

to assist the Elders

The Teachers duty is to watch over the Church always & be with them & strengthen them & see that there is no iniquity in the Church ^{neither} ~~was~~ ^{hardness} ~~with~~ ^{with} each other ^{neither} ~~lying~~ ^{lying} nor backbiting ^{neither} ~~nor~~ ^{neither} ~~evil speaking~~ ^{evil speaking} & see that the Church meets to gether often & also ^{that} ~~every~~ ^{all the} members ~~do~~ ^{do} their duty & he is to take the lead of Meetings in the absence of the Elder or Priest & is to be assisted always & in all his duties in the Church by the Deacons but ^{neither} ~~the~~ ^{the} Teaching nor ~~the~~ ^{the} Deacons have authority to Baptize nor ^{administer} ~~administer~~ the Sacrament ^{but} ~~are~~ ^{are} to warn exhort & teach & invite all to come ^{unto} ~~unto~~ Christ.

Every elder Priest Teacher & Deacon is to be ordained according to the gifts & callings of God unto ^{them} ~~them~~ by the power of the Holy Ghost which is in them one who ordains ~~them~~ ^{them}

The several elders composing this Church of Christ ^{or} ~~or~~ ^{from} ~~from~~ ^{time} ~~time~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{time} ~~time~~ as they shall direct ^{or} ~~or~~ ^{appoint} ~~appoint~~ ^{it} ~~it~~ ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{meet} ~~meet~~ ⁱⁿ ~~in~~ ^{conference} ~~conference~~ ^{once} ~~once~~ ⁱⁿ ~~in~~ ^{three} ~~three~~ ^{months} ~~months~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{Church} ~~Church~~ ^{whenever} ~~whenever~~ ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{necessary} ~~necessary~~ & ^{and} ~~and~~ ^{every} ~~every~~ ^{Priest} ~~Priest~~ ^{or} ~~or~~ ^{Teacher} ~~Teacher~~ ^{who} ~~who~~ ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{ordained} ~~ordained~~ ^{by} ~~by~~ ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{Priest} ~~Priest~~ ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{take} ~~take~~ ^a ~~a~~ ^{certificate} ~~certificate ^{from} ~~from~~ ^{him} ~~him~~ ^{at} ~~at~~ ^{the} ~~the ^{time} ~~time~~ ^{which} ~~which~~ ^{when} ~~when~~ ^{delivered} ~~delivered~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{an} ~~an~~ ^{Elder} ~~Elder~~ ^{he} ~~he~~ ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{give} ~~give~~ ^{him} ~~him~~ ^a ~~a~~ ^{licence} ~~licence~~ ^{which} ~~which~~ ^{shall} ~~shall~~ ^{authorize} ~~authorize~~ ^{him} ~~him~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{perform} ~~perform~~ ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{duty} ~~duty~~ ^{of} ~~of~~ ^{his} ~~his~~ ^{calling} ~~calling~~.~~~~

The duty of the members after they are Received by Baptism the Elders or Priests are to have a sufficient time to expound all things concerning this Church of Christ to their understanding previous to their partaking of the Sacrament & being confirmed by the laying on of the hands of the Elders so that all things may be done in order & the members shall manifest before the Church & also before the Elders by a Godly walk & conversation that they are worthy of it that there may be works & faith agreeable to the Holy Scriptures walking in holiness before the Lord.

