

The Doctrine of the Priesthood and Gender Issues

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When I was 16 years old my father instructed me to learn how to perform the ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood—baptism by immersion, the administration of the sacrament, and the conferral of the Aaronic Priesthood. Although at that point, in 1975, he and I could not hold the priesthood, my father still told me to study those ordinances because, as he said, “That’s what a 16-year-old young man should learn in the Church at this age.” That began my study of the priesthood, its orders, offices, keys, ordinances, rights, etiquette, and blessings.

My father and I received the priesthood in 1978, ten days after announcement of the revelation that reinstated priesthood ordination to Latter-day Saint men with Black African ancestry. Since then I have had the honor of serving several times in priesthood leadership assignments, which made my studies become even more meaningful to me. After four decades I am still studying, but what I have learned so far have brought me a lot of enlightenment and enjoyment.

Outlining the Doctrine of the Priesthood

The Book of Mormon contains precise statements defining the main components of the doctrine of Christ—faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism by immersion, the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, and endurance in keeping the commandments of God until the end (2 Nephi 31:10-21; 3 Nephi 11:31-39). On the other hand, the term “doctrine of the priesthood” is found only once in the currently available scriptures, in an inspired letter from the Prophet Joseph Smith to the Church recorded as section 121 of the Doctrine & Covenants. But unlike the doctrine of Christ, that single instance is not a direct statement outlining the doctrine of the priesthood.

However, through the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith recorded mainly in Doctrine & Covenants and in some of his inspired sermons we can still identify certain components of the doctrine of the priesthood. Through those revelations and teachings we learn the following:

- “The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven,” (Doctrine & Covenants 121:36) and these powers can be handled, or the priesthood can be “activated” and properly exercised through several virtues or “principles of righteousness”: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, pure knowledge, charity, and virtue (D&C 121:41-42, 45).
- These principles of righteousness also guide the exercise of priesthood authority in the work of salvation, by expressly prohibiting hypocrisy or insincerity, guile or deception, and compulsion. Ultimately, priesthood government is grounded on the unchanging values of righteousness and truth (D&C 121:42, 46).

- Decision-making in priesthood quorums is to be engaged in by councils at the general and local levels (D&C 102:1-2; 107:33-34, 36). Their deliberations will be blessed with divine inspiration when the council members themselves employ the qualities of righteousness, holiness, lowliness of heart, meekness, long suffering, faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity (D&C 107:30-31). And the decisions of these councils should be reached in unanimity (D&C 107:27).
- The divine institution of marriage, initiated in temples by the authority of the priesthood, is an additional order of the priesthood called “the new and everlasting covenant of marriage” (D&C 131:2). Consequently, reason dictates that decision-making and leadership in priesthood-instituted families should follow the same previously-mentioned principles of righteousness employed in priesthood leadership and decision-making in the Church.

So, what do we understand about the priesthood, based on latter-day revelations?

The priesthood is an endowment given to men in all ages of the world, by which they can access and manipulate the powers of heaven (D&C 121:36) to act in the name of God in the divine work of salvation. Organized in orders (like “departments”) and corresponding offices, and trained in quorums and groups, priesthood holders can perform labors, officiate and administer ordinances and their associated covenants, and all other things necessary for the eternal salvation of the human family in the presence of God.

After almost two millennia of apostasy, the priesthood was brought back to earth in our era by heavenly messengers (D&C 13; 27:8, 12) acting in the name and authority of Jesus Christ. The priesthood has been, is, and always will be necessary for the establishment and government of the Church of Jesus Christ in any era of human history. The work of salvation cannot be implemented without the priesthood, because only through the ordinances of the priesthood can the power of godliness be manifested for the blessing, salvation, and exaltation of the human family (D&C 84:19-21).

The priesthood is conferred through the power of the Holy Ghost (D&C 20:60), and it is through the power of that third member of the Godhead that those ordained to offices in the priesthood can officiate in the name of the Lord (2 Nephi 32:9; Moroni 3:1-4). As the power of the Holy Ghost is constant, incessant, or ever-available, whenever a priesthood holder acts worthily and appropriately within his assigned office, he taps into heavenly power and obtains the authority necessary to perform whatever the Lord sees fit. And if a proper record of such performance is kept, the effect of that act will transcend time and space, and will be validated in heaven (D&C 128:9).

