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## Women and the Priesthood in the Contemporary Church

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## **Women and the Priesthood in the Contemporary Church**

Barbara Morgan Gardner

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# WOMEN AND THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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**Barbara Morgan Gardner**

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**I**n the past decade, we have seen an acceleration of invitations for women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to understand their

priesthood power and authority. In reference to the 2013 worldwide leadership training meeting she attended, then Relief Society general president Linda K. Burton related that “Elder Oaks emphatically stated: Men are not the priesthood! To me, that is a wake-up call as well as an invitation to all of us to study, ponder, and come to better understand the priesthood.” She then declared, “Sisters, we cannot stand up and teach those things we do not understand and know for ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Six years later, Sister Jean B. Bingham, who had replaced Sister Burton as the Relief Society general president, extended the following invitation to the women of the Church:

To all of us who have daughters and sons, nieces and nephews, young women and young men—will you teach them this? Teach them that in church callings, temple ordinances, family relationships, and quiet, individual ministry, Latter-day Saint women and men go forward with priesthood power and authority.

Teach them that the interdependence of men and women in accomplishing God’s work through His priesthood power is central to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and will help prepare the world for the Savior’s second coming.<sup>2</sup>

This statement advances Sister Burton’s thoughts further. In addition to asking the women of the Church to understand their priesthood power and authority, Sister Bingham was asking them to use it!

In her 2019 women’s conference talk, Sister Bingham clarified, “I bear my witness that each woman is a beloved daughter of Heavenly Parents, and in this latter-day has been given the opportunity to be endowed with priesthood power that will help her achieve all her righteous desires and dreams. My hope is,” she continues, “the same as President Nelson’s, that each will take [our] ‘rightful and needful place in [our] homes, in [our] communities, and in the kingdom of God—more than [we] ever have before.’”<sup>3</sup>

Between these talks, other Church leaders, primarily the First Presidency and senior apostles, have invited the women of the Church to learn more about, understand, and use the priesthood for various reasons. The prophet himself, the members of the First Presidency and leaders of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Relief Society general president, all her counselors, the Young Women’s general president, and the Primary general presidency are all asking the women of the Church to start studying, understanding, and using their priesthood power and authority as never before.

Some of places where leaders have asked women to do this include but are not limited to the following:

- Russell M. Nelson, “A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2015, 95–98.
- Dallin H. Oaks, “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2014, 49–52.
- M. Russell Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight,” (Brigham Young University Education Week, August 2013). See also “Men and Women and the Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*, September 2014.
- M. Russell Ballard, “Women of Dedication, Faith, Determination, and Action,” (Brigham Young University Women’s Conference, May 1, 2015).
- Linda K. Burton, “Priesthood: ‘A Sacred Trust to Be Used for the Benefit of Men, Women, and Children,’” (Brigham Young University Women’s Conference, May 3, 2013).
- Julie B. Beck, “The Vision of prophets regarding Relief Society: Faith, Family, Relief,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2012, 83–85.
- Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Rise Up in Strength, Sisters in Zion,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2016, 12–15.
- Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Young Women in the Work,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 36–38.
- Sharon Eubank, “This Is a Woman’s Church,” (FairMormon conference, August 2014).
- Russell M. Nelson, “Sisters’ Participation in the Gathering of Israel,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2018, 68–70.
- Jean B. Bingham, Sharon Eubank, Reyna I. Aburto, “Endowed with Priesthood Power,” (Brigham Young University Women’s Conference, May 2, 2019).
- David A. Bednar, “Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2019, 101–104.
- Russell M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2019, 76–79.
- Dallin H. Oaks, “The Melchizedek Priesthood and the Keys,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2020, 69–72.
- Joy D. Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2020, 15–18.
- Henry B. Eyring, “Sisters in Zion,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, November 2020, General Conference, 67–69.