Every member of this Church of Christ Living Children ~~is~~ ^{is} to bring them unto the Elders before the Church

Seeking After the Ancient Order: Conferences and Councils in Early Church Governance, 1830–1834

Joseph F. Darowski

As I reviewed the record of council minutes for 1833 in Minute Book 1 (Kirtland Council Minute Book) for future inclusion in the Joseph Smith Papers series, it became apparent that conferences and councils were routinely used to resolve administrative matters and problems facing the early Church, especially before 1834, when the first Church high council was established at Kirtland. As I immersed myself in the question of exactly what role Church conferences and councils played in the Church, I discovered three things. First, an appraisal of the minutes of the quarterly meetings held during the first years of the Church's existence as an institution reveals not a narrow hierarchical leadership, but a shared, even symbiotic, collaboration. This relationship remained the essence of the genius of Church organization and structure throughout the lifetime of Joseph Smith. Second, it was interesting to discover that Joseph Smith was not always as prominent a participant as might be expected. I had previously labored under the assumption that Joseph Smith primarily governed the early Church through the power of his charismatic personality and priesthood authority, sanctioned by revelatory endorsement from on high. My notion was that Joseph Smith stood at the head of everything and therefore ultimately decided everything. Govern he did, but not quite as exclu-

JOSEPH F. DAROWSKI (darowskijf@ldschurch.org) received his BS from Cornell University, and his MA from Brigham Young University. He has also done graduate work at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. He is currently a research historian in the LDS Church History Department, and is a volume editor with the Joseph Smith Papers Project. A version of this article will be included in *A Firm Foundation: Essays on the Administrative and Organizational History of the LDS Church* published by BYU's Religious Studies Center (forthcoming).

sively as I had supposed. Finally, over time, even as the complexity and scope of church governance expanded, the conference/council model was retained. An important watershed was reached with the ratification of a constitution for the “High Council of the Church of Christ” on February 19, 1834, which formalized this arrangement. Another occurred in 1835 with the calling of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and the First Quorum of Seventy. In many respects, the *basic* structure of the Church was in place by March 1836 when the Church’s extant organizational structure was sustained by the membership at the dedication of the Kirtland “House of the Lord.”

During the Kirtland era and beyond, two factors became driving forces behind the development of Church government. First, Joseph Smith experienced considerable internal resistance to his control, both temporal and ecclesiastical, regarding the affairs of the Church. Contemporary correspondence and personal accounts attest to the difficulties he encountered in his dealings with fellow Church leaders such as Edward Partridge, William W. Phelps, Sidney Rigdon, and others. In apparent response, a series of revelations reiterated his appointment to be even as Moses and to hold the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom. Simultaneously, the nature, duties, and offices of the priesthood were elaborated, particularly in revelations given in September 1832 and spring 1835 (D&C Sections 84 and 107). These and other developments had to be accommodated as institutional organization and administration were gradually rationalized.

This article focuses on the dynamic convergence of issues surrounding early Church conceptions of priesthood, authority, and governance that generated a flow of revelations and refinements which over time yielded a hierarchical, yet consensual, institution in which all official members were able to appreciably participate; I trace specific steps critical to the unfolding of these developments in an effort to illuminate the historical, ecclesiastical, and social dimensions of that process. I also provide historical evidence of Joseph Smith’s and the Saints’ commitment to a collaborative, council-based response to ecclesiastical and institutional demands.

Two words—*conference* and *council*—need clarification. Initially, Church business was conducted by elders at meetings called conferences. By 1833, the terms *conference* and *council* sometimes seem almost synonymous, at least in regard to gatherings of high priests in Kirtland. At that point, the nature of the meetings and the business attended to appear outwardly similar regardless of the designation; a distinction between them is not clearly apparent. Pre-1834 meetings convey a sense of “a conference” as a setting in which the elders, high priests, or both groups conferred with each other and conducted “Church business” as directed in the April 1830 *Articles and Covenants*. Several meetings were designated as “general conferences” or “special conferences” as

well. After the high council was formed in February 1834, the term *council* was generally applied to its meetings.

Webster's 1828 dictionary offers definitions that seem to fit hand in glove. For "conference" it proposes as a primary meaning "the act of conversing on a serious subject; a discoursing between two or more, for the purpose of instruction, consultation, or deliberation." For "council" we are given "an assembly of men summoned or convened for consultation, deliberation and advice." In this regard and given the limited numbers in attendance at many of the early Church gatherings, "council" really seems the more applicable term, but at the same time it also has a somewhat more formal connotation—a bishop's council, a president's council, and so forth.

