AN ESSAY ON PRIESTHOOD COUNSEL, TRUTH, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

WHEN TRUTH IS CALLED THE DEPARTURE OF THE SPIRIT

The sacred obligation to see, speak, receive, and repair

> *A council that mistakes the discomfort of truth for the departure of the Holy Ghost may become capable of resisting the very light for which it was convened.*

The Moment a Council Misidentifies the Spirit

There is a moment in some councils when a difficult truth is introduced and the character of the room changes.

The conversation had been agreeable. The matter under consideration seemed settled. Those present may have been speaking of inspiration, unity, sustaining, and the Lord's will. Then one member names something the others would prefer not to consider. Perhaps he identifies an error in an assumption, a boundary of stewardship that has been crossed, a consequence for a family that has not been considered, or a practice that cannot be reconciled with revealed doctrine.

The room becomes uncomfortable.

And someone concludes that the Spirit has departed.

That judgment may be expressed aloud. More often it is communicated through a change of manner, a troubled look, a withdrawal of warmth, or a later characterization of the person who spoke. What was initially a question about the truth of a proposition becomes a question about the spiritual condition of the person who introduced it. The matter that required examination is displaced by the claim that his words disturbed the sacred atmosphere of the council.

The ease with which this occurs ought to alarm us. An impression of discomfort has been elevated into a verdict about the Holy Ghost. That verdict has then been used to determine who was faithful, who was contentious, and whose contribution was spiritually suspect. Yet the underlying doctrinal claim—the claim that an uncomfortable room is a room from which the Spirit has departed—may never have been examined at all.

I believe this is among the more dangerous counterfeit understandings that can operate within a council precisely because it need never be openly taught. It can become the assumed meaning of reverence, unity, sustaining, and discernment. And once it becomes habitual, the very discomfort through which a council might discover error is used to prevent that discovery.

The question that must be asked is not whether the room felt different. The question is whether the truth was present, how that truth was offered, and whether the hearts of those hearing it were willing to receive correction. Those are not interchangeable inquiries.

An unwelcomed truth may be introduced in an unrighteous spirit. That possibility requires discernment. But the fact that truth is unwelcome establishes neither that it was spoken unrighteously nor that the Spirit departed. To make discomfort the test is to substitute a feeling about the messenger for an examination of the message.

And a council that makes that substitution may come to condemn its own most necessary act of faithfulness.

The Holy Ghost Does Not Exist to Preserve Our Comfort

The scriptures do not sustain the proposition that the presence of the Holy Ghost can be reliably determined by the absence of discomfort.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter confronted his hearers with the truth concerning Jesus Christ. When they heard him, they were "pricked in their heart" and asked what they should do. Peter called them to repentance, and many received his words (Acts 2:36–41). There was spiritual pain before there was spiritual

renewal. The pain was not evidence that the Spirit had abandoned them. It was part of the occasion through which they became willing to repent.

In another council-like setting, Stephen spoke truths that his hearers did not wish to receive. They too were "cut to the heart," but they responded with fury rather than repentance. Stephen remained "full of the Holy Ghost" even as their hostility grew (Acts 7:51–60). The difference was not that one group felt discomfort and the other felt none. Both were deeply unsettled. The difference lay in what they did with the truth that unsettled them.

Nephi was accused of speaking things too hard to bear. His response was not that truth becomes false when it wounds pride. He taught that the guilty often receive truth as hard because it cuts them deeply. His brothers then humbled themselves, at least for a season (1 Nephi 16:1–5). The very passage that records their objection also records the possibility that the hard thing might accomplish a righteous purpose.

When the Savior looked upon the wealthy young man, He loved him. He then invited him to surrender what he would not surrender. The young man went away grieved (Mark 10:21–22). Was the Savior's love absent because the hearer was troubled? Did the Spirit depart because the cost of discipleship had become painfully clear? The text places love and sorrow together, not in opposition.

And when the Savior delivered teaching that some of His followers found difficult, many walked away (John 6:60–69). Their offense did not become proof that His words were spiritually corrupt. It revealed the cost of receiving them.

These accounts do not teach that discomfort always proves truth. They teach something more exact and more necessary: discomfort cannot, by itself, tell us whether truth has been spoken or the Spirit has withdrawn. A false accusation can cause anguish. So can a true reproof. Fear, pride, conscience, grief, and genuine spiritual conviction can all make a room uncomfortable. To treat that discomfort as a self-interpreting revelation is to refuse the discernment the Lord actually requires.

The Holy Ghost testifies of Christ and truth. The Comforter comforts, but He also teaches, brings to remembrance, reproves, and leads disciples toward repentance (John 14:26; John 16:8, 13; Doctrine and Covenants 50:13–24). The peace of Christ cannot be reduced to the preservation of a pleasant meeting.

We should be especially careful with Doctrine and Covenants 50:23, which teaches that what does not edify is not of God. Edification is an increase of light, understanding, truth, and spiritual capacity. It is not a guarantee that every necessary word will be agreeable. The same Lord who commands edification commands reproof under the influence of the Holy Ghost (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43). A doctrine of edification that makes divinely prompted reproof impossible has interpreted one revelation so as to contradict another.

A troubled conscience may be evidence that truth has entered the room, not that the Spirit has left it.

When the Spirit Is Withdrawn From Those Who Misjudge

There is an additional revelation that makes this matter far more serious than an error in interpreting a meeting's atmosphere.

In Doctrine and Covenants 64:16, the Lord says He withheld His Spirit from servants who had sought evil in their hearts. He then identifies their wrong: they had condemned as evil something in which there was no evil. The verse does not describe a peaceful assembly being disturbed by a faithful question. It describes servants whose judgment of something innocent was itself part of the offense for which the Lord withheld His Spirit.

