

AUTHORITY AND PRIESTHOOD IN
THE LDS CHURCH, PART 2:
ORDINANCES, QUORUMS,
NONPRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY,
PRESIDING, PRIESTESSES, AND
PRIESTHOOD BANS

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In the prequel to this article, I discussed in general contours the dual nature of authority—individual and institutional—and how the modern LDS concept of priesthood differs significantly from the ancient version in that it has become an abstract form of authority that can be “held” (or withheld, as the case might be). In the ancient world, *priesthood* was used to describe either the condition of being a priest or the collective body of priests. And in the ancient world, the duties of “the priesthood” revolved around rituals, with the priests standing in the place of the Lord, being his agents, as it were. By contrast, in the modern Mormon version of priesthood, those who “hold” this authority, especially the Melchizedek Priesthood, generally have only occasional opportunity to officiate in religious rituals, which we call ordinances. *Priesthood* is now much more expansive, involving many functions that have little to do with the ancient duties of priests. In certain ways, it is also less clearly defined.

Ordinances

According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “The word ‘ordinance’ is derived from the Latin *ordinare*, which means to put in order or sequence; or to act by authorization or command. . . . The power to perform ordinances whose validity is recognized by God is inseparably connected with the divine authority conferred on mortal man, that is, the priesthood of God.”¹ Robert Millet and his coauthors, in a thick volume some see as a replacement for McConkie’s now out-of-print and out-of-favor *Mormon Doctrine*, give a dual definition: “In a broad sense, a gospel ordinance is a law, statute, or commandment of God (D&C 52:15–16; 64:5).” In a narrower sense, “an act or ritual done with proper priesthood authority is known as an ordinance.”²

The Millet book lists several of these ordinances and divides them into two categories—those that are necessary for salvation and those that are not. Gregory Prince, looking at ordinances from a historical perspective, makes an interesting observation: “In a Latter-day Saint context whatever tradition has defined as an ordinance is one. Otherwise what Latter-day Saints accept as ordinances defies simple definition.”³ Prince points out that some ordinances are tied scripturally to priesthood; others are not. He lists seventeen separate ordinances, including casting out evil spirits, raising the dead, and the second anointing. Millet and his coauthors mention setting people apart for callings and dedicating graves, which Prince omits, thus helping underscore his point that the LDS definition of *ordinance* appears to be somewhat fluid.

1. Immo Luschin, “Ordinances,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1032.

2. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top, *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 464.

3. Gregory A. Prince, *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 79.

The original version of the fourth article of faith, which was finally changed to its current wording in 1902, reads, “We believe that these ordinances are First, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; Second, Repentance . . .”⁴ indicating that Joseph Smith initially regarded faith and repentance as ordinances. Even disregarding this historical anomaly, the necessity of having priesthood authority is not always clear. For example, during Joseph Smith’s and Brigham Young’s administrations, women were permitted to lay on hands and heal the sick,⁵ and today they still help administer the endowment and perform washings and anointings in the temple. So ordinances may not always require priesthood for participation. Again, we run into definitional difficulties here.

Taking this line of thinking a step further, since our definition is not exactly set in stone, there may be some wiggle room for declassifying certain ordinances. This has already been done for the practice of cursing those who reject the gospel message, an ordinance that is

4. See, for instance, *The Pearl of Great Price: Being a Selection from the Revelation, Translations and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Latter-day Saint Printing and Publishing Establishment, 1878), 63. For a detailed description of the textual change, see Lyndon W. Cook, “The Articles of Faith,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1977): 254–56.

5. See Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 1–85. Female participation in the priesthood ordinance of blessing the sick still occurs, though rarely. Stapley and Wright relate an incident in September 1979, when Elders Bruce R. McConkie and Marion D. Hanks were called to the bedside of President Spencer W. Kimball after his first surgery for a subdural hematoma. Elder McConkie invited President Kimball’s wife, Camilla, to join them in laying hands on her husband’s head during the blessing (84). A similar occurrence was related to me by an elderly high priest whom I home taught and who served earlier in his life in a stake presidency. He said that once, when giving a blessing to a family member, he laid his hands on the afflicted person’s head, but his mind went blank. He then had a strong impression that his wife was to join him in the ordinance. He invited her to lay her hands on the family member’s head, and when she did, the stupor of thought left him, and he was able to proceed with the blessing.

mentioned in eight different early revelations but is no longer practiced in the Church.⁶ A similar though not identical change could occur, for instance, if Church leaders were to determine that dedicating a grave is not really a priesthood ordinance. They might conclude that there is no necessary reason why women or non-LDS family members cannot offer this particular prayer. Dedicating a grave is certainly not an ordinance of salvation. Expanding participation in ordinances might also extend to serving as witnesses for ordinances such as baptism or temple sealings. I can think of no reason, for instance, why a woman could not serve as a witness to a baptism.

Ironically, Millet and his coauthors point out that “ordinances set things in order within the Church,” but our difficulty in specifying exact criteria for defining what an ordinance is seems to work against that desired order. Regardless, any attempt to define Mormon priesthood narrowly, as merely the authority to perform ordinances, becomes problematic. This is due both to the haziness of our notion of what an ordinance is and to the abstract nature of LDS priesthood authority, which allows it to extend far beyond the performance of priestly rituals.

Specifically, a significant function of priesthood is to be a governing institutional authority in the Church. It could easily be argued that presiding has become the most significant function of priesthood, far outweighing the ritualistic role that priesthood played in ancient times. Even our vocabulary reveals our priorities in the modern Church: rather than *performing* sacred rituals, Mormons speak of *administering* ordinances. Priesthood is inseparably connected to institutional administration.

Priesthood as Institutional Authority

Because priesthood is an abstract principle in modern Mormondom, it does not necessarily have to be attached to the institutional Church, although in our day this is always the case. Joseph and Oliver, for instance,

6. See Prince, *Power from On High*, 108–09.

were not members of the Church when they received authority that was later termed priesthood, nor were they members when they baptized each other, but we explain this fact by observing that they had to receive the authority first *in order to establish the Church*; otherwise, the organization would not have been *authorized* by the Lord. Still, as pointed out in the predecessor to this article, Joseph Smith did not invoke priesthood at all in organizing the Church. Indeed, the word *priesthood* does not appear in early Church documents until more than a year after its organization.⁷ Nevertheless, since the founding of the Church, priesthood has always been bestowed and exercised within its institutional confines.⁸ Indeed, Orson Hyde, in a May 1844 article titled “Priesthood What Is It,” declared that priesthood “is the right and the power to establish and govern the Church of the Living God, and is the same to that body, that government is to the nation.”⁹ This definition entirely sidesteps the more elementary and historical notion that priesthood has a necessary connection to being a priest and performing priestly rituals; it is instead the authority to establish an organization and then govern it. It is institutional authority. D. Michael Quinn makes this insightful observation: “When the Church

7. In part 1 of this pair of articles, on page twenty-six, I mistakenly stated that the word priesthood first appears in early Church documents in October 1831. The word actually appeared in the minutes of a June 3–4 conference, indicating that several men were “ordained to the High Priesthood,” meaning they were ordained high priests. The point, though, is still valid. Priesthood was not on Joseph’s radar at the organization of the Church or for at least a year afterward. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, the Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 326–27.

8. As I explained in the previous article, men were ordained to offices, but they did not receive priesthood. Just as in the Book of Mormon, there were elders (Joseph and Oliver were first and second elders but were not ordained such), priests, and teachers. Later, biblical offices were added: deacon and bishop. But priesthood, as was explained in the previous article, was not a concept yet, other than meaning the state of being a priest.