Of course, other denominations held "conferences" and "councils," and a more thorough investigation of those usages may shed appreciable light on the subject. Given the early Church's penchant for borrowing Protestant terms and then repurposing, it seems likely that the term *conference* carried a contemporaneous cultural meaning, regardless of the challenge we may encounter in trying to parse fine distinctions today. It is also possible that the gradual shift toward using the term *council* for a certain class of meetings represented a passage from a less formal to a more structured institution with the introduction of bishops and presidents in addition to the first and second elders. In this sense, the term *council* came more prominently into play as the Church grew and offices and officers multiplied. However, forcing a distinction between the use of conference and council for the period through February 1834 is essentially unnecessary. Under either usage, Church business was conducted, the mind and will of the Lord sought, and instruction given. After that period it may be advantageous to qualify the terms to an extent, as *conference* seems to take on a more familiar connotation, as does *council*.

Commencing with the founding or organization of the "Church of Christ" as an institution in April 1830, guidelines, designated as the *Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ of the Church of Christ*, were drafted and soon thereafter adopted. An early version states: "The elders are to conduct the meetings as they are led by the Holy Ghost. . . . The several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet at each of its meetings to do church business, whatsoever is necessary, &c."¹ Another iteration specifies that "The several elders composing this Church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three Month[s] or from time to time as they Shall direct or appoint—to do Church business whatsoever is necessary."²

The first actual conference of the Church met on June 9, 1830, at Fayette, Seneca County, New York. The fairly succinct minutes of this meeting, which were later copied into Minute Book 2 (Far West Record), begin, "Minutes of the first Conference held in the Township of Fayette, Seneca County, State of

New York, by the elders of this Church, June 9th 1830. According to the Church Articles and Covenants.” The pattern or format of the meeting was rigorously consistent with the instructions in the *Articles and Covenants*, which were formally adopted at the conference. Joseph Smith played a leading role, as did Oliver Cowdery, both of whom stood at the head of the Church as first and second elders. But the only duty acknowledged was Cowdery’s, who was to “keep the Church record and Conference minutes until the next conference.”⁷³ An adjustment to this order occurred at the September 26, 1830, conference. Two months prior to this meeting, a revelation received in July 1830 mandated that “all things shall be done by common consent in the Church.”⁷⁴

A subsequent revelation received on behalf of Oliver Cowdery responded to issues raised by Cowdery’s questioning of Joseph Smith’s wording of a passage in the *Articles and Covenants*, and Hiram Page’s purported receipt of revelations for the Church. It explicitly asserted that “no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses.” It further stipulated that Cowdery “not leave this place until after the Conference” and that “my servent Joseph shall be appointed to rule the Conference by the voice of it.”⁷⁵ The conference record reads, “Minutes of the second Conference held by the Elders of this Church according to adjournment. . . . Br. Joseph Smith jr. appointed leader of the Conference by vote. Brother Joseph Smith jr. was appointed by the voice of the Conference to receive and write Revelations & Commandments for this Church.”⁷⁶ By these resolutions the conference both acknowledged and ratified the import of the revelations which preceded it.

Though the September conference had further defined and refined Church governance, it did not modify the essential practice of conducting important Church business at such gatherings. At the same time, Joseph Smith’s role in these sessions was more clearly established. He would provide the Church with revealed knowledge and counsel while standing at its head and holding the keys of the mysteries of the revelations. Yet it remained for the conference of elders as a body to “do Church business, whatsoever is necessary, &c.”