This is an almost exact reversal of the assumption we have been examining.

A person may announce that the Spirit has left because another disciple introduced an uncomfortable concern. Yet the revelation supplies another possibility: the real spiritual danger may lie in the act of falsely condemning the concern, the truth it conveyed, or the person who was under obligation to speak.

I do not claim that verse 16 settles every disagreement about a council. I claim that it forbids an easy doctrine in which the person who creates discomfort is presumed spiritually responsible for that discomfort. The Lord expressly identifies a circumstance in which those who condemned an innocent thing were themselves the ones from whom the Spirit was withheld.

We ought to feel the full weight of that.

A member of the council may experience a troubling feeling because his settled judgment has been questioned. A presiding authority may experience distress because his preferred decision now requires examination. Neither feeling authorizes either man to claim he has discerned the Holy Ghost's departure. And if they then falsely condemn the one who spoke, they may be moving toward the very offense the Lord described.

The proper response is not for the speaker to assume his words were inspired merely because others resisted them. Nor is it for the hearers to assume that resistance proves their righteousness. Every party must return to the substance, the doctrine, the manner, the stewardship, and the fruits of what occurred.

A council should fear falsely condemning a righteous act at least as much as it fears experiencing an uncomfortable meeting.

The Lord's warning gives the reason. It is possible to be deeply disturbed by truth, to attribute one's disturbance to the loss of the Spirit, and to proceed to condemn as evil the very thing God would have us receive.

When an Unspoken Assumption Becomes a Counterfeit Doctrine

President Boyd K. Packer taught that true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior, and he explained that beliefs may arise from doctrines that are either true or false ("Little Children," October 1986 general conference). I have long believed that principle. I am increasingly persuaded that we must take seriously its sobering inverse.

When a false understanding is believed, it also changes attitudes and behavior.

Suppose a council comes to believe, without ever formally saying so, that the Spirit is present when everyone appears agreeable. Suppose it also believes that a member who challenges a presiding authority's settled position creates contention. Suppose sustaining has gradually acquired the practical meaning of withholding a contrary judgment. No one needs to write those propositions in a manual. The council will teach them through its responses.

Members learn which observations receive thanks and which receive a troubled silence. They notice who is praised as humble and who is treated as difficult. They learn that the leader's discomfort may be recast as a spiritual verdict, while the member's duty to counsel may be recast as an inability to sustain. In time, people begin to govern themselves accordingly. They cease introducing the very truths that most need examination.

The assumption is then strengthened by its own effects. Because uncomfortable truths are not introduced, meetings feel consistently harmonious. That harmony is cited as evidence of the Spirit. Because harmony has become evidence of the Spirit, anyone who disturbs it appears spiritually dangerous. The cycle completes itself: the avoidance of correction becomes proof that no correction was needed.

Thus a council can continue speaking the language of revelation while practically rewarding something very different. Its professed doctrine remains beautiful. Its operative doctrine teaches men and women to protect the comfort of authority from the claims of truth.

A false doctrine practiced often enough can become more powerful in everyday administration than a true doctrine merely quoted.

This is why it is insufficient to ask what a council says it believes about sustaining, spiritual discernment, and charity. We must also ask what conduct its members repeatedly exhibit, tolerate, and teach by example. The evidence of an operative belief is found in what people actually do when the belief becomes costly.

The Lord did not provide revelation to decorate an institutional culture. He provided it to correct that culture whenever it departs from Him (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28). If we admire those verses but resist the correction they authorize, then our admiration itself may become another way of avoiding repentance.

Doctrine and Covenants 121 Addresses the Entire Room

Doctrine and Covenants 121 must not be treated as a collection of gentle quotations offered when one man has already offended another. It is a severe revelation concerning the relation between sacred authority, mortal weakness, spiritual accountability, and righteous influence.

The Lord warns that the hearts of men may aspire to worldly things and the honors of men; that authority may be used to cover sins, gratify pride, or exercise unrighteous control; and that men may enter a condition of opposition to God's servants before they recognize what is happening (Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40). His warning that the disposition toward unrighteous dominion is widespread ought to remove every presumption that position itself is evidence of immunity.

The warning addresses the presiding authority, but it also searches the person who counsels. It searches every participant whose affection for acceptance, friendship, influence, status, or comfort may be allowed to compete with a sacred duty. A man need not aspire to another office to aspire to the honors of men. He may simply desire to remain agreeable in the eyes of those who hold one.

Then the Lord names the actual means by which priesthood power and influence are to be maintained: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42). These are not ornamental virtues added to decisions after the decision has been made. They govern the manner in which truth is sought, authority is exercised, disagreement is received, and correction is given.

The next verse is impossible to reconcile with a rule that the introduction of a hard truth necessarily drives away the Spirit. The Lord authorizes timely reproof, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, followed by an increase of love toward the one reproved (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43–44). In this revelation, the Spirit may be the very source of a word that another person does not want to hear.

If reproof can be moved upon by the Holy Ghost, then the discomfort caused by that reproof cannot, simply as discomfort, establish the Holy Ghost's departure. To claim otherwise is to accuse a possibility expressly contemplated by revelation of being evidence against revelation.

Nor can the command to show increased love after reproof be detached from the act of reproof itself. Love is not always the refusal to disturb. Sometimes it is the willingness to tell a necessary truth and then remain present, kind, and accountable for how that truth is carried. Conversely, a presiding authority may speak softly and still exercise coercive influence; a member of the council may speak with feeling and still convey an

honest and necessary concern. Neither volume nor composure is an adequate substitute for the Lord's standards.

