

LDS Women and Priesthood

Scriptural Precedents for Priesthood

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I

I have heard many LDS women approach the issue of women and the priesthood by protesting that they do not want to hold the priesthood because they have no interest in passing the sacrament or performing some other ecclesiastical duty. I will venture a guess that many men who have the priesthood do not particularly want to hold it either, and that some of them also have no interest in passing the sacrament. But the reluctance of some men would hardly be a good reason to prevent all men from holding the priesthood. Rather than asking, "Do I want to hold the priesthood?" women and men should approach the issue by asking, "Does denying the priesthood to women reflect God's eternal will?" Let me approach this question by looking at priesthood in LDS scriptures including those it accepts with the larger Judeo-Christian community, the Old and New Testaments.

The scriptures never explicitly state that women may be permitted to hold priesthood or are prohibited from doing so. Instead, they recount who holds or should hold priesthood at a particular time, and what those priesthood holders do or should do. Therefore, a student of LDS scriptures finds inferences, precedents, and ambiguous information that needs to be interpreted about women holding the priesthood but no direct answer to the question (Hansen 1981; Hutchinson 1981).

Let me first give some information on how each scriptural community defined priesthood, then summarize who held the priesthood in those communities. Next I will look at that information asking the questions: Does that scriptural practice or teaching reflect God's will for his people at all times, and consequently, does or should the LDS Church consider it normative and bind-

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ing today? Do we, should we, follow what the scriptures say about who can hold the priesthood?

II

Some general observations about priesthood are in order. Please realize that what I say about priesthood in each book of scripture is a simplification and a generalization, telescoping together information from different time periods. While priesthood may be eternal, it is not unchanging (Heb. 7:12). In every book of scripture, the priesthood develops and evolves. Neither the personnel nor their functions remain the same throughout any single LDS scripture.

For example, the notion of who can perform ritual sacrifice evolves within each scripture. Early in the Old Testament, the privilege is broad: all kinds of males do it with no connection made to priesthood. The privilege gradually narrows until finally only priests who can claim Aaronic descent are allowed. In *Moses* and *Abraham* in the *Pearl of Great Price*, the biblical patriarchs sacrifice, while Joseph Smith quotes Moroni that at some time the sons of Levi will again offer an offering in righteousness (*Moses* 5:5, 20; 6:3; *Abr.* 2:17–18; *JS-H* 1:69). In the *Book of Mormon*, the people obey the law of Moses, including sacrificing animals (*Mosiah* 2:3), until Christ announces in person that he has fulfilled the law of Moses. Therefore, rather than offering animal sacrifice to God, the people should offer him a broken heart and a contrite spirit (3 *Ne.* 9:17–22). In the New Testament, sacrifice evolves from being the prerogative of the priests at the Jerusalem temple, to being the prerogative of Christ, who sacrifices himself, and does it only once. Furthermore, Jewish sacrifices cease after the temple is destroyed. The *Doctrine and Covenants* is written in a time when animal sacrifice is not practiced, but it promises that in the future, such sacrifice will again be offered by the sons of Levi (13:1; 128:24).

The activities explicitly connected to priesthood in scripture include performing rituals, preaching, teaching, and governing the Church. I found no examples of priesthood being invoked when someone manifests spiritual gifts or performs miracles such as healing the sick or raising the dead. Instead these individuals often invoke the power of God or Christ, or claim that the power of God, Christ, or faith makes their action possible.

III

What is priesthood in the Old Testament? In *Exodus* 19:6 God covenants with the Israelites that if they will obey him they will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, i.e., a people set apart from all other people. Priesthood then, is a quality or a condition of holiness, sacredness, and purity, of being more removed from the profane than others are. This concept is reflected in the New Testament and modern Christian idea of a priesthood of all believers (see 1 *Pet.* 2:5, 9, and *Rev.* 1:6).

The demands of ritual purity are so strict that no nation can be pure always, so the priests, obeying the strict law, represent the people. This purity qualifies

the priests to perform specialized functions wherein contact with God occurs (Cody 1969, 119). Cody also argues that priesthood can be seen as a function or craft rather than a condition. For example, whether a Levite is a priest depends upon whether he is functioning as one (Cody 1969, 59). Because the priests are purer than other people, they have superior power to communicate with the supernatural, and therefore, they mediate between the divine and humans (ID 3:877).