9. Orson Hyde, “Priesthood What Is It,” *The Prophet*, May 25, 1844, 3.

was organized in April 1830, there was still little sense of hierarchy. Smith was seen as one prophet among potentially many. Neither was there a structured sense of authority or priesthood. . . . It was priesthood—and eventually a highly structured priesthood—which required the hierarchical institution that Mormonism became.”¹⁰ Priesthood and hierarchy are inextricably intertwined in the modern Church. One does not exist without the other. In fact, one spawns the other.

The Organizational Impulse

Priesthood in modern Mormonism has hatched a hierarchical institution that is, organizationally speaking, on steroids. The LDS Church is so massively organized that it makes even the Roman Catholic Church look like amateur hour. Even if we completely ignore the general Church hierarchy of First Presidency, apostles, seventies, and general auxiliary presidencies as well as all area- and stake-level officers, we still see that each fully staffed ward in the Church has not just a bishop and his counselors, but twelve (yes, twelve) presidents with two counselors each (if you count the bishop as president of the priests quorum with his two assistants), a handful of clerks, a ward mission leader, an employment specialist, a music chairperson, dozens of teachers, secretaries, advisers, and other assorted official positions. This irrepressible organizational impulse makes Mormonism easily the most highly structured religion on earth, but it also opens the door to several significant and as yet unanswered questions regarding authority. One very simple question is: how much of this organization is absolutely necessary? This is a question that has been studiously avoided. The idea of giving every member a “calling” has certainly trumped every call for organizational reduction and simplification.

Returning to the idea that priesthood and institutional hierarchy are inseparable in modern Mormonism, I should point out that it is, of

10. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 7–8.

course, theoretically possible for the Lord to bestow priesthood authority upon someone not baptized into the Church, but as far as we know, this has not happened since the Church was organized. In earlier dispensations, however, prophets sometimes received authority and spoke and acted in the Lord's name without any sort of corresponding formal organizational structure (Moses in exile and Abinadi among the apostate colony of King Noah, for instance), but this pattern does not prevail in our day—the priesthood and the Church are inseparable. Without the priesthood, there is no authorized Church, and without the Church, there is no valid framework within which the priesthood can operate, although this framework has changed and evolved significantly since the early days of the Restoration.¹¹

At times in the ancient world, priesthood was directly responsible for leading the people, not just performing sacred rituals. At the time of Jesus' ministry, for instance, the religious leader of the Jewish people was the high priest. As I understand it, this is because the temple was the central pillar of the Jewish religion, and the high priest was the chief of the priests who performed sacrifices in the temple. A similar situation prevailed at times among the Nephites, but the direct connection to priestly rituals is missing from the record. Alma₁ and his successors in the office of high priest did function as head of the church, but just how the Nephite temple figured into this arrangement is unclear. Indeed, there is only one mention in the Book of Mormon of sacrifices being performed in connection with Nephite temples, and this was long before the church was established. It is also not a very specific or clear connection: "And . . . the people gathered themselves together throughout all the land, that they might go up to the temple to hear the words which king Benjamin should speak unto them. . . . And they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to

11. See William V. Smith, "Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations: Text, Impact, and Evolution," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 4 (2013): 1–84, especially 13–19 and 46–48.

the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:1, 3). The temple here is only tangentially connected to priestly rituals (priests and priesthood are not even mentioned). The temple is instead a place where the king teaches the people. We must assume, since the Nephites followed the law of Moses, that they performed sacrifices in their temples, but the specifics of this practice are not mentioned. In the Book of Mormon, as opposed to the Bible, the temple is not ever directly connected to either priesthood or the office of high priest. In the Nephite record, at least after Alma₁ founded the church of Christ, priesthood served as a form of institutional religious authority. In this particular regard, the Book of Mormon church is similar to the modern LDS Church, even though the concept of priesthood among the Nephites differed from our understanding of priesthood today.

In terms of the two types of authority discussed in my previous article—personal and institutional authority—priesthood in the modern LDS Church is entirely an institutional authority. It is not an authority based on personal influence or a divine dispensation to an individual. It is conferred by and through the organization. Granted, some leaders possess a set of personal qualities that have been labeled *charisma*, and this may give them greater influence over those they lead than the leverage exerted by others whose personality and attributes are less alluring. But charisma alone does not give any member of the Church the right to act officially in Church affairs. It certainly does not give a person the right to preside over the organization.

Leadership Succession

After the death of Joseph Smith, there were two major non-institutional claims to succeed him as the presiding authority in the Church and two significant institutional claims,¹² as well as several marginal claims. James

12. Three if you count the early effort by Emma Smith and some members of the Quorum of the Anointed to promote William Marks, president of the Nauvoo high council and an opponent of polygamy, as Joseph’s successor. This

Strang sought to succeed Joseph Smith on the basis of a letter he claimed Joseph had sent him and visions he claimed to have had. This could be viewed as a charismatic appeal for authority. Another group held that authority to lead was a hereditary matter (a notion Joseph actually encouraged), and they eventually convinced Joseph Smith III to accept the presidency of their movement, which became the Reorganization. The largest body of Saints, however, chose to follow the apostles, who claimed the right to succession based on their priesthood and on keys they said Joseph had conferred upon them. This was a formal institutional claim to authority. Sidney Rigdon also claimed the mantle of institutional leadership by virtue of his position in the First Presidency, which created competing priesthood claims.¹³ In September 1844, the Twelve excommunicated Rigdon in an attempt to extinguish his claim that he was the only ordained prophet, seer, and revelator remaining after the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum. Rigdon moved to Pittsburgh with a group of his followers and continued to stake his priesthood claim to leadership. In terms of sheer numbers, though, the apostles prevailed, and since the 1844 succession crisis, the right to preside in

effort was nipped in the bud before the entire Quorum of the Twelve returned to Nauvoo. See Merina Smith, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2013), 186.

13. Sidney Rigdon, who likely suffered from bipolar disorder, would have been a poor choice to lead the Church had his claim succeeded, an assessment his son John Wycliffe Rigdon agreed with. “I do not think the Church made any mistake in placing the leadership on Brigham Young,” he wrote. “Sidney Rigdon had no executive ability, was broken down with sickness, and could not have taken charge of the Church at that time. . . . The task would have been too great for Father. I have no fault to find with the Church with doing what they did. It was the best thing they could have done under the circumstances” (quoted in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994], 360. See pages 116–18 for a discussion of Rigdon’s mental health).

the LDS Church has come only through regular and formal priesthood channels, established and maintained by the apostles.¹⁴

But are presiding and priesthood necessarily connected? I will examine that issue later in this article.

