



As deacons carry the sacrament from row to row, they are delivering not only bread and water but also the symbolic means of the participants' salvation.

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The Preparatory Priesthood

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As a young Aaronic Priesthood holder, I learned that the Aaronic Priesthood was a preparatory priesthood. I always understood that to mean that the primary purpose for my holding the Aaronic Priesthood was that it would help prepare me to someday hold the Melchizedek Priesthood—hence the title “preparatory.” Although this is no doubt part of the Lord’s reason for allowing the young men of the Church to hold the priesthood, in my mind it somehow lessened the importance of the Aaronic Priesthood as a powerful and essential priesthood in its own right. I saw the Aaronic Priesthood as a sort of “training” priesthood to teach me how to eventually hold the “real” priesthood of Melchizedek.

It has only been as an adult, as a teacher and adviser of young men, and more recently as bishop in my ward, that I have come to appreciate the crucial saving power of the Aaronic Priesthood and its impact on the lives of every Latter-day Saint. In addition, I have come to understand in a more complete sense how the Aaronic Priesthood is indeed a preparatory priesthood. Thus, this article offers a basic overview to help teachers and leaders to better teach the sacred and powerful nature of the Aaronic Priesthood.

A Preparatory Gospel

It is interesting that the term “preparatory priesthood” is not found anywhere in the scriptures. However, in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Aaronic Priesthood is described as holding “the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel” (D&C 84:26). What, then, is this “preparatory gospel”? Is there more than one gospel? And if the Aaronic Priesthood holds the key to the “preparatory gospel,” what gospel keys are held by the Melchizedek Priesthood? The answer to the first question is found in the very next verse (27): “Which [preparatory] gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments.” This description reminds us of the words of John the Baptist to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery as John conferred this priesthood upon them. He said, “Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins” (D&C 13:1; emphasis added).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, “There are two gospels—the preparatory gospel and the fullness of the everlasting gospel.”^{cxxxviii}1 To understand this preparatory gospel, or gospel of repentance and baptism, and how it is that the Aaronic Priesthood holds the keys to the same, it is helpful to understand clearly the nature of ordinances and their relationship to covenants. In the priesthood session of the October 1991 general conference, Elder Jorge A. Rojas explained: “To make [an agreement between two parties] official, to make it stand, you both sign your name on that written agreement. When you want to make an agreement with the Lord official, you don’t sign a document; you perform an ordinance.”^{cxxxix}2 Thus, the performance of an ordinance is the means whereby we enter into a covenant, or two-way promise, with our Heavenly Father.

The Covenant of Baptism

The first major impact that the Aaronic Priesthood has in our lives is at our baptism. Baptism is an ordinance belonging to the Aaronic Priesthood and is essential to our salvation. The Savior said, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). When we are baptized, we enter into our first covenant with God in mortality. We covenant to take upon us the name of Christ, to always remember Him, and to keep His commandments (see D&C 20:37, 77).

Having made such promises with the Lord, what happens if we break them? President N. Eldon Tanner said: “Note that the Lord says (and I am not quoting word for word): ‘I cannot break this covenant, but if you break it there is no promise.’ Isn’t it something to think about when the Lord says he cannot break a covenant that he makes with his people. That covenant stands as long as we will keep the covenant, but when we break the covenant, there is no covenant as far as the Lord is concerned.”^{cxli}3 President Joseph Fielding Smith put it this way, “If a person violates a covenant, whether it be of baptism, ordination, marriage, or anything else, the Spirit withdraws the stamp of approval, and the blessings will not be received.”^{cxli}4

If, after baptism, we fail to keep our covenant, if we break the Lord’s commandments (which indeed we all do on occasion), then we have broken our baptismal covenant, and the promised blessings (in this case, entrance into the celestial kingdom) cannot be granted. This is bad news for us all.

Repentance

The good news is that there is repentance. Repentance is a great gift from God; indeed, the scriptures teach us that Christ “hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance. And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!” (D&C 18:12–13). But it is only through our entering into a covenant with God *through baptism* that repentance becomes truly effective. Many times in scripture the prophets and the Savior Himself

use the phrase “baptized unto repentance.”^{cxlii}5 Alma, for example, taught, “Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins, that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness” (Alma 7:14).

Alma makes two points clear, the first being that forgiveness of sins does not come simply through repentance alone but that baptism is also necessary. Second, he shows that it is not the waters of baptism that cleanse us but rather the Lamb of God. Nephi clarifies that the remission of sins comes “by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:17). Thus, we are cleansed from our sins only when the Holy Ghost places the stamp of approval upon us.

President Brigham Young taught: “Has water, in itself, any virtue to wash away sin? Certainly not; but the Lord says, ‘If the sinner will repent of his sins, and go down into the waters of baptism, and there be buried in the likeness of being put into the earth and buried, and again be delivered from the water, in the likeness of being born—if in the sincerity of his heart he will do this, his sins shall be washed away.’ Will the water of itself wash them away? No; but keeping the commandments of God will cleanse away the stain of sin.”^{cxliii}6

Our sins, therefore, are remitted by the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost following our repentance *and* baptism by water. Continued repentance is then available only to those who have entered into a covenant with the Lord through the Aaronic Priesthood ordinance of baptism. Since the fruits of repentance (forgiveness and cleansing) are available only through the administration of the Aaronic Priesthood, the Aaronic Priesthood “holds the keys of . . . the gospel of repentance” (D&C 13:1; see also Joseph Smith—History 1:69).