The following year, in October 1831, Joseph Smith raised concerns regarding the elders’ understanding of the purpose and potential of Church conferences. At a preliminary meeting on October 11, he echoed instructions from the *Articles and Covenants* and promised to instruct the elders regarding the “ancient manner of conducting meetings as they were led by the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁷ The subsequent “general Conference” held at the Town of Orange, Cuyahoga County, Ohio on October 25 began with exhortations by Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith concerning the need for unity, faith, and reliance on God. Rigdon observed: “When God works all may know it, for he always answers the prayers of the Savior for he makes his children one, for he by his

Holy Spirit binds their hearts from earth to heaven. . . . God always bears testimony by his presence in counsel to his Elders when they assemble in perfect faith and humble themselves before the Lord and their will being swallowed up in the will of God.” Joseph Smith added: “It is the privilege of every Elder to Speak of the things of God &c, And could we all come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith the vail might as well be rent to day as next week or any other time.”⁸

The tenor of Sidney Rigdon’s and Joseph Smith’s remarks, especially when considered in light of the October 11, 1831, conference, apparently bore immediate fruit, elevating the elders’ understanding of their authority and access to the “mind and will of God.” On November 1, 1831, at a conference held in Hiram, Ohio, “Oliver Cowdery made a request desiring the mind of the Lord through this conference of Elders to know how many copies of the Book of commandments it was the will of the Lord should be published in the first edition.”⁹ That same day a revelation to Joseph Smith for Orson Hyde and others commenced: “The mind & will of the Lord as made known by the voice of the Spirit to a confrence held November first, 1831, concerning certain Elders, who requested of the Lord to know his will.” In that revelation the instruction received at the October 25, 1831, conference was reiterated on a personal level. Hyde was specifically taught, “lo this is my ensample unto all those who are ordained unto this priesthood whose mission is appointed unto them to go forth & this is the ensample unto them that they shall speak as they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost & whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be Scripture shall be the will of the Lord shall be the mind of the Lord shall be the word of the Lord shall be the voice of the Lord & the power of God unto Salvation.”¹⁰

At a “Special Conference” held on November 8, 1831, Sidney Rigdon raised the issue of “errors or mistakes which are in commandments and revelations.” Significantly, the minutes of the meeting record how this issue was addressed by noting: “Resolved by this conference that Br Joseph Smith Jr correct these errors or mistakes which he may discover.” Further, it was “Resolved by this conference that br Oliver Cowdery shall [copy correct and select] all the writings which go forth to the world.”¹¹ In this instance, the conference, through the passing of resolutions, gave explicit direction to the Church’s first and second elders, and they willingly complied. This example illuminates the role Joseph Smith intended conferences and councils to play in the affairs of the early Church and the degree to which he and Oliver Cowdery sustained the principle of Church governance through such means.

Language such as “the mind and will of the Lord” and “resolved by this conference” was repeated over the ensuing months in the record of subsequent meetings as copied into Minute Book 2. It reflected a refinement in the early

Saints' understanding of the symbiotic relationship between revelation and administration, between the authority of Joseph Smith and the authority of the elders of the Church meeting in conference. Joseph Smith stood like Moses at the head of the priesthood and the Church—prophet, seer, and revelator. The elders, when they met in conference per the *Articles and Covenants*, stood charged to “do church business, whatsoever is necessary &c” as guided by the Spirit. Melded together in a mutually supportive bond and collaboration, Joseph Smith and the elders in conference constituted the governing council of the Church. Moreover, conferences and councils were not to just conduct “Church business” in some conventional administrative sense, they were to come together to learn the mind and will of the Lord and implement it. Joseph Smith was to provide revelations, commandments, and inspired direction to the Church, while conferences and councils were to direct its ecclesiastical and temporal activities as guided by the Holy Ghost.