The priesthood emanates from the eternal worlds—immortal, glorified realms where the nobility of heaven engages in the never-ending work of organizing, downgrading, redeeming, and glorifying worlds without end and their innumerable occupants, whether

they be spirits, mortal humans, translated humans, or the countless forms of animal and plant life. The power of the priesthood is everywhere and governs all things (D&C 88:13). On earth, when exercised in righteousness, its authority allows for manipulation of the powers of heaven (D&C 121:36)—the powers that give and govern life, light, and allows divine beings, and those mortals authorized and inspired to act on their behalf in faith, to exercise control on space, matter, and possibly time itself, according to the will of God (Helaman 12:8-17; 3 Nephi 26:3; D&C 121:12; Abraham 2:8). The highest and most sacred expression of priesthood power and authority is found in the creation, redemption, and glorification of all forms of life—especially in the creation, redemption, and exaltation of human life (D&C 88:17-20, 25-26; 77:2-3).

The Church, the Temple, and the Kingdom

In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we find two of the orders of the priesthood—the Melchizedek Priesthood and its appendix, the Aaronic Priesthood, which includes the ancient Levitical Priesthood (D&C 107:1). With these priesthoods the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becomes an earthly repository—and its leaders the guardians—of the keys of the priesthood, defined as the presiding rights and the authorities necessary to unlock additional blessings and privileges. These are the keys of the Kingdom of God on the earth, which we may understand as being the priesthood-based agency in charge of the temporal organization, government, and salvation of the earth.

As He did in ancient times, the Lord has inspired his latter-day prophets to establish his holy house, the temple, with its ordinances and standards, directed and performed by the authority of the priesthood. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the entryway to the house of the Lord, and through its meetings, classes, and activities, the Church prepares individuals and families to be worthy to enter the temple and receive the knowledge, ordinances, and covenants necessary to, in one future day, enable them to gain admission into the kingdom of heaven.

In the temple faithful Latter-day Saint men and women reenact sacred symbolic rituals, performances, ordinances, and make sacred covenants, all designed to grant or endow them with the knowledge necessary to be prepared to enter into the highest order of the priesthood. Eventually, when a man and a woman fall in love and become husband and wife sealed for time and eternity by the authority of the priesthood in the house of the Lord, they enter together into the highest order of the priesthood—the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (D&C 130:2)—also known as the divine patriarchal order. Through admission into this order, many blessings and rights of the priesthood are transmitted through one’s direct family line (Abraham 2:9, 11).

This highest order of the priesthood is not exercised in meetings and activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but it can be exercised in a limited way in the home. The family home evening and family councils may be understood as “priesthood meetings of the patriarchal order”, hopefully enriched by doctrines and principles taught in weekly classes provided by the quorums and auxiliary organizations of the Church.

All things of eternal significance and eternal effect are found in, and based on, the knowledge, ordinances, and covenants taught and administered in the house of the Lord. Hence, the centrality of temple attendance and worship in latter-day saint religious life.

On earth the priesthood has different orders, (like “departments”), quorums and groups, and also auxiliary organizations in charge of the implementation and performance of several elements of the mortal phase of the divine plan of salvation: the preaching of the word of God, the administration of sacred covenants through several symbolic rituals, or ordinances, and other blessings—both temporal and spiritual—necessary for mortal health and welfare. It is conceivable that there may be additional orders of the priesthood yet to be revealed, but however many there may exist, all of them are designed to ennoble, save, and glorify as many members of the human family as will accept the divine laws, covenants, and ordinances. President Brigham Young explained the following about the priesthood:

“The Priesthood of God, that was given to the ancients and is given to men in the latter days, is co-equal in duration with eternity ... It is unchangeable in its system of government and its Gospel of salvation. It gives to Gods and angels their supremacy and power, and offers wealth, influence, posterity, exaltations, power, glory, kingdoms and thrones, ceaseless in their duration, to all who will accept them on the terms upon which they are offered.” (Discourses of Brigham Young, p.76)

Since the priesthood is received and operates in tandem with the power of the Holy Ghost (D&C 20:60; 121:45-46), Elder Parley P. Pratt’s teaching on the effect of the gift of the Holy Ghost on the human mind and emotions may very well describe how the “principles of righteousness” of the doctrine of the priesthood can be activated and enhanced in a mortal person:

“An intelligent being, in the image of God, possesses every organ, attribute, sense, sympathy, affection, of will, wisdom, love, power and gift, which is possessed by God himself. But these are possessed by man, in his rudimental state ... Or, in other words, these attributes are in embryo; and are to be gradually developed. ...

