

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 134

The official policy statement regarding national governments. The text is written by Oliver Cowdery, and while not considered a revelation from the Lord, was endorsed by Smith who felt the contents in principle were binding.

1 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. 2 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. 3 We believe that all governments necessarily require civil officers and magistrates to enforce the laws of the same; and that such as will administer the law in equity and justice should be sought for and upheld by the voice of the people if a republic, or the will of the sovereign.

4 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.

5 We believe that all men are bound to sustain and uphold the respective governments in which they reside, while protected in their inherent and inalienable rights by the laws of such governments; and that sedition and rebellion are unbecoming every citizen thus protected, and should be punished accordingly; 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. 6 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.

v1-6 Human governments are founded by God for the betterment of society (v. 1-3), worship of God is to be independent of the

Government and by an individual's conscience (v. 4). All men must respect the government and its representatives or else anarchy would result (v. 5-6).

Note the parallel: Governments are founded by God and He holds men responsible for their actions within them (v. 1); Religion is founded by God and He holds men responsible for their actions within it (v. 6).

Both secular laws and religious laws have their place in the Lord's plan.

Throughout the scriptures the Lord creates, uses and destroys various kingdoms and governments as He sees fit for His own purposes. He has the king of Assyria sack the Northern Ten Tribes, He has the king of Babylon exile Judah, He has Cyrus free Judah from Babylon, He pits the Lamanites against the Nephites and so on. He creates these nations and holds their rulers responsible for their actions, even if they are not directly covenanting with Him or even aware of their role in history.

v3 "the voice of the people", cp. Mosiah 29:26.

v6 Secular laws, regulations and administrators of such are a good thing. Without them there would be anarchy and mayhem. A simple example is traffic laws. If people simply stopped paying attention to traffic laws, the consequences would almost immediately result in serious, if not fatal injuries. So, it is in our best interest to observe them.

7 We believe that rulers, states, and governments have a right, and are bound to enact laws for the protection of all citizens in the free exercise of their religious belief; but we do not believe that they have a right in justice to deprive citizens of this privilege, or proscribe them in their opinions, so long as a regard and reverence are shown to the laws and such religious opinions do not justify sedition nor conspiracy. 8 We believe that the commission of crime should be punished according to the nature of the offense; that murder, treason, robbery, theft, and the breach of the general peace, in all respects, should be punished according to their criminality and their tendency to evil among men, by the laws of that government in which the offense is committed; and for the public peace and tranquility all men should step forward and use their ability in bringing offenders against good laws to punishment.

9 We do not believe it just to mingle religious influence with civil government, whereby one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the

individual rights of its members, as citizens, denied. 10 We believe that all religious societies have a right to deal with their members for disorderly conduct, according to the rules and regulations of such societies; provided that such dealings be for fellowship and good standing; but we do not believe that any religious society has authority to try men on the right of property or life, to take from them this world's goods, or to put them in jeopardy of either life or limb, or to inflict any physical punishment upon them. They can only excommunicate them from their society, and withdraw from them their fellowship.

v7-10 The respective roles of civil and religious authorities are spelled out. Verses 7-8 review the proper role of secular authorities, which should not infringe upon religious authorities. Verses 9-10 present the proper role of religious authorities, which should not infringe upon secular authorities.

v9 Religious and governmental authority not be mixed.

v10 Spiritual matters ought to be dealt with internal to the Church by religious authorities, cp. Matt. 18:15-17, D&C 42:28, 74-93.

11 We believe that men should appeal to the civil law for redress of all wrongs and grievances, where personal abuse is inflicted or the right of property or character infringed, where such laws exist as will protect the same; but we believe that all men are justified in defending themselves, their friends, and property, and the government, from the unlawful assaults and encroachments of all persons in times of exigency, where immediate appeal cannot be made to the laws, and relief afforded.

v11 When at all feasible one should appeal to the civil law, but when it is not feasible to do so men are justified in defending themselves from unlawful assault.

"exigency", a case or situation that demands prompt action or remedy.

12 We believe it just to preach the gospel to the nations of the earth, and warn the righteous to save themselves from the corruption of the world; but we do not believe it right to interfere with bondservants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor to meddle with or influence them in the least to cause them to

be dissatisfied with their situations in this life, thereby jeopardizing the lives of men; such interference we believe to be unlawful and unjust, and dangerous to the peace of every government allowing human beings to be held in servitude.

v12 This verse was obviously prompted by the slavery issues of the time, and was sure to be intended to prevent allegations or real situations of turning slaves against their masters.

