

THEOLOGY



Joseph F. Smith on Priesthood and Church Government

As “the Presiding High Priest” (D&C 107:66) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, President Joseph F. Smith assured that the order, doctrinal principles, and practices of the priesthood were understood and observed. Biographer Francis M. Gibbons noted, “So frequently did President Smith return to the theme of the priesthood, and so detailed and explicit were his remarks on the subject, that this aspect of his public speaking overshadows all others. Indeed, his whole ministry was characterized by a deliberate effort to strengthen and magnify the priesthood, which he recognized as the key factor in the effective administration of Church affairs.”¹ President Smith taught and clarified principles regarding priesthood authority, keys, offices, and presiding officers. In addition, his 1918 vision of the spirit world (D&C 138) made it clear that these principles operated on both sides of the veil. President Smith’s instructions, explanations, and clarifications continue to guide the Saints in their understanding of principles of the priesthood and Church government up to the present day.

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Historical Context: Need for Instruction on Priesthood and Church Government

The decades preceding President Smith's administration had provided little opportunity for Church leaders to teach the Saints correct principles regarding the priesthood and Church government, and even less opportunity to observe priesthood leadership in action. During the era immediately following the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the organization of the Church appeared to emphasize leaders of pioneer companies under the direction of the Twelve Apostles as much as bishops and stake presidents presiding over local congregations (see D&C 136:1–3). During the 1880s, many general and local Church leaders were in hiding previous to the issuing of the Manifesto, which ended the practice of plural marriage, while other leaders had been committed to prison for their support of plural marriage. Visible Church government was veiled, and even the location of the President of the Church was often not known during that era. Thomas G. Alexander noted that President John Taylor "died in Kaysville, a small town north of Salt Lake City, while hiding from United States marshals bent on taking him to trial for practicing plural marriage."²

In addition, unlike today, prior to President Smith's administration, ward and stake priesthood leadership opportunities had been minimal. Each county served as the boundary for a stake and each town was a ward. "After the move to Utah in 1847, local units grew rather haphazardly until 1877, when Brigham Young supervised their reorganization. . . . Under the 1877 reorganization, most counties with large Mormon populations were designated as stakes, supervised by a stake presidency and high council. Wards were presided over by a bishop and two counselors, who were subordinate to stake officers. In the smaller settlements, each town constituted a ward. In the cities, wards corresponded to geographical subdivisions."³ Even with President Joseph F. Smith's efforts to educate them, understanding of general priesthood principles appeared to be shallow among the Church membership. For example, Bill Hartley noted, "By 1913 the Church leaders felt it necessary to remind the Church that bishops were to be the presiding high priests over all local priesthood matters, and that all quorum loyalties therefore were subordinate to his local needs and directives."⁴

As President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith did not require new revelations to understand and explain priesthood and Church government. From the beginning

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of his prophetic ministry to the end of his life, President Joseph F. Smith built upon the foundation the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. In the special general conference at which Joseph F. Smith first presided as the President of the Church, he indicated he would be emphasizing priesthood principles—not teaching something new, but clarifying the previously revealed doctrinal principles of the priesthood. He explained:

It is our privilege to live nearer to the Lord, if we will, than we have ever done, that we may enjoy a greater outpouring of His Spirit than we have ever enjoyed, and that we may advance faster, grow in the knowledge of truth more rapidly, and become more thoroughly established in the faith. . . .

We can make no advancement only upon the principles of eternal truth. In proportion as we become established upon the foundation of these principles, which have been revealed from the heavens in the latter days, and determine to accomplish the purposes of the Lord, we will progress, and the Lord will all the more exalt and magnify us before the world and make us to assume our real position and standing in the midst of the earth. . . .

We cannot deny the fact that the Lord has effected one of the most perfect organizations in this Church that ever existed upon the earth. I do not know of any more perfect organization than exists in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. We have not always carried out strictly the order of the Priesthood; we have varied from it to some extent; but we hope in due time that, by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we will be led up into the exact channel and course that the Lord has marked out for us to pursue, and adhere strictly to the order that He has established.⁵

This theme of teachings upon the priesthood and Church government continued for nearly two decades. On September 13, 1917, a little more than a year before his death, President Smith delivered a message to the Parowan Stake in southern Utah entitled “Principles of Government in the Church.” He declared, “I do not profess to be able to teach you anything that the Lord has not revealed. I have nothing that is not found written in the word of the Lord as it has come to us through the instrumentality of the chosen of God, Joseph the Prophet, and his associates who have succeeded in the presiding authority of the Church since the day of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”⁶

Priesthood Authority, Offices, and Keys

President Smith taught by example and instruction the distinction between principles of priesthood authority, priesthood offices, and priesthood keys. At times these exemplary and clarifying teachings were so apparent that they offered startling reflection. All men who receive the priesthood have authority to act in the name of Jesus Christ. Those who have the authority of the priesthood are ordained to specific offices within the priesthood. In addition, keys are conferred upon those that preside and direct the labors of priesthood bearers.