Who holds this priesthood? Male descendants of Levi hold it, according to Exodus 32:25–29, because they are more zealous than other Israelites in obeying God. Later, Zadokites, whose Israelite origin is questionable, hold priesthood positions more important than those held by Levites. Later still, people who claim to be Levites descended from Aaron perform the most important functions (Cody 1969, 89, 134, 146). Because the priest had to be as whole and as perfect as possible, those who perform the primary function of offering sacrifice cannot be lame, hunchbacked, or dwarfed, nor can they have defective sight, mutilated faces, a limb too long, an injured foot or hand, an itching disease, or crushed testicles (RSV Lev. 21:16–21).

What is priesthood in the Book of Mormon? It is an eternally existent cosmic entity. As Alma explains, “This high priesthood [is] after the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity” (Alma 13:7). Joseph Smith’s description of priesthood as “an everlasting principle” (HC 3:386) fits priesthood in all three exclusively Mormon scriptures. As in the Old Testament, those who hold this priesthood are expected to be exceptionally holy and pure. However, purity in the Book of Mormon is more ethically focused than in the Old Testament, where it is ritually, physically focused. The primary purpose of priesthood is to help people accept Christ as their savior and live in accordance with his teachings.

Who holds this priesthood? The Book of Mormon shows no concern for lineage as a criterion for holding the priesthood. Numbers help determine priesthood bearers when Alma ordains one priest for every fifty people he has baptized (Mosiah 18:18). The men who hold the priesthood are “just,” fore-ordained by God because they exercised exceedingly great faith, did good works, chose good, repented, and were righteous before him (Mosiah 23:17; Alma 13:3). Immediately after Jesus appears, the twelve Nephite disciples chosen by Jesus seem to be the only priesthood holders.

What is priesthood in the Pearl of Great Price? As in the Book of Mormon, it is an eternally existent cosmic entity. It is also a vehicle for God’s power. Some people are “rightful heirs” to it and some people “are cursed as pertaining to it” (Moses 6:7; Abr. 1:2–4, 18, 20–24, 26–27). Who holds this priesthood? Noah (Moses 8:19), Abraham, and “the fathers,” that is, the biblical patriarchs (Abr. 1:2–4, 18, 31). Who is denied it? The descendants of Cain, and the children of Canaan, who are described as being black (Moses 7:8, 22)

and the descendants of Ham (Abr. 1:20, 22–24, 26–27), presumably all the same people.

What is the priesthood in the New Testament? Most references to priesthood are references to the Jewish priesthood. The great exception is Hebrews, which explains that the priesthood which Christ himself possesses is infinitely superior to, and therefore fulfills and does away with, Jewish priesthood. For most of the New Testament period, there is apparently no Christian priesthood which mortals hold. Although the Gospels show Jesus appointing Peter to be the foundation of his church, commissioning apostles, and assigning seventy people to spread his teachings, they do not connect any of these functions to priesthood. Nor are any of these positions portrayed as being part of a functioning hierarchy during Jesus's lifetime.

As far as we can tell from the texts, New Testament titles, such as apostle, bishop, pastor, evangelist, teacher, elder, and deacon initially describe only functions — roles of service — not priesthood offices (see Mesle 1984, Hutchinson 1981, ID 3:889–90). Paul thinks of his apostleship not as power, authority, or rank, but as a responsibility assigned to him directly from Christ and God to serve humanity by converting them to Christ (Rom. 1:4–5; 1 Cor. 9:15–18; 1 Cor. 2:17, 4:1; Gal. 1:15–17). Toward the end of the New Testament period, some of these functions have evolved into offices which are part of an official church hierarchy (1 and 2 Tim. and Titus). Later, though not in the New Testament, these functions are identified as priesthood offices.

