

Part Two – Mormonism and the World

Chapter 4 – “Render Unto Caesar...”: Mormonism and Government

At a general assembly of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, on August 17, 1835, the LDS church adopted a “declaration of belief regarding governments and laws.” This declaration subsequently became Section 134 of the book known as the Doctrine and Covenants. To Mormons, this placement gives the declaration the status of inspired scripture.

The most striking aspect of Section 134 is the way in which it strongly advocates the separation of church and state and carefully delineates the respective roles of each. Verse nine says: “We do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government...” If one were to tell a citizen of modern Utah, Mormon or non-Mormon, that Mormons do not believe in mingling religious influence with civil government, one would likely hear back either a sarcastic comment or a cynical laugh.

Actually, the Mormon position is very much the same position taken by Jesus when the Pharisees were trying to “entangle him in his talk” (Matthew 22:15). (Even 2000 years ago, the use of rhetorical tricks by politicians was an old game!). Jesus was asked whether it was “lawful” (meaning according to Jewish law, which was, at the time, essentially the same as asking if it was “righteous”) to “give tribute unto Caesar?” (verse 17). Jesus’ well-known reply, after asking whose picture was on a penny, was that one should: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21).

According to Section 134, both governments and religion were “instituted of God” and they each have their own job to do. One of the major responsibilities of each is to respect and uphold the other without interfering with or undermining the other.

The separation of Church and State

“We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society.” (Doctrine and Covenants 134:1.)

“We believe that religion is instituted of God; and that men are amenable to him, and to him only, for the exercise of it, unless their religious opinions prompt them to infringe upon the rights and liberties of others; but we do not believe that human law has a right to interfere in prescribing rules of worship to bind the consciences of men, nor dictate forms for public or private devotion; that the civil magistrate should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul.” (Doctrine and Covenants 134:4.)

“We believe that every man should be honored in his station, rulers and magistrates as such, being placed for the protection of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty; and that to the laws all men show respect and deference, as without them peace and harmony would be supplanted by anarchy and terror; human laws being instituted for the express purpose of regulating our interests as individuals and nations, between man and man; and divine laws given of heaven, prescribing rules on spiritual concerns, for faith and worship, both to be answered by man to his Maker.” (Doctrine and Covenants 134:6.)

Mormon doctrine teaches that God instituted both governments and religion and that He will hold us responsible for our actions in relation to both. Mormon scripture is also very clear that government and religion have different purposes. Governments make and administer laws for the “express purpose” of regulating the interests “between man and man” whether as individuals or as nations. Religions prescribe rules “on spiritual concerns” for the purposes of “faith and worship.”

The proper functioning of both government and religion depends upon each staying within their proper sphere. Throughout history, whenever one has meddled in the affairs of the other, corruption, despotism, and violence has been the result. Examples range from the Inquisition period when the church meddled far too much in the affairs of individuals, to the bloody rule of King Henry VIII who actually founded his own church so that he could divorce his wife.

In Christian history, the classic example of the mingling of Church and State was the council at Nicaea in AD 325. This event was the first ecumenical council and the result was the first Christian creed. Mormons often point to this council as the culminating event in a universal apostasy from the doctrines and principles taught by Jesus. We believe the true Priesthood of God, and its saving ordinances, had, by this time, disappeared from the Earth. The key detail never mentioned by those Christian churches that still accept the Nicenean creed, is that the council was called by, and presided over, by the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was a sun worshipper. His motive was to use the Church to unite his authority over his empire.

The council represented the beginning of an alliance between church and state and the end of religious freedom that would reap untold misery in years to come. Those not acquiescing to the religious decisions of the council were to be banished from their homes by the authority of the state. Indeed, there was nothing in the nature of this council to suggest a purity of purpose.

(Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1998], 38.)

In the United States, the doctrine of the separation of Church and State is codified in the 1st Amendment to the Constitution. This is hardly surprising since many of the earliest colonists came here to escape religious persecution, and since the persecution often came from governments. Because of this history, the Founding Fathers were concerned that the new government be prohibited from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The danger in the United States today, however, is not governmental interference in religion. Rather, it is religious interference in government. The political right wing has worked tirelessly and spent millions of dollars to organize churches, especially evangelical Christian churches, into a potent political force. The Christian Coalition and its successor organizations are powerful and wealthy political action committees that use the name of God to serve their political purposes.