At the death of President Lorenzo Snow, when Joseph F. Smith became the senior Apostle on the earth, he helped to answer an important question: In sustaining, then setting apart the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as a new President of the Church, does anyone on earth have higher authority, office, or keys to give to him that would make him the President of the Church? If, as occasionally is misunderstood today, some believed that each of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles holds authority or keys to bestow upon the future President of the Church that he does not already possess, President Joseph F. Smith quickly dismissed such a notion by means of the procedure he directed in being set apart as the President of the Church. “On October 17, 1901, the Twelve sustained Joseph F. Smith as president of the church.” Following the unanimous sustaining by the presiding authorities,⁷ Brigham Young Jr., next in apostolic seniority to President Smith, recorded, “Pres. Smith was set apart by all present, his brother Patriarch Jno. [John] S.[mith] being Mouth by his request.”⁸ Note that in requesting his brother John to be mouth in the setting apart rather than a member of the Quorum of the Twelve it was not thought that as Patriarch to the Church, John Smith held higher authority, office, or keys than did members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; nor was it asserted that he had higher authority, office, or keys than his brother, Joseph F. Smith. Rather, this request demonstrated that an individual, who already has been given the keys of the kingdom, is set apart to the office the President of the Church by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood.⁹ This specific procedure of being set apart as President of the Church illustrated the distinction between priesthood authority, priesthood keys, and priesthood offices. Joseph F. Smith had received the authority of the priesthood to act in the name of Jesus Christ when the Melchizedek Priesthood

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President Joseph F. Smith with Patriarch John Smith, his brother. Joseph F. Smith requested that he be set apart as President of the Church by his brother John. Members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stood in the circle. Photo by Charles R. Savage, 1895, Church History Library.

was conferred upon him as a young man. Years later he had received priesthood keys to preside over the Church on October 8, 1867, when he was set apart as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.¹⁰

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Thus, in requesting his patriarch brother to set him apart to the office of President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith explicitly taught that he already held the authority and the keys to preside over the Church, and that he could direct priesthood bearers in ordaining others to offices in the priesthood. In addition, this action emphasized the fact that all holders of the Melchizedek Priesthood are equal in authority regardless of the particular office to which they are ordained. Thus, that which is true of the President of the Church, the Twelve Apostles, and the Patriarch to the Church is also true of other priesthood holders. All hold the same priesthood authority—the Melchizedek Priesthood; however, they differ in their rights and responsibilities according to their office. Those who receive keys preside and direct the labors of priesthood bearers. A few months prior to becoming the President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith clarified:

The Priesthood in general is the authority given to man to act for God. Every man ordained to any degree of the Priesthood, had this authority delegated to him. But it is necessary that every act performed under this authority, shall be done at the proper time and place, in the proper way, and after the proper order. The power of directing these labors constitutes the *keys* of the Priesthood. . . . Thus, the president of a temple, the president of a stake, the bishop of a ward, the president of a mission, the president of a quorum, each holds the keys of the labors performed in that particular body or locality. His Priesthood is not increased by this special appointment, for a seventy who presides over a mission has no more Priesthood than a seventy who labors under his direction; and the president of the elders' quorum, for example, has no more Priesthood than any members of that quorum. But he holds the power of directing the official labors performed in the mission or the quorum, or in other words, *the keys* of that division of that work. So it is throughout all the ramifications of the Priesthood—a distinction must be carefully made between the general authority, and the directing of the labors performed by that authority.¹¹

As aforementioned, President Smith already had the keys to preside over the priesthood and the Church before being set apart to the office of President. When President Lorenzo Snow died, as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Joseph F. Smith became the presiding high priest on the earth. This apostolic authority had been transmitted from the hands of heavenly messengers upon the heads of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. In 1829 Peter, James, and

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John restored the Melchizedek Priesthood and the apostolic keys of the kingdom (see D&C 27:12–13; Joseph Smith—History 1:72). Seven years later, on April 3, 1836, Moses, Elias, and Elijah committed additional keys for the gathering of Israel, the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, and the sealing power (see D&C 110:11–15). The Prophet Joseph Smith conferred all of the keys and authorities of the priesthood upon members of the Quorum of the Twelve. President Joseph F. Smith’s son Joseph Fielding Smith explained:

