending disaster. A little later, he was denounced for his faithlessness by an apostle, Elder Franklin Richards. The journey was, of course, a tragic mistake, and loss of lives and many injuries ensued. In an ironic denouement, Brigham Young denounced Elder Richards; he had been a Church leader for most of his life and lacked practical knowledge, Young pointed out disparagingly. Thus, in this case, the rank and file member with expertise in a limited area was more inspired than an apostle out of his element.

Another interesting example of counter-hierarchical revelation is the conflict of Brigham Young and Orson Pratt over the Adam-God doctrine (i.e., the teaching that Adam is God the Father, and Christ is Adam’s literal son), a topic so troubling to Church leadership that it has almost become a taboo subject. Brigham Young, as Church president, apparently was a strong proponent of this doctrine, though sometimes he seems to have had more typical views on Adam and God. Orson Pratt, on the other hand, was a strong opponent of it. In the fascinating, long, drawn out conflict between these strong-willed leaders, Brigham Young never quite got Orson to knuckle under completely, and Orson, though he had moments of retraction, never stopped insisting that the doctrine did not square with the scriptures. Brigham Young always claimed that he had learned the Adam-God doctrine from Joseph Smith. In an article on this topic, David Buerger concludes, convincingly, that Joseph Smith did not teach the doctrine; Young was either elaborating on or misunderstood Joseph’s teachings. Though this conclusion, if correct, happily leaves us without the necessity of believing in the confusing (in my view) Adam-God doctrine, it also leaves us with a rather unnerving view of a Church president going fairly far astray, doctrinally. Though Brigham strongly believed in the doctrine, significantly, he never advanced it as a revelation to be added to the Doctrine and Covenants, and the body of the Church, led by Orson Pratt and vindicated by time, never received it (to Brigham Young’s frustration). This is an example of the body of the Church being more inspired than its leader on this particular issue (assuming that we reject the Adam-God doctrine, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for one, has instructed our generation to do). This does not mean that we can’t accept Brigham Young as a prophet, an “American Moses” called by the Lord to fulfill a specific mission which he did with complete success though he was a fallible human being. Perhaps doctrinal exploration was not Brigham’s greatest area of expertise; like Elders Snow and Benson in Hawaii’s treacherous waters, he was out of his depth in this matter. But in many other areas, his inspiration is evident. I am not suggesting that he had no theological insights, but rather that he was more inspired in certain doctrinal areas than in others.

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES OF COUNTER-HIERARCHICAL REVELATION

For balance, I add two examples of the pattern from the contemporary Church. A friend of mine once had a stake president who felt strongly that long hair was inappropriate for men at a time when that style was popular. He refused to allow any of the young men of his stake to be ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood if they had long hair; this went on for years, and as a result many young men did not go on missions. Finally, when there had been widespread dissatisfaction with
his policy, he submitted it to his high council for a vote. They voted against it, and he bowed to their decision. When I first heard the story, I remarked that it showed humility that he would submit the question to the high council. My friend countered, "Yes, but only after years of practicing the previous policy with all its effects."

Another example involves a rank and file member of the Church. A friend of mine went to a foreign country on his mission, where he met someone who had been excommunicated from the Church for questioning the morals of a local leader. A stake president had become involved in a serious moral problem, and this member, not part of the local hierarchy, found out and was very troubled. He went to his bishop and told him the story. The bishop thought the member was falsely accusing the stake president (who he thought should be above suspicion) and excommunicated the member. Eventually there was an appeal to authority higher than the stake president and an investigation ensued. Finally the stake president was excommunicated, and the local member was reinstated in the Church.

This is, of course, a challenging and paradoxical situation. Church members have the "follow the Brethren" principle impressed on them continually. But, what do you do when Church leaders have serious moral flaws? Fortunately, most Church leaders don't, but it is always possible that some leaders could have lapses. I think the Church member in the story above did exactly as he should have done, though he had to endure excommunication because of his actions. If he had a strong belief in the Church and Church leaders, this must have been a harrowing, lonely ordeal.