It is possible that you, the reader, may be asking yourself, “What is wrong with that? Isn’t it everyone’s right in America to organize and vote in support of what they believe? And don’t some liberal churches also organize and participate in politics?” The answer to the second and third questions is “yes,” though it must be pointed out that the financial and political influence of “liberal” churches is practically insignificant compared to the religious right.

The first question is more complicated. What is wrong with the political right finding common allies in the conservative churches and organizing them for direct political action? The first problem is that the political right and the Christian churches are not, or at least should not be, natural allies. The politicians have lied to, and are abusing the good will of, decent, hard-working, American Christians. How they did this is the topic of chapter three.

The second problem is that, by using religion as a political wedge, the right wing is blatantly, for selfish political advantage, violating the constitutional separation of church and state. It is supremely ironic that some of these same right-wingers who so deliberately mix religion and politics are the same people who claim to be “Constitutionalists” who speak reverently (and often!) of the “Founding Fathers.”

I want to remind my Mormon readers again how the LDS church deals with this situation. In addition to regular official statements of political neutrality, the Mormon Church allows no political use of its buildings, properties, or publications at the local, state, national, or international levels. The Church does not endorse, officially or unofficially, any political candidate, and the Church is not a partner with, or supporter of, any partisan political organization. In other words, the LDS church believes in the separation of church and state, and its actions are consistent with its beliefs.

It is instructive that, while the early colonization and government of Utah was church directed and controlled, Brigham Young encouraged the creation of civil (i.e., not ecclesiastical) forms of government throughout the Territory as quickly as was feasible. Church-run public schools were turned over to civil authority as soon as the mechanisms were in place to govern them. It was not the desire of the Church to remain indefinitely in position as the secular authority of Utah. This is evidenced by the Church’s strong support of efforts to achieve statehood for Utah

So, if the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints both teaches and acts in a way that is consistent with its belief in the separation of church and state, how is it that many see the Mormon Church and the Utah Republican party as inseparable? Who stands to gain from this perceived linkage of the Mormon Church and a particular political party? Who conceived, promoted, and maintains this outrageous lie? Could this linkage possibly have come from the LDS Church? Or is it more likely the Republicans are shamelessly manipulating people of faith?

Interestingly, the organization that, more than any other, has spoken up for (and defended in court) the principle of separation of church and state is the American Civil

Liberties Union. The ACLU has a noble history of defending civil liberties. Specifically, they provide legal services in cases involving the Bill of Rights. Their efforts often put them at odds with powerful people and organizations because the Bill of Rights was written specifically to defend the little guys against the big guys, the minority against the tyranny of the majority.

Though one may not agree with every issue the ACLU chooses to litigate, we are fortunate to have such an organization in our country. Sadly, the negative opinion most Utahns have toward the ACLU is a sign that Utah Mormons have completely forgotten what it is like to be a persecuted minority. Given our history as a church, this is astonishing.

Freedom of conscience

We believe that no government can exist in peace, except such laws are framed and held inviolate as will secure to each individual the free exercise of conscience, the right and control of property, and the protection of life.

...that the civil magistrate should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul.

...and that all governments have a right to enact such laws as in their own judgments are best calculated to secure the public interest; at the same time, however, holding sacred the freedom of conscience. (Doctrine and Covenants 134:2, 4, 5)

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (The Declaration of Independence of the United States).

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (1st Amendment to the Constitution of the United States).

In 1787, during the Constitutional Convention, Virginia delegate George Mason made a motion that Congress be empowered to enact laws that would regulate personal behavior on moral and religious grounds. The proposal was defeated. Since that time our government has generally avoided legislating personal morality. This is important for two reasons. First, if we, as Mormons, wish to maintain freedom of conscience in matters of personal faith and morality for ourselves, we must defend the same right for others.

Second, any attempt to coerce personal faith and morals inevitably results in conflict and violence. (See Eugene England, *Making Peace*, p.90)

There are two great examples in American history when Congress violated this principle. The attempted Prohibition of liquor in 1919 led to gang violence, political corruption, and guaranteed to the criminals a significant and steady source of income. The utter failure of this attempt to legislate morality led to the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.

The other example is the Federal persecution of the Mormon Church over the question of plural marriage. It is important to keep in mind that the disenfranchisement of Mormon voters, the legal disincorporation of the Mormon Church (including the confiscation of its properties), the arrest and imprisonment of LDS Apostles and other leaders, and the occupation of Utah by the U.S. Army were all instigated by Republicans in Congress who claimed to be offended by the Mormon's "peculiar institution."

