

Why a Church?

KEVIN S. HAMILTON

I love this university. I attended BYU as a freshman before I left for a mission.

This is me on my mission in France. [A photo was shown.] Believe it or not, my companion had just given me a haircut with a pair of scissors that he found in the apartment.

I came back to BYU after my mission and met Sister Hamilton here. You know the story—same ward, same coed softball team. For me, it was love at first sight. For her, it took some encouragement from her grandmother, who somehow saw something in me.

This is us early in our adventure together. [A photo was shown.]

After a time we were sealed in the Los Angeles Temple, and then we graduated together from BYU. Here we are outside of this very building following commencement exercises. [A photo was shown.]

All six of our children graduated from BYU, as well as most of their spouses. This has always been a special place for us. I remember sitting right up there [pointing] as a freshman and

feeling the Spirit of the Lord as His prophet spoke in a devotional like this one.

We love you, our fellow BYU students and faculty. This is a unique place—what President Spencer W. Kimball referred to as an “educational Mt. Everest”¹—and you are singular and unique people.

Why a Church?

My remarks today are centered on a simple question: Why a church? Why do we need a church—especially this Church?

Over the years I have had friends tell me something to the effect, “I’m more of a spiritual person, not a religious person.” Or “I find my spirituality on my own, not through organized religion.” Or one time a friend said to me, “My religion is just to be nice to people, to be kind.”

Well, it is good to be kind, and we should be nice. But for a number of reasons, we need an organized church—one that can deliver the blessings of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Kevin S. Hamilton, a General Authority Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on January 24, 2023.

Pew Research on Religious People

Addressing the topic of those who say they are spiritual but not religious, the Pew Research Center recently reported:

*Groups that exhibit the highest levels of traditional . . . religious observance . . . are most likely to say they regularly experience a sense of spiritual peace and well-being. Nearly two-thirds of religiously affiliated adults . . . say they feel a deep sense of spiritual peace at least once a week.*²

The Church Has Always Existed

In Old Testament times, the Church was generally centered in the family, and ideally families were presided over by loving parents—think of Adam and Eve or Lehi and Sariah—with the father serving as the patriarch, or spiritual leader. These families taught the gospel of Jesus Christ and helped one another stay true and faithful to God.

In New Testament times, Jesus Christ Himself organized a church—even His Church. As we read in Ephesians:

He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

*For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*³

In our day, the Church of Jesus Christ has again been organized on the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was called by God to do so. It was a restoration of the New Testament Church, complete with apostles and prophets and with “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.”⁴

Teachings of the First Presidency and the Twelve

But the question remains, why do we need a church? Why isn’t it enough for me to simply worship God directly—on a beach or a mountaintop? Why do I need the intermediary of a church?

The First Presidency teaches that “Jesus Christ established His Church to enable individuals and families to do the work of salvation and exaltation.”⁵

In addition, they teach that the Church provides:

- priesthood authority and keys
- covenants and ordinances⁶
- prophetic direction⁷
- scriptures
- gospel learning and teaching support⁸
- service and leadership opportunities⁹
- a community of Saints¹⁰

The Church is not just a social club, although we certainly enjoy being together. And it is also not just a humanitarian organization, although we also do plenty of that kind of service.

The Church of Jesus Christ is how we come to Christ. It is His Church. It teaches His doctrine. It provides His ordinances and covenants.

We can think of the Church using the analogy of a prescription drug capsule. The Church is the capsule, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ is the medicine delivered inside the capsule. The Church delivers the blessings of the Atonement of Christ to its members who are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Bound to the Savior Through Covenants and Ordinances

Through the ordinances and covenants made available by Jesus Christ through His Church, we can bind or yoke or connect ourselves to Him.

A *covenant* is a sacred agreement between you and Heavenly Father. With infinite love and desiring your greatest happiness, He sets conditions for each covenant. If you accept and live the covenant, He will bless you. A covenant is meant to be binding—to create an everlasting connection.

An *ordinance* is a sacred physical act that shows God you accept His covenant. It must be performed by someone with priesthood authority. For example, when you were baptized, you showed that you were willing to follow Jesus Christ and take upon yourself His name.