Nonpriesthood Authority

We come first, though, to an interesting question. Although priesthood today does not exist without the institutional Church, is priesthood the *only* authority in the Church? There are two views on this. One is the perspective I grew up with—that priesthood and authority in the Church are synonymous (in other words, priesthood is the only form of authority in the Church). This view of authority is a fruit of the unique Mormon definition of priesthood as an abstract idea, a general power that people can possess. If priesthood is God's authority delegated to men

14. It is interesting to note, as Michael Quinn has point out, that before 1847, the First Presidency of the Church was not an apostolic quorum (*Mormon Hierarchy*, 37–38). Four of Joseph's counselors (Gause, Rigdon, Williams, and Law) did not come from among the Twelve, nor were they ever ordained apostles. Amasa Lyman was ordained an apostle and took Orson Pratt's place in the Quorum of the Twelve when Pratt was excommunicated. When Pratt was reinstated, Lyman was bumped from the quorum but was made a counselor in the First Presidency. Two of Joseph's assistant presidents (Cowdery and Hyrum Smith) were ordained apostles but never served in the Quorum of the Twelve. Assistant President John C. Bennett was not ordained an apostle. After Joseph's death, the First Presidency became an apostolic quorum. All members of the First Presidency (with one exception noted below) either came from the Quorum of the Twelve or were ordained apostles shortly before or after their call to the presidency. J. Reuben Clark Jr. and Alvin R. Dyer, for instance, never served in the Quorum of the Twelve, but they were ordained apostles. Clark served in the First Presidency for eighteen months before being ordained an apostle. Dyer was ordained an apostle in October 1967 but was not added to the Quorum of the Twelve. In April 1968, he became an additional counselor to President David O. McKay, serving with first counselor Hugh B. Brown, second counselor N. Eldon Tanner, and additional counselor Thorpe B. Isaacson, the only counselor since 1847 who was never ordained an apostle.

on earth, then what other authority can there be in the Church? This is the perspective behind Elder Oaks's 2014 general conference talk on the authority of the priesthood, in which he gave the following explanation:

We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.¹⁵

I will give some reasons why I find this explanation inadequate, or at least incomplete, but for now let me just say that the other view on priesthood—the view I have come to see as more convincing—is that priesthood is not the only authority in the Church, which may open a side door through which we can get around the impasse we are now experiencing on this very difficult issue.

Four Examples of Nonpriesthood Authority

Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that priesthood is not the presiding, supervisory authority in the Church. No one would argue this. What I am saying is that there seem to be types of authority in the Church that, while created and directed by priesthood leaders, do not seem to be part of the priesthood. Let me illustrate what I mean by other forms of authority with some examples.

1. The Relief Society president in my ward has authority. In fact, I would argue that in a practical sense she has more institutional authority in our ward than I do, even though I am a high priest and a member of

15. See Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," Apr. 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

the stake high council. She certainly has more institutional authority than the president of the teachers quorum, even though she does not “hold” the priesthood or possess priesthood keys and her calling is not a priesthood calling, as is the teachers quorum president’s. She can call meetings, give sisters ministering assignments, coordinate the care of the afflicted, participate in ward council, and preside over Relief Society meetings. Of course, she acts and presides under the supervision of the bishop, but so does the president of the teachers quorum. According to the first view presented above, both of these presidents “exercise priesthood authority,” but there is obviously a distinct difference between the two. One is a priesthood office; the other is not. And we can’t just gloss over this difference.

The relationship between Relief Society and priesthood is no simple matter, particularly if we consider statements such as the following, which Joseph Smith reportedly made when organizing the women’s organization: “I am glad to have the opportunity of organizing the women, as a part of the priesthood belongs to them.”¹⁶ What we may be encountering here is simply a question of semantics, perhaps even somewhat careless semantics. Joseph loved to give people authority, as long as it was subordinate to his authority as presiding officer of the Church, and he established a complex institutional hierarchy that required multiple (and sometimes overlapping) levels of authority, but he called that authority *priesthood*, even when it had nothing to do with the office and ritual duties of a priest. Whatever authority Joseph was intending to bestow upon the Relief Society, however, it was suspended by his death, and when Brigham Young resurrected the society several years later, in certain ways it was not really the same organization Joseph authorized.

2. Today we have a highly organized Church, with a complex hierarchical pyramid of authority that we call priesthood, but the institution—particularly the corporate support structure that has grown

16. Sarah M. Kimball, “Auto-Biography,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 7 (Sept. 1, 1883): 51.

up around the ecclesiastical core—cannot easily fit within the naturally restrictive bounds of an all-male priesthood. Similar to the Relief Society president example mentioned above, middle managers in the departments at Church headquarters exercise authority in a variety of ways. None of these managers, however, exercise authority as a function of their priesthood. Indeed, some (the female managing editor of the *Friend* magazine, for example) do not hold the priesthood. Rather, these individuals exercise institutional authority in a manner very similar to that of a middle manager in any worldly corporation. They do this under the supervision of priesthood advisers, but they are not exercising priesthood in their jobs.

3. Another example of nonpriesthood authority in the Church occurs in its missions. Young male missionaries are called to be district leaders, zone leaders, and assistants to the mission president as if these were priesthood offices, but they are not. Missionaries called to these positions of leadership and administrative authority are not set apart or ordained or sustained by the vote of other missionaries. (I should add that mission president and temple president are perhaps the only high-level callings in the Church that are not sustained by the vote of those over whom they preside, which places them at variance with the law of common consent.) Because so many sister missionaries are now entering the field, new leadership positions have been created for them, called “sister training leaders.”¹⁷ Although these new positions are of course not priesthood offices, neither are the leadership positions occupied by male missionaries. But they *are* positions of institutional authority. Which brings up the question of why a sister missionary could not serve as a zone leader or assistant to the president.¹⁸ The argument may be

17. Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Church Adjusts Mission Organization to Implement ‘Mission Leadership Council,’” Apr. 5, 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-adjusts-mission-organization-implement-mission-leadership-council>.

18. I heard recently of a mission in which the mission president organized an entire zone of female missionaries, complete with female district and zone

made that this would allow women in the mission to preside over men, but we already have this arrangement in the Primary auxiliary in almost every ward in the Church, including my calling a couple of years ago as a teacher, in which I answered to the Primary president.

4. A final example that is quite different but very much related to the previous three can be illustrated by the frequent situation that occurs in part-member families where the wife is a member but her husband is not. Who presides in the home when a son turns twelve and is ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood? Certainly not the twelve-year-old, even though he is the only priesthood holder in the house. And what about six years later when that son turns eighteen, becomes an adult, and is ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood? In no less an official source than “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” we find this statement: “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families.”¹⁹ This statement in no way insinuates that the father must have the priesthood in order to preside. According to President Joseph F. Smith, “There is no higher authority in matters relating to the family organization, and especially when that organization is presided over by one holding the higher Priesthood, than that of the father.”²⁰ The

leaders. It is significant to note that these female leaders did not preside over any male missionaries.

19. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129, available at <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation>.

20. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1968), 286–87. *Father, Consider Your Ways*, a pamphlet published by the Quorum of the Twelve in 1973, concurs: “Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home” (4–5, quoted in Ezra Taft Benson, “To the Fathers in Israel,” Oct. 1987, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1987/10/to-the-fathers-in-israel?lang=eng>). See also Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family

parenthetical clause here is just that, parenthetical, which means that it can be dropped from the sentence without impairing its basic meaning. Therefore, according to President Smith, the highest authority in any family is the father, whether he is a baptized member or not. But how can this be possible? The home is the fundamental unit of the Church, we are taught. How, then, can someone who is not even a Church member preside over the fundamental Church unit, and in some cases preside over someone who holds the Melchizedek Priesthood? Apparently, the biological (or even adoptive) authority of the father outranks priesthood authority. And what about the situation where an aged high priest goes to live in the home of his son who became inactive at age fifteen and is still only a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood. Who presides? In this case, home ownership would probably trump priesthood rank.

This concept of the father, or husband, presiding in the family runs into difficulties, however, when considered in tandem with another statement in the family proclamation: “Fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.” How can fathers and mothers be equal partners if the father presides over the mother? I will have more to say about the sometimes-confusing notion of presiding, in families and elsewhere, later in this article, but for now let us merely acknowledge the very real possibility that priesthood is not the only authority in the Church, nor does it preside in every circumstance.

Women and Authority

What is the difference, then, between priesthood authority and these other possible types of authority in the Church? One of the primary differences is that performing certain ordinances is limited to the priesthood

and the Church,” Oct. 2005, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/10/priesthood-authority-in-the-family-and-the-church?lang=eng>, where Elder Oaks explains why his single mother presided in the home even when he was ordained a deacon.