“The gift of the Holy Spirit adapts itself to all these organs or attributes. It quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections; and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use. It inspires, develops, cultivates and matures all the fine-toned sympathies, joys, tastes, kindred feelings and affections of our nature. It inspires virtue, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and charity.” (Key to the Science of Theology, pp.100-101)

The Interaction Between Body, Spirit, and Priesthood

The body is the first stewardship we receive when we enter mortality, and many major aspects of the plan of salvation depend on the righteous use of the body. Some of our earthly activities are meant to maintain the health—physical, mental, and emotional—of the body. Likewise, the body is also necessary to perform rituals that portray “shadows and prototypes” of those functions necessary for the vitality of our immortal spirits.

The Lord has revealed little about the interaction between the body and the spirit, but it is clear that a powerful and constant interaction exists, which causes mutual effects that can be recognized more clearly after one has been baptized with water and fire (Moses 6:64-65). Add the power of the priesthood to that combination of human body, human spirit, and the power of the Holy Ghost, and we'll have something greater than the sum of its parts—beyond being merely a living soul, one may become a saint, as explained by a heavenly messenger:

“... [The] natural man is an enemy to God ... unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.” (Mosiah 3:19)

Some have struggled in their attempts to live the principles, commandments, and standards of the restored gospel, but once they understand what is really going on, the struggle may be felt more like a privilege than a burden. The divine plan is one that slowly elevates the sons and daughters of God from mere men and women to a state of sanctification.

In the future, through faithful endurance following the receipt of earthly ordinances, those sanctified sons and daughters will be further elevated through the power of the resurrection to a glorified state of divinity. So, the challenge facing us is to “... lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better” (D&C 25:10). Or, putting in different language, to set aside certain aspects of our humanity and embrace first sanctity, and one day, divinity.

The Inevitability of the Priesthood

Another aspect of the doctrine of priesthood worthy of elaboration is the fact that the power of the priesthood is universal, and its divinely-instituted laws are unchangeable and unavoidable. The revelations declare the following:

“All kingdoms have a law given; And there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space ... And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified.” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:36-39)

The Prophet Joseph Smith later elaborated on this point saying the following:

“The organization of the spiritual and heavenly worlds, and of spiritual and heavenly beings, was agreeable to the most perfect order and harmony: their limits and bounds were fixed irrevocably, and voluntarily subscribed to in their heavenly estate by themselves, and were by our first parents subscribed to upon the earth. Hence the importance of embracing and subscribing to principles of eternal truth by all men upon the earth that expect eternal life.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.325)

The laws and principles of the priesthood were established eons ago in higher and holier spheres—environments beyond mortal conception in which God operates and where he “... comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever” (D&C 88:41). Due to this immortal and glorified origin, it’s no wonder that certain laws and principles of the doctrine of the priesthood may appear “difficult” to be understood and subscribed to by mortals used to views and philosophies impaired by the natural limitations of mortality.

The correct understanding of our true nature as human beings depends on the correct understanding of the unchangeable nature of God himself and of the unavoidable nature of the powers by which human life is created and governed. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated:

“I wish to go back to the beginning—to the morn of creation. There is the starting point for us to look to, in order to understand and be fully acquainted with the mind, purposes and decrees of the Great Elohim ... It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it be a hard matter to get right. ...

“If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves. I want to go back to the beginning, and so lift your minds into a more lofty sphere and a more exalted understanding than what the human mind generally aspires to.” (Teachings, p.343)

The divine laws established by the priesthood, and the virtues and principles of righteousness derived from them, challenge humanity to look heavenward, to “a more lofty sphere,” and slowly begin to conceive their true nature as eternal offspring of divinity. The prophet Moroni’s invitation to “... come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness ...” (Moroni 10:32) means precisely the ultimate purpose of the priesthood on the earth—to elevate humanity towards divinity.