Renewal of Covenants

There is yet another crucial aspect to this key of the gospel of repentance. Repentance, while bringing forgiveness of sin, doesn’t necessarily reestablish a broken covenant. If through our disobedience to the commandments we have broken our covenant, how can we ever expect to lay hold upon the promised blessings? Here again, it is only through the administration of an Aaronic Priesthood ordinance, the sacrament, that we are able to enter again into a covenant relationship with our Heavenly Father. President Gordon B. Hinckley explained: “Every member of this church who has entered the waters of baptism has become a party to a sacred covenant. Each time we partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, we renew that covenant. We take upon ourselves anew the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and promise to keep His commandments. He, in turn, promises that His Spirit will be with us. We are a covenant people.”^{cxliv}7

Two Laws

Elder McConkie associated the Aaronic Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood with two different laws: the law of Moses and the law of Christ.^{cxlv}8 Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants makes it clear that Moses’ goal in bringing the children of Israel to Mount Sinai was to “sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God” (D&C 84:23). But the children of Israel “hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence,” so the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away and they were given the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood.

The resulting set of performances and ordinances is known as the law of Moses. The Apostle Paul explains the purpose of this law: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Thus, the purpose of the Aaronic Priesthood is to bring us to Christ and His law and to help us become “justified” (which we will look at shortly).

The higher law is administered by the Melchizedek Priesthood. This priesthood was originally called “the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:4) and is therefore the priesthood of Christ. The performances and ordinances belonging to this priesthood constitute the law of Christ. The ultimate purpose of the law of Christ is the same as Moses’ ultimate purpose: “to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God.” The Lord explains in the Doctrine and Covenants, “And they who are not sanctified through the law which I have given unto you, even the law of Christ, must inherit another kingdom, even that of a terrestrial kingdom, or that of a telestial kingdom” (D&C 88:21). The law of Christ sanctifies us to enter into the celestial kingdom of God.

So here we see another aspect of the preparatory nature of the Aaronic Priesthood. The Aaronic Priesthood’s ordinances and covenants help us to repent of our sins, thus preparing us to come unto Christ. The law of Christ and the ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood then prepare us to come into the presence of the Father. “This is eternal lives,” the Savior explained to Joseph Smith, “to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent. I am he. Receive ye, therefore, my law” (D&C 132:24).

Two Principles: Justification and Sanctification

The principles of justification and sanctification have been mentioned in the context of these two priesthoods. To be justified is to be in compliance with the law: to be without guilt. The simplest way to be justified is to live a sinless life, never to break a law. For all but the Savior, this way is impossible, so our Heavenly Father has prepared for us another way. It is the gospel of repentance administered through the Aaronic Priesthood. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the demands of justice (punishment for sins) have been met by the Savior. All those who exercise faith in Christ, repent of their sins, and covenant through baptism to keep His commandments and strive to do so are then justified by the grace of God.

Having been justified by grace through the Atonement, we are no longer under the grasp of the law; our guilt is swept away. But we are not yet prepared to enter into God’s presence because “no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom” (3 Nephi 27:19). Our basic nature has not changed; our hearts are not yet pure. Sanctification is what is needed. Sanctification is the process of becoming pure and holy—clean in a dimension beyond just being free from guilt. We are to become new creatures in Christ (see Mosiah 27:26).

Sanctification comes as we put off the natural man and become “a saint through the atonement of Christ” (Mosiah 3:19). The Savior commanded the Nephites: “Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name [Aaronic Priesthood preparation-justification], that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand blameless before me at the last day” (3 Nephi 27:20). It is through the gift of the Holy Ghost, received through the Melchizedek Priesthood, that we receive, as we follow the Spirit, a new heart and a new spirit (see Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Two Priesthoods

We live in a dispensation where there are two priesthoods given to man. In the words of Elder McConkie: “There are two priesthoods—the priesthood of Melchizedek and the priesthood of Aaron. . . . The Melchizedek Priesthood administers the gospel in its everlasting fullness, but the Aaronic Priesthood administers the preparatory gospel only, which preparatory gospel is the law of Moses and includes the law of carnal commandments.”^{cxlvi9}

We call the Aaronic the “lesser” priesthood and the Melchizedek the “greater,” but this should in no way suggest that the Aaronic Priesthood is unimportant. It is no small thing to be “lesser” than the very priesthood of God Himself, the power by which the universe was created and the

plan of salvation set in motion through the Atonement. Indeed, the importance of the Aaronic Priesthood is that it prepares us for the blessings of this “greater” priesthood, which blessings include eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7).

How, then, is the Aaronic Priesthood the “preparatory priesthood”? Is it because it is the priesthood that prepares young men to become Melchizedek Priesthood holders? Well, certainly, in part. But the far greater reality is that the Aaronic Priesthood and its ordinances prepare every willing son and daughter of Heavenly Father to enter into covenants with Him to repent and keep His commandments. They then come to Christ, are forgiven of their sins, and become justified and *prepared* to enter into greater covenants, through the Melchizedek Priesthood, which can ultimately bring them into the presence of the Father. The Aaronic Priesthood prepares us all! What an inspiring thing it can be for a young Aaronic Priesthood holder to know and understand that the priesthood he holds is not just some “training” priesthood but rather an essential part of each member’s salvation. Would it not humble a young deacon to know that as he carries a sacrament tray from row to row, he is not just delivering bread and water but the symbolic means of the participants’ salvation? He is helping to save eternal lives as a savior on Mount Zion (see Obadiah 1:21).

Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 404.
2. Jorge A. Rojas, in Conference Report, October 1991, 61.
3. N. Eldon Tanner, in Conference Report, October 1966, 99.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:45.
5. See Matthew 3:11; Mosiah 26:22; Alma 5:62; 6:2; 7:14; 8:10; 9:27; 48:19; 49:30; Helaman 3:24; 5:17; 5:19; 3 Nephi 1:23; 7:24, 26; Moroni 8:11; D&C 35:5.
6. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:4.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1994, 72.
8. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 408.
9. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 409–10.