In addition, the counselor offices in Church government implicitly acknowledge this pattern of checking leaders. If the prophet were infallible, if he received a steady, direct stream of absolute revelation, and were entirely self-sufficient, he would not need counselors. Yet they are there—counselors for bishops, stake presidents, and the prophet of the Church. I've always been impressed with what Joseph F. Smith said on becoming president of the Church:

I propose that my counselors and fellow presidents in the First Presidency shall share with me in the responsibility of every act which I shall perform in this capacity. I do not propose to take the reins in my own hands to do as I please; but I propose to do as my brethren and I agree upon... I have always held, and do hold, and trust I always shall hold, that it is wrong for one man to exercise all the authority and power of presidency in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I dare not assume such a responsibility, and I will not, so long as I can have men like these [pointing to Presidents Winder and Lund] to stand by and counsel with me in the labors we have to perform. . . . If at any time my brethren of the apostleship shall see in me a disposition to depart from this principle, or a forgetfulness on my part of this covenant that I make today before this body of Priesthood, I ask them in the name of my Father, that they will come to me, as my brethren, as counselors in the Priesthood, as watchmen on the towers of Zion, and remind me of this covenant and promise which I make to the body of the Church in general conference assembled at this time. The Lord never did intend that one man should have all power, and for that reason he has placed in his Church, presidents, apostles, high priests, 70s, elders, and the various officers of the lesser Priesthood, all of which are essential in their order and place.

Here we have, connected with the concept of revelation going from lower to higher, the idea of revelation coming to a group. There is both an upward flow and a downward flow of inspiration—the counselors' insights and inspirations go up to the president, who in turn has a special link to God, and revelation comes down in response.

Also, the president, in true humility, welcomes reproof from his hierarchical subordinates, as watchmen, if he acts without taking counsel with those "beneath" him, the body of the Church. According to Joseph F. Smith, for us to reprove leaders who are too autocratic is not just an option, but our duty as watchmen on the towers of Zion.

As we ponder this recommendation for ecclesiastical reproving, we remember that a revelation given through Joseph Smith authorized that he be reproved. In one of the earliest sections in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord instructed Oliver Cowdery to reprove Joseph on occasion: "Admonish him in his faults, and also receive admonition of him" (D&C 6:19). Thus we have an upward and downward interplay of reproval. But in the previous verse, Oliver is instructed to "stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be..." Paradoxically, "standing by" a leader and reproving his faults are not opposed activities, if done in the right spirit.

This is not to deny that many times the leader is right, the followers wrong, perhaps the most common circumstance. But the other possibility exists: the pattern is there in the scriptures for us to think about.

Obedience to Leaders and to God

I WILL now discuss some of the implications this pattern has for us as Church members, for leaders and also for rank and file members.

First of all, it challenges us as leaders to take seriously the ideas, insights, counsel, suggestions, and even rebukes of those hierarchically beneath us, to accept inspiration wherever we may find it, and to look for it in other people, both "above" and "below" us. We should realize that we are fallible, morally and intellectually, and we should have the courage to admit our mistakes and get back on track, as did Lehi, instead of doggedly pursuing a wrong course—instead of thinking that, because we are leaders, everything we do is rubber-stamped as perfection. It is dangerous to equate our mistakes with the truth of the Church. There is also the danger of not subjecting ourselves to the continual moral and intellectual self-examination that all human beings need—even and perhaps especially
Church leaders. Lehi's community was much better off because Lehi did not lash out at the quiet rebuke given him by his son. The rebuke, combined with Lehi's humility, opened the way for a renewal of revelation in a community that was drifting away.

According to one patristic tradition regarding the Antioch incident, Peter "humbly submitted to the reproach of his 'inferior.' " This interpretation helped create the "humble prelate" theme, which theologians cited when trying to reason with obstinate popes in the middle ages. Later, Luther would use this theme to argue that the humblest Christian could correct an erring pope.15

The implications for the rank and file Church members are also important. We may return to the Antioch incident and apply to it a standard phrase from Mormonism: "Follow the Brethren." Consider Peter eating with gentile Christians, the arrival of a group from James, and then Peter, the Church president, withdrawing from the gathering. Then, others follow him, including Barnabas, Paul’s missionary companion among the gentiles. These people who withdrew with Peter were, literally, following the Brethren, the “president” of the Church. How does Paul view this obedience? Does he commend it, since the people were, after all, following the prophet of the Church? No, he denounces it strongly. They are “playing the hypocrite” along with Peter, and share his guilt. To Paul's shock, Barnabas (also an apostle and Paul's former mentor) is even led aside “by their hypocrisy.” Thus, according to Paul, if we follow Church leaders who are not doing right, we are not absolved from wrongdoing; we share their guilt. And the conclusion is inescapable: sometimes obedience to Church leaders and obedience to God and moral justice are not the same thing.

