

THE OATH AND COVENANT OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Ensign Magazine

What wonders God hath wrought in the restoration of his Holy Priesthood in this our day!

We stand in awe; we ponder what the Lord has given us; and we marvel at the glory and wonder of it all.

Angelic ministrants from the courts of glory; exalted beings from heaven above; holy men—our brethren and fellow servants from days long dead—have ministered again to mortal men. From them we have received priesthoods, keys, apostleship, and offices as of old.

That holy endowment of heavenly power which is after the order of Melchizedek; which is after the order of Enoch; which is after the order of the Son of God himself—the Melchizedek Priesthood with all of its keys and powers, all of its rights and prerogatives, all of its saving strengths and graces—has been placed again in mortal hands.

That Holy Priesthood, which administers the gospel and governs the Church; which holds the right of presidency, and has power and authority over all offices in the Church in all ages of the world, to administer in spiritual things; which continueth in the Church of God in all generations—is once again on earth in all its glory, power, and perfection.

That God-given power which saved Adam and Enoch and Noah; which has been given of God to holy men in all ages, and is without beginning of days or end of years; which Melchizedek conferred upon Abraham; and which the Lord Jehovah then decreed should be offered, as of right, to all of the natural seed of the Father of the Faithful—is now possessed by the gathered remnant of that seed.

That divine and heaven-born power by which the worlds were made; by which mortal men can be sealed up unto eternal life and become as their Maker; by which they can see the face of God, even the Father, and live—is now resident in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

That supreme spiritual power which holds the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the Church; whose worthy recipients have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; of having the heavens opened unto them; of communing with the general assembly and church of the Firstborn; and of enjoying the presence of God the Father, and Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant—that supreme priestly power is now vested in the latter-day servants of Him whose all things are.

Once again, to those who abide in the covenant of the priesthood, the Eternal Father is swearing with an oath that all those who become his sons by adoption (even as it was

with his Natural Son) shall exercise the power of God in this life and shall be priests forever after the order of Melchizedek.

And so again we say—glory of glories and miracle of miracles—what wonders hath the Great God wrought! How unspeakably great it is that there are now legal administrators among men who can stand in the place and stead of the Lord Jesus Christ in administering life and salvation to all who will believe and obey!

Ought not all men, from one end of heaven to the other, look upon the wonders of these latter-days, ponder the truths of heaven in their hearts, and come and partake of the priestly blessings now offered to all men of every race and kindred?

As we study, pray, and ponder about the priesthood and its blessings, there are some basic verities which must be accepted and followed. We shall now make brief reference to some of these.

There are two accepted and approved definitions of priesthood:

1. As pertaining to exalted beings in the eternal worlds; as pertaining to gods and angels; and viewed from an eternal perspective—priesthood is the power of God. It is the power by which the worlds were made. By it all things are: this earth, the sidereal heavens, the very universe of which we are a part. It is the power by which God governs all things—by which his children become mortal; by which they die and rise again in immortality; by which all his works are made, upheld, and preserved.
2. As pertaining to us men on earth, who are the servants and agents and representatives of the Lord in heaven—priesthood is the power and authority of God, delegated to man on earth, to act in all things for the salvation of man. It is that delegation of power from on high which lets us stand in the place and stead of the Son of God in doing for men all that must be done to make them joint-heirs with him. The gospel is preached, its ordinances are performed, and (as occasion requires) miracles are wrought, the elements are controlled, and nations are governed—all by the power of the priesthood.

Priesthood keys are the right of presidency. They are the powers and prerogatives to govern the manner in which others Use their priesthood. All who hold positions of presidency are given the keys of that labor for the time and season of their appointment. There is only one man on earth at a time—the President of the Church—who can exercise all the keys in their fulness. Such is inherent in the very nature of the keys themselves; there cannot be two equal heads, and we repeat, keys are the right of presidency.

There are in the Church two priesthoods: the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God, called by us the Melchizedek Priesthood, lest we use too frequently and without requisite reverence the name of Him whose priesthood it is, and the Aaronic (or Levitical) Priesthood, named for Aaron (and for the tribe of Levi who ministered in its ordinances anciently). The Aaronic Priesthood administers the preparatory gospel, paving the way

for the Melchizedek Priesthood which administers the fulness of the everlasting gospel. Both priesthoods are received with a covenant, but the higher priesthood is also given with an oath, the significance of which we shall set forth shortly.