At the very time these refinements in the operation of Church conferences became the practice, additional elements and dimensions were added to the Church's organizational structure. Though the authority and office referred to as the “high priesthood” was introduced at a conference held in Geauga County, Ohio, in June 1831, it was not until a revelation received on November 11, 1831, that it took on specific connotations in regard to Church governance. That revelation begins: “To the Church of Christ in the Land of Zion in addition to the Church Laws respecting Church business.” The various offices in the Church were reviewed and the need for presiding officers identified. Much of the revelation addressed the high priesthood, establishing its preeminence in the Church. The phrasing could not be plainer: “Then cometh the high Priesthood, which is the greatest of all.” A new office was mandated to preside over this order of the priesthood and over the Church as a whole: “Wherefore it must needs be that one be appointed of the high Priest hood to preside over the Priesthood; & he shall be called President of the high Priest hood of the Church; or in other words the Presiding high Priest over the high priesthood of the Church; from the same cometh the administring of ordinances & blessings upon the church.” The president's ultimate authority, however, did not derive just from presiding over the high priests, per se; rather, it also flowed from a broader administrative and judicial responsibility. After reiterating that the office of bishop was not equal to that of president of the high priesthood, the revelation specifies that “the most important business of the church, & the most difficult cases of the church, . . . shall be handed over, & carried up unto the court of the church before the president of the high Priesthood; & the president of the Court of the high Priesthood shall have power to call other high priests, even twelve to assist as counselors; & thus the president of the high priesthood & his councillors, shall have power to decide upon testimony,

according to the laws of the church; . . . for this is the highest court of the church of God & final desision upon controvers[i]es, there is not any persons belonging to the church who is exempt from this court of the church.” Finally, Joseph Smith’s standing and authority is restated once more by way of an allusion to Moses: “And again the duty of the President of the office of the high Priesthood is to preside over the whole [Church] and to be like unto Moses. Behold here is wisdom yea to be a seer a revelator a translator and a prophet having all the gifts of God.”¹²

Joseph Smith was sustained and ordained to the office of president of the high priesthood of the Church in a conference at Amherst, Ohio, on January 25, 1832. On March 8, 1832, he selected Jesse Gause and Sidney Rigdon “to be my counsellors of the ministry of the presidency of the high Priesthood.”¹³ The authority to call such counselors was reaffirmed in a revelation regarding the role of the bishops: “unto the office of the presidency of the high Priesthood I have given authority to preside with the assistance of his counsellors over all the Concerns of the church.”¹⁴

The Missouri high priests acknowledged Joseph Smith as president of the high priesthood on April 26, 1832, during a series of council meetings held there that formally established the Literary and United Firms.¹⁵ In the minutes for these meetings the terms *council* and *conference* were referenced, and Joseph Smith was identified at one point as “President of Conference & also of the High priesthood.” A number of resolutions and orders were issued in the name of the “council.” Though the practice of “conferences/councils” directing the business of the Church was apparently adhered to, those who held the office of high priest expressly took the lead.

On July 3, 1832, the leadership in Missouri (Zion) endorsed the November 11, 1831, revelation, resolving “that the mode and manner of regulating the Church of Christ Take effect from this time, according to a Revelation received in Hiram Portage County Ohio Nov 11, 1831.”¹⁶ In subsequent meetings leaders reorganized the Church in Missouri into branches and called presiding officers over the elders and high priests.

Eventually, at a conference of high priests in Zion, a presiding council was organized. On March 26, 1833, it was determined that “seven High Priests, who were sent from Kirtland to build up Zion, viz.—Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, John Whitmer, Algernon Sidney Gilbert, Bishop Partridge, and his two counselors—should stand at the head of affairs relating to the Church, in that section of the Lord’s vineyard.”¹⁷ Later that year, on September 11, according to further minutes of a council of high priests on that date, Edward Partridge was “acknowledged to be at the head of the Church of Zion at present.”¹⁸ Partridge was the first bishop called in the Church and was apparently recognized as the ranking or presiding officer in Zion, in contrast to

Joseph Smith, who had been previously sustained president of the high priesthood of the Church.