This principle puts a sobering burden on us. It can be easy, in one sense, to live by a religious version of "my country right or wrong," "when the prophet speaks the debate is over." But this isn't what the Lord wants; he requires us to subject our leaders' actions and directives to moral and intellectual scrutiny; to serve with all of our mind as well as our heart. That is more difficult. Then, if we find our leadership wanting, morally, we have a duty to address the problem.16

Brigham Young instructed Church members not to take his counsel thoughtlessly, but to subject it to careful examination.17 Hugh B. Brown, as a counselor in the First Presidency, said:

While all members should respect, support, and heed the teachings of the Authorities of the Church, no one should accept a statement and base his testimony upon it, no matter who makes it, until he has, under mature examination, found it to be true and worthwhile; then his logical deductions may be confirmed by the spirit of revelation to his spirit because real conversion must come from within.18

An interesting example in a non-Mormon setting is the case of Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who has openly spoken out against doctrines in the Catholic church he feels are not compatible with scripture. He has also opposed the present pope openly, who in turn has used every means in his power to quiet the theologian. Küng describes his dissent as "critical loyalty and loyal criticisms of this Church."19 His criticisms are a result of his loyalty. Their main thrust has been directed against the doctrine of Papal infallibility, which he argues is not biblical in any way. In 1979 Küng's authorization to teach was withdrawn from him under the direction of Pope John Paul II, causing immediate international protest. Since then, the gulf between the theologian and the Pope has, if anything, widened, and Küng's criticisms have become sharp.

In the Church, we strongly hold to the idea of personal revelation but we often interpret it very hierarchically. You get personal revelation only for yourself; the Prophet alone gets inspiration for the Church. But the story of Emma and the Word of Wisdom shows that inspired insights, for the benefit of the Church, can come to us as non-hierarchical Church members. If our leaders are sensitive and thoughtful, as Joseph Smith was, insights we receive can affect them and lead them to receive further revelation.

Finally, this pattern leads us to one last implication. I have argued elsewhere that women have priesthood in our church,
especially those who have been through the temple, and that it should be more recognized and integrated formally into the Church structure. But as matters presently stand, women are not part of the Church hierarchy—they are excluded from the most important Church positions. However, the counter-hierarchical pattern shows us that women can receive revelation and inspiration for the benefit of the Church, not just for themselves and their children.

I hope that we, as Church leaders, will be sensitive to inspiration from those “beneath” us, from the general membership of the church, and that we in general membership can live close to the spirit and convey inspiration to those above us on occasion, and, if necessary, constructively be the loyal opposition. I hope that together we can all find the unity necessary in the gospel.

AFTERWORD

SINCE I gave this talk, a few reasonable objections have been raised to it, which I will try to deal with now.

Some object that many of my examples of people who receive counter-hierarchical revelation are still part of the hierarchy, and perhaps even have a “calling” to dissent, i.e., a counselor. However, I shared some non-hierarchical examples, such as Emma Smith and the Word of Wisdom, the case of Levi Savage, and the two modern examples. Most of us can provide examples of local leaders who have acted because of a comment from the rank and file. However, this paper emphasizes only that revelation can go upward in the Church, upward through a hierarchy at its top or bottom, or even from non-hierarchical to hierarchical positions. I am certainly not saying that upward revelation is the only, or most common, pattern for revelation, only that it can happen and that it happens more often than we acknowledge. It is a necessary escape valve in the Church, and we should make use of it on occasion, as leaders or rank and file members.

Another valid question: does my model lead to the danger of schism? That danger obviously does exist. An authoritarian wrong-headed leader can do the Church a great deal of damage, but an authoritarian wrong-headed critic can also do the Church a lot of damage (in my experience, some Sunstone symposium lecturers are not entirely immune to dogmatism or wrong-headedness). But in none of my examples did the person leave the Church when they received their individual inspirations—they stayed with the Church and enriched it. Paul never dreamed of deposing Peter or leaving the Church, when he denounced him publicly, and there are hints that he continued working closely with Peter after the Antioch incident.20 Levi Savage stayed with the ill-fated handcart company after his warning had been rejected and he did all he could to help the company endure the winter. His stoic heroism is all the more poignant when you consider that he was denounced by an apostle for being faithless.

Does non-hierarchical revelation make a person a law unto himself or herself? No, counter-hierarchical revelation does not negate the hierarchy. The hierarchy is still there; it is still the structure. The people I have looked at are usually on good terms with the Church structure—either a part of it or related to it somehow. They were spiritually sensitive people. Nephi didn’t lay down the law to Lehi; he went to Lehi and asked him for leadership. There are ways of working counter-hierarchically that are non-threatening.