Doctrine and Covenants 121 also locates a tragic possibility in the misuse of authority: a person may come to "persecute the saints" while imagining himself faithful (verse 38). That warning should arrest any impulse to condemn a disciple's spiritual standing merely because the disciple has raised an uncomfortable question about those who preside.

The revelation ends by returning our attention to charity, virtue, confidence before God, and the Holy Ghost as a constant companion (verses 45–46). That is the end toward which the council must labor—not protecting every existing judgment from exposure, but becoming righteous enough to receive whatever light the Lord gives.

A Council Is Appointed to Receive Light Not Yet Possessed

The Lord instructed His servants to speak one at a time and listen, so that all might be edified by all and each enjoy an equal privilege to contribute (Doctrine and Covenants 88:122). This does not imply that all possess the same keys, assignments, or governing authority. It does imply that each person's appointed contribution matters to the spiritual work of the assembly.

The current General Handbook teaches that council leaders should invite open and honest contributions, including differing viewpoints. It explains that varied backgrounds and experiences enrich the council; that leaders should listen more than they speak; that stating a conclusion too early can inhibit contributions; and that the eventual decision should be informed by discussion and confirmed by the Spirit (General Handbook, 4.4.3). The Handbook even recognizes that unsettled feelings about an important decision may warrant further consideration. These provisions make no sense if the presiding authority's first view is to be treated as the council's predetermined spiritual conclusion.

Unity, addressed separately in section 4.4.4, is a unity in desire and purpose with the Father and Son. It is not the appearance of agreement secured by withholding sincere judgment. Harmony purchased at the expense of truth is not the same as unity discovered through counsel.

The distinction becomes unmistakable in the revealed procedure for early high council judicial proceedings. Doctrine and Covenants 102:19–21 contemplates a presiding officer rendering a decision, a member of the council discovering an error in that decision, the error being made known, the case being reheard, and the decision being changed when additional light is obtained. Those verses prescribe a particular adjudicative procedure; they should not be treated as though every administrative meeting follows the same steps. But they establish beyond dispute that revealed council order can include a member of the council's correction of the man who presides.

Doctrine and Covenants 107:30–31, speaking of presiding quorums, makes righteousness, humility, knowledge, patience, brotherly kindness, and charity conditions associated with the Lord's blessing upon decisions. And Doctrine and Covenants 107:99–100 places a personal obligation upon each called servant to learn his duty and perform it diligently. The existence of another person's keys does not render the participant's duty optional.

The Handbook also teaches that high council meetings, held twice monthly if feasible, include counseling together concerning individuals, families, and the work of salvation in the stake (General Handbook, 29.3.6, "High Council Meeting"). Members of the high council additionally serve on stake councils and committees (6.5.2). Those are living deliberative responsibilities, not honorary associations with a presiding office.

Why gather people with different knowledge and experience if their principal contribution is to repeat what the leader already thinks? Why provide for discussion, unsettled feelings, additional information, and even the discovery of error if those things are, by their nature, indications that the Spirit has withdrawn?

A council's purpose is not to manufacture opposition. Neither is it to sanctify a conclusion merely by surrounding it with silence. It is to seek the Lord's will with the full measure of light His servants have been called to contribute.

And when that light is unwelcome, its necessity may be greatest.

Whence Reproof Comes and Whither It May Go

The direction of priesthood administration is ordered by keys and stewardship. The direction in which truth may arrive is not confined to that same hierarchy.

A presiding authority may correct a member of the council. A member of the council may correct a factual, doctrinal, or moral error voiced by another member of the council. A member of the council may bring needed correction to the attention of the man who presides. None of these acts, considered simply in terms of their direction, is proof of righteousness or unrighteousness. What matters is whether the person speaks truthfully, within the responsibilities properly belonging to him, through righteous means, and, where reproof is claimed, as moved upon by the Holy Ghost.

There is no revealed principle by which a man's keys make him incapable of receiving truth from one who does not hold those keys. Jethro told Moses that the course he was following was not good, and Moses hearkened to his counsel (Exodus 18:17–24). Nathan confronted David, whose kingly authority could not make his wrongdoing good (2 Samuel 12:1–13). Paul described withstanding Peter when Peter's conduct concerning Gentile believers was inconsistent with the truth of the gospel (Galatians 2:11–14). And Doctrine and Covenants 102 expressly envisions error in a presiding decision being identified by another council member.

These examples differ in office, setting, and divine commission. Their common principle is narrower and clearer than the assertion that anyone may command anyone else: possession of authority does not make a person beyond the reach of truthful correction.

Doctrine and Covenants 28:4–6 preserves the complementary limit. Oliver Cowdery could speak by the Comforter, but he was not authorized to command Joseph Smith as the presiding prophet. Corrective counsel does not confer another man's keys. A member of the high council who honestly identifies a concern does not thereby presume to preside. A woman serving on a council who contributes a contrary spiritual or practical insight does not thereby usurp the keys of the leader conducting the council. There is a difference between bringing light into an appointed deliberation and claiming jurisdiction one has not received.

What, then, does sustaining mean? Surely it includes honoring the lawful stewardship of the presiding authority, participating in good faith, preserving appropriate confidence, and helping execute righteous decisions within one's assignment. But it cannot rightly mean treating every existing judgment as beyond examination. The Handbook directs the leader to invite the very contributions that such a counterfeit definition of sustaining would prohibit (General Handbook, 4.4.3–4.4.4).

The presiding authority's duty to decide and the council member's duty to counsel are complementary. They are not rivals. Neither should be used to extinguish the other.