Now mark! The Lord . . . in the winter of 1843–4, commanded the prophet to confer upon the heads of the Twelve Apostles, every key, power, and principle, that the Lord had sealed upon his head. The Prophet declared that he knew not why, but the Lord commanded him to endow the Twelve with these keys and priesthood, and after it was done, he rejoiced very much, saying in substance, “Now if they kill me, you have all the keys and all the ordinances and you can confer them upon others, and the powers of Satan will not be able to tear down the kingdom as fast as you will be able to build it up, and upon your shoulders will the responsibility of leading this people rest.”¹²

He further clarified:

The Prophet, in anticipation of his death, conferred upon the Twelve all the keys and authorities which he held. He did not bestow the keys on any one member, but upon them *all*, so that *each held the keys* and authorities. All members of the Council of the Twelve since that day have also been given all of these keys and powers. But these powers cannot be exercised by any one of them *until*, if the occasion arises, he is called to be the *presiding officer* of the Church. The Twelve, therefore, in the setting apart of the President do not give him any additional priesthood, but *confirm* upon him that which he already received; they *set him apart* to the office, which it is their right to do.¹³

Three Presiding High Priests: Calling Counselors in the First Presidency.

The Prophet Joseph Smith instructed the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles that the First Presidency of the Church consists of “three Presiding High Priests” (D&C 107:22). In his choice of counselors in the First Presidency, President Joseph F. Smith emphasized that members of the First Presidency preside

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as high priests who have keys bestowed upon them, rather than the often-held notion that their presiding authority devolves upon them because they have been ordained to the office of Apostle. This principle of Church government was clarified in President Smith's choice of John R. Winder as First Counselor and Anthon H. Lund as Second Counselor in the First Presidency. John R. Winder, a British immigrant, had been serving as second counselor in the Presiding Bishopric prior to his call to serve in the First Presidency.¹⁴ President Winder was a high priest but not a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. His call to the First Presidency without ever being ordained to the office of an Apostle caused some concern among the Saints.

The First Presidency felt it necessary to clarify the principles of the priesthood and to cite past instances in which members of the First Presidency had not been ordained apostles. They wrote:

In the *Era* [the official Church magazine] for February [1902], it was stated that several persons who had acted as counselors in the First Presidency had never been ordained apostles. Several correspondents have objected to the statement that Sidney Rigdon, Jedediah M. Grant, Daniel H. Wells, John R. Winder, and



First Presidency, 1901: John R. Winder, Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund. President Joseph F. Smith called John R. Winder as his first counselor. President Winder had been serving as second counselor in the Presiding Bishopric. He was a high priest but was never ordained an apostle. Photo by C. R. Savage, circa 1905, courtesy of Church History Library

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others, were not ordained apostles. We still maintain, upon lack of convincing evidence to the contrary that none of these brethren was ever ordained an apostle. We do know positively that John R. Winder, Sidney Rigdon, Wm. Law and Hyrum Smith, all of whom were members in the First Presidency of the Church, were never ordained apostles.¹⁵

Joseph F. Smith had previously addressed this principle in Church government during the special conference held on November 10, 1901, in which the newly organized First Presidency was sustained by the membership of the Church. He stated:

I will call your attention to the fact that the Lord in the beginning of this work revealed that there should be three High Priests to preside over the High Priesthood of His Church and over the whole Church (D&C 107:22, 64–67, 91–92). He conferred upon them all the authority necessary to preside over all the affairs of the Church. They hold the keys of the house of God, and of the ordinances of the Gospel, and of every blessing which has been restored to the earth in this dispensation. The authority is vested in a Presidency of three High Priests. They are three Presidents. The Lord himself so calls them. But there is one presiding President, and his counselors are Presidents also. I propose that my counselors and fellow Presidents in the First Presidency shall share with me in the responsibility of every act which I shall perform in this capacity. I do not propose to take reins in my own hands to do as I please; but I propose to do as my brethren and I agree upon and as the Spirit of the Lord manifests to us. I have always held, and do hold, and trust I always shall hold, that it is wrong for one man to exercise all the authority and power of presidency in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I dare not assume such a responsibility, and I will not, so long as I can have men like these [pointing to Presidents Winder and Lund] to stand by and counsel with me in the labors we have to perform and in doing all those things that shall tend to the peace, advancement and happiness of the people of God and the building up of Zion.¹⁶

Some of the confusion which President Smith wished to correct may have arisen from misunderstandings regarding the office of high priest, the High Priesthood, and the Melchizedek Priesthood. Although there may be occasions