What of the problem of conflicting revelations—members of the Church getting (false) revelations that counter the (true) revelations of the leadership? This obviously can happen. This is not a simple question; living in the real world, and in the real Church, many times does not give us simple solutions to complex problems. Every Church member must simply use judgment in evaluating what is inspiration and what isn’t. In some ways the concept of counter-hierarchical revelation is freeing; in other ways it is a great burden. If it is misused it can lead to apostasy; but if it is not used in certain situations, that moral apathy can also lead to apostasy. Nephi helped bring his community back from the edge of rebellion.

Some wonder how it would be possible to keep order in the Church with such a “counter-hierarchical” pattern in operation. Again, I don’t see this pattern denying the structure of the Church. I see it as using the structure of the Church. Any who have “counter-hierarchical” inspiration must subject it to Church leaders and the Church, even if informally, for acceptance or rejection. I believe God in his infinite vision sees the Church in all its complexity. While there is hierarchical order in the Church, it also contains important democratic elements. It is not strictly authoritarian, but a community, full of checks and balances, where important inspiration can come to any one who is in tune, not just to a few (though Church leaders have a responsibility to conduct the business of the Church). One reader of this talk commented that it raised interesting questions about how God looked at hierarchy, and mentioned that, after the Resurrection, Christ did not appear first to Peter, but to Mary, who was not part of the hierarchy. Thus, a “non-hierarchical” person was the first witness of the most important religious event in the history of humankind and was sent to take the message to the eleven apostles (Mark 16:7,9; John 20:17-18). But this did not negate the ecclesiastical structure that was already in existence—Mary was sent to help it.21

My paper could be seen as a critique of those critics of the Church who leave the Church, instead of staying with it and working constructively to improve it.22

NOTES

4. For defense of Peter in this incident, see the Kerygmatikon Petra: 1:4-5, found in Betz 331; Betz 109, 104, 103; for Augustine and Jerome, see Froehlich 261-62, with bibliography.
10. Elder Dallin Oaks has said, "Seekers who have paid the price in perspiration have been magnified in inspiration," Ensign 19 (May 1989): 29.
13. Brigham Young and Orson Pratt also disagreed about whether God progressed in knowledge. In our day, Elder McConkie, following President Joseph Fielding Smith, supported the Pratt position, and Eugene England supports the Young position. See Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complimentary Ways to Talk about God," BYU-Idaho Studies 29 (Summer 1989): 31-47. Counter-hierarchical inspiration was operating in either the earlier or later controversy.

You watch Ed pad his window to mute the outside world. You close your door to invaders, take off the receiver to the telephone move to the back back bedroom. Walls of your skin link together to exclude all but inside sight that's dropped inside you. You crawl under the web of sheets, your brain wrapped in a bandage of fog so dense the sun has gone down behind your eyes that close and see honey-combed walls spun underground like Christians of old who hid in dark tunnels beneath Rome secretly close to what they loved in catacombs and you drift off, barely remembering about cobweb catacaracts—"The outside world was unclear to James Joyce" and you imagine his glasses thickening, "so he became introspective," you read, feeling yourself falling inside where these sheets seem to tumble in soft down through layers of comfort and you drop into the dark of sleep surrounded in salmon light and feed on what nurtures you—joined to a primitive source almost like a desert dwelling or mother's soft adobe walls—your private Walden, secluded and so close to home, dreaming of ancient Jews who leave sands of Egypt, wandering through the Red Sea that opens, and feel yourself falling, through wilderness—wandering further into the steady pulse of deep sleep and sink into the ebb, the flow of the ocean breaking and pulling you in now, retiring again then gently pushing against what is solid on shore.

You want to stay in this world of deep peace. It is what you know, a place to be alone like Jews who finally found their own Jericho—a bonne vaux. What you love is this familiar place where as a child you sank inside to this comfort, seeing gardens like those in Rome where inner courts held secrets of foliage growing lush behind terra cotta more primitive than cave dwellings and recall your mother telling you of the desert when over walls of adobe she peeked in, seeing green so luminous it was like acombe of Eden, moist and rich like life here and you dream of marmots biting you, and jump from your sleep, thinking that if you sink back now, this earthwomb might swallow you, bury you in warm moist walls for good.

—MARGARET RECHIF