(the only function the word itself actually suggests). But, as mentioned in the previous article, even this was not always as strictly defined as it is today. Women and girls at an earlier time, for instance, were allowed to prepare the sacrament for church meetings and perform other tasks that are now the domain of priesthood holders.²¹ And for decades after the establishment of the Church, women also laid hands on the sick and afflicted and blessed them. They performed these healings not through the priesthood but through their faith, in harmony with this declaration in the Book of Mormon: “And these signs shall follow them that believe—in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover” (Mormon 9:24). We might well ask how laying hands on the sick and healing them through faith in Jesus Christ can be construed as *not* “acting in the Lord’s name,” which again illustrates the difficulty associated with the abstract definition of priesthood we embrace today. We might also ask how, in a more official ritualistic capacity, women are permitted to officiate in certain temple ordinances. How can they perform priestly functions without holding an authority we define as priesthood?

One answer is to insist that women do indeed exercise priesthood authority, but without actually having the priesthood. If we accept the idea that priesthood is the only authority in the Church, this explanation

21. Many of the duties associated today with Aaronic Priesthood offices evolved over time and were not institutionalized until as late as the 1950s. Of course, at one time, youth were not given the priesthood at all, and adult men were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood offices. For a recounting of the evolution of the Aaronic Priesthood and a listing of current priesthood duties that do not actually require the priesthood, passing the sacrament among them, see William G. Hartley, “From Men to Boys: LDS Aaronic Priesthood Offices, 1829–1996,” *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 1 (1996): 117–18, 129–31. This article is reprinted in William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2010), 37–86. Hartley quotes President Heber J. Grant saying that “there was ‘no rule in the Church’ that only priesthood bearers could carry the sacrament to the congregation after it was blessed” (130).

does indeed have some merit. But it leaves too many questions unanswered and even creates new questions that are very difficult to answer.

I don't want to be difficult here, and I don't want to openly argue with an apostle, especially Elder Oaks, who has always been one of my favorite General Authorities. I realize that his assertion (that anyone who receives a calling from someone with priesthood keys is exercising priesthood authority) is a generous gesture toward women in a spirit of inclusion, but in the attempt to make space for women under the umbrella of priesthood authority, this assertion actually expands our already nebulous definition of priesthood and creates further ambiguity. If that is all priesthood is—the performance of a necessary function under commission from someone who holds priesthood keys—then everyone who performs any function in the Church, from the lowliest Primary teacher to the general president of the Relief Society, exercises priesthood authority in their calling. And this includes nonmembers, who are sometimes given minor callings in wards and branches. They too would be exercising priesthood authority.

This is where an expanding definition gets us into murky waters and can bruise already tender feelings. Regardless of how broadly we try to define priesthood, female Primary teachers, sister missionaries, and Relief Society general presidents know that they do not actually *have* the priesthood, an abstract authority that is bestowed only on men and boys through *ordination* and that enables them to perform *priesthood* functions such as baptizing, blessing the sacrament, and anointing the sick. If sister missionaries are really exercising priesthood authority in their labors, why then are they not allowed to baptize their investigators who desire to join the Church? If they really do have priesthood authority (you really can't exercise it without having it), it is difficult to understand why they should not be able to baptize under the keys held by the mission president. But they cannot, which means, quite plainly, that they do not have priesthood authority, and to tell them they do in

an effort to smooth over troubled waters may only make things worse and bring a new level of confusion to the issue.

This notion (that anyone who has received an assignment from a priesthood leader is exercising priesthood authority) is also undermined by the status of black male members of the Church before 1978. Some of them served faithfully in their wards and branches in various nonpriesthood capacities. They received these callings from priesthood leaders. According to this reasoning, these black men were exercising priesthood authority by teaching Primary, leading the music, and coaching Young Men basketball teams. But according to teachings of Church leaders at the time, they were “denied the priesthood; under no circumstances [could] they hold this delegation of authority from the Almighty.”²² Any attempt to explain to them that they were actually exercising priesthood authority while being specifically denied that authority would have been confusing at best, offensive at worst. So why is this reasoning deemed acceptable when addressing questions about women and the priesthood? This is perplexing.

As suggested above, many women do have some sort of unnamed, undefined institutional authority, but I would argue that it is not priesthood. Consequently, all our attempts to try to include female Church members in the priesthood in some indirect or tangential way only end up offending and alienating many of them, because there are so many things this oblique “exercise” of priesthood does not include. If we are really serious about claiming that priesthood is the only authority in the Church and that anyone who fulfills a calling under priesthood direction is exercising priesthood authority, reason suggests that we simply make this official by ordination. Otherwise, we find ourselves in increasingly troubled definitional waters with no clear way to resolve the confusion created by our problematic priesthood lexicon.

22. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 527.

Presiding and Nonpresiding Positions

Because of our abstract definition of priesthood, exercising this authority in Mormonism involves more than just performing ordinances; it also encompasses the right of presidency, or the right to preside. All presiding positions at the general Church level and in all major subdivisions of the organization (stakes, missions, districts, wards, and branches) are reserved for priesthood holders—for men.²³ But what about nonpresiding positions? Is there any apparent reason why women could not be called as, say, high councilors or clerks, which are not priesthood offices and really have nothing to do with presiding? And what about a presiding position such as Sunday School president, which is not a priesthood office?

Interestingly, when we move past the “important” leadership positions, there are other presiding positions in the Church that seem almost of a different species. For instance, presiding positions in ward priesthood quorums are, in practice, very similar to presiding positions in auxiliary organizations, especially Relief Society and Young Women. Thus, at lower levels in the Church hierarchy, there seem to be presiding positions for men and presiding positions for women. Both types are positions of authority, but only one is called priesthood, even though they are quite analogous in practice. I will explore the differences and similarities between these two types of presiding positions later in the context of priesthood keys and quorums.

For now, though, let me merely suggest that the only acceptable avenue out of this increasingly confusing maze of explanations

23. Some would bring up the general auxiliary presidents in this context, but the Relief Society general president no longer presides over the Churchwide Relief Society. Ward Relief Society presidents are presided over by their bishops, not, I should add, by their stake Relief Society presidents. This fruit of correlation creates the strange situation in which we have presidents who do not preside. General and stake auxiliary presidents function more in the mode of consultants, not file leaders.

regarding priesthood and authority in the Church seems to be the admission that priesthood is only one kind of divine authority and that there are, in fact, other kinds. This admission may lead us to consider new possibilities, such as the validity of the ancient scriptural notion that priesthood and authority are distinct concepts, that priesthood is linguistically and logically connected to officiating in priestly rituals, and that priesthood and institutional leadership may not necessarily be coterminous. These are certainly radical ideas, but they have a solid basis in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

What I have tried to point out thus far in this article and in the previous one is that our unique definition of *priesthood* leaves us somewhat in no-man's-land.²⁴ We are stuck somewhere between a rather restrictive scriptural/historical idea of priesthood as merely the capacity of being a priest (performing the ritualistic functions that a priest performs) and the more expansive (and apparently still expanding) modern idea of priesthood as the institutional authority that enables a person to lead or speak or act in the Church in an official or governing capacity. The idea that there are other types of authority in the Church that are not designated "priesthood" illustrates the problematic nature of a priesthood that is neither completely restrictive nor completely expansive.

