



Type: Magazine Article

Did the Nephites Have a Church Organization Before the Days of Alma?

Author(s): Joseph Fielding Smith

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 62, No. 8 (August 1959)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 584–585

Abstract: This article asserts that the Nephites did indeed have a church organization before the days of Alma, and that Lehi, King Benjamin, and King Mosiah each had a church organization. Whenever and wherever there were gospel ordinances administered by a minister there was a church organization.

DID THE NEPHITES HAVE A CHURCH ORGANIZATION

Question:

"In our lesson this week we came upon the question which follows: 'Are we necessarily obliged to conclude that the Nephites had no church organization before Alma's time?' See Mosiah 18:17-18 and 23:16-17."

Answer:

To get this matter clearly before us let us quote the passage in question:

"And they were called the church of God, or the church of Christ, from that time forward. And it came to pass that whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God was added to his church.

"And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests; even one priest to every fifty of their number did he ordain to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." (Mosiah 18:17-18.)

"And now, Alma was their high priest, he being the founder of their church.

"And it came to pass that none received authority to preach or to teach except it were by him from God. Therefore he consecrated all their priests and all their teachers; and none were consecrated except they were just men." (*Ibid.*, 23:16-19.)

There is always danger in isolating passages from their context; or in failing to take into account all the factors of the historical setting. It should be remembered that Alma had been one of the priests of King Noah in the land of Lehi-Nephi. It should also be taken into consideration that the colony in that land separated themselves from the main body of the Church in Zarahemla. In the days of Amaleki, who kept the Nephite record, a company of Nephites under Zeniff desired to occupy the land which was first settled by the Nephites,¹ and entered into an agreement with the Lamanites to possess that land. There they established an independent kingdom which they possessed for many years, however in constant war and bondage to the Lamanites. In

course of time, under King Noah, they became very wicked. It was at this time that the prophet Abinadi was murdered, and Alma, having accepted the teachings of Abinadi, gathered around him all who were willing to keep the commandments of the Lord, and doing so he brought upon himself and his followers the wrath of the wicked king, and they had to flee from their homes into the wilderness, with the intention of making their way back to the land of Zarahemla. The story of their flight, suffering, and blessings from the hand of the Lord were recorded in the book of Mosiah. While in the wilderness Alma organized his group of believers into a branch of the church and is spoken of as their founder. The main body of the Nephites, under the second King Mosiah, was still intact in the land of Zarahemla. The reference stating that Alma was the founder of their church has reference only to the refugees who were fleeing from the land of the Nephites' first inheritance. In course of time they found their way back to the main body of the Church and Alma was consecrated as the high priest over the church in all of the lands occupied by the Nephites. When we have the complete picture before us, it is plain to see that Alma did a great service in rescuing and organizing the refugees who came with him out of the land of Lehi-Nephi.

The colony lead by Lehi out of Jerusalem, was part of the Church of Jesus Christ. From the day of Adam to the present day, whenever the people obeyed the commandments of the Lord, there was the Church, and people came into it by obeying the same ordinances which are practised today. The missionary who went to a foreign land and by divine authority baptized a man, that man became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. That was true in the days of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist. It does not require a complete organization consisting of a branch, ward, and stake to constitute the Church of Jesus Christ. Wherever a person is legally baptized, there is the Church, or by right of that baptism, he becomes a member of it. The kingdom of God and the Church are synonymous terms. The Prophet

¹Omni 27-30. Mosiah 9.

BEFORE THE DAYS OF ALMA?

Joseph Smith has made this clear in the following words:

"Some say the kingdom of God was not set up on the earth until the day of Pentecost, and that John [the Baptist] did not preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; but I say, in the name of the Lord, that the kingdom of God was set up on the earth from the days of Adam to the present time. Whenever there has been a righteous man on earth unto whom God revealed his word and gave power and authority to administer in his name, and where there is a priest of God—a minister who has power and authority from God to administer in the ordinances of the gospel and officiate in the priesthood of God, there is the kingdom of God; and, in consequence of rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ and the prophets whom God hath sent, the judgments of God have rested upon people, cities, and nations, in various ages of the world, which was the case with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, that were destroyed for rejecting the prophets."²

From the Book of Mormon we learn that the ordinance of baptism for the remission of sins was practised by the Nephites from the beginning. While confirmation is not stated, nevertheless the members were confirmed, for there is an abundance of evidence of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Jacob has given us a most definite statement in the following words:

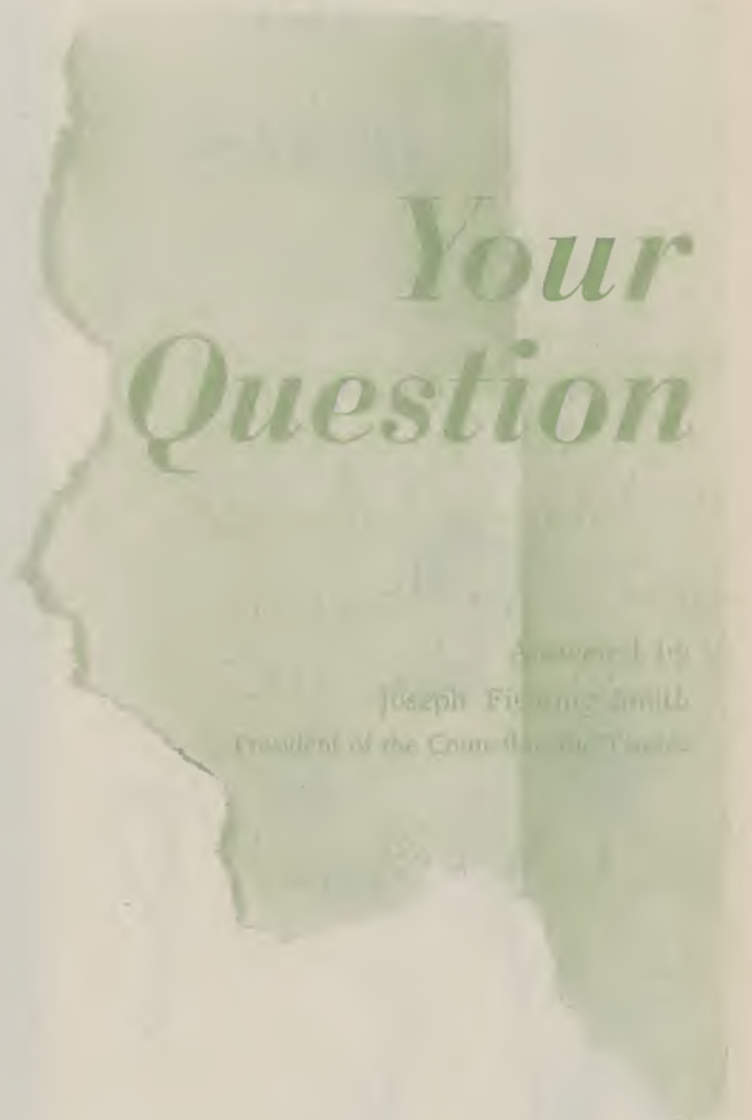
"And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.

"And if they will not repent and believe in his name, and be baptized in his name, and endure to the end, they must be damned; for the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has spoken it."³

If they were baptized and had the gift of the Holy Ghost in the days of Lehi, then they had a church organization, which endured all through the Nephite history, notwithstanding the constant apostasies that occurred among them.

²*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 271.

³2 Nephi 9:23-24.



*Your
Question*

Answered by
Joseph F. Smith
President of the Church of the Latter-day Saints