The frightening thing to me is that many Mormons today would seemingly have sided with the Republicans against the Church. Currently, issues of personal conscience, such as abortion and gay marriage, are being used by the Republican Party as wedge issues to strengthen their standing with religious groups. What these political opportunists want people to forget is that we have religious freedom in this country precisely *because* the government allows us personal freedom of conscience. If we allow the government to start dictating what proper religious or moral behavior is, we can say goodbye to the freedom that led many to this country in the first place.

The Mormon people ought to know better than to get involved with groups (such as the Republican Party) who want the government to coerce religious or moral behavior. Mormon scripture points out that this issue was at the very heart of a War in Heaven that took place before this Earth was created. The person in that drama who advocated that everyone on Earth be *forced* to be righteous was Lucifer. The person who advocated free agency was Jehovah, the pre-mortal Christ (Moses 4:1-4). In other words, a central tenet of Mormonism is the freedom for each individual to choose good or evil for him or her self. Of course it is better to choose righteousness, but without a legitimate choice how can one ultimately be held responsible for one's own actions?

This is the beauty of our Constitutional system as originally set up. It is perhaps the first system of government in history that fully allows people to make their own choices and reap their own rewards (and consequences). And if I, as a religious person, consider that another person's behavior is sinful, I should not ask or expect the government to enforce my beliefs on that person unless that person's behavior directly victimizes others.

In the spirit of true charity taught by Christ, we Mormons ought to be the most open and tolerant of people. Where we see sin and darkness, we should preach against it and invite people to come into the light of Christ. Where evil has caused misery and pain, we should offer comfort and aid. Our missionaries are a far greater force for good in the world than any "morality" law we could possibly get passed. As Jesus taught, let's stop worrying about the mote in our neighbor's eye and start working to remove the beam in our own (Matthew 7:3-5).

Common Consent vs. Democracy

One reason the Latter-day Saints may be so vulnerable to authoritarian politics is that growing up in the church we are socialized to respect and honor authority. This is no small matter since the LDS Church teaches that the key point of Joseph Smith's restoration of the Gospel was the restoration of long lost authentic priesthood authority. This was accomplished by literal visits from heaven of the resurrected beings John the Baptist, and the Apostles Peter, James, and John.

Given that Mormons define priesthood as "the authority to act (or perform ordinances) in the name of God," and given that we accept that the authority was given to Joseph Smith from heavenly messengers who had themselves received the authority directly from Jesus, the fact that Mormons are generally respectful toward authority is not surprising. Indeed, if one truly believes, as I do, that the President of the Church is a prophet of God in the same sense that Moses was a prophet of God, surely one would want to accord due respect and honor to him.

I believe that the problem arises when Mormons fail to understand the difference between church government and secular government. The Church is not a democracy. This would seem to be especially true in a church that, like the Mormon Church, claims to be lead by a Prophet and Apostles, and which teaches that, at least in matters related to church government, inspired revelation from God is not only possible but, indeed, common.

On the other hand, it is equally true that our secular government (and its political parties!) is not a theocracy. This point needs to be reemphasized. Though various modern politicians have sometimes tried to claim a mandate from God for their political agendas, one must go back to Book of Mormon times to find actual prophets of God serving as the political leaders of their countries. The current Republican strategy of positioning their candidates as somehow having a divine mandate to rule by automatically receiving the Mormon vote, regardless of their political positions or their personal qualifications, would be pathetic if it were not so successful.

One LDS practice in particular may contribute to the failure of many Mormons to distinguish between church and secular government and that is the common practice of the "sustaining vote" or the vote of "common consent."

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. Amen.
(Doctrine and Covenants 26:2.)

Church leaders are expected to seek the will of God. When the Lord makes His will known, and administrative decisions are reached, or new leaders are to be called, the matter is brought before the appropriate quorum or body of Church members for their consideration and vote. (See *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol. 1, Common Consent*). In addition to the "sustaining vote" that takes place upon the appointment of new leaders, existing leaders (Ward, Stake and General) are "sustained" by a vote of their respective congregations every year.

The point is that these frequent votes are nearly always unanimous. The congregation is not being asked to make a decision with their vote, but, rather, is being

asked to ratify an existing decision. To the world, Common Consent may appear to be a hollow gesture. In the Church, however, Common Consent is an important part of Church governance.