Walk the Covenant Path

At baptism, you entered His path. And you continue on “this strait and narrow path”¹¹ as you keep your baptismal covenants, make additional covenants in the house of the Lord, and then keep them. Those covenants guide your journey like signposts on a path. That’s why we sometimes

call it “the covenant path.” Returning to God is a process of receiving ordinances and making and keeping covenants with Him.

Because God works through covenants, He refers to us as a “covenant people”¹² or even “children of the covenant.”¹³ President Russell M. Nelson has tried to help us understand this as our “true identity.”¹⁴

When Moroni in the Book of Mormon says, “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him,”¹⁵ this is how we do it: We make and keep sacred covenants, and as we do so, we are drawn to Him. We bind ourselves to Him. We connect with Him. These covenants are found in His Church. They are delivered through priesthood ordinances. The Savior invites us:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*¹⁶

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

Jesus Christ is not just some distant or remote being looking down on us and cheering us on. He is with us every step along the way—every step on the covenant path. To Enoch, the Lord simply said, “Walk with me.”¹⁷ In other words, “I will be with you on your journey. I am there for you.”

God’s Purpose

God’s great purpose, His objective, and what He calls His “work and . . . glory” is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of [His children].”¹⁸ This is quite a statement.

We are taught:

*Immortality is to live forever with a resurrected physical body. Eternal life, or exaltation, is to become like God and live in His presence eternally as families.*¹⁹

Immortality is a free gift—there are no conditions. Because of the Atonement, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we will all be resurrected and live forever.

Eternal life, on the other hand, is a conditional gift. It is conditioned on making and keeping covenants with God. Eternal life—or exaltation, as Joseph Smith referred to it—is our ultimate destiny: not just to return to live with God but ultimately to become like Him.

As we make and keep sacred covenants and receive priesthood ordinances such as baptism, confirmation, and temple ordinances, we gradually “[put] off the natural man”²⁰ and progress through the eternities until we ultimately become “even as [He is].”²¹ These covenants and ordinances are only found in His Church.

Gathering Together to Worship

Because of His great love for His children and His desire that they receive all that He has, the Lord has commanded us to gather together. From the Book of Mormon we read:

And the church did meet together oft, to fast and to pray, and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls.

*And they did meet together oft to partake of bread and wine, in remembrance of the Lord Jesus.*²²

The sacrament is a priesthood ordinance that occurs weekly. Each Sabbath day we come to a dedicated meetinghouse somewhere in the world and, under the keys of a bishop, worship, sing, pray, and partake of the sacrament. In that ordinance we renew or refresh all of our baptismal and temple covenants. We rededicate ourselves to keeping these covenant promises.

And through this process of regular gathering and participation in the sacrament ordinance, we change. We become transformed over time, even as “a new creature” in Christ.²³

Just last week in this devotional setting, Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said:

We need the ordinances and covenants we remember and renew each week as we take the sacrament.

*Our faith grows and develops as we regularly and consistently work to build our discipleship along with others who are as committed as we are.*²⁴

This is the plan of our Heavenly Father for His children to help them realize their full divine potential. This is how we come to Christ. This is how we enter and stay on the covenant pathway. The Church of Jesus Christ enables us to come to Christ.

His Church Is Led by Apostles

The Lord’s Church is led and directed by His apostles, just as it was in New Testament times, because “God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”²⁵ His plan has not changed. His doctrine does not change. His covenants do not change. His Church exists so that He can accomplish His objective: “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of [His children].”

Now, we—the General Authorities and leaders of the Church—love you and care deeply about you. We are grateful for your faith and goodness. Furthermore, your Heavenly Father and your Savior Jesus Christ love you with a perfect, even infinite, love.

In that spirit of love and appreciation, could I share a few observations with you? These are just a few things that I have observed as I have traveled around the Church and have met with members of the Church.

Decoupling Jesus from His Church

My first observation: I have heard some who would try to decouple or disconnect Jesus Christ from His Church and His apostles by saying things like “I follow Jesus, not the Church” or “I follow the Savior, not the apostles.”

