

Insights on Church Leadership

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Unrighteous Dominion

According to the word of the Lord spoken by the Prophet Joseph Smith, unrighteous dominion happens whenever we try to use the rights of the priesthood "... to cover our sins; or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness ..."¹

These rights of the priesthood include the privilege of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and of administering its ordinances; or the privilege of participating in the greatest cause on this earth. The Prophet Joseph Smith predicted that this work "... is destined to bring about the destruction of the powers of darkness, the renovation of the earth, the glory of God, and the salvation of the human family."² When these rights are not used to the glory of God, priestcraft occurs.

Nephi explained: "for, behold priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion."³ Avoiding unrighteous dominion and priestcraft is perhaps one of the greatest challenges church leaders have to face not only during their service, but also after they are released.

Covering Sins

Committing sins is bad, but living in a mortal and imperfect stage of existence, full of paradoxes and ambiguities, we are all inevitably going to sin. When we learn something valuable from these unfortunate experiences, repent, and forsake those sins that we have identified, the Lord forgives us⁴, and we remain on the strait and narrow way that leads to eternal life⁵. A worse problem arises when we do not want to admit that we have committed a sin, and try to act as if nothing wrong had happened, to the point of causing harm in the lives of the people, especially when we try to force them to live with the results of those mistakes we have made. In many unfortunate occasions like this the people have the tendency of starting

¹ D&C 121:37

² TPJS, p.231, May 2, 1842

³ 2 Nephi 26:29

⁴ D&C 1:25-28,31-33; 58:42-43; 82:1,7

⁵ 2 Nephi 31:18-20

to complain, and as it happens in any social group, they tend to discuss that in their conversations and sometimes they even demand a corrective action.

We can read about that even among the ancient Israelites. After failing to consult the Lord, the leaders of the people were deceived by the Gibeonites (one of the kingdoms the Lord had ordered them to destroy), and made a treaty with their ambassadors. The reaction of the people was typical: "And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the Lord God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes."⁶

If we are humble enough at this point to admit our sin and then make the necessary restitution, life will go on in order. But on the other hand, if in the height of our stubbornness and pride we insist in justifying our actions, and if in addition to that we try to use the authority of the priesthood to silence the people, we will be exercising unrighteous dominion.

Some may even misinterpret a passage found in the Doctrine and Covenants as a means to silence the people: "Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord ..."⁷ But notice that the verse is only partially quoted. If we read the remainder of the verse, we will find the following addition: "... and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meet in mine eyes, and which I commanded them."⁸ The Lord defends those leaders who did what He had commanded them to do, not those who were trying to hide mistakes under the mantle of authority⁹. For those who may have sinned before the Lord, and did that which was neither appropriate in His eyes nor commanded by Him, the charge is to repent, and not to wrest the scriptures to hide their mistakes

My personal standard, which over the years has guided my performance as a priesthood leader, is that I should live my life and perform my assignments in such a way as to never knowingly give the people even apparent reasons¹⁰ to lift up their heels against me.

Gratifying One's Pride and Vain Ambition

We tend to admire and at times even revere effective world leaders. We quote their ideas, laud their great accomplishments, and in some cases these narratives are repeated and even "expanded" for generations, at times to the point of originating myths and legends. The human desire for accomplishment and recognition may at times induce some to desire to have their names in a pantheon.

While serving in the Church of Christ, are involved in the greatest of all causes. Combine this great cause with that almost unconscious desire for accomplishment and recognition that at times strikes some of us, and we have some of the ingredients for unrighteous dominion.

As I have observed in a few sad incidents, the perspective of being engaged in a work that will last for the eternities, "... a work that God and angels have contemplated with delight for generations past;

⁶ Joshua 9:18

⁷ D&C 121:16

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ That does not mean that we can indulge ourselves in criticizing those in leadership positions who have made mistakes. But I will discuss this other perspective in the last section of this chapter.