Organizational Imbalance

One circumstance that arises from the LDS view of authority is that lesser (local) priesthood keys are bestowed upon leaders in one branch (male) of the organization, but they are not bestowed in the other branch (female), thus creating a situation in which there are presiding officers who have keys and there are other presiding officers who do not have keys. This

24. It is tempting to render this idiom "no-woman's-land" here, but I'm sure any attempt at either humor or political correctness would be offensive to someone, so I will resist the temptation. By the same token, "no-man's-land" will probably offend others, so I'm in a no-win situation. Nevertheless, the term is exactly right, regardless of its sexist overtones, so I will use it.

produces not only organizational confusion but also inequalities that cannot be easily explained away.

Perhaps Joseph Smith would have eliminated these inequalities had he lived long enough. We cannot know. As mentioned earlier, Joseph saw the Relief Society as having some part in the priesthood, and on April 28, 1842, “he spoke of delivering the keys to this Society and to the church.”²⁵ What keys these might be he did not explain clearly, but he did say that “the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them [the Relief Society], that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders.”²⁶ If this seems confusing, it is likely because Joseph used many terms loosely, *keys* included. For Joseph, a particular word could mean many things, and meanings often shifted over time. For instance, in 1842, Joseph, speaking about the keys of the kingdom, explained that “the keys are certain signs and words by which false spirits and personages may be detected from true, which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.”²⁷ Regardless of the several meanings he may have attached to the word *keys*, the general figurative idea of keys was obviously important to him.

So, where does this leave us? I’m not sure. Priesthood keys serve a purpose in the Church—of maintaining order, particularly in terms of succession at the top—but they also add a layer of complexity and of perplexity to the lower levels of the organization. For instance, we make a big deal of the fact that a deacons quorum president holds priesthood keys. But what do those keys do? Frankly, nothing. They purportedly permit the deacons quorum president to assign other deacons to pass the sacrament and collect fast offerings (activities that were not always

25. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, Apr. 28, 1842, 36, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/33>.

26. *Ibid.*, 37, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/34>.

27. *History of the Church*, 4:608.

priesthood functions), but he could just as easily do this without the concept of keys. According to our standard explanation, these keys permit the deacons quorum president to preside over his quorum. But how is this different from what the Beehive class president does?

So, just for the sake of asking the obvious, what would happen if we removed the term *priesthood keys* from our LDS vocabulary? Would the organization, in practice, function any differently? Would the Church become simpler or more chaotic? Would the absence of this concept open the door to greater equality? These are questions we perhaps ought to examine more carefully.

Priesthood Quorums

Temple ordinances, we are told, like most other ordinances in the Church, must be performed under the specific authority of priesthood keys. As pointed out in the first article in this series, priesthood keys constitute a rather confusing topic, partly because they do not pertain only to the performance of ordinances. They also allow certain individuals to preside over the whole Church or certain segments of it. But what, we might ask, do priesthood keys have to do with priesthood quorums? The answer may be surprising. Indeed, in certain ways it is almost as if the keys governing ordinances and the keys for presiding over quorums are different sets of keys.

Priesthood keys in the modern Church are generally said to be exercised within the parameters of a priesthood quorum—sort of. This is fairly straightforward with, say, a deacons quorum president. He presides over a quorum of up to twelve deacons because he holds the priesthood keys for that quorum. But this pattern is not so simple in higher levels of the hierarchy. A stake president, for instance, presides over the stake quorum of high priests because he holds priesthood keys pertaining to that quorum. But he also presides over all members of the stake, most of whom do not hold the priesthood. So priesthood keys do

not govern just members of a priesthood quorum. They can govern all Church members who live within a certain geographic area. But there are limitations. The deacons quorum president does not preside over all twelve- and thirteen-year-olds within the ward boundaries.

Setting these questions of presiding aside for the moment, let us look more closely at priesthood quorums. A priesthood quorum is, at present, a body of men or boys within a particular geographic area who hold the same office in either the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood. In the twenty-first-century Church, however, we must ask how these groups function and how they differ from other groups within LDS wards, such as the Relief Society or the Beehive class.

The elders quorum in my ward meets weekly, discusses gospel topics as determined by quorum leadership, and engages in various service projects organized by the elders quorum presidency. The Relief Society in my ward meets weekly, discusses gospel topics as determined by auxiliary leadership, and engages in various service projects organized by the Relief Society presidency. The only priesthood-related function specifically directed by the elders quorum presidency is the ministering program. But this is not an ordinance. In fact, there are no ordinances in the Church that the elders quorum is uniquely responsible for. And the Relief Society is also involved in the new ministering program. So there is no appreciable difference between the two organizations.

The Aaronic Priesthood quorums are specifically responsible for one ordinance—the sacrament. But a priesthood quorum is not necessary to perform this ordinance. The deacons could receive assignments to pass the sacrament, the teachers to prepare it, and the priests to bless it through direct invitation from the bishop, without the intervention of a quorum presidency (although the bishop *is* the priests quorum president). In other words, the quorum organization itself is superfluous to the performance of the ordinance of the sacrament. There is no necessary connection between quorums and ordinances, which is why I

suggested above that the keys for presiding and the keys for performing ordinances seem quite distinct.

So why do we need quorums? Apparently for the same reason we need an organization for women and classes for young women. Organizationally speaking, there is no appreciable difference between priesthood quorums and parallel female groupings. Priesthood is connected to ordinances, but these can take place without the involvement of quorums. Some quorums, in fact, have no direct connection with any ordinance. Elders and high priests may give health blessings, but these are performed upon request on an individual basis and are not organized by the quorum presidency. Again, the purpose of the quorum appears to be unrelated to the primary purpose of the priesthood as depicted in ancient scripture, which is ritualistic in nature, not instructional or administrative. Given this fact, we might well ask what purpose priesthood keys bestowed on elders, teachers, or deacons quorum presidents serve. Since those keys do not specifically relate to the performance of ordinances, they serve only to allow the president to preside over the group, which is no different from what a Relief Society, Laurel, Mia Maid, or Beehive president does without keys.

An Irreconcilable Situation

In essence, we have presidents in the Church who preside *with* the priesthood and we have presidents who preside *without* it. This fact presents a very difficult conundrum. In essence, we must ask what the connection is between priesthood and presiding. In the ancient world, there was either no connection or, at best, an inconsistent one. But in the modern Church, presiding is one of the primary and necessary functions of priesthood, a function made possible only by our unique understanding of priesthood as an abstract principle rather than as a ritualistic office. How this plays out in the family creates tensions that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile, and we must wonder how much

of the male-dominant aspect of family governance is strictly cultural and how much is based on some sort of eternal pattern. The Church seems of two minds on this question, as illustrated by the conflicting message sent by the proclamation on the family—that the father presides *and* that the husband and wife are equal partners.

Of course, in the early years of the Restoration, there was no talk at all of equality in marriage relationships. Women had few rights in society—in terms of property ownership and voting rights, for instance—and the Church was very patriarchal in every way. And when polygamy became a public institution, in which one man could have multiple wives but the reverse was not true,²⁸ there was no way to construe the relationship as equal. It was not an equal partnership of one woman and one man—if one man had ten wives, then each wife had one-tenth of a husband. But since the Church abandoned polygamy and moved closer and closer to a somewhat hypothetical ideal of equal partnership in marriage, the patriarchal rhetoric has dissipated even though we still insist that the husband presides in this theoretically equal relationship.

Personally, I have been very reluctant to use the term *preside* in my family. If I *preside*, that means I am the *president*, the one who presides. *Preside*, from the Latin, means literally to “sit at the head of;” and *president* is derived from the present participle of the Latin verb.²⁹ But what does that make my wife? Vice president? Not if we are truly equal partners. Co-president? Well, apparently not, because according to Church dogma the wife does not preside in the family unless the husband is absent. If the husband is present, he presides, which means he presides over the wife too, which means they are not really equal partners, unless we come up with a special definition of *equal* (which, of course, we have done). This

28. In the earliest days, Joseph Smith did marry already-married women, but this practice did not prevail after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley and eventually acknowledged publicly their practice of plural marriage.