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when the term “High Priesthood” has been used to refer to the Melchizedek Priesthood, it more properly refers to those who have been ordained to the office of high priest within the Melchizedek Priesthood. In one of the early revelations on the priesthood, the Lord clarified that there are to be presiding officers to preside over those who are of the offices of an elder (within the Melchizedek Priesthood), priest, teacher, and deacon (within the Aaronic Priesthood). “Then comes the High Priesthood,” the Prophet Joseph Smith explained, “which is the greatest of all . . . Wherefore, it must needs be that one be appointed of the High Priesthood to preside over the priesthood, and he shall be called President of the High Priesthood of the Church; or, in other words, the Presiding High Priest over the High Priesthood of the Church” (D&C 107:64–66).¹⁷

In the later 1902 article in the *Improvement Era*, the First Presidency continued to clarify and elucidate the revelation on the First Presidency:

The main point we wish to make is this, that it was not necessary that they should be so ordained apostles in order to hold the position of counselor in the First Presidency. The leading fact to be remembered is that the Priesthood is greater than any of its offices; and that any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood may, by virtue of its possession, perform any ordinance pertaining thereto, or connected therewith, when called upon to do so by one holding the proper authority, which proper authority is vested in the President of the Church, or in any whom he may designate.¹⁸

Authority and Keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood

President Smith and his counselors in the First Presidency also referred to the principle of priesthood authority and keys to clarify why an individual who had never been ordained to a specific office of the priesthood could still ordain other individuals to that office. For example, under the direction of the President of the Church, a high priest could ordain an individual to the office of an Apostle. However, only those that have received keys to preside may confer those keys upon others. Citing the ordination of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President Smith explained:

Every man holding the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood may act in any capacity and do all things that such Priesthood authorizes, it makes no difference what

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office in that Priesthood he holds, providing he is called upon by proper authority to so officiate . . .

Witness the calling on Feb. 14, 1835, of David Whitmer and Martin Harris, both High Priests, by the Prophet Joseph, in conformity with prior revelation from God (see Doctrine and Covenants, section 18) to “search out the Twelve.” They chose the Twelve, ordained, and set them apart for their exalted callings, because they were called upon by the prophet of God who had been instructed of the Lord, and also because these men held the necessary authority of the Priesthood, which authority was exercised, in this case as it should be in all cases, upon proper calling. The Doctrine and Covenants makes it very clear that while each officer in the Church has a right to officiate in his own standing, “The Melchizedek Priesthood holds the right of Presidency, and has power and authority over all the offices of the Church in all ages of the world to administer in spiritual things.” (Doctrine and Covenants, section 107:8)¹⁹

At another time President Smith clarified the greater importance of priesthood authority above that of priesthood offices:

There is no office growing out of this Priesthood that is or can be greater than the Priesthood itself. It is from the Priesthood that the office derives its authority and power. No office gives authority to the Priesthood. No office adds to the power of the Priesthood. But all offices in the Church derive their power, their virtue, their authority, from the Priesthood . . . If it were necessary, the Seventy, holding the Melchisedek Priesthood, as he does, I say IF IT WERE NECESSARY—he could ordain a High Priest; and if it were necessary for a High Priest to ordain a Seventy, he could do that. Why? Because both of them hold the Melchisedek Priesthood.²⁰

The principle directing President Smith’s teachings was again that of the distinction between priesthood authority, priesthood offices, and priesthood keys. Individuals do not preside because of any particular office to which they have been ordained, apostles not excepted. Indeed, an individual could be ordained to the office of Apostle and not receive keys to preside. On the other hand, an individual could have keys conferred upon them without being ordained to the office of Apostle. The First Presidency further explained:

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When an Apostle presides, he, like the High Priest, the Seventy, the Elder, or the Bishop, presides because of the High Priesthood which has been conferred upon him; and furthermore, because he has been called upon so to do by the acknowledged head of the Church. (D&C 107:24) And so with the High Priest who has been called to officiate in the First Presidency, in which case he is “accounted equal” with the President of the Church in holding the keys of the Presidency (section 90:6), as long as the President remains. When he dies, the calling of his counselors ends, and the responsibility of Presidency falls upon the quorum of the Twelve Apostles, because they hold the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood and are the next quorum in authority. (D&C 107:24) It is not the apostleship, but the Priesthood and the calling by power and authority which enables any person to preside.²¹

Preparing the Church for Worldwide Expansion

The principles of priesthood authority, offices, and keys guide Church government from the highest quorums of General Authorities to the most immediate local priesthood leaders. As the Church grows, the order of the priesthood is repeated in each area in which congregations are established. That is, priesthood authority is conferred upon individuals—all being equal in authority according to the priesthood order, Aaronic or Melchizedek. Those that receive priesthood authority are then ordained to various offices within the priesthood, each office devolving specific rights and responsibilities. From those ordained to specific offices, individuals are given keys to preside over their respective quorums. Thus, the order of the priesthood is perfect in its organization and able to expand infinitely across the globe with the growth of the Church. This expansion requires that greater numbers of individuals be given and understand priesthood authority, offices, and keys.