Nor should every uncomfortable observation be labeled reproof. Sometimes it is a question. Sometimes a statement of fact. Sometimes a testimony from experience. Sometimes it is the recognition of an unintended consequence. True reproof, in the sense of Doctrine and Covenants 121:43, carries its own spiritual and moral conditions. We do injury to that verse if we invoke it to excuse an angry attack; we do equal injury if we invoke the prohibition against contention to forbid every unwelcome word.

No keyholder is required to accept every contrary judgment. Every keyholder is required to remain subject to the principles by which the Lord commands him to receive and exercise light.

How Often Should Unwelcome Truth Arise?

If a council is composed of mortal people exercising real stewardships, possessing different gifts and experiences, and making decisions that affect actual souls, then correction should not be a strange visitor.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:39 warns of a widespread human tendency to misuse assumed authority. That language is not a mathematical prediction of how often any particular presiding authority will err. But it does foreclose an easy assumption that the human disposition toward such error is practically absent among leaders. And the Handbook's explicit provisions for diverse viewpoints, additional information, unsettled feelings, and delayed decisions demonstrate that differences in judgment belong within the ordinary work of councils.

I would expect questions and genuinely differing insights routinely. I would expect incomplete assumptions to be corrected as a normal feature of substantive deliberation. I would expect occasional consequential truths to require a leader or council to reconsider a preferred course. I would expect particularly serious warnings whenever circumstances actually warrant them. I would not demand disagreement for disagreement's sake or imagine that a council must have a confrontation at every meeting.

But consider the opposite extreme. Imagine men and women serving together month after month, year after year, discussing real people, real needs, and real decisions. Yet almost no one ever offers an observation that asks something uncomfortable of those presiding. Almost no one ever identifies a questionable assumption. Almost no one ever admits publicly to having been wrong. Almost no one ever interrupts a preferred course by proposing that the Lord's instruction may require another.

What should that pattern lead us to examine?

It might indicate that the council is exceptionally wise. But it might also indicate that members have not learned their duty, have ceased seeking sight, fear the price of speaking, or have been taught by experience that agreement is rewarded and correction resented. The absence of contrary counsel is not sufficient evidence to decide which explanation is true. It is sufficient reason to inquire.

A healthy council may become increasingly free of resentment toward correction. That would be a wonderful fruit of discipleship. But it should not become increasingly free of the need to correct. Mortality, imperfect knowledge, and the Lord's continuing instruction have not ceased simply because the meeting is orderly.

The most meaningful question is therefore not how frequently meetings become tense. It is whether, over the course of actual deliberation, the council visibly discovers and abandons error, receives knowledge no single member brought in complete form, and sometimes changes because a member was willing to say what others had not yet considered.

A council that never changes its mind should be very slow to congratulate itself on its unity. A presiding authority who never does should quickly repent.

The Duty to See Comes Before the Duty to Speak

A person can defend his silence by saying that he did not see anything requiring comment. Sometimes that is true. But for one called to a council, the duty is not exhausted by speaking when a problem happens to become impossible to overlook.

Doctrine and Covenants 107:99 instructs each servant to learn his duty and act diligently. One cannot diligently counsel concerning people one has made no effort to know, consequences one has refused to examine, or doctrine one has not bothered to study. The responsibility to counsel imposes a corresponding responsibility to seek understanding.

To see may require study, prayer, attentive listening, inquiry, and a willingness to examine the consequences of decisions for people who are not present to speak for themselves. It may require asking why a matter has been brought to the council, what has not been presented, whose stewardship is implicated, what instruction the Lord has already given, and whether an apparent administrative convenience may impose an unexpected spiritual burden upon another.

The watchman language of Ezekiel 33:1–9 was given in a particular prophetic commission; it is not a decree that every member of the council becomes a prophet or incurs identical consequences in every setting. But its governing moral logic is difficult to evade: seeing danger, having a duty to warn, and knowingly withholding warning are not morally neutral acts. Jacob and Joseph likewise took seriously the responsibility to teach and warn within their sacred charge (Jacob 1:18–19).

There is therefore a difference between a person who has honestly investigated and found no reason to dissent and a person who carefully avoids investigation because understanding might require courage. The latter has not achieved peace. He has used agency to avoid the sight that would create an obligation.

One may call that discretion. One may call it deference. One may call it staying within one's lane. But when the matter lies within a stewardship one has actually been called to fulfill, and when the reason for not knowing is the desire not to be required to act, the name supplied does not change the nature of the omission.

We cannot faithfully discharge the duty to speak if we deliberately refuse the work of seeing.

And where sacred duties overlap, clear stewardships are meant to serve the Lord's work, not provide an escape from it. A member of the high council does not become a stake president by offering counsel; a presiding authority does not become a substitute for the appointed judgment of every council member by holding keys. The very boundaries of stewardship that guard against unauthorized interference also preserve the distinct obligations through which the Lord intends His work to be accomplished.

The Burden One Person Is Left to Carry

At the waters of Mormon, covenant disciples promised to bear one another's burdens, mourn with those who mourn, comfort those in need, and stand as witnesses of God (Mosiah 18:8–10). I take those obligations as real. They were not intended to expire when fulfilling them became uncomfortable for a friend, a fellow council member, or a presiding leader.

Consider what happens when several council members recognize a troubling truth but only one speaks.

The man or woman who speaks assumes the visible cost of making the concern known. The person may become identified as the source of disagreement. The presiding authority's attention may settle upon that

person. Others may distance themselves. Questions about disposition or loyalty may arise. Meanwhile those who recognized the concern but said nothing retain the appearance of agreement and the protection of the group.