This process provides for direction of the Church by revelation, while protecting the agency of the members to verify in their own minds whether decisions have been proper and made according to the will of God (Robert E. Quinn, “Common Consent,” *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol. 1*).

Also, if a Church member should, with his or her vote, object to a proposed action, the presiding officer typically will meet with him or her privately to learn about and consider the objection. Though it happens rarely, decisions have been modified and rescinded through this process.

The problem is that Mormons “vote” far more often in this “sustaining” manner than they vote in the “democratic” manner required by the processes of civil government. Hence, they are unused to the clash of ideas, the need to examine alternatives, and the necessity of compromise, that is common in the politics of the real world. This has made them easy prey for Republican strategists who have long encouraged Mormon voters to just “sustain” Republican candidates and policies without critically examining them.

This is a dangerous situation. A democracy cannot be run by common consent. Despite their pretensions, Republican candidates are not called by God and their election should not be automatic. A democracy requires discussion, debate, controversy, and compromise. Things that are probably not appropriate in the Church are critical to the proper functioning of our government. The current political climate in Utah is highly dysfunctional. It is time for the Saints to learn that in a democracy the believer and the citizen have very different roles.

The role of the believer: Sustaining our leaders

It is very difficult to go from church on Sunday, where it may be appropriate for the faithful to pretty much accept and trust everything they are told, to our weekday lives wherein we must challenge, test, and prove everything we are told. Yet that is exactly what we must learn to do. We are instructed to “prove all things” and “hold fast” to “that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). This is not the same as “believe what we tell you” and “do what you are told.”

Maintaining an intelligently skeptical outlook without becoming cynical or sarcastic is a challenge. So is remaining confidently faithful without becoming either blind or authoritarian. Finding the proper balance is even more difficult when some of the church leaders you sustain on Sunday are the very same people you must challenge, debate, and perhaps resist on Monday. Yet that is our responsibility – both as Mormons and as citizens.

Some very fine Mormon stake presidents and bishops are marvelous managers of church resources, compassionate pastors of their flocks, and give very fine sermons. Yet, on the floor of the Utah state legislature some of these same men promote causes and sponsor bills that comfort the comfortable and afflict the already afflicted. As

responsible, active citizens, Mormons must expose and oppose the work of Satan even when, perhaps especially when, done by men we otherwise respect.

When a man or woman is acting as our leader in a church capacity we are obliged to “sustain” them in their work. When the same man or woman serves in a community or political position, we need to help them remember that we, the citizens, are their boss and their responsibility is to listen to and serve us.

One reason Mormons seem to have a confused sense of their relationship to authority is the misuse of the word “sustain.” Mormons are frequently asked, both hypothetically in sermons and directly in personal interviews, whether they “sustain” their church leaders. Not infrequently the question is phrased in terms of a specific person, such as in, “Do you sustain your Bishop?” Anything other than a “Yes” answer to the question is considered an indication that the person is a disloyal and unworthy Mormon. A common consequence is that the person may be denied Temple attendance privileges.

The problem here is that the word “sustain” is used in these contexts as a synonym for “obedience.” The member tends to hear, “Do you obey your Bishop?” In other words, “Do you do as you are told?” A majority of Mormons, likely because of their personality types, seem to accept this as a legitimate question to ask and consider their passive, submissive, affirmative response to be a true indicator of their personal purity and righteousness.

However, “sustain” does not mean “obey.” And neither was the original Mormon use of the word meant to imply obedience. “Sustain” means “to nourish.” Joseph Smith often commented on the difficulties of leadership and asked his followers to help their leaders, support their leaders, “sustain” their leaders. He never asked the Mormon faithful to “obey” their leaders because he knew that in most matters, the lay leaders of the Church were as likely to be wrong as any member of their congregations.

In fact, Joseph Smith strongly warned anyone who would ever be called to a leadership position in the church that leadership assignments brought with them temptations that few could resist.

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.”
(Doctrine and Covenants 121:39)

What better example of unrighteous dominion could we have than a church leader who expects his congregation to demonstrate their faithfulness to the commandments of God by obeying him personally? The scripture goes on to instruct church leaders exactly how they are expected to lead.