Gender Issues in Light of the Doctrine of the Priesthood

Perhaps some of the most sensitive contemporary topics in society are related to gender, which in recent decades have been brought to the forefront of many political, legal, and social debates. After the focus on women’s rights and the equality of women

in economic and political life, now we see a focus on the reaffirmation of the citizenship rights of homosexuals and transgender persons.

How would the doctrine of the priesthood shed light on these concerns?

Women and the Priesthood

In some of the early revelations in this dispensation the Lord indicated that a necessary step in the establishment of his kingdom on earth was that the people needed to be “endowed with power from on high” through the ordinances of the House of the Lord, the temple (D&C 38:38; 43:16; 105:11-12).

Every worthy Latter-day Saint man or woman who receives his or her own endowment receives symbolically this “power from on high” which will be used to strengthen a person’s ability to keep the commandments of God, and be a more refined and effective disciple of Jesus Christ. Pretty much the same ordinances a faithful man receives in the temple, will be received by a faithful woman. Thus, the ordinances of the house of the Lord function as a great equalizer between the two genders, granting equal blessings, honors, and an equal promise of exaltation, to men and women.

As we focus on the expression “endowed with power from on high,” our minds eventually come to the idea that the central “power from on high” is the priesthood of God. Thus, we may properly understand that when a faithful Latter-day Saint woman receives her own endowment, she receives the priesthood of God, but with one significant difference: she is not ordained to any of the offices of the priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One might ask how this can be. The process was described in a vision given to President Joseph F. Smith in 1918, in which he saw that righteous spirits were organized, appointed as messengers, and “clothed with power and authority” (D&C 138:30). We find a similar process in the house of the Lord. This is part of the restoration of the “ancient order of things,” as the Prophet Joseph Smith called it (Teachings, p.237), since special clothing has been used symbolically in ancient times to represent authority and priestly endowments (Exodus 40:13-14).

When faithful Latter-day Saint women receive their own temple ordinances, they also are symbolically clothed with power and authority—which is the nature of the endowment. However, since these faithful women are not ordained to any of the offices of the priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they cannot officiate the ordinances of salvation in the Church—baptism, confirmation, sacrament, etc.

On the other hand, we may say that the temple and the Church are “separate and unequal departments” in the kingdom of God, considering that they are regulated by different standards. The Church builds and maintains temples, but temples operate with standards and regulations a lot higher and more rigorous than those employed in Church meetinghouses.

And so it is that while in the Church women are not ordained to offices in the priesthood, in a temple they can be properly recommended and set apart to exercise the priesthood—or that “power from on high” they received in their own endowments—and officiate some of the ordinances of the house of the Lord. Therefore, faithful Latter-day Saint women who feel a desire to render service by performing priesthood ordinances by the laying on of hands, may consult their bishops and inquire about becoming temple ordinance workers.

The doctrine of the priesthood expands our understanding and appreciation for women’s vital and sacred role in the Lord’s plan of salvation. Although women are not ordained to offices in the priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we may still appropriately affirm that they hold the key of the highest and most sacred characteristic of divinity—the creation and nurturing of new mortal life. In fact, often I wonder if motherhood might not one day be revealed to be an additional order of the priesthood.

Viewing this as a possible key of the priesthood inevitably would lead us to a higher and holier view of femininity, and elevate women to “a more lofty sphere,” (using Joseph Smith’s words). In this loftier sphere the inherent sacredness of a woman would be demonstrated symbolically by her being “covered.” Rather than demeaning, under this view that symbolic gesture would be ennobling and exalting.

Through the ministry of the word of God women also help others “...enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory” (Moses 6:59). By this means, even those women who were not blessed with the capability of bringing children into mortal life, can still receive the lofty title of “Mothers in Israel” by bringing “foster children” into eternal life.

Farther in the future we can envision glorified women nurturing newly resurrected beings who died as little children, and enabling the exaltation and eternal life of other women. The doctrine of the priesthood, when properly understood, elevate women to a reverential status in the kingdom of God.