The cost that belonged, in appropriate measure, to all who understood and were responsible to counsel has fallen upon one.

The duty was not transferable, yet its burden has been transferred in fact.

The Savior condemned a religious pattern in which heavy burdens were laid upon others while those imposing them would not move them with a finger (Matthew 23:4). The historical setting concerns the scribes and Pharisees; I do not pretend every silent council member has committed their sins. But the principle searches us: what does it mean to demand that another person bear the consequences of a sacred obligation from which I have exempted myself?

In a faithful council, a member who agrees that a difficult truth needs to be heard may not need to repeat every word of the person who first speaks. He can do something simpler and more courageous. He can acknowledge that the concern deserves consideration. He can add what he knows. He can correct an unfair characterization. He can distinguish the truth of the proposition from his assessment of the speaker's manner. He can make it impossible for the council to pretend that one troubled soul invented a concern no one else recognized.

There are burdens that become light when even one other person stands beside the one who has carried them. Sometimes a sentence of honest counsel accomplishes more covenantal good than months of privately expressed sympathy.

But there is a further failure more grievous than silence.

The men and women who declined their own burden may later join in accusing the person who carried it. The speaker becomes disruptive. His persistence is characterized as contention. His refusal to surrender an unanswered concern is described as a failure to sustain. His pain becomes an inconvenience that everyone else is invited to manage.

What began as a failure to lift a burden has become a deliberate or careless addition to its weight.

Mosiah 18 has been practically reversed. Instead of making another's burden light, covenant disciples have made it heavier and called their conduct faithful.

When the Messenger Becomes the Alleged Offender

The progression can be subtle. A member introduces an unwelcome truth. Rather than examine it, the council evaluates the discomfort it caused. The discomfort is attributed to the departure of the Spirit. The speaker is identified as the likely cause. Subsequent accounts of the meeting center upon his intensity, timing, tone, or persistence. The truth he asked the council to consider becomes secondary or disappears altogether.

And then something especially destructive can occur: the speaker's reaction to mistreatment becomes evidence used to justify the original judgment against him.

He is hurt. He becomes grieved. At times he becomes angry. His longing to be understood may become more urgent. He may speak less patiently than he ought. Those are real matters for him to take before the Lord, as I have had to take my own failings. But they do not answer the first question: Was the concern true, and what did the others owe the Lord, the people within their stewardship, and the one who spoke?

If his pain is used to avoid that question, the wound itself has become part of the accusation.

The Lord condemned a form of spiritual error in Doctrine and Covenants 64:16: His servants had condemned as evil that in which there was no evil. It is a fearsome thing to classify a righteous act of conscience as spiritual disloyalty merely because it made powerful or respected people uncomfortable. The mistake is not made harmless by the religious vocabulary in which it is expressed.

Nor does the word *contention* settle the matter. In 3 Nephi 11:28–30, Christ condemns a spirit that stirs hearts to contend with anger against one another. That doctrine must govern the person who challenges and the person who presides. A contrary observation is not automatically contention. A presiding authority's resentful response may itself be contentious. A council's collective irritation with a faithful question may be closer to the spirit Christ condemned than the question that exposed its irritation.

There is no virtue in sharpness that originates in wounded pride. There is no virtue in suppressing a necessary warning to preserve appearances. Both can be wrong, and the existence of one does not excuse the other. The Lord's counsel concerning persuasion, meekness, pure knowledge, and love must be allowed to judge the entire exchange (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–45).

We must resist the temptation to substitute an assessment of the speaker's character for an answer to the speaker's concern. The character of a person may matter to the way we receive him, but the truth of a proposition is not established by how comfortable we feel with its messenger.

The hardest form of accountability is often the simple willingness to say: I did not like the way that was said, but what was said was true, and I need to repent.

When Persecution Is Respectable

Persecution is not made righteous by gentility. It can be conducted without shouting. It may arrive as a carefully framed concern about someone's alignment with the Savior, a withdrawal of trust, a public insinuation about sustaining, a private conversation that damages reputation, or the patient accumulation of descriptions that render a faithful person suspect without ever addressing the substance of what he said.

I do not use the word lightly. Disagreement is not persecution. Nor is every correction of the conduct of a member of the council an act of retaliation. But where a disciple is falsely accused, disparaged, or disadvantaged because he exercised a legitimate duty to introduce needed truth, the conduct can take on the moral character of persecution even when the participants remain pleasant and outwardly respectable.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:37–38 expressly warns that the misuse of sacred influence may culminate in persecuting the saints. The Savior's description of persecution includes false accusation and reviling for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:10–12). These warnings should make us slow to assume that a person is safe from persecution merely because he is surrounded by fellow believers—or that we are incapable of participating in it merely because our reasons sound religious.

A member of the council who remained silent may come to resent the member who spoke because that member's action exposes the cost of his own omission. That may happen. So may simpler explanations: fear, sincere doctrinal confusion, an insufficient understanding of what occurred, or the habit of judging dissent by its effect upon the room. The hidden motive does not have to be established in order to examine the observable wrong. If a man joined a false accusation, the false accusation remains his responsibility, whatever embarrassment or anxiety preceded it.

Indeed, making motives the central controversy may create yet another escape from accountability. The council can argue indefinitely about whether its members consciously intended harm while neglecting to examine the harm actually done, the words actually spoken, and the obligations actually neglected.

The Lord knows hearts. We are responsible to examine conduct by the light He has supplied.