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;
By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile –
(Doctrine and Covenants 121: 41-42)

Clearly Joseph Smith set a very high standard for all future church leaders to follow. In no case is a Mormon lay leader ever justified in considering himself more righteous, more spiritual, or wiser than anyone else simply by virtue of the office he holds. In fact, a call to leadership in the Mormon Church is a challenge to improve oneself through service to others. It is an opportunity to learn patience, develop meekness, and express love. I personally tend to believe that many Mormons are called to leadership positions not because they show leadership potential, but because they *lack* leadership skills and need to learn some. In other words, like any other assignment in the Mormon Church, a leadership assignment is an opportunity to learn and grow.

This, then, sheds new light on the question, “Do you sustain your Bishop?” The question now means, “Will you help your Bishop in his difficult job of serving the ward congregation by doing your part and contributing of your time, money, and skills?” This is the challenge I hear whenever I hear the “sustain” question, and I believe it is the true intent of the question in the eyes of the Lord. “Will you help nourish your Bishop?” I can never answer the question quickly because it always causes me to do some deep personal soul searching, and, frankly, I find it a bit overwhelming. I generally answer that I will do my best.

No wonder many Mormons would rather hear the word “obey” than the word “nourish” when they are asked if they sustain their leaders. It is much easier to brush off the question. One can simply say, “Yes, I obey the Bishop,” and then go home and do nothing to help unless the phone rings. Obedience is a lesser law. It is easy to wait to do until you are told to do. One who promises to “nourish” his Church leaders is committing himself to the higher law of Consecration. He is promising to act on his own initiative and to hold nothing back. Any Mormon Bishop would consider himself blessed to have a few ward members with such commitment.

Now, after decades of being told the importance of “sustaining” any and all church leaders; and after decades of mistakenly assuming that “to sustain” means the same as “to obey,” is it any wonder that modern Mormons are uncritical and submissive when faced with any type of authority? And, to address the topic of this book directly, is it any surprise that politicians would manipulate these good-hearted but naïve and trusting people for selfish political purposes?

The next question would seem to be which political party has been cynical enough, conniving enough, and self-righteous enough to twist Mormon’s natural respect for, and deference to, their religious leaders into a pseudo-religious reverence toward politicians from a particular political party? That is, it would be the next question to ask except for the fact that the answer is painfully obvious.

Let’s be very specific here. When the bi-annual neighborhood precinct political party caucuses are announced in Mormon Sacrament Meetings, which political party is never “accidentally” forgotten? If a candidate for political office prints his church experience and callings on his campaign literature, which party does he likely belong to? Which political party has an incumbent Utah Congressman tell one of their county conventions that their political party is “on the side of the angels?” Which political party is seen as the “Mormon” party in the state of Utah?

I want to repeat here something I said in chapter one. I do not believe the Mormon Church itself has fostered or encouraged the belief that there is some special

connection between the Republican Party and the Mormon Church. The Mormon Church has more important concerns. The Utah Republican Party, however, has everything to gain and, seemingly, nothing to lose from mixing church and politics, preaching political propaganda as if it were religious doctrine, and marketing ambitious politicians to appear as if they were pious men of God.

The role of the citizen: Participate in our democracy

In a properly-functioning democracy, the role of the citizen is not a passive one. The “Founding Fathers” of the United States, many of whom were quite comfortable financially, did not choose to sit back and enjoy lives of gentlemanly leisure. No, they studied philosophy and political theory, they argued, they debated, they published pamphlets, they wrote letters, they raised money, they lobbied, and they held many, many meetings. Eventually some of them dressed as Indians, sneaked out at night, and dumped some tea into Boston harbor.

Do we modern Americans frown on these men for this irresponsible and illegal act of blatant vandalism and disrespect for (corporate) property? Of course we don’t. These men are our heroes. We understand that the tea episode was an act of political theater designed to call attention to unfair, unreasonable, and unrepresentative taxation by the British Crown. All previous attempts to seek relief through lobbying, letters, and protest had been unsuccessful and the colonists finally decided that the only way to get the attention of the King was through an act of civil disobedience.

Of course the forces of power and privilege do not give up their prerogatives easily. As the American colonists grew increasingly restless, the British became more and more repressive. People were arrested and homes were searched without warrant. More and more British soldiers were sent in to “keep the peace.” These soldiers were, of course, seen as a hostile, occupying army by the colonists. Eventually, inevitably, war broke out because the Americans held their liberty dearer than their safety and comfort.