Francis M. Gibbons noted, “The Church over which Joseph F. Smith was called to preside had grown from a membership of six in 1830 to a membership of almost two hundred eighty thousand in October 1901, divided into fifty stakes and twenty-one missions. Over one-sixth of the membership resided in the Salt Lake Valley, and until just a year before Joseph became president, the large concentration of Latter-day Saints was included in a single stake and fifty wards.”²² In order to meet the needs of a growing Church membership, President Smith focused on

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giving local priesthood leadership greater responsibilities and duties rather than emphasizing a greater role for central Church leadership. In so doing, Joseph F. Smith continued to emphasize the responsibilities of local priesthood leadership as he had done previously while serving as a counselor in the First Presidency to President Lorenzo Snow. Historian Thomas G. Alexander noted, “President Snow insisted that the local officials ‘assume the burden of their charges and not expect the apostles to do their work.’ As counselor in the First Presidency, Joseph F. Smith believed that the lowest possible level ought to deal with any problems.”²³ From the beginning of his administration as President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith instructed the priesthood holders, “We want every man to learn his duty, and we expect every man will do his duty as faithfully as he knows how, and carry off his portion of the responsibility of building up Zion in the latter days.”²⁴

President Smith prophetically anticipated the day when the Church would be governed by priesthood councils and the auxiliaries of the Church would not be needed to support the latter-day work. In the general conference of April 1906, he described that future day in the Church:

We expect to see the day, if we live long enough (and if some of us do not live long enough to see it, there are others who will), when every council of the Priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will understand its duty, will assume its own responsibility, will magnify its calling, and fill its place in the Church, to the uttermost, according to the intelligence and ability possessed by it. When that day shall come, there will not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations, because it will be done by the regular quorums of the Priesthood. The Lord designed and comprehended it from the beginning, and He has made provision in the Church whereby every need may be met and satisfied through the regular organizations of the Priesthood.²⁵

Rights and Privileges of Offices in the Priesthood

During his ministry, Joseph F. Smith taught repeatedly regarding the rights and privileges belonging to the various priesthood offices.²⁶ He emphasized the fact that “all the quorums or councils are organized in the Church, each with special duties and special callings; not clashing with each another, but all harmonious and united.”²⁷ Among his instructions he addressed the duties of each office of

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the Melchizedek and Aaronic Priesthoods. Regarding his own office and keys as President of the Church, he explained:

I have the right to bless. I hold the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood and of the office and power of patriarch. It is my right to bless; for all the keys and authority and power pertaining to the government of the Church and to the Melchizedek and Aaronic Priesthood are centered in the presiding officers of the Church. There is no business, nor office, within the Church that the President of the Church may not fill, and may not do, if it is necessary, or if it is required of him to do it. He holds the office of patriarch; he holds the office of high priest and of apostle, of seventy, of elder, of bishop, and of priest, teacher and deacon in the Church; all these belong to the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they can officiate in any and in all of these callings when occasion requires.²⁸

“The duty of the twelve apostles,” he explained, “is to preach the gospel to the world, to send it to the inhabitants of the earth and to bear testimony of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as living witnesses of His divine mission.”²⁹ Regarding the privileges afforded, as well as the responsibilities of the Twelve, President Smith admonished them thus:

Be eye and ear witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ. It is not permissible for them to say, I believe, simply; I have accepted it simply because I believe it. Read the revelation, the Lord informs us they must *know*, they must get the knowledge for themselves. It must be with them as though they had seen with their eyes and heard with their ears and they know the truth. That is their mission, to testify of Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen from the dead and clothed now with almighty power at the right hand of God, the Savior of the world. That is their mission, and their duty, and that is the doctrine and the truth that it is their duty to preach to the world and see that it is preached to the world.³⁰

Regarding the Seventy he taught:

The Seventies are called to be assistants to the Twelve Apostles; indeed they *are* apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ, subject to the direction of the Twelve, and it is their duty to respond to the call of the Twelve, under the direction of

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the First Presidency of the Church, to preach the Gospel to every creature, to every tongue and people under the heavens to whom they may be sent. Hence they should understand the gospel. . . . They should take up the study of the Gospel, the study of the scriptures and the history of the dealings of God with the people of the earth.³¹