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 134

The text of this section was first published in the Messenger and Advocate, volume 1, number 11, pages 163-164, dated August, 1835. It was published in the Desert News, volume 2, number 9, pages 33, dated March 6, 1852. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 15, number 19, pages 300-301, dated May 7, 1853. It first appeared in the 1835 Kirtland edition Doctrine and Covenants, pages 252-254.

Excerpt from Kirtland Council Minute Book 1

Deacon Wm. Burgess took the Book into his hands stating that he fully approved of the matter contained in it, & gave his voice in favor of the committee There being only one Deacon present beside himself, he called upon him to give his voice concerning this book, & he said he received it with Joy and was satisfied with the Committee Brother Tho. Gates Then took the Book and expressed his satisfaction with it, and also called a vote of all the members present, both male & female, & They gave a decided voice in favor of it & also of the committee. There being a very large portion of the church present. All of the above testimonies and votes were voluntarily & unhesitatingly given with the utmost freedom of conscience on part of the Assembly. President Wm. W. Phelps then arose & read a chapter of Rules for Marriage among the saints: And the whole church voted to receive it, It is therefore to be attached to the book. President O. Cowdery, then arose and read an instrument containing certain principles or items upon laws in general & church government,

Vote of the whole house called for & unanimously given by the usual sign of uplifted hand in favor of the same.

The services of the day closed by prayer, the congregation then arose & sung a hymn precious is the name, &c. President. S. Rigdon then dismissed the assembly by invoking the blessing of heaven with uplifted hands. (["Minute Book 1," p. 106, The Joseph Smith Papers](#))

Excerpt from History of the Church

A general assembly of the Church of Latter-day Saints was held at Kirtland on the 17th of August, 1835, to take into consideration the labors of a committee appointed by a general assembly of the Church on the 24th of September, 1834, for the

purpose of arranging the items of the doctrine of Jesus Christ for the government of the Church. The names of the committee were: Joseph Smith, Jun., Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, and Frederick G. Williams, who, having finished said book according to the instructions given them, deem it necessary to call a general assembly of the Church to see whether the book be approved or not by the authorities of the Church: that it may, if approved, become a law and a rule of faith and practice to the Church....

"President Oliver Cowdery then read the following article on 'Governments and Laws in General,' which was accepted and adopted and ordered to be printed in said book, by a unanimous vote: [Beginning of article.] 'That our belief with regard to earthly governments and laws in general may not be misinterpreted nor misunderstood, we have thought proper to present, at the close of this volume, our opinion concerning the same.'

[text of D&C 134 quoted]

[\(Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 2, chapter 18, pages 243-247\)](#)

Excerpt from History of the Church

Before closing this communication, I beg leave to drop a word to the traveling Elders. You know, brethren, that great responsibility rests upon you; and that you are accountable to God, for all you teach the world. In my opinion, you will do well to search the Book of Covenants, in which you will see the belief of the Church, concerning masters and servants. All men are to be taught to repent; but we have no right to interfere with slaves, contrary to the mind and will of their masters. In fact it would be much better, and more prudent, not to preach at all to slaves, until after their masters are converted, and then teach the masters to use them with kindness; remembering that they are accountable to God, and the servants are bound to serve their masters with singleness of heart, without murmuring.

I do most sincerely hope that no one who is authorized from this Church to preach the Gospel, will so far depart from the Scriptures, as to be found stirring up strife and sedition against our brethren of the South. Having spoken frankly and freely, I leave all in the hands of God, who will direct all things for His glory, and the accomplishment of His work. Praying that God may spare you to do much good in this life, I subscribe myself your brother in the Lord, ([Joseph Smith,](#)

Excerpt from Doctrine and Covenants Commentary

It should be noted that in the minutes, and also in the introduction to this article on government, the brethren were careful to state that this declaration was accepted as the belief, or "opinion" of the officers of the Church, and not as a revelation, and therefore does not hold the same place in the doctrines of the Church as do the revelations. In fact the first sentence could be improved by a slight change. The Lord in the very beginning revealed to Adam a perfect form of government, and this was "instituted of God for the benefit of man;" but we do not hold that all governments, or any man-made government, was instituted of God although the Lord holds a controlling hand over them. It was not long after the Lord established His government with Adam, and had commanded him to teach correct principles to his children, that men began to rebel and turn away. (Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, Doctrine and Covenants Commentary, page 852)

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