Today, rather than agitating to make the world a better place, Americans prefer to strive for a bigger house, a bigger TV, and a bigger SUV. We have developed what author Noam Chomsky calls a “spectator democracy.” Despite the fact that the mechanisms are in place for our citizens to truly participate, and despite our rhetoric about “government of, by, and for the people,” Americans generally are not direct participants in the major decisions that affect our lives. Merely voting every two or four years is but the smallest beginning to the level of civic participation we ought to be involved in -- and half of us can’t even be bothered to vote.

We are here to make the world a better place. We are charged with helping others. Our doctrine calls us to seek and promote social and economic equality among all of God’s children, our brothers and sisters. As long as people anywhere are hungry, as long as people cannot get health care, as long as the schools are overcrowded and under-equipped, as long as our seniors are denied the dignity of a comfortable retirement, as long as we foul our air and water and waste the world’s resources on trivial materialism, as long as the United States behaves as the “gun-totin” bully of the world, there is great cause for Americans to repent...and then we need to get up off our knees and get to work.

Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written. (Ether 2:12.)

The consequences of non-participation

The United States of America was founded on the principle of self-government. Modern Americans have ceded that birthright back to the wealthy elites. When good people generally choose not to study the issues, attend the meetings, print the pamphlets, and run for office, there are others who do. And these people do not have the best interests of the public at large in mind. Wherever and whenever there is a vacancy in positions of power, the criminal element will naturally step in. The Book of Mormon describes our current situation with frightening accuracy in its repeated warnings about the Gadianton robbers.

For there was one Gadianton, who was exceedingly expert in many words, and also in his craft, to carry on the secret work of murder and of robbery; therefore he became the leader of the band of Kishkumen.

Therefore he did flatter them, and also Kishkumen, that if they would place him in the judgment-seat he would grant unto those who belonged to his band that they should be placed in power and authority among the people; therefore Kishkumen sought to destroy Helaman. (Helaman 2:4-5.)

Mormons generally read this Book of Mormon story about a secret society of robbers and killers as a warning about organized crime of the “mafia” type. That warning is well taken, and the parallels between the Gadianton robbers and the modern mafia are strong. However, it is clear from the scripture above that, unlike modern mafia members, Gadianton was interested in political power. What is instructive to us is how the two major ethnic groups, the Lamanites and the Nephites, reacted very differently to the thieves in their midst.

And now it came to pass that when the Lamanites found that there were robbers among them they were exceedingly sorrowful; and they did use every means in their power to destroy them off the face of the earth.

But behold, Satan did stir up the hearts of the more part of the Nephites, insomuch that they did unite with those bands of robbers, and did enter into their covenants and their oaths, that they would protect and preserve one another in whatsoever difficult circumstances they should be placed, that they should not suffer for their murders, and their plunderings, and their stealings. (Helaman 6:20-21.)

It is possible that you, the reader, may think I am overstating the case when I compare modern, corporate-owned, politicians to robbers who secretly conspire to murder, plunder, and steal. If so, I refer the reader to the next chapter of this book and its

discussion of the Mahan principle. As a quick example here, let me just ask the reader to consider the potential disastrous cost in money, dreams, and, yes, lives, of the continual Republican efforts to destroy Social Security.

And it came to pass that the Lamanites did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton; and they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them, insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites.

And it came to pass on the other hand, that the Nephites did build them up and support them, beginning at the more wicked part of them, until they had overspread all the land of the Nephites, and had seduced the more part of the righteous until they had come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them in their secret murders and combinations.

And thus they did obtain the sole management of the government, insomuch that they did trample under their feet and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek, and the humble followers of God.

And thus we see that they were in an awful state, and ripening for an everlasting destruction. (Helaman 6:37-40.)

The frightening part of these verses is that the band of robbers was actually successful in seducing “the more part of the righteous” into believing their lies and partaking of their spoils. In addition, it was precisely this support, from the members of the Church, which allowed the thieves to “obtain the sole management of the government.” If there is any doubt that this is exactly what is happening again today, the scripture points out that the new government “did trample under their feet, and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek...”

Pick any example: Minimum wage, Social Security, lower health costs, welfare, foreign aid, school spending, worker’s rights, renter’s rights, workplace safety, pollution controls, pension protection, etc. The Republicans oppose them all. At the very least, the Latter-day Saints should reexamine their political beliefs in the light of our own scriptures. As the Apostle Paul said:

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:21.)