During the same period, Minute Book 1 records a succession of conferences and councils of high priests at Kirtland, Ohio, beginning December 5, 1832, and continuing until the organization of the high council of the Church of Christ, as it was initially styled, in February 1834. The Kirtland high priest conferences and councils were witness to several seminal events in early Church history. Among these were the receipt of the “Olive Leaf” revelation in late December 1832 and early January 1833 (D&C Section 88); the inauguration of the School of the Prophets on January 22–23, 1833; the ordination of Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams to the presidency of the high priesthood, “to be equal in holding the Keys of the Kingdom with Brother Joseph Smith Jr.,” on March 18, 1833; the purchasing of the French Farm where the Kirtland “House of the Lord” was to be constructed; Doctor Philastus Hurlbut’s disciplinary councils; revelations concerning the “House of the Lord” and its design; information concerning the plat of Zion and Kirtland; and the establishment of F. G. Williams & Co.¹⁹

It is in the light of the unfolding of principles and practices of Church government received and implemented over a four-year period that these assemblies are best understood. These meetings were, in effect, president’s councils, presided over by the president of the high priesthood of the Church. They reflect a culmination of the early Saints’ efforts to respond to the directives initially received and ratified in the *Articles and Covenants* in 1830 and subsequently amplified in October and November 1831. They further demonstrate that the institutional Church was governed through conferences/councils founded on the principles of divine guidance and common consent. Though Joseph Smith stood at the head of the Church, he envisioned, endorsed, and participated in a conference/council system of Church government.

Even though much had been accomplished in 1833 through these president’s council meetings, Joseph Smith was still concerned about their form and structure, and about the conduct he observed when priesthood leaders met. All was not yet according to the ancient order. At a council meeting held in his home on February 12, 1834, Joseph Smith hearkened back to the instruction given in October 1831, observing, “I shall now endeavor to set forth before this council, the dignity of the office which has been conferred upon me by the ministering of the Angel of God, by his own will and by the voice of this Church. I have never set before any council in all the order in which a Council ought to be conducted, which, perhaps, has deprived the Council of some, or many blessings.” He then proceeded to explain the ancient order for the conducting councils. He related that “in ancient days, councils were conducted with such strict propriety, that no one was allowed to whisper, be

weary, leave the room, or get uneasy in the least, until the voice of the Lord, by revelation, or by the voice of the council by the Spirit was obtained; which has not been observed in this Church to the present.”²⁰ In this respect, his discourse to the gathered high priests and elders further amplified and elaborated his October 25, 1831, instructions.

Five days later, a conference of high priests assembled, again at Joseph Smith’s house. On this occasion the minutes state that “they proceeded to organize the President’s Church Council, consisting of twelve High Priests, and this according to the law of God.”²¹ Thus, what would subsequently be known as the first “High Council of the Church of Christ” was organized. It consisted of “twelve high priests, and one, or three presidents, as the case may require, . . . appointed by revelation, for the purpose of settling important difficulties which might arise in the Church.” With the organizing of a formal high council, a new phase in Church governance commenced. As part of his instruction Joseph Smith explained that “he would show the order of councils in ancient days as shown to him by vision.” He also observed that this counsel would be a model for the high priests “abroad” to follow, though they should be careful to send a copy of their actions to the seat of church government, that is, to the council presided over by the president of the high priesthood of the Church. Such councils abroad were also authorized to appoint a president to preside over their meetings. The process for conducting deliberations was explained to the twelve counselors selected to serve on the president’s Church council. Then, as the minutes relate, “It was then voted by all present that they desired to come under the present order of things which they all considered to be the will of God.” And it was also voted “by all present that Bro. Joseph should make all necessary corrections by the Spirit of inspiration hereafter.”²² The meeting then adjourned until February 19.