And the one who was injured should not have to prove that others secretly hated him before he is entitled to truthful inquiry, charity, and the correction of a false narrative. A believer can inflict profound injury without consciously seeking to do so. The absence of deliberate malice may matter to God's final judgment of the person; it does not erase a covenantal responsibility to see the injury and seek to repair it.

In the house of faith, the language of sustaining ought never become a respectable instrument for silencing the very people who are trying to sustain the Lord's revealed order.

The Condemnation Attached to a Duty Neglected

The Lord has not left the diligence of those called to serve a matter of personal taste. Doctrine and Covenants 107:99–100 commands every appointed servant to learn his duty and perform it diligently, and warns of the consequence of slothfulness and neglected responsibility. The warning is not neutralized by an impressive calling, a favorable relationship with the presiding authority, or the appearance of harmony.

A person who knowingly withholds needed counsel may be neglecting the very assignment for which he was called. A person who has deliberately avoided understanding may be neglecting the duty that precedes counsel. A person who sees a brother or sister wrongly burdened and chooses the safety of silence may be neglecting both a council responsibility and the covenant to bear burdens. A person who joins in mischaracterizing the faithful speaker may add a distinct wrong requiring a distinct repentance.

These are not always identical failures. They must not be collapsed into one vague admonition to be nicer.

First is the failure to seek and see. Second is the failure to speak when speaking is part of one's duty. Third is the failure to receive counsel according to the Lord's revealed manner. Fourth is the failure to stand beside a fellow disciple who is being unfairly condemned. Fifth is the active addition of false accusations or burdens. Sixth is the failure to repent after those matters become known.

Each may carry consequences for more than the person immediately responsible. False unanimity may form. Mistaken decisions may remain uncorrected. Leaders may be deprived of light they were meant to receive through those they called. Families and individuals may suffer unnecessarily. Other council members may learn that silence is safer than faithfulness. And a culture may eventually treat the absence of dissent as evidence of divine approval.

The warning in Ezekiel 33 concerning a watchman who sees danger and fails to warn belongs originally to a particular prophetic commission. Its principle nevertheless teaches why responsibility for warning cannot always be discharged by saying that someone else held authority to decide. Jacob's account of magnifying a sacred office similarly connects diligent warning with one's standing before God (Jacob 1:18–19). Those passages ought to awaken anyone whose calling gives him a responsibility to counsel for the welfare of others.

The responsibility is particularly serious when a person claims *sustaining* as the reason for avoiding the duty to counsel. He is not merely confessing timidity. He is offering one sacred obligation as justification for leaving another undone. He risks teaching a false relationship between the two duties and passing the misunderstanding to those who observe his example.

If the Lord's order requires both presiding keys and honest counsel, then the refusal of honest counsel in the name of presiding keys is not greater faithfulness to that order. It is a departure from part of it.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:35 warns against hearts attached to the honors of men. That warning reaches the council member who desires approval as surely as it reaches the man who enjoys deference. A person's fear of losing favorable regard may be understandable, but it does not transform silence into righteousness when the Lord has required speech.

And if repeated neglect is justified long enough, something else may happen. The person who once saw but feared to speak may learn not to look. He may regard the absence of uncomfortable insight as evidence of spiritual maturity, when in fact he has become less willing to receive the light that imposes obligation. A failure of courage can mature into a failure of sight.

The gravity of these warnings does not empower one mortal to declare the eternal condemnation of another. It does something more useful: it requires each of us to recognize that sacred office carries sacred duties, that neglected duties have consequences, and that the Lord—not the culture of the council—will finally judge their fulfillment.

An assignment to stand as a witness is not fulfilled by having occupied a chair.

The Obligation to Receive Is Greater Where the Stewardship Is Greater

Everything said concerning the duty to counsel must be matched by equal seriousness concerning the duty to receive it.

The presiding officer is not merely the recipient of information. He sets much of the moral climate in which that information can be offered. His face, manner, patience, questions, and response to correction teach council members what he actually understands about authority. The General Handbook recognizes this with remarkable practicality when it warns that a leader's early expression of his own view may inhibit the contributions of others (4.4.3).

How much more inhibiting, then, is the suggestion that disagreement may demonstrate disloyalty to the Savior? What member is likely to speak freely when an honest contrary thought may become a question concerning his worthiness or spiritual discernment?

A leader who wants real counsel must do more than permit others to speak before rendering the decision he already intended to render. He must remain willing to learn. He must be capable of saying that another person has seen something he did not. He must be able to distinguish a challenge to an assumption from an attempted challenge to his keys. He must resist the impulse to interpret personal discomfort as revelation about the person who caused it.

A man's keys authorize him to preside within his stewardship. They do not relieve him of the need to inquire, reason, listen, and repent. Nor do they allow him to declare the spiritual state of a council member offering contrary counsel merely by appealing to the position he holds. His authority is most faithfully exercised when his decisions remain subject to truth and to the Lord's revealed principles of righteousness.

The General Handbook does not say that a leader should arrange the appearance of unanimity. It directs him to listen, receive diverse counsel, allow further consideration where appropriate, and seek confirmation by the Spirit after the discussion (4.4.3). Unity is to be sought with the Father and Son, not manufactured by the silencing of differences (4.4.4).

If a leader discourages honest correction and then cites the council's silence as evidence that the Spirit has confirmed his view, he has created a closed circle in which the absence of counsel is made to prove the wisdom of having suppressed it.

The exercise of authority can be administratively final in a matter without becoming spiritually infallible. A person may be responsible to support the lawful implementation of a decision while still having faithfully expressed a serious concern during its consideration. The Lord has not required every person who can faithfully sustain to have first erased his conscience.

