PRIESTHOOD KEYS AND THE LIMITS OF LOCAL CHANGES TO THE SACRAMENT

The allocation of stewardship and the limits of local discretion

A stake president's decision to alter a prescribed sacrament procedure on the basis of a spiritual impression raises two separate questions. First, does his particular stewardship authorize him to direct that action, given the keys assigned to the bishop? Second, is the proposed departure permitted even when directed by the appropriate key holder? These questions concern the allocation and limits of authority. Neither is resolved merely by the sincerity of the impression, the seniority of the leader, or the spiritual effect of the experience.

The concern examined here is the precedent established when a local presiding leader treats an impression as sufficient authority to change an established practice. No judgment about the validity of the ordinance is necessary to examine that concern. Nor does examining the decision require judging the leader's motives. The issue is what his action teaches others about keys, revelation, and accountability.

The allocation of authority

The scriptural foundation is an assignment of duties within an ordered priesthood. Doctrine and Covenants 107:15 identifies the bishopric as the presidency of the Aaronic Priesthood and assigns it the corresponding keys. Verse 99 requires each man to learn his duty and act in the office to which he is appointed. The same section recognizes broader Melchizedek Priesthood presidency in verses 8–10. Both principles must be retained: presiding relationships exist, and particular offices have particular responsibilities. [12]

President Russell M. Nelson taught in April 2024 that priesthood keys govern the use of God's priesthood to accomplish His purposes. Earlier, as an Apostle, he explained that receiving keys gives a person the right to direct priesthood work without giving him additional priesthood, and that keys are conferred for specific offices and callings. [13, 14] Applied to the present question, presiding rank is insufficient as an explanation unless the particular action falls within the authority actually entrusted to that calling.

The General Handbook describes priesthood keys as authority to direct the use of the priesthood. It also expressly limits their scope: "This presiding authority is valid only for the specific responsibilities of the leader's calling." Local leaders receive keys for their assigned responsibilities; holding keys is not a general license to direct every priesthood function. [1]

Elder Dallin H. Oaks explains that Church acts and ordinances require direct or indirect authorization from the holder of the keys for the particular function. His example of administering the sacrament at home illustrates that priesthood office alone does not supply the necessary authorization. Keys both enable the work and limit how authority is exercised. [2]

That allocation is concrete. Handbook 18.9.1 assigns the bishop the keys for administering the sacrament in the ward. Section 7.1.1.2 likewise assigns him direction of its administration. These are specific responsibilities, not merely tasks he happens to perform when a more senior leader is absent. [3, 4]

The stake president nevertheless has a real supervisory stewardship. He holds keys to lead the Church's work in the stake, guides bishops, and instructs bishoprics in their responsibilities. [5] The distinction is therefore not between authority and no authority. It is between the authority to fulfill his own responsibilities and a claimed entitlement to assume a function specifically assigned to another key holder.

It would be too broad to say that all priesthood stewardships are independent or that presiding relationships have no bearing on their exercise. It is equally unwarranted to assume that every specific prerogative of a bishop automatically belongs to a stake president because he presides over the bishop. The relevant question is which responsibility authorizes the particular action. A statement that someone presides cannot substitute for that analysis.

Ordered revelation and the right to direct

Inspiration, revelation, and spiritual impressions from the Holy Ghost operate within God's established order. Describing an experience as an impression rather than a revelation does not create a separate exemption from the responsibilities of a calling. In this context, ordered revelation means divine guidance consistent with revealed truth and the stewardship of the recipient. [6, 17]

Elder L. Tom Perry stated the boundary directly: "However, we cannot receive revelation for someone else's stewardship." He also cited Joseph Smith's teaching that an officer may obtain revelation relating to his particular calling and duty. [15] This is substantive apostolic support for examining the jurisdiction of a claimed impression. It does not, by itself, resolve every boundary between supervising and administering; the actual assignment of responsibilities must still be identified.

Doctrine and Covenants 28 demonstrates this order without denying the recipient's access to the Spirit. Oliver Cowdery could teach by the Comforter (verses 1, 4), yet he was not appointed to receive revelations governing the Church or to command its presiding head (verses 2, 6–7). Verse 13 expressly places Church action within order and common consent. Although this revelation concerns Churchwide authority rather than the precise relationship between a stake president and a bishop, it establishes that spiritual communication and governing jurisdiction are distinct. [17]

Receiving an impression and possessing authority to implement it are distinguishable. A person may have an insight that benefits another leader's stewardship. That possibility does not make the insight a binding directive or transfer the authority to act. The orderly response may be to offer counsel for consideration by the person responsible.

Councils provide an established setting for such contributions. Handbook 4.3 teaches that council members can receive revelation; section 4.4.3 directs leaders to invite open discussion, listen more than they speak, and reach decisions informed by the discussion and confirmed by the Spirit. Thus, respecting keys includes

receiving inspired contributions from those who do not preside. Their contribution does not independently confer authority to make the governing decision. [18]

Elder Dale G. Renlund teaches that revelation operates within the recipient's purview and must harmonize with God's commandments. His teaching connects revelation to responsibility rather than treating a spiritual feeling as its own authorization. [6] Applied here, the important inquiry is whether a claimed impression is being offered within a legitimate counseling role or invoked to displace the bishop's assigned direction of the ordinance. He also identifies scripture and covenants as part of that framework and preserves the individual's responsibility to receive revelation for personal decisions. Presiding authority consequently has limits in both directions: a personal impression does not enlarge a leader's jurisdiction, and a leader's jurisdiction does not encompass every decision in another person's life. [6]

The sources establish who holds the relevant keys more explicitly than they establish who could first experience an impression about a practical matter. Consequently, the most defensible claim is not that God could never give a stake president an insight concerning the sacrament. It is that such an insight does not itself establish authority to bypass the bishop's stewardship. A proposed exercise of authoritative direction must respect the assignment of keys.