President Smith taught that the responsibility of the Presiding Bishopric is that of “temporal custodians of the means of the Church and whose duty it is to account for the receipt and disbursement of these funds.”³²

He described the role of patriarchs, indicating that this was their responsibility:

To bestow blessings upon the heads of those who seek blessings at their hands. . . . It is their business and right to bestow blessings upon the people, to make promises unto them in the name of the Lord, as it may be given them by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to comfort them in the hours of sorrow and trouble, to strengthen their faith by the promises that shall be made to them through the Spirit of God, and to be fathers indeed of the people, leading them into all truth.”³³

He taught concerning the high priest:

It is his bounden duty to set an example before the old and young worthy of emulation, and to place himself in a position to be a teacher of righteousness, not only by precept but more particularly by example—giving the younger ones the benefit of experience of age, and thus becoming individually a power in the midst of the communities in which they dwell. . . . From among those who hold this office are chosen the presidents of stakes and their counselors, and the High Councils . . . and from this office are chosen the bishops, and the bishop’s counselors, in every ward in Zion. . . . Those holding this office are, as a rule, men of advanced years, and varied experience, men who have filled missions abroad, who have preached the Gospel to the nations of the earth, and who have had experience not only abroad but at home. Their experience and wisdom is the ripened fruit of years of labor in the Church, and they should exercise that wisdom for the benefit of all with whom they are associated.³⁴

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President Smith explained regarding those ordained as elders:

It is the duty of this body of men to be standing ministers at home; to be ready at the call of the presiding officers of the Church and the stakes, to labor in the ministry at home, and to officiate in any calling that may be required of them, whether it be to work in the temples, or to labor in the ministry at home, or whether it be to go out into the world, along with the Seventies, to preach the Gospel to the world.³⁵

Concerning the bishopric he taught:

It is expected that the Bishop of a ward and his counselors will understand the necessities of every member of his ward. . . . It devolves upon the Bishopric of the ward to look after the poor, to minister unto the sick and the afflicted and to see that there is no want nor suffering among the people in these organized divisions of the Church. It is also the duty of these presiding officers in the Church to look after the spiritual welfare of the people, to see that they are living moral, pure and upright lives, that they are faithful in the discharge of their duties as Latter-day Saints, that they are honest in their dealings with one another, and with all the world.³⁶

President Smith summarized the duties of the Aaronic Priesthood, “which attends to the different temporal matters of the Church, consisting of Priests, Teachers, and Deacons, who labor under the direction of the Bishopric in the various wards in which they dwell.”³⁷

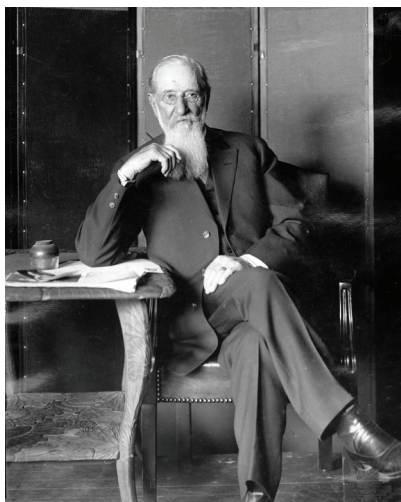
Under Joseph F. Smith’s direction, the ages at which young men were ordained to the various offices in the Aaronic Priesthood were formalized. The Quorum of the Twelve was given the responsibility to oversee the instructions regarding regularizing the Aaronic Priesthood. In addition, President Smith established a General Priesthood Committee on Outlines to oversee unified selection and writing of material to be used in instruction for Aaronic Priesthood quorum members throughout the Church. Their counsel followed President Brigham Young’s directions in 1877 that young men were to be ordained deacons when they were twelve years old. To facilitate regular advancement in the Aaronic Priesthood offices, it was determined that ordinations should occur at three-year intervals until they received the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained elders. Thus, each deacon would be ordained at age twelve and then to the office of teacher at age fifteen. After

another three years they should be ordained to the office of priest at age eighteen. Ordination to Elder would follow when they were twenty-one years old.³⁸

Priesthood Authority and Keys in the Postmortal Spirit World

Joseph F. Smith's culminating contribution, both doctrinally and regarding the priesthood, is his vision on the redemption of the dead (D&C 138). Among other important concepts, this vision emphasized the acts of the Savior in authorizing and sending forth individuals, including elders from this dispensation. Regarding the work of preaching the gospel in the spirit world President Smith wrote, "from among the righteous, he [Jesus Christ] organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead" (D&C 138:30).