Where authority is greater, the example is more consequential. The presiding authority models for the entire council whether repentance is a living gospel principle or merely something he teaches others to practice. An unforced acknowledgment of error may strengthen his authority far more deeply than the preservation of an impression that he never errs.

He ought to be the safest person in the room to correct—and, by his own example, the most willing to be corrected.

Restitution Is More Than a Private Apology

When harm has occurred, what then is required at the hands of those who caused or compounded it?

The doctrine of repentance provides the answer, though its demands are often more costly than the words *I am sorry*. The Lord identifies confession and forsaking as marks of repentance (Doctrine and Covenants 58:42–43). Church teaching also identifies restitution—the making right, as far as possible, of wrongs we have committed—as part of that process (*Gospel Principles*, chapter 19, "Repentance").

A person who remained silent when he knew he should have counseled cannot fully repent by regretting that the meeting was difficult. He must acknowledge the duty he neglected. If he then joined in accusing the person who spoke, he must acknowledge that additional wrong. The two injuries should not be concealed in a general statement that everyone involved could have handled the matter better.

A person who helped spread an inaccurate account must seek to correct that account. If he damaged another's spiritual credibility in the eyes of a council, a private expression of regret to the injured person may not repair what the council still falsely believes. If he communicated a false characterization to others, he should seek an appropriate way to withdraw or correct it with those who received it. The Church's instruction on restitution explicitly uses the example of one who slanders another person's character working to restore the person's good name (*Gospel Principles*, chapter 19).

Scripture recognizes that offenses occurring in different settings may call for correction proportionate to their scope (Doctrine and Covenants 42:88–92). This is not permission to violate confidence, broadcast private matters, or conduct retaliation under the name of restitution. Council confidentiality remains a serious obligation (General Handbook, 4.4.6). It is a summons to make the correction reach those places where the wrong can responsibly and meaningfully be repaired.

A member of the council who failed to bear his portion of a difficult burden ought to consider bearing it now. He can acknowledge what he knew. He can correct unfair descriptions. He can take responsibility for teaching the actual doctrine of counsel and sustaining. He can resolve not to repeat the failure when another person stands at cost. His repentance becomes visible when it changes the conduct that injured his brother or sister.

A presiding officer who cultivated a climate of fearful silence has a related duty. He must address more than a single incident if the assumptions that produced it remain operative. He can teach the revealed role of

councils. He can distinguish contention from necessary correction. He can invite unwelcome insight sincerely. He can publicly model the acknowledgment of his own error when the circumstances warrant it. He can make room for additional light without making those who bring it pay a spiritual price.

And where a wounded person has tried repeatedly to explain the nature of the injury, the responsible fellow disciples should undertake the work of understanding rather than requiring him to persuade them that his pain deserves investigation. Mosiah 18 asks more of us than sympathy after we have exhausted another person's attempts to be heard. It asks us to come close enough to understand what burden we have covenanted to bear.

There are injuries that cannot be erased by an apology. Years cannot be returned. Lost trust cannot be commanded back into existence. A wounded person may forgive and still need time, distance, or demonstrated change before renewed confidence becomes possible. None of these realities nullifies the offender's responsibility to repair what can be repaired.

And the duty of the wounded disciple to forgive does not become a substitute for the offending disciple's duty to repent. Doctrine and Covenants 64:9–11 commands forgiveness. Doctrine and Covenants 58:43 commands confession and forsaking. They address distinct responsibilities. We do violence to both if we demand forgiveness as a means of avoiding restitution.

The Savior's command to seek reconciliation with a brother before bringing an offering to the altar (Matthew 5:23–24) places initiative upon the person aware of the breach. It does not instruct him to wait until the wounded brother finds sufficiently agreeable words to make the matter comfortable.

The first labor of restitution may therefore be neither an explanation nor a defense. It may be the willingness to say: I see what I did. I see what it cost. I was wrong. What can I now do to help make it right?

The Questions Every Council Must Be Willing to Answer

Before claiming that an unwelcome truth drove away the Spirit, can I identify the doctrine by which I made that judgment? Have I examined the concern itself, or only my reaction to it? Could the discomfort in me be the distress of a person being asked to surrender an assumption? Could the Lord be calling me to repentance rather than asking me to correct the one who spoke?

Before describing someone as contentious, have I examined whether he was attempting to stir up anger against another or faithfully to introduce a matter that required attention (3 Nephi 11:29–30)? Have I applied the same standard of meekness and love to the presiding authority, to myself, and to the council as a whole? Have I confused the preservation of calm with the presence of charity?

Before invoking sustaining, have I considered the difference between honoring another person's keys and withholding the counsel I was called to provide? Have I studied the limits that keys impose as carefully as the authority they confer? Am I protecting the lawful order of stewardship, or employing that order as a reason not to discharge my own responsibility?

Before leaving a matter unspoken, have I done the work necessary to see? Have I listened to those affected? Have I asked the questions I would rather avoid? Would I have offered the same counsel if the presiding authority had expressed the opposite conclusion? If my silence is sincere agreement, can I say so without fear? If it is fear, will I name it honestly before God?

Before participating in criticism of a person who spoke, can I identify what was false in his statement? If I cannot, why am I examining his loyalty instead? Did I privately agree with something I refused to acknowledge

publicly? Did my silence increase his burden? Have I allowed his later injury or anger to become a convenient excuse for avoiding the truth he originally presented?

And when the Lord reveals that I have been wrong, what then? Will I confess it? Will I seek out the person I injured? Will I correct a false account where it has taken root? Will I allow the doctrine to change not merely my feelings about the event but the governing assumptions by which I act?