This focus of women understanding their priesthood power and authority is unprecedented in this dispensation since the days of Joseph Smith. Like President Nelson, Joseph Smith also seemed to have a prophetic priority on preparing people, both women and men, for the temple and their priesthood power and authority. This paper will look at the priesthood in terms of its more holistic definitions, its historical context, and the significance and emphasis the prophet and Church leaders have put on women understanding their priesthood power and authority both during Joseph Smith's leadership and today, especially in regard to the temple. Perhaps with this understanding, women in our day will fulfill the prophet's blessing to "understand the priesthood power with which you have been endowed and that you will augment that power by exercising your faith in the Lord and in His power."<sup>4</sup>

### **The Definitions of Priesthood**

It has become apparent that one of the major struggles in understanding and using the priesthood for women is a matter of semantics. Recently, members often speak of and discuss the priesthood as if it has one definition only and as if that definition is all encompassing. A single definition of priesthood causes many to have a very narrow view of what the priesthood is. Recently, Church leaders have tried to expand and help clarify a broader definition of priesthood that is more inclusive than some might have previously articulated. For example, Elder Dale G. Renlund and his wife recently wrote a book on the priesthood. In this book they explained,

Many members of the Church who accept, love, and appreciate the priesthood may find themselves "fuzzy" on the doctrine and principles. Perhaps that is because the term priesthood is used in at least two ways. First, *priesthood* is the term used to describe the total power and authority of God. Second, *priesthood* is also the term used to describe the power and authority that God gives to ordained priesthood holders on earth to act in all things necessary for the salvation of God's children.<sup>5</sup>

Elder and Sister Renlund refer to the two definitions of priesthood in the same way that we might define the earth. We use the term *earth* to describe the entire globe and planet on which we live, but yet we would also use the term *earth* to describe the dirt that we hold in our hands.

The second definition of the priesthood is the most commonly used and understood by the members of the Church for many reasons. One is that we have priesthood-holding men speaking to priesthood-holding men in general conference. In these settings, male leaders are doing specific training and teaching, primarily regarding the second definition of the priesthood. As most administrative functions of the Church are also held by men, these talks are understandably perpetuated by men through the Church Educational System, Temple Department, Priesthood Department, Curriculum, etc. with historically little distinction or focus on women or the larger definition of priesthood. Thus, historically, we have many more talks, training, and educational material regarding the second definition than the first. Until recently, the priesthood session of general conference was held twice as often as the Relief Society session and was considered more official. And for years it was, frankly, quite taboo for women or men to talk about women and their priesthood power and authority.

Therefore, in our efforts to help members of the Church understand the more inclusive definition of priesthood and how it relates to women, it is important to talk about it in terms that do not require ordination to a priesthood office but rather focus on the broader definition of God's power and authority (see Figure 1). By focusing our definition of the priesthood on the second definition, we are missing the more expansive concept of priesthood, which, by need of ordination, cuts women almost completely off from this conversation.

**Priesthood=God's total power**

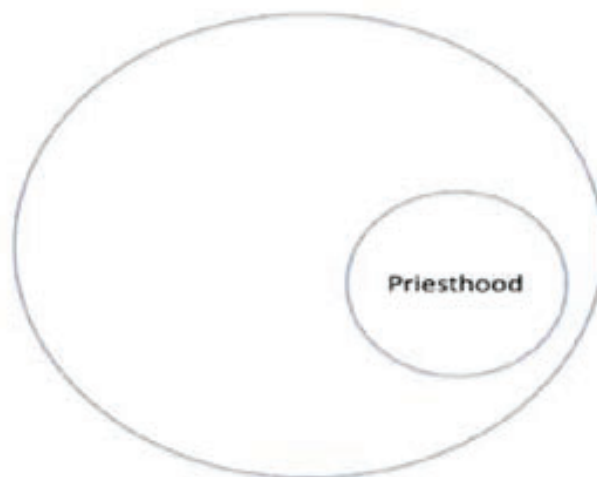


Figure 1.