29. *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “preside” and “president.”

dilemma seems to place marriage partners in an irreconcilable situation, and there is no comfortable way to spin this into something it is not.

According to Elder L. Tom Perry, “There is not a president or a vice president in a family. The couple works together eternally for the good of the family. . . . They are on equal footing. They plan and organize the affairs of the family jointly and unanimously as they move forward.”³⁰ If this is truly the Church’s understanding of family governance, then it needs to officially move away from the language of “presiding,” because partners cannot really be equal if one presides over the other. But there seems to be no inclination to do so. Thus, in the same talk, Elder Perry, quoting from a 1973 pamphlet published by the Quorum of the Twelve, included the following declaration: “Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home. It is not a matter of whether you are most worthy or best qualified, but it is a matter of [divine] appointment.”³¹ So which is it? On this point, the Church cannot have its cake and eat it too. One spouse cannot preside over the other if both are equal.

My wife and I discussed this conflict, and we came to the conclusion that the only way I really exercise this presiding prerogative in our family is in calling on people to pray, mostly at the dinner table. We decided that the notion of being equal partners trumped the idea of the husband presiding, so we now take turns, a week at a time, in asking someone to pray. In all other situations, we were discussing options and making important decisions as a team anyway, so this change in our

30. L. Tom Perry, “Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling,” Apr. 2004, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/04/fatherhood-an-eternal-calling?lang=eng>.

31. Perry, “Fatherhood,” quoting The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, *Father, Consider Your Ways: A Message from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (pamphlet, 1973), reprinted in *Ensign*, June 2002, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/06/father-consider-your-ways?lang=eng>.

household management methods was far from disruptive. But in more than a symbolic way, it does bring us closer to the ideal.

There is no real one-to-one correlation between marriage and the way authority is exercised in the institutional Church, but we can draw some insights from this personal example. We are often told by Church leaders that women are equal to men in the Lord's eyes, but that they have different roles. This may be true. My wife and I have chosen different roles, some of them culturally derived, some of them perhaps biologically determined, but in terms of authority, we are attempting to share presiding duties. In the Church, although men and women are said to be equal, they are not really, because women are denied the opportunity to preside over wards, stakes, and the Church as a whole. So this is not really about different roles. It is about one gender having an open door to higher supervisory positions and the other gender being limited primarily to lower-level supervisory positions in the institution.

It is interesting to note that the word *preside* does not appear at all in the Old Testament, New Testament, or Pearl of Great Price. It appears only once in the Book of Mormon, when Alma consecrates priests and elders "to preside and watch over the church" in Zarahemla (Alma 6:1). But it appears thirty-eight times in the Doctrine and Covenants. Similarly, the word *president* appears only five times in the Bible, all in the sixth chapter of Daniel, referring to an office in the Persian government. It appears only once in the Pearl of Great Price (Articles of Faith 1:12, referring to worldly government officials) and not at all in the Book of Mormon. But it appears fifty-four times in the Doctrine and Covenants. *Preside* and *president* are words that arise from and require an organizational hierarchy. A president is "an official chosen to preside," and to preside is "to occupy the place of authority."³² The connection between these two words in the early instructions given through Joseph Smith can be seen in a revelation given on November

32. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "president" and "preside."

11, 1831, which later evolved into part of what is now section 107 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Here, we read, “<6>{t\T}hen cometh the high Priest hood, which is the greatest of all: <7> wherefore it must needs be that one be appointed of the high Priest hood to preside over the Priest hood: <8> & he shall be called President of the hood high Priest hood of the Church; <9> or in o other high words the Presiding high Priest hood over the high Priesthood of the Church.”³³ The difference in usage between ancient and modern scripture once again suggests that the current LDS view of priesthood and presiding is a modern notion that originated in the nineteenth century. While the patriarchal nature of society persisted from ancient times to more recent times, in the past few decades cultural norms have shifted decidedly in favor of women’s equal rights. The Church’s rhetoric has also shifted somewhat in an attempt to accommodate this societal change, but the patriarchal nature of priesthood has remained unaltered.

Whether a male-only form of authority reflects some eternal necessity, we do not know. In spite of all that has been said about Mother in Heaven,³⁴ nothing has ever been revealed about her. Perhaps this is

33. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, Revelations and Translations, vol. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 217.

34. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97. This article runs the gamut on what Church leaders have said about Mother in Heaven. All of it is simply conjecture. None of it is revelation. Significantly, the most definitive statement is by George Q. Cannon: “There is too much of this inclination to deify ‘our mother in heaven.’ . . . Our Father in heaven should be the object of our worship. He will not have any divided worship. . . . In the revelation of God the Eternal Father to the Prophet Joseph Smith there was no revelation of the feminine element as part of the Godhead, and no idea was conveyed that any such element ‘was equal in power and glory with the masculine.’ Therefore, we are warranted in pronouncing all tendencies to glorify the feminine element and to exalt it as part of the Godhead as

because no one has asked persistently enough to obtain this knowledge. Or perhaps God has his own reasons for remaining silent. But we do have the prophet's efforts to give authority, after the pattern of the priesthood, to women, and we do have the perplexing word *priestess* that surfaces here and there in our doctrine. What is obvious is that there are enough inconsistencies in our doctrine and definition of priesthood that there is plenty of room for both inquiry and discussion.

Priesthood is certainly more than just institutional authority. Multitudes of effective priesthood blessings testify that there is a power in the priesthood that God honors. But just because there is power in the priesthood doesn't automatically mean that we understand it very well, that we always bestow or use it appropriately, or that we shouldn't be asking questions about it—lots of questions. As President Kimball so capably demonstrated in the years leading up to the June 1978 revelation that ended one particular priesthood ban, if we don't ask questions, and don't ask persistently, we likely won't get any answers. And no answer is not necessarily an answer. Certainly, enough unanswered questions exist to allow us to at least explore some possibilities for significant change. To simply close off all discussion does not really resolve anything.

Priestesses

Despite the absence of women in positions of authority in either the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants, women do indeed

wrong and untrue, not only because of the revelation of the Lord in our day but because it has no warrant in scripture, and any attempt to put such a construction on the word of God is false and erroneous" (George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, compiled by Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [Salt Lake City: Zion's Book Store, 1957], 1:135–36, quoted in Paulsen and Pulido, 78). This sobering little reminder is significant because Cannon is right. We really do have no revelation from God on this subject, and we have no revelation telling us why he has been so silent about his supposed female counterpart. So, without such a revelation, we really are shooting in the dark here.

have authority, as indicated earlier, in both the Church and the family. We just do not have a name for this authority. It is not “moral authority,” as was recently suggested.³⁵ And it is not *priesthood*, because women, in spite of institutional attempts to put a positive spin on the matter, do not “hold” the priesthood. It is, however, an official form of organizational authority. We just do not know what to call it.

At the organization of the Relief Society, Joseph Smith seemed to be attempting to broaden his concept of priesthood authority so that it included women. Perhaps he would not have ordained women to the priesthood, but he was certainly seeking to establish a women’s organization after the pattern of the male priesthood. According to the minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society, Joseph taught “that the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood, hence there should be a select Society separate from all the evils of the world, choice, virtuous and holy—Said he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day—that it is the privilege of each member to live long.”³⁶ Unfortunately, we do not know how Joseph would have set up this kingdom of female priests (or priestesses) over the long run, and his successors have retreated from the language he employed and even some of the practices he encouraged, which leaves us today with an authority dilemma that seems unsolvable.