To those who say this, I would simply say, “It’s just not possible. You cannot accept Jesus Christ and reject His Church or His authorized messengers. You cannot separate Jesus Christ from the Church of Jesus Christ.” God taught this to the Nephites in the Book of Mormon: “Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants.”²⁶ This is from the Nephite account of the Sermon on the Mount—one of the most famous sermons in the Bible. Yet in the Book of Mormon version, Christ adds a very clear teaching emphasizing

the role of the Twelve to make sure the Nephites know to whom they should look.

It is simply not possible to completely follow the Savior without following His Church. You cannot come to Christ without coming to His Church, and you cannot come to His Church without accepting His prophets.

God’s Kingdom Is One of Order

Another observation: The Lord’s Church is one of order and organization. It is organized into geographic wards and stakes. We do not choose which ward to attend. There is no bishop shopping or ward hopping in God’s kingdom. We simply attend in the ward in which we live and serve to the best of our abilities.

Every once in a while, I hear someone say something like “I don’t like my ward. It is unfriendly.” Or sometimes “I don’t get much out of sacrament meeting. I am not sure why I even go.”

But a ward is not about what you can get but what you can give. It is the laboratory in which we learn the gospel and learn to love and serve one another.

Consider the response of President Spencer W. Kimball . . . when someone once asked him, “What do you do if you find yourself caught in a boring sacrament meeting?” President Kimball thought a moment, then replied, “I don’t know; I’ve never been in one.” With his long years of Church experience, President Kimball had undoubtedly been to many meetings where people had read their talks, spoken in a monotone, or given travelogues instead of teaching doctrine. But most likely, President Kimball was teaching that he did not go to sacrament meeting to be entertained; he went to worship the Lord, renew his covenants, and be taught from on high.²⁷

Councils Are the Safety Net

Occasionally I have heard people say that those who serve in the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve “are only human and are capable of making mistakes.” While it is true that we are all fallible human beings, the safety net—for all of us—is the council system that we use at

every level of the Church. Decisions in the Lord's Church always require a unanimous council. In the *General Handbook* we read:

*All members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are prophets, seers, and revelators. Together they form the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Under the direction of the Lord and by unanimous voice, this council has authority to declare and interpret doctrine and establish policy for the Church (see Doctrine and Covenants 1:38; 107:27–31).*²⁸

When the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve speak in unity, they speak on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Be the Change vs. Humble Follower of Christ

Another comment that I hear from time to time, especially on social media, is “Be the change,” as in “I will be the change.” You know, as in “I will stay in the Church and work for change from within.” But how does this square with the invitation to simply be “the humble followers of Christ”?²⁹

Besides, true change—the kind of change that makes a difference in the eternities—comes from within. We change our hearts and minds, and then our circumstances change. We repent, and then we change.

President Nelson has taught this frequently:

*When Jesus asks you and me to “repent” [see Luke 13:3, 5], He is inviting us to change our mind, our knowledge, our spirit—even the way we breathe. He is asking us to change the way we love, think, serve, spend our time, treat our wives, teach our children, and even care for our bodies.*³⁰

Loyal Opposition

I occasionally meet people who feel that it is their duty to point out what they see as shortcomings or failings of the Lord's Church. They feel that they are loyal to the Savior but opposed to certain teachings of His Church.

President Dallin H. Oaks has addressed this:

*Some who use personal reasoning or wisdom to resist prophetic direction give themselves a label borrowed from elected bodies—“the loyal opposition.” However appropriate for a democracy, there is no warrant for this concept in the government of God's kingdom, where questions are honored but opposition is not (see Matthew 26:24).*³¹

The Church or the Savior

As I visit with members across the Church, I sometimes hear things like “I don't support the Church's policy on (you fill in the blank).” Or “I don't agree with the way the Church does (this or that).”

Could I suggest an alternative approach? Substitute the word *Savior* or *Lord* or *Jesus Christ* in place of “the Church”—as in “I don't support the Savior's policy on (again, you fill in the blank)” or “I don't agree with the way Jesus Christ does (this or that).”