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:22; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

that fired the souls of the ancient patriarchs and prophets ...¹¹", is much more than some of us can bear. As the Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "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. Hence many are called, but few are chosen."¹²

Some seem to forget rather easily that God is above all things and operating in all things¹³; that whatever we accomplish on this earth, whatever ideas we have, whatever discoveries we make, we owe it to the Lord, because "... the light which shineth, which giveth [us] light, is through him who enlighteneth [our] eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth [our] understandings; Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space--The light which is in all things and giveth life to all things ...¹⁴".

When we cease to acknowledge the Lord in our accomplishments, we are in a way stating that things happened entirely because of us, and couldn't that be considered an initial step towards idolatry? In the accounts of the ancient Israel we find the situation where the Lord commanded Gideon to fight against thousands of Midianites with an army of only three hundred men; and why did he order that? "... lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me."¹⁵

So far, we have dealt with the gratification of pride. But how about dealing with the gratification of vain ambitions? Perhaps the most common problem in this area arises when some of us aspire to positions of leadership in the Church. We sigh and think (for most of us would not dare to mention it) "If I were the president (of the Relief Society, or of the Elders Quorum, or of the Stake) ..." and then we think about all the wonderful solutions we would implement to solve the issues faced by the current presidency.

The problem with this practice is this: since we deal with confidential matters all the time--for the lives of the people and their problems are always sacred matters, and must be dealt confidentially--we generally do not have access to all the details of the problems; and above all, since we have not been set apart to that particular position we may be aspiring, we have not received the keys to receive inspiration on those matters. Therefore, our "wonderful solutions" are coming not from the Lord, but from ourselves, and they are most likely destined to fail, because while the work of God does not fail, the works of men do¹⁶.

Besides, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a business; therefore, people are neither "promoted" nor "demoted." A sister serving as an excellent counselor in the stake (or district) Relief Society presidency may very well be called to serve as a secretary in her ward's Primary Association; she may after that be called to serve in the nursery. This sister will be called to serve in positions where she will be able to develop new talents or to use her talents to help others develop theirs. This is the idea behind our assignments in the Church of Christ: personal development for the one who serves and for those who are served.

¹¹ TPJS, p.231, May 2, 1842

¹² D&C 121:39-40

¹³ D&C 88:41

¹⁴ D&C 88:11-13; brackets added.

¹⁵ Judges 7:2,7

¹⁶ D&C 3:1-4

Likewise, a brother serving as a stake high councilor may, after a few years be called as a Sunday School teacher; after that he may be called as a Bishop, and then as a Primary teacher; later, as a member of another stake high council, and finally once again as a Sunday school teacher. Hypothetical case? No; this is exactly what happened with me a few years ago, and I am glad for the opportunities I have had (especially in the Primary.)

A Misconception About Inspiration

Another common way by which unrighteous dominion develops is through a misconception about inspiration. We listen (most often in testimony meetings) that church leaders are inspired. I also testify of that, particularly when I think about the inspiring experiences I have had over the years with many of our General Authorities.

But as for myself as a local leader, I would rather testify that I have *the right to receive* inspiration. If we concentrate on the idea that we are always inspired, we may fall into the trap of thinking that every thought in our minds is a revelation from the Lord. Those who yield to this idea will generally tend to no longer be open to counseling; and their behavior sometimes can be defined by the cliché "don't confuse me with facts, I've already made up my mind."

When individuals find themselves in this sad stage, they tend to see themselves surrounded by "enemies." If their counselors (or others) try to advise them that they might be wrong in some point, they think that their counselors are "conspiring" against them. And anyone who voices a concern in relation to one these leaders' misguided decisions is labeled "rebellious" and accused of not supporting church authority.

That happens because in this sad state these people think that they are the only ones who receive the mind and will of the Lord, and feel that they must be, or (in extreme cases) that they already are the only examples to be followed, and that there can be no one else as an example. Their opinions become--in their judgment--the final word and they demand others to regard their opinions as the mind and will of the Lord, without questioning. As the Lord explained: "Behold, ere he is aware, he is left unto himself, to kick against the pricks [i.e. like punching the point of a spear,] to persecute the saints, and to fight against God."¹⁷

I have seen persons who seemed to believe in the idea that they had been called because they had in their minds the solutions for all problems; almost like saying that they could save the world. To this idea I respond with this sentence: This eternity isn't big enough for more than one Messiah.