Perhaps another way to understand priesthood, which is both doctrinally accurate and more inclusive toward women, is to use a more holistic and historically accurate approach (see Figure 2). As is the same in the previous diagram, the largest circle of the priesthood represents God's total power and authority. The inner circle is the priesthood described as God's power and authority delegated to man. The final two circles are the two priesthood organizational structures that have been on the earth since the times of Adam and Eve: the hierarchical and ecclesiastical or administrative priesthood, and the patriarchal or familial priesthood. By understanding these two priesthood structures, not only do women become more included but the focus also turns from the ecclesiastical or administrative structure of the Church to temples and families, which, in reality, is the eternal structure.

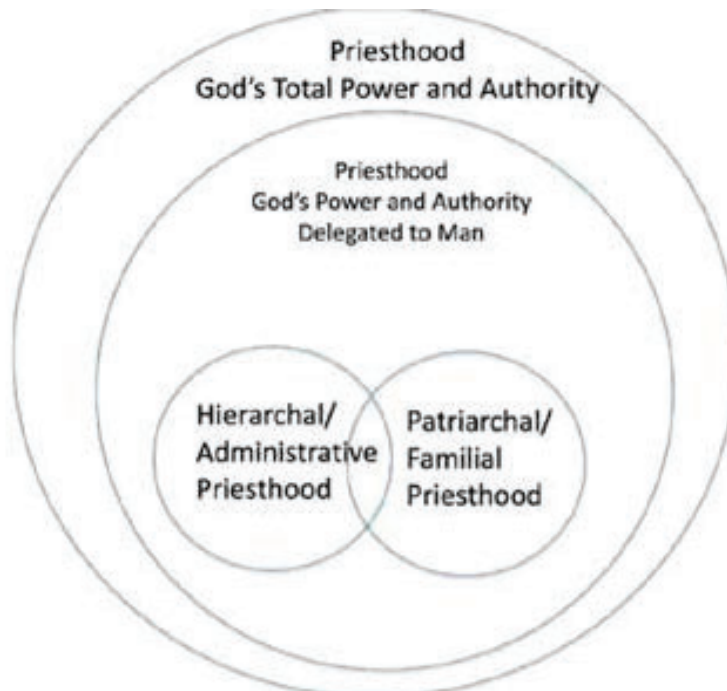


Figure 2.

## The Historical Context of the Priesthood

### Adam and Eve through Christ

Throughout the history of the earth, the Lord has used two organizational structures to administer his priesthood: the more public structure, being the ecclesiastical structure, which is more commonly discussed and understood and is culturally primarily related to men, and the more private structure, being the patriarchal or familial priesthood structure,

which is better understood to apply to both women and men. (In fact, both genders must enter into the patriarchal or familial priesthood structure in order to receive exaltation.)

Let's look more carefully into the patriarchal order or structure of the priesthood. Regarding this order of the priesthood, President Benson instructed,

Adam and his descendants entered into the priesthood order of God. Today we would say that they went to the House of the Lord and received their blessings.

The order of the priesthood spoken of in the scriptures is sometimes referred to as *the patriarchal order because it came down from father to son*.

But this order is otherwise described in modern revelation as an *order of family government* where a man and woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God throughout their mortality.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that both Adam and Eve entered into the covenant and that both were promised the associated blessings or given the same guarantee from the Lord. This priesthood organizational structure, as we know, continues on from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah and throughout the generations until we get to Moses. Although the Lord gave the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham, it is clear that the covenant would not exist without Sarah. There is no Abrahamic covenant and there is no Patriarchal Order, or Fulness of the Priesthood, without a woman and a man sealed by God through the sealing ordinance, where both wife and husband make the associated covenants. President Benson continued,

Moses taught this order of priesthood to his *people* and “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God;

But they hardened their hearts and could not enter his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fullness of his glory.

Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also.” (D&C 84:23-25)<sup>7</sup>

We learn through the Joseph Smith Translation that the Lord further instructed Moses: “I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them” (JST, Ex. 34:1).

It is through this holy order that Adam and Eve and their righteous posterity were able to enter into the presence of God. It is through this order that any individual can enter into the presence of God and live (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:22). After this order of the priesthood was taken from the children of Israel at the time of Moses, there were only few exceptions as to who could enter into this order of the priesthood until the time of Jesus Christ. As President Benson explained, Elijah was one of those.<sup>8</sup> It was Elijah who gave these keys to Peter, James, and John, and it was Elijah who would eventually give these same keys to Joseph Smith.

When Christ came to the earth, he of course had the fulness of the priesthood and desired to use it. But he set up a completely different organizational structure. Why didn’t we still have the patriarchal order of the priesthood? Why was this no longer a familial priesthood? Well, Elder McConkie states very simply in a pragmatic way,

The church operates in the easiest and harmonious way because of the social setting that exists from the world. The social circumstances of the nations and the governments reflect that we can’t operate through families like they did in Abraham’s day. You can’t have civil and ecclesiastical authority combined, because the great masses of men don’t belong to the Church.<sup>9</sup>

This may be an obvious point, but Elder McConkie talks about Abraham’s day, which connects us to the Abrahamic covenant. There is no Abrahamic covenant if there is no Sarah. The Abrahamic covenant requires two individuals to enter into the fulness of the priesthood together. Sarah must also have received her endowments. That is obvious. Sarah and Abraham together must have received and entered into the patriarchal order of the priesthood. Both had the benefits of, the knowledge of, and the privilege of using that priesthood for the benefit of their family. And this holds true for any man and woman who enters into and receives the fulness of the priesthood that requires the temple.

Elder McConkie added to our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant when he explained,

Now what was the gospel of Abraham? Obviously it was the commission, the mission, the endowment and power, the message of salvation, given to Abraham. And what was this? It was a divine promise that both in the world and out of the world his seed should continue "as innumerable as the stars; or, if ye were to count the sand upon the seashore ye could not number them." (D&C 132:30)

Thus, the gospel of Abraham was one of celestial marriage.... This power and commission is what Elias restored, and as a consequence, the righteous among all future generations were assured of the blessings of a continuation of the seeds forever, even as it was with Abraham of old."<sup>10</sup>

Both men and women receive this promise, and today they receive it together in the sealing ordinance.

After Christ's crucifixion and the ensuing death of the apostles, the world went into an apostasy; God's priesthood power and authority was taken from the earth. After the death of the prophets in the Book of Mormon, there no longer existed a church on the earth that was led by a prophet who held and was responsible for all priesthood keys.

## **Restoration of Priesthood**

### **Ecclesiastical, Administrative, and Hierarchal Priesthood**

All this changed in May of 1829 when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were visited by John the Baptist, who ordained them with the Aaronic Priesthood, and later when they were visited by Peter, James, and John, who gave them the keys and authority associated with the Melchizedek priesthood, specifically, the priesthood keys of presiding. With these priesthood keys, Joseph was able to establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, call members of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency, and perform other ecclesiastical duties within the Church. He also delegated priesthood authority for a variety of purposes such as performing priesthood ordinances like baptism and conferring the Holy Ghost.

All these functions are extremely important, but the Lord needed Joseph and the Saints to go way beyond this priesthood structure in order to create Zion and reach their ultimate exaltation.

## **Patriarchal, Temple, and Familial Priesthood**

Throughout the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord reveals that the priesthood would be received, found, and used in the temple by both women and men. Women and men would be blessed to enter into an order of the priesthood and receive their endowment, make and keep sacred covenants, and perform priesthood functions. Women would be given the priesthood authority to do so regardless of ecclesiastical ordination. In the temple, members of the Church would be given instruction and endowed with priesthood power and authority.