Priesthood is conferred upon us; we are ordained to offices in the priesthood; and when so ordained we are given the rights, powers, gifts, and graces that appertain to the office involved. We are set apart to positions of presidency and administration. Keys go with settings apart and are conferred when a position of presidency is involved. Counselors in a presidency do not receive keys; they are not counselors to an organization but to the president who holds the keys.

Thus a man—having been called of God by the spirit of inspiration and having been sustained by the requisite congregations—is ordained a bishop (and given the rights and powers appertaining thereto), but he is set apart to preside over a particular ward (and is given the keys of presidency, which enable him to govern the ward in harmony with the policies of the Church and subject to the direction of his presiding officers). Thus also a man might be ordained an apostle, thereby gaining that office in the Melchizedek Priesthood, but he would receive the keys of the kingdom only when he is set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve. Keys, we repeat, are conferred in a setting apart and not in an ordination.

In our dispensation the Aaronic Priesthood was conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery on the 15th of May 1829. They were also given the keys which authorized them to use that priesthood for all of the purposes for which its powers can be used.

Shortly thereafter Peter, James, and John conferred upon these same mortals the Melchizedek Priesthood, including as it does the Holy Apostleship; they were also then given the keys of the kingdom of God and of the dispensation of the fulness of times.

At various times other holy messengers—Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Moses, Elijah, Elias, and divers angels—brought back their keys, powers, and authorities. All of these keys were conferred by the Prophet Joseph Smith upon each member of the Council of the Twelve; all subsequent members of that quorum have received a like endowment, which means that all such apostles are ordained and empowered to serve as the President of the Church, if and when any one of them becomes the senior apostle of God on earth. Such is the system the Lord has given us to govern succession in the Presidency, and there is no greater authority that man can hold on earth than that of the Holy Apostleship,

But it is not being an apostle or even the President of the Church that saves and exalts a man. It is instead the receipt of the Holy Priesthood, conformity to the ordinances of the house of the Lord, and keeping the commandments of God. It is not position or place in the Church that guarantees an eternal reward but rather walking in obedience to the commandments and living by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God.

In the eternal sense all holders of the higher priesthood are equal; all are entitled to all of the blessings of the Holy Order; the priesthood does not come in portions, every elder

receives it all and thus ranks equally before the Lord with the apostles and prophets. Some brethren have greater talents or more administrative ability, but all hold the same priesthood, make the same covenant with reference thereto, enter into the same ordinances, and have the same hope of eternal life by obedience to the same laws.

Paul spends a large part of the book of Hebrews to set forth the terms and conditions of the oath and covenant of the priesthood. This is the source of our basic scriptural knowledge of the glorious concepts here involved. Reference is also made to this matter in Section 84 in the Doctrine and Covenants. In this latter-day revelation the Lord tells what a man must do to keep the covenant involved and makes passing reference that the reward for so doing will be assured because of the oath sworn by Deity in such cases—all of which brings us back to the recitations in Hebrews.

A covenant is a contract; at least two parties must be involved. In the case of gospel covenants the contractual relations entered into are between God and man. Those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood make this covenant:

1. I covenant to receive the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, to receive them for what they are, to accept them as the power of God delegated to me, and to use them, as the Lord's agent, for and on his behalf.
2. I covenant to magnify my callings in the priesthood by doing the work incident to whatever office I hold.
3. I covenant to keep the commandments of God; to walk in truth and light all my days; to live by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God; to endure in faith unto the end of my days.

On his part, the Lord in turn promises those who do these things that in this life they shall have great power; they shall be sanctified by the Spirit and renewed in their bodies; and that in eternity they shall have place in his Father's kingdom, where all that the Father hath shall be given unto them. This is the promise of eternal life, of exaltation, of godhood. There is no greater promise that could be received.

Because one of the stipulations on our part is that we must magnify our callings in the priesthood it becomes important beyond expression to learn what these callings are and how we magnify them.

There seems to be some confusion in the Church on this point, and it is reported that many hours have been spent in quorum meetings and gospel doctrine classes discussing whether there are five or six offices in the Melchizedek Priesthood, and whether the President of the Church is ordained or set apart to his high and holy calling.

As it happens there are at least three major publications by members of the Council of the Twelve which say there are five offices in the Melchizedek Priesthood. These are *The*

Articles of Faith, by Elder James E. Talmage, *Doctrines of Salvation*, by President Joseph Fielding Smith, and *Mormon Doctrine*, by the author of this article. There are also some statements in priesthood lessons which specify that there are six offices. A few words of explanation may be helpful in clarifying the thinking of all concerned. Before making them it should be emphasized that all of the Lord's servants should have as their sole objective, in cases like this, to find out what the true doctrine is and not to sustain a preconceived notion or an expressed opinion. The doctrine is the Lord's; it comes from him; and our interest and concern should be to find out what he has said about any given subject and to interpret correctly the true meaning and intent of his words.