By the time the corrected minutes were presented for consideration and ratification, Joseph Smith had significantly revised them. As noted on February 19, “he had labored the day before with all the strength and wisdom that he had given him in making the corrections necessary in the last council minutes.”²³ The “president’s church council” was restyled the “High Council of the Church of Christ.” The purpose of the council was to settle “important difficulties which might arise in the Church, which could not be settled by the Church, or the Bishop’s council to the satisfaction of the parties,” language that mirrored the November 11, 1831, revelation regarding the office of president of the high priesthood of the Church. Another provision provided for the selection of the president of the high council of the Church. It explicitly affirmed that Joseph Smith was to serve in that office. As expressed in the revised minutes, “The president of the Church, who is also the president of the Council, is appointed by the voice of the Saviour and acknowledged in his

administration by the voice of the Church, and it is according to the dignity of his office that he should preside over the High Council of the Church.” It was again specified that high priests abroad who organized a council after this model were to report their proceedings to “the High Council at the seat of government of the Church,” which at that time was wherever Joseph Smith resided. If any party was dissatisfied with the results of such a council they could appeal to the high council “at the seat of the general Church government” of the Church for a rehearing. In addition, “the President or Presidents at the seat of general Church government shall have power to determine whether any such case . . . is justly entitled to a rehearing.” After some further minor revisions, the minutes were presented to the council by Joseph Smith. According to the record of the meeting, “The questions were asked whether the present Council acknowledged the same, and receive them for a form or constitution of the High Council of the Church of Christ hereafter. The Document was received by the unanimous voice of the Council.” These provisions made it clear that the high council at the seat of Church government was a presiding high council for the Church, or to use earlier terminology, the president of the high priesthood of the Church’s court or council.²⁴ To reiterate, during the Kirtland period, the high council of the Church at Kirtland was also the high council of the Church itself when functioning as the president’s Church court or council. By implication, the stake high council wherever Joseph Smith resided, became, by default, the president’s council.

This became the practice during much of Joseph Smith’s lifetime. The intention, of course, was for Joseph Smith to reside in Zion and thus make the high council there the presiding high council for the Church. This aim was later reflected in language incorporated into Section III of the 1835 D&C (currently D&C Section 107), which adopted much of the November 11, 1831, revelation regarding the president of the high priesthood of the Church.

Once organized, the high council of the Church of Christ met frequently to conduct disciplinary councils and other Church business as directed. On February 24, 1834, Joseph Smith assembled the council at his home to receive the report of Lyman Wight and Parley Pratt who had just arrived from Zion. It was at this gathering that the initial plans for Zion’s Camp emerged. According to the minutes for this occasion, “Bro. Joseph . . . arose and said that he was going to Zion to assist in redeeming it. He then called for the voice of the council to his going, which was given without dissenting vote.”²⁵

After the arrival of Zion’s Camp in Missouri in June 1834, the Missouri high priests met together. The minutes from Minute Book 2 note that on July 3, 1834, “The High Priests of Zion assembled for the purpose of organizing a general Council of High Priests, agreeable to the revelation for the purpose of settling important business that might come before them which could

not be settled by the Bishop and his council. Proceeded to make choice of President.”²⁶ These actions reflect both the constitution of the high council as ratified on February 19 in Kirtland, and the November 11, 1831, revelation.

There remains some question whether Joseph Smith was present in the meeting on that date. The minutes do not list him specifically. Only the three presidents appointed, David Whitmer, William W. Phelps, and John Whitmer, along with twelve high priests as counselors and Frederick G. Williams as clerk, are identified. He may have been present, and some later recollections place him there, though they may simply reflect a conflation of events from July 3–7.²⁷ In any event, the actions taken were fully consistent with the provisions of the constitution of the high council regarding high priests abroad—that is, outside the boundaries of the seat of Church government or an organized stake. At that moment, Kirtland was technically the seat of Church government and the only organized stake, *per se*. So in that sense, it is something of a moot point whether Joseph Smith was physically present or not.

However, matters are quite different on July 7, 1834. At that assembly of high priests, the members were sustained, and Joseph Smith ordained the three presidents and twelve counselors appointed on July 3. Interestingly, after that high council was organized and business conducted, another action was taken by those present. As the minutes relate, “High Priests, Elders, Priests, Teachers, Deacons & members covenanted with uplifted hands to heaven that they would uphold Brother David Whitmer as President, head and leader in Zion (in the absence of br. Joseph Smith jr.) & John Whitmer & W. W. Phelps as assistant Presidents and Counselors.”²⁸ Thus it seems that David and John Whitmer with W. W. Phelps were first sustained and ordained as presidents of the high council at Zion, and then as presidents of the Church in Zion. In a sense, this structure paralleled locally that of the Church in general, with Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams as presidents of the high priesthood of the Church and also as presidents of the high council of the Church.