These questions belong to women and men who counsel. They belong to presiding authorities and those who serve beside them. They belong to a bishopric, a presidency, a stake council, a high council, an organization presidency, and every other gathering in which disciples claim to seek the Lord's will together.

No one need possess exceptional intelligence to recognize the obligation. No one need hold the highest office to fulfill it. No one need be perfectly certain of every conclusion in order to inquire honestly and speak faithfully. The call is not to infallibility. It is to diligence, courage, charity, humility, and continuing repentance.

These questions do not leave a thoughtful disciple with the comfort of ignorance. They give him an opportunity to examine himself before the Lord instead of waiting to be corrected by the suffering of someone else.

The Doctrine That Must Finally Govern Us

At the root of the gospel stands Jesus Christ, not the preservation of a leader's comfort, a council's reputation, or a disciple's pride.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ means that error need not be permanent. Sin need not remain concealed. Weakness can be shown to us and, through humility and grace, become the occasion for strength (Ether 12:27). The Lord declared in the preface to His revelations that when His servants erred, the error might be made known; when they sinned, they might be chastened and repent; and when they humbled themselves, they might be strengthened (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28).

That revealed order is not hostile to the Lord's servants. It is among His most merciful provisions for them.

There is no reason a disciple ought to fear discovering he was wrong more than he fears remaining wrong after the Lord has offered further light. There is no reason a presiding officer should need his council to maintain an appearance of agreement when the purpose of counsel is to seek a greater understanding of the Lord's will. There is no reason a member of the council should preserve his standing with other men by allowing another to pay the price of an obligation that belonged to them both.

And there is no doctrinal reason to treat necessary spiritual discomfort as though it must be the enemy of the Holy Ghost. The sorrow that leads to repentance may be an expression of the Lord's mercy. The hard truth received humbly may enlarge the soul. The admission of error may bring a unity deeper than any that could have been preserved through silence.

I do not write as one who believes he has always spoken perfectly. I have known occasions when injury spoke first or too loudly. I have needed to repent of anger, impatience, and failures of charity. I expect to need that repentance again. But the Lord's command to examine myself does not release another disciple from the same command, nor may my failures be used to erase a true principle that stands apart from me.

Indeed, the principle must come home most searchingly to the one who bears witness of it.

If I call men and women to submit themselves to correction, I must do the same. If I testify that Christ can expose and redeem error, I must not defend a false understanding merely because it has become precious to

me. If I ask others to choose truth when truth requires sacrifice, I must remain willing for the Lord to require that sacrifice of me. My willingness to speak cannot become an exemption from the obligation to listen. My conviction cannot become permission to cease learning.

I must remain willing to be changed by the very Lord whose truth I feel obligated to defend.

That willingness is not a concession made to an opponent. It is fidelity to Jesus Christ. It is the proper beginning of the repentance I have sought among my fellow disciples, and it is the only foundation upon which that repentance can become a shared covenant labor rather than another demand imposed upon someone else.

Perhaps this is the most searching lesson of all. The council that truly possesses the Spirit need not be the council in which no one is unsettled. It may be the council in which a member offers difficult truth with love, a presiding authority receives it with humility, others refuse the refuge of self-protective silence, and all leave more willing to repent than when they entered.

That council may have experienced a painful conversation. It may also have experienced the Lord's most merciful work.

I plead for a culture of discipleship in which the word *sustaining* never means a refusal to see; in which *unity* never requires a counterfeit unanimity; in which *reverence* does not mean protecting the powerful from difficult questions; in which the *Spirit* is not invoked to dismiss a truth that has yet to be examined; and in which *charity* carries its burdens rather than passing them to the one person willing to stand.

I plead for men and women who understand that the right to preside never cancels the duty to repent, and the duty to counsel never authorizes unrighteous domination. I plead for servants who will study before speaking, speak when duty requires, listen when corrected, and seek restitution when they have caused injury.

And I plead for the lonely disciple who speaks a needed truth in a room that would rather not hear it. May his fellow servants have enough love for the Lord, enough love for him, and enough courage to make certain he does not bear alone what the Lord intended them to carry together.

We must not condemn the Spirit's work because it has made us uncomfortable. We must not call a wound contention because acknowledging it would require us to repent. We must not mistake the peace of unchallenged error for the peace of Jesus Christ.

The Lord did not organize His Church to make it impossible for His servants to discover they were wrong. He gave them the gospel, the Holy Ghost, revealed stewardships, and councils so that, through His grace, they might discover and abandon error together.

I was not asking that any of us be right about everything.

I am asking that we believe deeply enough in Jesus Christ that none of us will be content to remain wrong.

Doctrinal Sources for Further Study

Revelation governing authority and counsel: Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28; 28:4–6; 50:13–24; 88:122; 102:16–23; 107:27–32, 99–100; 121:34–46.

The necessity and reception of correction: 1 Nephi 16:1–5; Ether 12:27; Acts 2:36–41; Acts 7:51–60; Mark 10:17–22; John 6:60–69; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Exodus 18:17–24; 2 Samuel 12:1–13; Galatians 2:11–14.

Covenant burdens, warning, and reconciliation: Mosiah 18:8–10; Jacob 1:18–19; Ezekiel 33:1–9; Matthew 5:10–12, 23–24; Matthew 23:4; Doctrine and Covenants 42:88–92; 58:42–43; 64:9–16; 3 Nephi 11:28–30.

Church instruction: *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4.4.2–4.4.6 (Principles of Effective Councils); 6.5 (High Council); 29.3.6 (High Council Meeting); *Gospel Principles*, chapter 19 (Repentance); President Boyd K. Packer, "Little Children," October 1986 general conference.