Repressing Free Agency

There is another way by which one can exercise unrighteous dominion, and that is by trying to impede others of exercising their free agency. This is a very serious transgression, and one of the reasons why Lucifer, a brilliant Spirit in the pre-mortal world¹⁸, was expelled from heaven¹⁹.

The motto of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints--regarding church government or control--is and will always be the one defined by the Prophet Joseph Smith: "... teach the people correct principles and they govern themselves²⁰". That means that in some cases we will see brothers and sisters

¹⁷ D&C 121:38; brackets added.

¹⁸ D&C 76:25-27

¹⁹ Moses 4:3

²⁰ Quoted by President John Taylor in JD, Vol.10, p.57-58, May 18, 1862

doing the opposite of what the Lord has prescribed, and we will be able to predict the consequences of their actions. These situations are extremely painful, because we will have a desire to prevent them from pursuing those wrong courses of action, but we won't be able to do so--after all, it is their life, and they have to choose by themselves.

Allowing others to exercise their free agency may sometimes be painful. It is certainly painful to see dear brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, or close friends make wrong personal decisions and pursue a course of life that will cause them to suffer. However, that is the way the Lord designed His plan of salvation. And isn't this one aspect of His own experience as our Father in Heaven--to see us making choices that He knows beforehand will make us suffer?

This is a very serious matter, with consequences stretching far into eternity. The Lord revealed the following through the Prophet Joseph Smith: "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man ...²¹" Since the Lord described his Church as a "true and living church²²", in order to continue as a living entity, its members must be allowed to exercise their free agency, whether for their good or for their condemnation, "... otherwise there is no existence."

Let us consider this: does the Lord--in general--prevent us from doing something? Did he prevent Lucifer from spreading his evil ideas, to the point of influencing one third of the pre-mortal spirits? Did the Lord prevent Adam and Eve from partaking the forbidden fruit? He certainly could have built a high wall around the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Did the Lord ever force anyone to be baptized or to keep his commandments? Has he ever sent fire from heaven over those who break the Sabbath--or broken down the cars of those on their way to recreational activities on his holy day? Has he ever ... well, you can see the point. Likewise, we cannot prevent anyone from exercising his or her free agency, no matter how painful that may seem to us. Doing so would be another way of exercising unrighteous dominion. Let's read the words of two modern Prophets, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young:

"How oft have wise men and women sought to dictate Brother Joseph by saying, "O, if I were Brother Joseph I would do this and that;" but if they were in Brother Joseph's shoes they would find that men or women could not be compelled into the kingdom of God, but must be dealt with in long-suffering, and at last we shall save them. The way to keep all the Saints together, and keep the work rolling, is to wait with all long-suffering, till God shall bring such characters to justice. There should be no license for sin, but mercy should go hand in hand with reproof.²³"

"Gather the Saints, but do not flatter; invite, but do not urge, and by no means compel any one.²⁴"

Avoiding Unrighteous Dominion

There is no need to be ashamed of giving the Lord credit for the mighty works (or the small ones) we perform. We should not only mention that, but also really feel the reality of that. Then, we would use prayers of thanksgiving. Remember how the Lord prayed to the Father among the Nephites and Lamanites, even while those individuals were praying directly to Jesus?

²¹ D&C 93:30-31

²² D&C 1:30

²³ TPJS, p.241. June 9, 1842.

²⁴ Discourses of Brigham Young, p.326. April 22, 1860.

"And behold, they began to pray; and they did pray unto Jesus, calling him their Lord and their God. And it came to pass that Jesus departed out of the midst of them, and ... bowed himself to the earth, and he said: ... Father, ... they pray unto me because I am with them. And now Father, I pray unto thee for them, and also for all those who shall believe on their words ...²⁵"

The Lord Jesus Christ, could very well have answered the prayers of those individuals, but instead of doing that, he preferred to acknowledge the power and authority of the Father. We must follow this same pattern, and always pray to our Father in Heaven, acknowledging his supremacy over us²⁶. We must also give credit to the Lord before the other persons, instead of simply accepting their compliments. Our dialogues should become somewhat like this:

Person: Congratulations for your class (or talk, or whatever else)! I appreciated it very much.