President Smith chronicled seeing priesthood leaders from past dispensations such as Adam, Abel, Noah, Shem the great high priest, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Elias, Malachi (D&C 138:38–46), "all these prophets and many more, even the prophets who dwelt among the Nephites and testified of the coming of the Son of God" (D&C 138:49). Concerning these individuals, President Smith testified, "our Redeemer spent his time during his sojourn in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh; that they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom he could not go personally, because



President Smith posed at writing table, ca. 1916. "So frequently did President Smith return to the theme of the priesthood, and so detailed and explicit were his remarks on the subject, that this aspect of his public speaking overshadowed all others." (Francis M. Gibbons, Joseph F. Smith: Patriarch and Preacher, Prophet of God, 269), Church History Library.

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of transgression, that they through the ministration of his servants might hear his words” (D&C 138:36–37). In addition, President Smith witnessed regarding these prophets that “the Lord taught, and gave them power to come forth, after his resurrection from the dead, to enter into his Father’s kingdom, there to be crowned with immortality and eternal life” (D&C 138:51).

President Smith also saw prophets from this dispensation that had departed to the world of spirits. He recorded that he saw “the Prophet Joseph Smith, and my father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great latter-day work” (D&C 138:53). All of these he saw continued the work of salvation over which they presided in mortality. The Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith “the keys of this kingdom shall never be taken from you, while thou art in the world, neither in the world to come” (D&C 90:3). Thus the keys of the priesthood given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in mortality continued with him through the veil into the world of spirits, and he continues to direct the priesthood of this dispensation in that sphere. It is also evident that others that have held the keys continue to exercise those keys under the Prophet Joseph Smith’s direction.

At the M. I. A. Conference on June 5, 1910, President Smith taught:

This gospel revealed to the Prophet Joseph is already being preached to the spirits in prison, to those who have passed away from this stage of action into the spirit world without the knowledge of the gospel. Joseph Smith is preaching that gospel to them. So is Hyrum Smith. So is Brigham Young and so are all the faithful apostles that lived in this dispensation under the administration of the Prophet Joseph. They are there, having carried with them from here the Holy Priesthood that they received under the hands and by the authority of the Prophet Joseph Smith and with that authority conferred upon them in the flesh they are preaching the gospel to the spirits in prison. . . . Not only are these engaged in that work but hundreds and thousands of others; the Elders that have died in the mission field have not finished their missions, but they are continuing them in the spirit world.³⁹

The following year he again emphasized the continuation of priesthood authority after death, “Those who are authorized to preach the gospel here and are appointed here to do that work will not be idle after they have passed away, but

will continue to exercise the rights that they obtained here under the priesthood of the Son of God to minister for the salvation of those who have died without a knowledge of the truth.”⁴⁰

In the later 1918 revelation, President Smith saw in vision those individuals of whom he had testified concerning their work in the postmortal spirit world. “I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation,” he testified, “when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead” (D&C 138:57).

Conclusion

President Smith’s teachings on priesthood authority, keys, offices, and presiding officers continue to guide our understandings today.⁴¹ His clarifications and explanations were founded on the revelations of God to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Yet, the direct and clear manner in which he taught expounded the doctrinal principles of priesthood and Church government in such a way that all might see application in their lives and Church experience. Personally, his explanations have become part of who I am as a priesthood holder and leader in the Church. That is, the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood enables me to administer and perform all that I am called upon to do; the offices of the priesthood I have held provide me instruction as to my duties and privileges, and, when I was given keys to preside over quorums of the priesthood and as a bishop, I was authorized to direct others in their priesthood labors. As President Smith taught, the principles of the priesthood and Church government provide a perfect organization to carry forth the work of the Lord in complete harmony among the many priesthood bearers.

Notes

1. Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph F. Smith: Patriarch and Preacher, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 269.
2. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986), 4.
3. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 94.
4. William G. Hartley, “The Priesthood Reform Movement, 1908–1922,” *BYU Studies* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 143–44.
5. Joseph F. Smith, in Special Conference Report, November 1901, 69–71.