One of the practices Joseph specifically approved was the female laying on of hands to heal the sick. “Respecting the female laying on hands, he further remark’d, there could be no devils in it if God gave

35. See D. Todd Christofferson, “The Moral Force of Women,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/the-moral-force-of-women?lang=eng>. The examples I mentioned above are not some sort of nebulous moral authority. They are official, nonpriesthood forms of institutional authority.

36. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, Mar. 31, 1842, 22, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/19>.

his sanction by healing—that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water—that it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal'd by the administration.”³⁷

Sometimes we use loaded terms without really understanding the implications of their meaning. One of these is *priestess*, which appears today primarily in the context of temple rituals. According to Cannon, Dahl, and Welch, “By 1843, the temple’s full import and design seem to have crystallized in the Prophet’s teachings. The doctrines of sealing and of becoming kings and queens, priests and priestesses were often discussed.”³⁸ The expression “kings and queens, priests and priestesses” will be familiar to anyone who has received his or her endowment in the temple. The implication, however, seems to slip past us: namely, if we teach that women will someday be priestesses, we mean, by the very definition of the term, that they will also receive the priesthood. Just as you cannot be a priest without having priesthood, you also cannot be a priestess without having priesthood. Linguistically, the relationship is similar to *parent* and *parenthood*. If you are a parent, you also experience parenthood. Therefore, according to what is taught in the temple, at some point in the hereafter, women will not be banned from holding the priesthood. This implication of our temple terminology should give us pause.

President Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth President of the Church, stated, “It is within the privilege of the sisters of this Church to receive exaltation in the kingdom of God and receive authority and power as

37. *Ibid.*, Apr. 28, 1842, 36, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmith-papers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/33>.

38. Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, and John W. Welch, “The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: Priesthood, the Word of God, and the Temple,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1989, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1989/02/the-restoration-of-major-doctrines-through-joseph-smith-priesthood-the-word-of-god-and-the-temple?lang=eng>.

queens and priestesses.”³⁹ Taken literally, this means that in the celestial kingdom, women will have priesthood, or “priestesshood,” if we want to be nitpicky. They will be priestesses. They will have authority. But what does this even mean? What does a priestess do that is different from what a priest does? To my knowledge, this office has never been defined, which is too often the case with words we use frequently and simply assume everyone understands.

At a minimum, since these two sets of titles—king and queen, priest and priestess—are listed as pairs, we can probably assume that they are parallel in meaning. Kings and queens rule, priests and priestesses officiate in rituals, or ordinances, perhaps in a manner similar to what we see in the temple. So, do women have the priesthood in this life? In the temple, they *seem* to, although there is no ordination involved. Of course, we have no evidence that prophets such as Abinadi and Alma received authority through ordination, so ordaining may be only one way in which authority can be bestowed. In our modern context, ordination by the laying on of hands is the generally approved pattern, but perhaps we should ask if someone can have authority to officiate in a sacred ordinance without having been *ordained* to do so. It appears this is exactly what is happening in the temple. But for consistency’s sake, perhaps we ought to rethink this aberration.

Traditionally, a priest (or a priestess) is someone who stands between God and his children by officiating in sacred rituals. In the temple, women are thus functioning as *de facto* priestesses without what we (perhaps incorrectly?) consider a necessity—ordination. Should this oversight be corrected? Since ordination is considered necessary in the modern Church to exercise priesthood authority, should female temple workers be ordained? Temple workers are *set apart* for their callings, but only men receive a priesthood ordination in order to perform the duties of this priestly calling. A man who does not hold the priesthood cannot

39. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Relief Society—an Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1959, 5–6.

officiate in temple ordinances; in fact, he cannot even enter the temple. Women, by contrast, are not only permitted to enter the temple, but they can also officiate in priesthood ordinances without an ordination. So, the logical question is, if women will be priestesses in the hereafter and will receive, we must assume, an ordination to that office, why are they not permitted to receive this ordination here, since many of them are already acting as *de facto* priestesses? This question has not been answered satisfactorily. A related question has also never been answered: If women can officiate in temple ordinances through the priesthood keys held by the temple president, why could not an unordained but righteous man do the same?

The 1978 Revelation and Temple Service

Much has been written about the priesthood ban and the 1978 revelation that ended it, but my wife, through her studies, became aware of a question that has not received much attention. Why did the priesthood ban prevent baptized black men and women (and boys and girls) from entering the temple to perform baptisms for the dead? Apparently, the only consistent requirements for serving as a proxy in this ordinance are having been baptized and living a righteous life. Prior to 1978, young nonblack women who did not hold the priesthood were allowed to serve as proxies in being baptized for the dead. If priesthood was not required for their participation in these ordinances, why, then, were faithful blacks not permitted to enter the temple and be baptized for their deceased ancestors?⁴⁰

We might also ask why, to this day, young men who are not ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood are not permitted to serve as proxies in these

40. Apparently, there was one notable exception to this rule. Jane Manning James, a black member known well to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, was permitted to perform baptisms for the dead but was repeatedly denied the opportunity to receive her endowment. See John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 229.

vicarious baptisms. It makes sense that to serve as proxy, a person would need to be baptized. But what does being given the Aaronic Priesthood have to do with being baptized *for* someone else? There is no apparent connection, especially since young women can be baptized vicariously without the priesthood. In this case, there is actually a reverse inequality. For example, a young man, a baptized member whose non-LDS father has forbidden him from being ordained to the priesthood, is not permitted by the Church to go to the temple and serve as proxy in baptisms for the dead, while his sister *is* permitted to do so. This policy makes little sense. Restricting participation to those age twelve and above, when baptism itself can occur at age eight, is also difficult to understand.

Taking this a step further, since faithful nonblack women (who did not hold the priesthood) were permitted to receive their endowments prior to 1978, why were faithful black men and women not permitted to receive their endowments? The lack of priesthood was not a barrier, apparently, for nonblack women. The Church does have a very vague tradition, dating back to Joseph Smith, that women somehow (though not by ordination) receive the priesthood through the endowment,⁴¹ but if that were the case, why do we not acknowledge that priesthood in the everyday Church? Apparently, this is a doctrine that has been abandoned over the years. And so we are again in no-man's-land: we have a requirement that males must hold the priesthood to participate in any ordinances in the temple, but women are not so restricted. Black women prior to June 1978, however, were not permitted to receive temple ordinances for themselves or to serve as proxies in vicarious ordinances, almost as if they were being told they should have had the priesthood, since the priesthood ban was what was keeping them out of the temple. But, of course, nonblack women were allowed to participate in temple ordinances without the priesthood.

41. See, for instance, Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 36–37.

This seeming cauldron of confusion regarding priesthood and temple policies both past and present stems almost entirely from one of the first notions introduced in the first article in this two-part series—that the Mormon priesthood is unique in all the world of religion in that it is an abstract concept, a power or authority one can hold separate from any priestly function in performing rituals or ordinances. Indeed, as pointed out in the previous section, in the case of temple ordinances we have the unique situation where individuals perform priestly functions without any official priesthood ordination.

Since 1978, of course, my wife's question has become moot. Members with black African heritage are able to participate in all temple ordinances. But other questions, both those suggested above and others beyond the scope of this study, remain unanswered. Perhaps we need to take a lesson from President Spencer W. Kimball about persisting in seeking answers until we receive them. Even though I am a white male who grew up in the LDS Church, President Kimball's dogged determination has played a significant role in my own life.