On June 1, 1833, the Lord once again emphasized the importance of building his holy house and promised to endow his servants with power and authority (Doctrine and Covenants 95). The prophet and apostles had already received the keys of the priesthood and the power and authority associated with the administrative function of the Church, but this power and authority came only through the temple. This was the Patriarchal or familial priesthood structure and was the power and authority associated with the fulness of the priesthood.

Joseph Smith thus received revelation both on the hierarchical structure and on the patriarchal structure of the priesthood. While he was restoring the administrative function of the Church—the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, etc.—he was also receiving revelation regarding the temple and the patriarchal structure of the Church.

This becomes apparent as we look at the early scriptures and at the Doctrine and Covenants. As early as 1831, Jesus Christ declared, “I am Jesus Christ, the son of God; wherefore, gird up your loins and I will suddenly come to my temple” (Doctrine and Covenants 36:8). Joseph had already received priesthood administrative language in Doctrine and Covenants 18 with information regarding the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

This temple language continues in Section 38: “And there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:32). Members of the Church most likely didn’t understand this point, but Joseph had known since Moroni visited him in 1828, as part of the revelation now known in part as Doctrine and Covenants 2, that something was missing; Elijah had not yet come. In Section 42 of Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord explained one of the purposes of the temple: “That my covenant people may be gathered in one in that day when I shall come to my temple. And this I do for the salvation of my people” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:36).

Finally, in 1836, the Kirtland Temple was dedicated.

Mary Fielding, wife of Hyrum Smith, spoke of the feelings and experiences she had at the Kirtland temple. She scribed,

The hearts of the people were melted and the Spirit and power of God rested down upon us in a remarkable manner. Many spake in tongues and others prophesied and interpreted.... Some of the Sisters while engaged in conversing in tongues their countenances beaming with joy, clasped each others hands and kissed in the most affectionate manner. They were describing in this way the love and felicities of the Celestial World....Some of the prophecies delivered in touns and interpretd were so great that I cannot begin to describe them....I believe as do many others that Angels were present with us. A brite light shone across the House and rested upon some of the congregation. What I felt that day seemed to outweigh all the affliction and distress of mind I have suffered since I came here.<sup>11</sup>

It wasn't until after the dedication of the Kirtland temple that the keys promised by Elijah were finally restored. Were these keys not delivered by John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John in May of 1829 to Joseph and Oliver? Apparently not. This was the assignment of Moses, Elias, and Elijah. Why? The prophet Joseph Smith explains why Elijah was necessary. He said, "Because he holds the keys of the authority to administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood," or the sealing power.<sup>12</sup> Joseph also explained that these keys were "the revelation, ordinances, oracles, powers and endowments of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood and of the kingdom of God on the earth."<sup>13</sup>

Yet the endowment was not yet given; the fulness of the priesthood had not yet been restored to the earth. Nearly two years after of the dedication of the Kirtland temple, the Saints evacuated the city and abandoned their temple — not by choice but as a result of the extermination order. Thus, although the temple had been built according to God's command and the keys had now been received, the power and authority given to the Saints through the ordinances and covenants of the Melchizedek priesthood had not been entered into or received.

What would be the significance of these ordinances and covenants? What were these keys to do? They would create families and save souls.

Who would become a vital part of this divine mandate? Both women and men!

President Ezra Taft Benson explained,

Even though the Aaronic Priesthood and Melchizedek Priesthood had been restored to the earth, the Lord urged the Saints to build a temple to receive the keys by which this order of priesthood could be administered on the earth again, “for there [was] not a place found on earth that he may come to and restore again that which was lost...*even the fulness of the priesthood*” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:28).<sup>14</sup>

Following the forced exodus of the Saints from Ohio and Missouri to Illinois, Joseph would turn his attention primarily to the building of the new temple. Having now obtained the keys of apostleship given to him by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, Joseph was determined that these keys would be used. This time, however, the temple the Saints would build would allow for priesthood ordinances not yet available that, unlike the Kirtland temple and the administrative priesthood functions, would require women. In the Nauvoo temple, both men and women would enter into a specific order of the priesthood, even the patriarchal order or fulness of the priesthood.