In the true Church brethren are called to offices by the spirit of inspiration resting upon those whose privilege it is to make the call. Hence we speak of callings and of offices, meaning the positions of responsibility in the Lord's work in which brethren are appointed to labor. Offices and callings are thus one and the same thing. The office of an elder is the same thing as the calling of an elder.

For purposes of clarifying our thinking and organizing the doctrinal concepts in our minds we speak of various kinds and types of callings. There are ordained callings on the one hand, which include the offices in the priesthood to which we are ordained and which remain with us forever—in this life and in the next—unless we lose them by sin and the resultant excommunication which comes because of it. There are also administrative callings or set apart callings in which brethren usually serve for a time and a season only and which do not necessarily endure and continue beyond the veil and in the realms ahead.

Of greatest concern to the greatest number of people are the ordained callings of elder, seventy, and high priest. Brethren holding these callings belong to quorums where they learn their duties so as to be able to magnify their callings. To magnify a calling is to do the work assigned so that the office will be held up as one of divine dignity and honorable renown. The other ordained offices in the higher priesthood are those of patriarch and of apostle. Patriarchs have no quorums of their own but apostles do. The ordained offices in the Aaronic Priesthood are deacon, teacher, priest, and bishop.

Brethren can hold and serve in more than one office at a time as is the case with patriarchs who are also high priests, and bishops who are also high priests, and members of the First Quorum of Seventy who are both high priests and seventies. The office of apostle embraces and includes all other offices. As pertaining to eternity, exalted brethren will be ordained kings and priests so as to hold positions of dominion and governance forever.

As President Joseph F. Smith so persuasively taught, the priesthood is greater than any of its offices; no office adds any power, dignity, or authority to the priesthood; and all offices derive their rights, powers, and authorities from the priesthood. Every holder of the higher priesthood, no matter what his office may be, makes the covenant of

exaltation. An elder holds as much priesthood as an apostle, or as the President of the Church, and all three stand equally before the Lord in their pursuit of eternal life.

Any office of presidency or of administration which comes by assignment or by setting apart is a set apart or an administrative calling as distinguished from an ordained calling. These callings to which brethren are not ordained, as we now use language, are usually temporary in nature and do not endure in eternity. They include positions of presidency in auxiliaries and quorums, and in wards and stakes, and such positions of administration as on high councils. Their number is limitless and may vary from time to time to meet the needs and circumstances of the times.

This brings us to the question of whether a President of the Church is ordained or set apart, and whether he alone or he and his counselors hold the ordained office of Presiding High Priest. In this connection, in a revelation given March 28, 1835, it is said: “Of necessity there are presidents, or presiding officers growing out of, or appointed of or from among those who are ordained to the several offices in these two priesthoods.”

In this setting—speaking of “those” “who are” already “ordained” to priesthood offices, and who are then called to positions of presidency—the revelation says: “Of the Melchizedek Priesthood, three Presiding High Priests, chosen by the body, appointed and ordained to that office, and upheld by the confidence, faith, and prayer of the church, form a quorum of the Presidency of the Church.” (D&C 107:21-22.)

Two questions arise from these revealed words: (1) What is meant by the designation “Presiding High Priests”; that is to say, is the office of Presiding High Priest a separate ordained office from the office of high priest; and (2) What is meant by “ordained to that office”?

With reference to the designation “Presiding High Priests,” it should be noted that at a later date (January 19, 1841), the Lord said: “I give unto you my servant Joseph [meaning the Prophet] to be a presiding elder over my church.” (D&C 124:125.) No one, as far as we know, has ever contended that this means that there is an ordained office of elder and an ordained office of presiding elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood. The same reasoning should apply to the terms high priest and presiding high priest.

Also, with reference to these designations, there is no record of anyone in this dispensation ever having been ordained a presiding high priest. The early church presidents were neither ordained nor set apart; they were sustained and served. By the time of President Joseph F. Smith it was determined that the President of the Church should be set apart which was done in his case by his brother, John Smith, the then presiding patriarch.