At the close of this period of Church growth and institutional development, Joseph Smith offered two observations which summed up the early Church’s accomplishments in regard to governance by conference and council. On February 19, following the ratification of the constitution of the high council of the Church of Christ, he noted with satisfaction that “the Council was organized according to the ancient order, and also according to the mind of the Lord.”²⁹ Subsequently, on July 7, 1834, when Joseph Smith ordained the presidency and counselors of the high council in Zion, he informed them that “if he should now be taken away . . . he had accomplished the great work which the Lord had laid before him, . . . and that he now had done his duty

in organizing the High Council, through which Council the will of the Lord might be known.”³⁰

Notes

1. *Painesville Telegraph* (Painesville, OH), April 19, 1831, attributed to Martin Harris.
2. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 56, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; facsimile copy in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert C. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 83; currently D&C 20:61-62. See also *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832): 1–2.
3. Minute Book 2 (Far West Record), June 9, 1831, 1, Church History Library.
4. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 34; see also Jensen, et al., *Revelations and Translations*, 39, currently D&C 26:2.
5. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 40–41; see also Jensen, et al., *Revelations and Translations*, 51, 53; currently D&C 28:2, 10.
6. Minute Book 2, September 26, 1830, 2.
7. Minute Book 2, October 11, 1831, 8–9.
8. Minute Book 2, October 25, 1831, 10–14.
9. Minute Book 2, November 1, 1831, 15–16.
10. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 113; see also Jensen, et al., *Revelations and Translations*, 199; currently D&C 68:2–3.
11. Minute Book 2, November 8, 1831, 16–17.
12. Book of Commandments and Revelations, 122–23; see also Jensen, et al., *Revelations and Translations*, 217, 219; currently D&C 107:59, 64–67, 78–81.
13. Kirtland Revelation Book, 10–11, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; facsimile copy in Jensen, et al., *Revelations and Translations*, 433, 435. In 1833, Jesse Gause was replaced by Frederick G. Williams after Gause was excommunicated on December 3, 1832.
14. Revelation, March 10, 1832, “Duties of Bishops &c to Joseph and Sidney March 1832,” Newel K. Whitney Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
15. Minute Book 2, April 26–30, 1832, 24–26.
16. Minute Book 2, July 3, 1832, 28.
17. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1971), 1: 335–36.
18. Minute Book 2, September 11, 1833, 36–37.
19. See specific dates in Minute Book 1 (Kirtland Council Minute Book), Church History Library.
20. Minute Book 1, February 12, 1834, 27–29.
21. Minute Book 1, February 17, 1834, 29–31.
22. Minute Book 1, revised minutes, February 17, 1834, 32–35.
23. Minute Book 1, February 19, 1834, 36–39.
24. Minute Book 1, revised minutes, February 17, 1834, 32–35.

25. Minute Book 1, February 24, 1834, 41–42.

26. Minute Book 2, July 3, 1834, 43.

27. Richard Lloyd Anderson finds George A. Smith's later recollection of Joseph Smith being in attendance on July 3, 1834, convincing. He also credits accounts by Wilford Woodruff, Levi Jackman, and Newel Knight which suggest Joseph Smith was present on that occasion as well. However, the copy of the minutes of the meeting available in Minute Book 2 do not acknowledge Joseph Smith's presence, leaving open the possibility that later recollections may be in error or conflated.

28. Minute Book 2, July 7, 1834, 43–45.

29. Minute Book 1, February 19, 1834, 37.

30. Minute Book 2, July 7, 1834, 43–45.