Marriage and Same-Sex Unions

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints endorses the idea that citizenship or constitutional rights should be affirmed for all, when referring to housing, employment, healthcare, and other purely secular aspects of life in a society. However, several modern societies have recently decided that citizenship rights should also include the right to same-sex marriages.

Such idea could only be considered consistent under a purely secular approach, focusing exclusively on the constitutional right of access to government services. Or in other words, if one were to secularize, redefine, and downgrade the institution of marriage to the level of a simple “government service,” then one might be justified in saying that no taxpayer should be deprived of such public service. And under such an exclusively secular approach, the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints regarding marriage and family would be difficult to understand, and to some, indefensible.

But it is precisely here that the doctrine of the priesthood allows us to understand the firm position of the Church on this issue. If God did not exist, then the expression of any human desire, appetite, or passion could be defended under the banner of individual rights. But at the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we find the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith that the heavens opened and that indeed there is a God, a real, tangible being with an immortal and glorified body of flesh and bones, who is the Eternal Father of our spirits. That testimony leads us to understand that there are aspects of our human experience that are divinely established, and cannot be altered by the ever-changing laws and customs of society.

Sometime ago I wrote the following in an essay posted online:

“Here we see one of the great differences between the philosophies of the world and the doctrines of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The current scientific theories, based on imperfect and limited tools, can only see human beings as a higher form of animal life. The revelations received from courts of eternal glory by prophets of God lead us, by faith, to see human beings as a lower form of divine life.

“On the other hand, the powers and capabilities of the body can be used in ways not entirely in harmony, or even contrary to divine laws and principles. By doing this a person discovers physical sensations and exaggerated emotions, which though "pleasing" to the body, do not elevate the person, do not build a foundation for eternity, and in some cases reduce the person to a mere servant of desires, appetites, and passions that by divine decree must be kept within certain limits set by God.” (Martins, “*The Body: First Stewardship & Liahona of the Spirit*”, 2014 – available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/z3aa6z58pbx1cn/Martins-Body-2014.pdf?dl=0>)

The body has tremendous physical and intellectual powers, appetites, and passions that need to be properly mastered, and there are divinely-mandated ways to master the human body and its capabilities. Since every human capability is to be expressed with restraint, how would one discover these divinely set limits? Once again, in the words of Elder Parley P. Pratt, “The gift of the Holy Spirit adapts itself to all these organs or attributes. It quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections; and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use.” (*Key to the Science of Theology*, p.101)

A great deal about the fundamental functions of the human brain—which ultimately generates and controls the body’s desires, appetites, and passions—has yet to be understood scientifically. However, whatever may be discovered in the future, we can be certain that the doctrine of the priesthood, when properly understood, can guide us safely in exercising our agency to use the body in ways that will be in harmony with the divinely-appointed eternal laws.

“This is an Hard Saying; Who Can Hear It?” (John 6:60)

The stipulations of the divine plan of salvation have always been challenging to many in the world. For example, the Apostle John recorded that after the Savior Jesus Christ gave his “Bread of Life” sermon, some of the disciples found the Savior’s teachings “hard” and “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.” (John 6:66)

This type of negative response should not be seen as unusual, because even in the pre-mortal realm, before the foundation of this earth, one-third of the spirits assigned to this earth also rejected certain conditions of the divine plan of salvation and left—never to return, and the heavens wept for them (D&C 76:26).

But in his mortal ministry the Savior asked a significant question which taught his faithful disciples to rely on their testimony of him and his gospel:

“Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

“Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68-69)

So it is with us today. The stipulations of the plan of salvation continue to challenge many around the world. Some of our dear brothers and sisters have found difficulty in setting aside their socio-political and philosophical inclinations in order to embrace fully the Church’s position on marriage and family. Personally, I believe that their difficulty may be based on their not having yet understood the ennobling glorious vistas afforded by the doctrine of the priesthood as pertaining to marriage and family.

May the good Lord open eyes and touch hearts so that the doctrine of the priesthood distills in people’s souls, and they qualify to one day enter into the glory of their Eternal Father.

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