For me personally, that seems to put a very different perspective on things.

Don't Steady the Ark

The Old Testament story of Uzzah is instructive. David had just been anointed king of Israel and was transporting the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark was the symbol of God's presence, of His glory and majesty. When first given to Israel, the ark was placed in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, and only the high priest could approach it—and then only on the Day of Atonement. When transporting the ark, the priests were required to use poles running through rings on the sides to carry it.

As the ark crossed Nachon's threshing floor, it became unstable—“for the oxen shook it”—and “Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God” to steady it.³² The punishment was swift and severe: “God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God.”³³

The symbolism for today is obvious: Don't steady the ark. Only the Lord and those He appoints—the First Presidency—are allowed to steady or lead the Church. Only those who hold the keys are permitted to “touch the ark.”

We Walk by Faith

In this life “we walk by faith, not by sight.”³⁴ In spite of our best efforts, we sometimes just “see through a glass, darkly.”³⁵ It is confusing. But the Lord, who knows the end from the beginning, sees things differently than we do. As Isaiah said:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*³⁶

Sometimes we just don’t know every reason and every rationale behind every point of doctrine or Church policy. When this happens, we simply move forward in faith—trusting, hoping, believing. In due time we will know all things. In the meantime, we look to the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles who lead His Church for inspired guidance and counsel.

Settle This in Your Hearts

This question of “Why a church?” is an important issue to wrestle through. As the Savior taught in Luke 14: “Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you.”³⁷ We have to get this settled deep in our hearts; otherwise, we are at risk of being as “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”³⁸

My dear brothers and sisters, this is the message: We need a church, and this Church is literally His Church. The Savior Jesus Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ are inseparably joined together. The Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency who direct His Church actually speak in His name. As the Savior taught Joseph Smith in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.”³⁹

Elder Khumbulani Mdletshe

Sister Hamilton and I served in Africa for five years. One of our Area Seventies, and a dear friend, was Elder Khumbulani D. Mdletshe.

Khumbulani learned of the Church in 1980 in a township outside of Durban, South Africa, at the age of fifteen, and he was baptized soon after.

A few years later, at age nineteen, he was called to serve as a full-time missionary in the London England Mission. He was one of the first Black members from South Africa to serve a full-time mission.

It might be hard to imagine, but Elder Mdletshe had never heard of the previous Church policy that restricted Black Africans from holding the priesthood. He simply had never been exposed to it. As Elder Mdletshe tells this story, one day as he and his companion were out tracting, they introduced themselves as missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to a man who then asked:

*“You are a Mormon?” Before I could say a word, [the man] continued, “And you are black!” I looked at my hand to see if I was still black, and indeed I was. . . . Finally, I said to him, “Yes, I am black, and I am a Mormon.” He continued, “You are lost, Brother! How can you be a member of a racist church? Mormons do not accept blacks in their church.”*⁴⁰

This stopped Elder Mdletshe in his tracks, since he had never heard this before. As they left the man’s house, Elder Mdletshe turned and asked his companion, “What was that all about?”

The companion did the best he could to answer Elder Mdletshe’s questions, and in doing so informed him of the priesthood and temple restrictions that had previously existed for members of Black African descent.

Elder Mdletshe thought about this new information for several days and finally concluded that he could no longer be a member of the Church, let alone serve as a missionary. He made an appointment with his mission president to let him know that he would be returning home and resigning his membership.

Elder Mdletshe wrote:

President Pinegar had me come to his office. I rehearsed what had happened . . . and voiced my decision to return home to South Africa. I . . . told him that I could not be a member of a racist church. . . .

After listening patiently to me, my mission president said, “Elder Mdletshe, . . . all I know . . . is that all worthy men can [now] be ordained to the priesthood [and that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son in the Sacred Grove].”⁴¹

I now quote from Elder Mdletshe:

President Pinegar helped me understand two things during that exchange:

One, [while it is true that] the Church did not ordain Black people to the priesthood [for a season], that is the past, and we do not have reasons as to why it happened; and

Two, he helped me understand that since I have a testimony of the restored gospel, including Joseph Smith having been called of God to restore [Jesus Christ’s Church] to the earth, why should I walk away? [With] those two truths firm in my mind and heart, I decided to stay.⁴²

And that decision has made all the difference. Brother Khumbulani Mdletshe went on to become highly educated. He has been sealed in the temple and, with his beloved wife, Futhi, has raised a faithful family. He has served in the Church in Africa in many capacities, including Area Seventy and mission president.