A Little Personal History, Followed by a Personal Perspective

I have a confession to make. I grew up a racist. No, I wasn't a member of the junior Ku Klux Klan. But I grew up in North Ogden, Utah, a very Mormon suburb of Ogden. I attended Weber High School. There was not one black student in the entire school of 1,500 students. We had maybe three or four Asian-Americans, a couple of Native Americans, and perhaps a couple of Hispanics (I don't think either of them spoke Spanish). We did have a few genuine cowboys, but that's another ethnic category altogether. In short, this was a very, very Caucasian school. Lily white. The student body came from the suburbs north of Ogden, the farming communities west of Ogden, and the frozen villages over the mountains in Ogden Valley where David O. McKay grew up. To my knowledge, I did not meet a black person until I played high school

basketball against Bonneville High, and even then my only interaction with my black opponent was maybe a foul or two. We didn't strike up a conversation during free throws. So I grew up believing the racial stereotypes that prevailed in a school such as Weber in the early 1970s. And I am not too proud to admit that I likely used a racial slur or two. This was simply the culture I grew up in. It was based on ignorance.

Then I was called on a mission to Germany. In my second assignment, we had a black member in the ward. He was a sweet, humble man from the Ivory Coast who accepted the fact that he couldn't hold the priesthood. He impressed me, even though he spoke very meager German and English. Later, in my fourth assignment, my companion and I were street contacting in the city one day and spoke with a blond-haired German farmer who told us we could visit him at his home. We bicycled out into the countryside east of town one day and found an ancient farmhouse with an attached barn and a heavy thatched roof. We knocked on the door, and Hans invited us in. He then introduced us to his wife, Josephine, who hailed from Ghana. What a shock. As it turned out, he was as spiritually alive as a piece of petrified wood. She was very interested in our message. So we began teaching them, and soon Josephine told us she had some friends who would be interested.

Her friends were Leo and his wife (whose name I can't remember). They were from Nigeria, and Leo was attending the university in Hamburg. Leo was perhaps the most Christlike man I had ever met. I knew instantly that he was a better Christian than I would ever be. He was intensely interested in our message and soon developed a conviction that Joseph Smith was a prophet. This was 1977. We knew we were not supposed to actively proselytize black people, so we were careful in our teaching. I counseled with the mission president a couple of times. I remember two things he said. First, "Elder Terry, I'm glad this is your problem and not mine." I think he meant this simply as a vote of confidence that I would handle the situation with care. Second, "Whatever you do, don't offend the Lord." Well, that gave me something to think about.

We taught our three black investigators slowly and carefully, and we eventually reached the point where we had to tell them about the priesthood ban. I think the most difficult day of my mission was the day I had to tell Leo that he couldn't hold the priesthood. He took it hard and wanted to know why. So we opened up the Pearl of Great Price and read a bit. We tried to explain how he and his people had been fence-sitters in the premortal world. We taught him about the blood of Cain that he obviously had running through his veins and the curse that attended it. In other words, we taught him all the standard LDS rationales for the priesthood ban. And everything we taught him was false.

Fast forward now a little more than a year into the future. It is June 1978, and I am teaching German-speaking missionaries at the MTC (it may have still been called the LTM at that point). One day, after teaching, I bounced on over to the teachers' lounge. As I was entering the building, another teacher passed me and said, somewhat excitedly, "Have you heard the news? Blacks can have the priesthood." Something in the way he said it made me think he was joking. I replied, "That's not funny." He insisted, "No, I'm serious. President Kimball's had a revelation." I ran out to my car and turned on the radio, and of course it was the only thing everyone was talking about. I sat there in that hot car and wept. I wept for the change, and I wept for Leo.

Fast forward again to 2007. I had been working for BYU Studies for just over a year. I was reading Ed Kimball's biography of his father's years as Church president, *Lengthen Your Stride*. But I wasn't reading the Deseret Book version. I was reading the longer account that was on the CD pocketed inside the back cover. BYU Studies had edited and prepared the CD. In that version, I found four chapters describing in great detail the history of the priesthood ban and the events surrounding the revelation. Ed had access to his father's journals, so this was possibly the most complete and moving version of these events that will ever be written. I said to myself, "We need to get this out where people will read it." I knew few would take time to read the longer version of the book on

the CD. So I combined those four chapters into a long article, worked with Ed to make sure he was happy with it, and published it in *BYU Studies* as “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood.”⁴² It is an incredible account and is available free for download at the BYU Studies website.

Over the years, as I have studied and contemplated the reason it took so long for this change to come, I, along with others, have reached the conclusion that it did not come earlier because, essentially, the Church wasn’t ready for it. The members, not the Lord, were quite likely the reason for the delay. David O. McKay prayed about this issue frequently during his administration and was eventually told, “with no discussion, not to bring the subject up with the Lord again; that the time will come, but it will not be my time, and to leave the subject alone.”⁴³ My own suspicion is that there were too many Mormons who shared the culturally embedded racism that I grew up with. It was only after the hard-fought gains made through the civil rights movement that much of this racism dissipated. My views changed because of Josephine and Leo. By 1978, enough Latter-day Saints were ready for the change that there were celebrations in the streets and many prayers of gratitude from Saints in all walks of life. The Church, as a whole, was ready in 1978.⁴⁴

So, what does this have to do with the other priesthood ban, the one preventing women from receiving the priesthood? Obviously there are differences. As mentioned earlier, there is actually more positive

42. Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 5–78. Available for download at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/spencer-w-kimball-and-revelation-priesthood>.

43. Church architect Richard Jackson, quoted in Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 104.

44. Eugene England called for Latter-day Saints to prepare and pray for the priesthood ban to be lifted. See his “The Mormon Cross,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 78–86.

scriptural basis (if interpreted a certain way) for denying blacks the priesthood. The scriptural evidence against ordaining women is mostly negative—in other words, an absence of evidence, although that absence is now being questioned by some very good scholarship.⁴⁵ But women, like blacks, have had to wage a long battle to achieve the rights and privileges and equalities they now enjoy in American society. Society has changed dramatically.

Now, let me be perfectly clear on this. I am not advocating that women be ordained to the priesthood. I have no reason to do so. What I am advocating is that we keep an open mind, much as President Spencer W. Kimball did regarding blacks and the priesthood, and that we do our homework, just as President Kimball and others did. An article that every Latter-day Saint ought to read is historian Craig Harline's 2013 Hickman Lecture, "What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms?: How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All," delivered at BYU on March 14, 2013.⁴⁶ Harline puts change in historical context and shows just how wrong we usually are when we assume some things will never change.

As members of a church that believes in ongoing revelation, we should never hold the attitude that things can't change. President Kimball showed us how flimsy that argument is. I often wonder how much earlier the 1978 revelation might have come if Church members had been more open to change. In this context, I believe the only appropriate answer

45. See, for instance, Cory Crawford, "The Struggle for Female Authority in Biblical and Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 48, no. 2 (2015): 1–66.

46. Craig Harline, "What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms?: How Things That Were Never Going to Change Have Sometimes Changed Anyway, and How Studying History Can Help Us Make Sense of It All," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2013): 49–79. Available for download at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/what-happened-my-bell-bottoms-how-things-that-were-never-going-change-have-sometimes-changed>.

to the question “How would you feel if the prophet announced that women will be able to receive the priesthood?” is “I would be delighted.” The answer “He would never announce such a change” is restricting the prophet in ways the Lord might not choose to restrict him. Who are we to tell the Lord what he can and cannot do? I think we often do that unwittingly by assuming we know more than we do. I have come to the point where I would welcome such a change, if it came about through the appropriate channels. As these two articles have demonstrated, I hope, our understanding of priesthood is not perfect. It is a complex topic that still holds many inconsistencies and perplexities. We don’t have it all figured out, even though we sometimes speak as though we do. We should be wiser.