The more recent presidents have been set apart and ordained. The performance of these ordinances, however, did not add any keys, powers, or authorities to those already possessed by the newly chosen president. Every member of the Council of the Twelve is given all of the keys and powers of the priesthood; in effect he is ordained to be the

President of the Church, although he does not so serve unless he becomes the senior apostle of God on earth as President Spencer W. Kimball now is. Thus when President Joseph Fielding Smith set President David O. McKay apart as President of the Church, he did not confer upon him the keys of the kingdom; rather, he confirmed upon him the keys, powers, and authorities previously received. President Spencer W. Kimball was ordained and set apart as President by President Ezra Taft Benson. Then President Kimball set apart each of his counselors.

With reference to members of the First Presidency being ordained—in addition to the above comments—we should take note that the word ordain is used in a much broader sense in the revelations than we in practice generally apply to it today. For instance, our revelation calls for us to ordain “every president of the high priesthood (or presiding elder), bishop, high councilor, and high priest.” (D&C 20:67.) Within the meaning of this statement some of our presidents, as we have seen, have been “ordained” without any Ordinance at all, and brethren are ordained to be high councilors, although we in fact always set high councilors apart and never use the word ordain.

All of this, we suppose, is interesting and, perhaps, helpful in understanding what is involved in priesthood callings and ordinations. The important determination which brethren should make, however, is to magnify whatever calling is theirs, be it an ordained or a set apart calling.

As to the covenant of the priesthood, the Lord is speaking of elders, seventies, high priests, patriarchs, and apostles, although the exhortation then given applies in principle to those having callings as quorum presidents, stake presidents, and members of the First Presidency. We are all expected to magnify every calling we receive, no matter what its nature is.

It now remains for us to put the capstone on this presentation by setting forth what is involved in the oath of the priesthood. An oath is a solemn attestation, given in a holy name, which affirms with unshakable reality the truth and verity of whatever is involved. It is the most sacred and solemn language known to the tongue of man or of God. “When God made promise to Abraham,” for instance, “because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself,” assuring the Father of the Faithful that he and his seed should have eternal life and exaltation through the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. (Heb. 6:13-14; D&C 132:29-32.) This divine oath singles out, emphasizes, and shows the eternal import of the Abrahamic covenant.

Similarly, God swore to David, “with an oath, . . . that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne.” (Acts 2:29-32.) God (meaning the Father!~ also swore to David that his Son should be “a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” (Ps. 110:4.) Paul quotes this divine oath, applies it to Christ, says the priests of the Aaronic order were made “without an oath,” and concludes that the priesthood which Christ would hold would be greater than that of Aaron’s seed (Heb. 5; 6; 7; 8; and 9.)

Thus, with reference to Christ—who is the Prototype, the Exemplar, the Light and Guide of all men—the Father swore that he should be a priest forever, or in other words should hold an everlasting and eternal priesthood, or in other words should have eternal exaltation.

Now this same oath is sworn with reference to every man who follows the Prototype and receives for himself the Melchizedek Priesthood. Two passages of scripture tell us of the greatness and glory of the priesthood conferred by an oath. One of them speaks of the blessings gained in this life, the other of the glories that will be forthcoming in the life to come.

As pertaining to Melchizedek the man, the scripture says: “Having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch, It being after the order of the Son of God; which order came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God; And it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name. For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course; To put at defiance the armies of nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God; to do all things according to his will, according to his command, subdue principalities and powers; and this by the will of the Son of God which was from before the foundation of the world. And men having this faith, coming up unto this order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven.” (JST, Gen, 14:27-32.)

As pertaining to all those who receive the Melchizedek Priesthood, the revealed word is: “For this Melchizedek was ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God, which order was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life. And all those who are ordained unto this priesthood are made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually.” (JST, Heb. 7:3.)

Thus it is that our revelation says: “All they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord; For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him. And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood. Therefore, all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved.” (D&C 84:35-40.)

What more could the Lord God—who is Father to us all—do to show the importance of the Melchizedek Priesthood!

With an oath, sworn in his own name—using the most solemn language known to the tongue of any who belong to the race of divine beings—the Father of us all acclaims that his adopted sons shall be exalted with his Natural Son.

Our obligation is to keep the commandments and magnify our callings—our priesthood callings and our administratively assigned callings.

“Wherefore [meaning by way of summary and in conclusion], now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office [calling] in which he is appointed, in all diligence.

“He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand [in glory and exaltation in the celestial kingdom], and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved [by keeping the covenant of the priesthood] shall not be counted worthy to stand.” (D&C 107:99-100.)