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6. James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:80.
7. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 97.
8. Vera Jean Cassel, ed., *Diary of Brigham Young Jr., 1900–1902* (1931), L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT; manuscript contained in the New York City Library, New York; entry date of October 17, 1901, 87. Marriner W. Merrill, also a member of the Quorum of the Twelve at that time, recorded in his diary regarding the reorganization of the First Presidency, “Joseph F. Smith was unanimously sustained as the President and was set apart as such by his brother, Patriarch John Smith.” Melvin Clarence Merrill, ed., *Utah Pioneer and Apostle: Marriner Wood Merrill and His Family* (n.p., 1937), 270.
9. Contrary to Irene Bates and E. Gary Smith’s assertion that “Joseph F. Smith unsettled the other apostles at the very beginning of his tenure as president by requesting that his brother, the Patriarch, ordain him” (*Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of Presiding Patriarch* [Urbana: University of Illinois, 1996], 142), there is no indication in the previously cited diaries that any of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had any concerns with Patriarch John Smith setting apart his brother Joseph F. Smith as President of the Church and of the High Priesthood. Further, both Young and Merrill use the term “setting apart” rather than “ordain” as appropriate for the ordinance.
10. As shall be further explained in the discussions that follow, there is also a distinction between priesthood offices and priesthood keys. Joseph F. Smith had been ordained to the office of an Apostle more than a year before being set apart as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. However, he did not receive the keys of the kingdom at that time. President Brigham Young ordained Joseph F. Smith to the priesthood office of an Apostle on July 1, 1866, at the time he called him to serve as a counselor to those serving in the First Presidency. Nevertheless, to repeat, ordination to a priesthood office or setting apart as a counselor to the First Presidency is distinct from receiving keys to preside over the kingdom of God.
11. Joseph F. Smith and Edward H. Anderson, “The Meeting of the Centuries,” *Improvement Era*, January 1901, 230; emphasis in the original. Also cited in *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 136.
12. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:259.
13. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:155.
14. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 97.
15. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, *Improvement Era*, May 1902, 549. Also cited in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:42–43.
16. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report [Special Conference], November 1901, 82; brackets in original.
17. George Q. Cannon clarified that “an Elder is not a High Priest until he is ordained to the ‘High Priesthood,’ that is, is made a High Priest.” *Gospel Truth*, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:243. For a discussion on the office of high priest and the High Priesthood please see the author’s explanation in Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration: A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 597–602.

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18. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, "The Priesthood and Its Offices," *Improvement Era*, May 1902, 549; also cited in Clark, *Messages*, 4:42; *Gospel Doctrine*, 136.
19. Smith, Winder, and Lund, "The Priesthood and Its Offices," 550–51. Also cited in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:43–42. As noted in this article, the Prophet Joseph Smith conferred all of the keys that he possessed upon the Twelve Apostles a few months prior to his death.
20. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1903, 87; emphasis and spelling in the original; also cited in *Gospel Doctrine*, 148; emphasis and spelling in original.
21. *Improvement Era*, April 1902, 550. Also note that this statement is an example wherein the term "High Priesthood," as used, appears to refer to the Melchizedek Priesthood and not to the office of high priest.
22. Gibbons, *Joseph F. Smith*, 215.
23. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 97.
24. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report [Special Conference], November 1901, 82.
25. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1906, 3.
26. Many of President Joseph F. Smith's teachings are compiled in the volume *Gospel Doctrine*, 136–200, in the chapter on priesthood. An abbreviated collection of his teachings was compiled for instruction in Relief Society and Melchizedek Priesthood quorums in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 137–45. In addition, Francis M. Gibbons masterfully researched and organized President Joseph F. Smith's teachings on the responsibilities and rights of the various priesthood offices. I am indebted to him for the references and citations in this section on President Smith's teachings regarding specific offices in the priesthood and have liberally utilized his study and work. See Gibbons, *Joseph F. Smith*, 264–69.
27. *Improvement Era*, July 1903, 704–8; also cited in *Gospel Doctrine*, 144.
28. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 7; see also D&C 107:65–67, 91–92.
29. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 4; see also D&C 107:23, 33.
30. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 6; emphasis in original; see also D&C 18:26–33.
31. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 5–6; emphasis in original; see also D&C 107:25–26, 34.
32. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 6; see also D&C 107:15–17; 119:1–2; 120:1.
33. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 4; see also D&C 124:91–92.
34. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 5–6; see also D&C 107:10–12.
35. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 4; see also D&C 20:38–45.
36. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 2–3; see also D&C 42:30–36; 72:9–18; 107:68–76.
37. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1915, 4; see also D&C 20:46–59.
38. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 111–112; see also William G. Hartley, "The Priesthood Reform Movement, 1909–1922," *BYU Studies* 13, no. 2, 137–56.
39. Joseph F. Smith, *Young Woman's Journal*, August 1910, 456–60; cited in Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 471–72.
40. Smith, *Young Woman's Journal*, March 1912, 128–32; also cited in *Gospel Doctrine*, 461.

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41. President Joseph F. Smith's teachings on the priesthood have been cited by both President Thomas S. Monson and President Boyd K. Packer in instructing members of the Church. Thomas S. Monson, "Willing and Worthy to Serve," *Ensign*, May 2012, 66; Boyd K. Packer, "What Every Elder Should Know—And Every Sister As Well," *The Things of the Soul* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 147–60.