Us: Thank you for your kindness. But I have to recognize the hand of the Lord in what I did. It is always a great delight to feel the Spirit of the Lord when we talk about his gospel.

Finally, we must pray also for patience to bear the pain for the sins of others. We cannot avoid this pain; but let us remember that this is a feeling we may have in common with prophets²⁷ and angels²⁸ of the Lord.

Coping with Someone Else's Unrighteous Dominion

Some may say that the Lord would never allow someone exercise unrighteous dominion in his true Church; however, President Brigham Young suggested that the Lord may allow it, so that we can learn wisdom²⁹:

"Brother Kimball said, today, when he was speaking, if you suffer yourselves to find fault with your Bishop, you condescend to the spirit of apostasy. Do any of you do this? If you do, you do not realize that you expose yourself to the power of the Enemy.

What should your faith and position be before God? Such that, if a Bishop does not do right, the Lord will remove him out of your Ward. You are not to find fault. As brother Wells has said, speak not lightly of the anointed of the Lord. Yet many rise up and condemn their Bishop. Perhaps that Bishop has been appointed expressly to try those persons and cause them to apostatize. A great many will not apostatize until they arrive here; and who knows but what the Lord has prompted a Bishop to do so-and-so to cause somebody to apostatize. One of the first steps to apostasy is to find fault with your Bishop; and when that is done, unless repented of, a second step is soon taken, and by-and-by the person is cut off from the Church, and that is the end of it.

Will you allow yourselves to find fault with your Bishop? No; but come to me, go to the High Council, or to the President of the Stake, and ascertain whether your Bishop is doing wrong,

²⁵ 3 Nephi 19:18-19,22-23

²⁶ See also 2 Nephi 32:9

²⁷ Acts 17:16; Alma 31:24,26,30-31,33,38

²⁸ 3 Nephi 28:25,30,38

²⁹ This is a rather long quotation, but I find it so important that I decided to insert it here anyway.

before you find fault and suffer yourselves to speak against a presiding officer. I want you to have faith enough concerning myself and my counselors for the Lord to remove us out of the way, if we do not magnify our calling, and put men in our places that will do right. I had the promise, years ago, that I never should apostatize and bring an evil upon this people. God revealed that through Joseph, long before he died; and if I am not doing right, you may calculate that the Lord is going to take me home. He will not send me to hell, but he will take me home to himself. 'I will take you up here, Brigham, and give you a few lessons.' I am going where He is, for I have that promise, and so have many others.

I am telling you these things for your comfort. In all this there are no new principles and doctrines, though it is new to many of you. You must have faith in God that he will lead his people right, in a way to preserve them from every evil.³⁰"

Those who exercise unrighteous dominion will still have the opportunity to repent and amend their ways or be condemned. Those who suffer unrighteous dominion will have the opportunity to exercise faith. They will grow through not reviling against those anointed by the Lord, and through praying for those who may harbor negative feelings towards them. They will gain the knowledge that he or she who is acting wrongly still has the power and authority (the mantle) given by God, and since that type of spiritual endowment is sacred, it must be honored even when the person wearing the mantle does not deserve that honor.

An excellent example is found in the early life of king David. After being anointed as the next king of Israel by the Prophet Samuel³¹, David still acknowledged Saul as both his king and as the Anointed of the Lord. Even in the occasions when Saul sought to kill him, David still maintained his respect for Saul, calling him "my lord", and "my father", and referring to himself as "a flea"³². As we can see in experiences like that in David's early life³³, no blessing will be lost by those who endure.

³⁰ JD, Vol.9, p.142-143, July 28, 1861

³¹ 1 Samuel 16:13

³² 1 Samuel 24:10,11,14; 26:17-20

³³ Before you can say '*But look at what happened with David later ...*' let me clarify that the fact that an individual fell in transgression at a certain point in his or her life does not invalidate the righteous actions and good experiences he or she may have performed or lived either before the transgression or after the prescribed repentance process.

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master’s degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor’s in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.