The limits of authorized discretion

The Savior's instructions concerning the sacrament establish a duty of faithful observance. In 3 Nephi 18:5–6, He authorizes its administration and directs His disciples to follow what He has done. Verses 12–13 command observance and warn against doing more or less than He has directed. [16] This supports restraint in administering sacred ordinances. It should not be stretched into a claim that every present-day logistical detail is an immutable divine requirement. The question remains whether a particular adjustment is authorized under the Church's current direction.

Even after the proper stewardship is respected, a second question remains. Authority to administer an ordinance does not by itself establish authority to revise its prescribed administration. The bishop's agreement would therefore leave the question of permission unresolved. A proposal can proceed through the appropriate leader and still exceed the discretion granted to that leader.

The handbook includes both definite procedures and authorized accommodations. It directs that the bread be broken into bite-sized pieces, permits adaptations for food allergies, and provides arrangements enabling people with physical disabilities to participate in ordinances. [3, 7] These provisions demonstrate that adaptation is possible. They do not establish a general local prerogative to introduce a symbolic practice wherever a leader believes it would enrich worship.

Deliberately substituting fist-sized portions as a teaching device illustrates the distinction. The issue is not a theological measurement of bread. It is a deliberate departure from an identifiable instruction, justified by a

claimed spiritual purpose. The same reasoning applies to other innovations that replace prescribed procedures. Calling a change procedural does not, by itself, establish permission to make it.

Doctrine and Covenants 27:2 provides genuine doctrinal flexibility concerning what is eaten or drunk in remembrance of Christ. Doctrine and Covenants 46:2 directs elders to conduct meetings by the Holy Spirit, while Moroni 6:9 describes spiritually directed preaching, prayer, and singing. [8–10] These passages must be taken seriously. None expressly grants a local presiding officer unrestricted authority to set aside sacrament instructions. Interpreting them as blanket permission would require an additional argument, not simply an appeal to inspiration.

The conclusion is therefore bounded: the cited instructions do not establish a general exception for a personally inspired ceremonial innovation. That is an assessment of the available authorization, not a claim to know the origin of another person's spiritual experience. Where guidance is uncertain, Handbook 0.4 directs leaders to counsel with their immediate presiding authority. Seeking clarification provides an accountable path; it does not make an exception automatic. [11]

The precedent established by leadership

The two concerns become especially significant when the action is modeled by a stake president. Members and other leaders learn from what he does as well as from what he teaches. If his example suggests that presiding rank is sufficient to assume another key holder's assigned function, it can weaken respect for the distribution of responsibility. If it also suggests that an impression is sufficient to override an explicit instruction, it can encourage others to treat their own impressions as permission for exceptions.

These are potential consequences, not predictions about every observer. Nevertheless, they explain why the concern extends beyond whether a single change appeared harmless or produced a moving experience. An emotionally powerful result does not independently establish either jurisdiction or permission. The practice may teach a rule of decision that becomes troublesome when others apply it elsewhere.

The two questions must therefore remain separate. The bishop's participation does not automatically authorize a departure from prescribed practice. Conversely, an otherwise permissible accommodation does not automatically authorize someone else to displace the bishop's assigned role. Each question requires its own answer.

Faithful leadership models both respect for the keys entrusted to others and restraint in exercising one's own authority. A concern about these boundaries can be expressed without hostility toward the leader or a verdict on his sincerity. It asks for an explanation of how the action respects the relevant stewardship and what permits the particular departure. Those are substantive questions about the order of the Church, and a claim of inspiration alone does not answer them.

Sources

Scripture, general conference addresses, and the General Handbook. Numbered references identify the supporting sources; applications and conclusions are the essay's analysis.

[1] General Handbook 3.4.1 and 3.4.1.2 — Priesthood keys and their scope

[2] Dallin H. Oaks — The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood, April 2014

[3] General Handbook 18.9.1, 18.9.3, and 18.9.4 — Administration of the sacrament

[4] General Handbook 7.1 and 7.1.1.2 — The bishop's responsibilities

[5] General Handbook 6.2, 6.2.1, and 6.2.1.2 — The stake president's responsibilities

[6] Dale G. Renlund — A Framework for Personal Revelation, October 2022

[7] General Handbook 38.2.5 — Ordinances and physical disabilities

[8] Doctrine and Covenants 27:2 — Sacramental emblems and remembrance

[9] Doctrine and Covenants 46:2 — Conducting meetings by the Spirit

[10] Moroni 6:9 — Meetings directed by the Holy Ghost

[11] General Handbook 0.4 — Questions about instructions

[12] Doctrine and Covenants 107:8–10, 15, 99 — Presidency and assigned duties

[13] President Russell M. Nelson — Rejoice in the Gift of Priesthood Keys, April 2024

[14] Elder Russell M. Nelson — Keys of the Priesthood, Ensign, October 2005

[15] L. Tom Perry — We Believe All That God Has Revealed, October 2003; includes teachings of Joseph Smith

[16] 3 Nephi 18:5–6, 12–13 — The Savior's directions for the sacrament

[17] Doctrine and Covenants 28:1–7, 13 — Inspiration and the order of governing revelation

[18] General Handbook 4.3 and 4.4.3 — Revelation in councils and the responsibility for decisions