Build upon the Rock

We come to Christ as we move forward in faith. It is not blind faith. It is just faith. We trust, we hope, we believe, and we act on our beliefs. We come to Christ through His Church. As Helaman taught his sons:

It is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds . . . , yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down . . . , because of the rock upon which ye are built.⁴³

How do we build upon the rock of our Redeemer? We build upon the Savior as we come to Him. We come to Him as we receive His authorized ordinances and make and keep the associated covenants. These ordinances and covenants

are found in His Church. We renew these covenants as we come to His Church every Sabbath day and partake of the sacrament. This is how we come to Christ. This is how we walk with Him. This is how we realize our full divine potential.

My Witness

In a coming day, every knee shall bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Messiah.⁴⁴ All flesh shall see Him together at the same time.⁴⁵ We will all be under the same obligation to repent and come to Him. All who will receive the blessings of exaltation will be required to make and keep the same baptismal and temple covenants that are only found in His Church and administered by His priesthood. We are the children of the covenant. This is our divine destiny and potential. This is our “true identity.”

I know these things to be true. He lives. This is His Church. We need His Church. We can know this. You can be settled in your hearts and established upon the rock of Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, Brigham Young University, 9; see also Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975. Quoted in Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021.

2. “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” Report, Pew Research Center, 3 November 2015, pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious.

3. Ephesians 4:11–12.

4. Ephesians 2:20; see also verse 21.

5. “The Purpose of the Church,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, July 2021 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2021), 1.3 (p. 18).

6. See John 3:5.

7. See Amos 3:7; Doctrine and Covenants 1:4.

8. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:77–78, 118.

9. See Mosiah 18:27–29.

10. See Moroni 6:4–6; see also Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79; Ephesians 2:19.
11. 2 Nephi 31:18.
12. 1 Nephi 14:14; 2 Nephi 30:2.
13. 3 Nephi 20:26.
14. Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022.
15. Moroni 10:32.
16. Matthew 11:28–30.
17. Moses 6:34.
18. Moses 1:39.
19. “God’s Plan of Happiness,” *General Handbook*, 1.1 (p. 17).
20. Mosiah 3:19.
21. 3 Nephi 27:27.
22. Moroni 6:5–6.
23. 2 Corinthians 5:17.
24. Neil L. Andersen, “Allowing Your Faith in Jesus Christ to Guide Your Life,” BYU devotional address, 17 January 2023.
25. Mormon 9:9; see also verse 10.
26. 3 Nephi 12:1; emphasis added.
27. A. Roger Merrill, “To Be Edified and Rejoice Together,” *Ensign*, January 2007; quoting Spencer W. Kimball, from a Church Educational System meeting, 30 June 1989, that was quoted in Gene R. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 140.
28. “First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,” *General Handbook*, 5.1.1.1 (p. 41).
29. 2 Nephi 28:14.
30. Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019.
31. Dallin H. Oaks, “Opposition in All Things,” *Ensign*, May 2016.
32. 2 Samuel 6:6.
33. 2 Samuel 6:7.
34. 2 Corinthians 5:7.
35. 1 Corinthians 13:12.
36. Isaiah 55:8–9.
37. Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 14:28; see also Luke 14:27.
38. Ephesians 4:14.
39. Doctrine and Covenants 1:38.
40. Khumbulani D. Mdletshe, “A Reflection from an African Convert on Official Declaration 2,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2016): 14.
41. Mdletshe, “A Reflection from an African Convert,” 16–17.
42. Personal correspondence with Khumbulani Mdletshe.
43. Helaman 5:12.
44. See Philippians 2:10–11; Mosiah 27:31; Doctrine and Covenants 88:104.
45. See Doctrine and Covenants 101:23; Isaiah 40:5.