Who holds the priesthood? The Jews, but after Christ's resurrection their priesthood is no longer valid and has been fulfilled. Christ himself possesses priesthood. But the roles of Christian service which evolve into priesthood offices seem to be open to anyone. Lineage is apparently no barrier. Sex is apparently no barrier. Paul twice "applies the Greek word meaning 'deacon' to women. To be sure, there is no absolute certainty that in his use of this word he would imply that deaconesses would be ordained and perform functions in the Church reserved to the order of deacons in later times. But there is no reason to believe that the male deacons mentioned in Acts and elsewhere would either" (Meyer 1974, 60). Meyer also notes that the Church Fathers' writings attest to deaconesses in the very early history of the Church who take care of sick women, serve as intermediaries between the bishop and the female members of his flock, and assist in women's baptisms. "As is well known, in the early Church those to be baptized entered the pools or stream naked." When infant baptism becomes the norm, the need for women to baptize women disappears (1974, 63–64, 74). The text of Romans 16:7 is ambiguous, but the evidence favors Junia's being both a woman and an apostle (Hutchinson 1981, 65–66; Jerome 330; Brooten 1977, 141–42). The English translations of these texts often obscure their application to women.

What is priesthood in the Doctrine and Covenants? An eternally existent cosmic entity which is a vehicle for God's power (84:17, 20; 112:30–31; 121:36; 128:11, 21; 132:7, 19, 44, 45, 59, 64).

Who holds it? Male members of the Church. Some hold it or have special assignments in it "by right," e.g., the sons of Levi, sons of Aaron, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Zion (which is referred to as she) (D&C 13; 68:15–21; 86:8–11; 113:8; 124:91). Official Declaration 2 explicitly allows "all worthy male members of the Church . . . without regard for race or color" to hold it.

IV

Has the Church followed the patterns set forth in these scriptures? Does the LDS Church follow the Old Testament pattern and ordain only Levites? Zadokites? Sons of Aaron? Men without physical blemishes?

Does it follow the Book of Mormon pattern and confer priesthood only on men foreordained by God? Men of exceptional righteousness? Those directly appointed by Christ?

Does it follow the Pearl of Great Price pattern and prohibit descendants of Ham, Canaan, or Cain (black people) from holding the priesthood?

Does it follow the New Testament pattern and restrict the priesthood to Christ? Does it let anyone serve who has the desire or who feels called?

Does it follow the Doctrine and Covenants pattern and allow all worthy males to hold the priesthood?

Pursuing this further, does it follow the Doctrine and Covenants pattern and expect priests, who in today's practice are sixteen years old, to "preach, teach, expound, exhort," and exhort each member "to pray vocally and in secret and attend to all family duties"? Does it follow the pattern of expecting teachers, who in today's practice are fourteen years old, "to watch over the church always, and be with and strengthen them; And see that there is no iniquity in the church, neither hardness with each other, neither lying, backbiting, nor evil speaking; And see that the church meets together often, and also see that all members do their duty" (20:46–47, 53–59)? Does it follow the advice in 1 Timothy and expect deacons, who in today's practice are twelve years old, to be "husbands of one wife" who rule "their children and their own houses well" (3:12)? What scriptural pattern does it follow in allowing nineteen-year-olds to have the title "elder"?

V

In summary, then, what do the scriptures say about women holding the priesthood? Nothing directly. While each scripture except for the New Testament seems to assume that priesthood holders are male, none explicitly claims that priesthood holders have to be only and forever male, nor does any scripture describe any necessary connection between priesthood-holding and maleness.

If the Church — any church — held itself rigidly to scriptural patterns and precedents, nothing could ever be done for the first time (McCabe 1977, 11). Continuous revelation to meet changing needs would be meaningless. Black Mormon males would not now exercise the priesthood, since the Pearl of Great Price strongly suggests that they have no right to hold it. The can-

onized revelation President Kimball received in 1978 is a good example of the Church's rejecting a scriptural precedent as not reflecting God's eternal will. By accepting this revelation, the Church created new scripture which superceded old.

In 1978 the question arose in the Church of whether women ought to be able to pray in sacrament meeting. According to President Kimball's statement in the Regional Representatives meeting on 29 September, to find an answer to that question, the brethren consulted the scriptures. Since they found no scriptural reason to prohibit women's praying in sacrament meetings, the existing policy was changed. Women have, since then, been allowed to pray in any meeting they attend (*Deseret News*, 29 Sept. 1978; *Salt Lake Tribune*, 30 Sept. 1978).

Thus, the LDS Church has rejected scripturally-based precedents about the priesthood and has allowed a practice because scriptures do not forbid it. Perhaps the time has come for the Church to evaluate the scriptural precedents on the issue of allowing women to hold the priesthood and determine which might reflect God's eternal will and which might not.

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