To these faithful saints, Joseph Smith declared, “Go to and finish the temple, and God will fill it with power, and you will then receive more knowledge concerning this Priesthood.”<sup>15</sup> There is only one place where the order of the priesthood, which is patriarchal authority, is made known, and that is in the temple. You enter into an order of the priesthood in the temple.

Thus, the building of the temple in Nauvoo began line upon line. With the building of the temple came new ordinances, new opportunities, and new privileges for women that were unheard of since the days of earlier dispensations. Regarding the Nauvoo temple, the Lord revealed to his prophet in January of 1841,

And verily I say unto you, let this house be built unto my name, that I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people; For I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times. And I will show unto my servant Joseph all things pertaining to this house, and the priesthood thereof, and the place whereon it shall be built. (Doctrine and Covenants 124:40–42)

In this same revelation, the Lord calls his temple, “the house of the daughters of Zion” (124:11)—perhaps a foreshadow of the necessary involvement of women in these sacred priesthood ordinances and its

associated power and authority given to women. It wouldn't be long before women would become full participants in both receiving and performing priesthood ordinances and making covenants in the temple. On April 6, 1841, the cornerstone of the Nauvoo Temple was laid.

About a year later, in March 1842, the Lord inspired the prophet Joseph Smith to organize the women of the Church, “after the pattern of the priesthood”<sup>16</sup> and to teach them “how [they] would come in possession of the privileges, blessings and gifts of the priesthood.”<sup>17</sup> When Joseph Smith turned the key of the priesthood in the women’s meeting held in the upstairs room of the Red Brick store in Nauvoo, he “made the Relief Society an official part of the Church and kingdom of God.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, Joseph Smith stated that the women of the Church were organized after the organization that existed in Christ’s Church anciently.<sup>19</sup> He then visited the Relief Society frequently and at least six times taught the women the doctrine of the gospel to prepare them to receive their endowment in the house of the Lord, focusing particularly on priesthood and how it related to them. This opened new opportunities to women for receiving knowledge and intelligence from on high such as through the temple ordinances that were soon to be instituted.

Shortly after the Prophet instituted Relief Society, in May of 1842, prior to the completion of the Nauvoo temple, Joseph introduced the endowment to nine men in the upper room of his Nauvoo store. Shortly after Bishop Newel K. Whitney received his own endowment, he spoke to the sisters of the Relief Society in May of 1842. To these sisters he declared, “In the beginning God created man male and female and bestow’d upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor’d to the earth it takes all to restore the Priesthood.”<sup>20</sup>

The importance of the establishment of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society in context of the temple cannot be overstated. The women would be included and needed to perform every one of the Melchizedek Priesthood temple ordinances, including baptisms for the dead, initiatories, endowments, sealings, anointings, etc. In June of 1842, in anticipation of the completion of the Nauvoo temple, the prophet Joseph encouraged the sisters to be prepared to “move according to the ancient Priesthood.” He told the women of the Relief Society that he intended “to make of this Society a kingdom of Priests [as] in Enochs day—as in Paul’s day.”<sup>21</sup> Bathsheba W. Smith later explained, “We have that ceremony in our endowments as Joseph taught.”<sup>22</sup>



It becomes clear through reading the early records of the Relief Society, the papers and journals of Joseph Smith, and early Church history that endowed members of the Church recognized the relationship between the endowment—the fulness of the priesthood, power, authority—and the celestial kingdom for both men and women and the need for both genders to enter into this priesthood order for exaltation to be possible. One of Joseph’s journal entries in April 1842, for example, states that he “met the members of the ‘Female Relief Society,’ and...gave a lecture on the Priesthood, showing how the sisters would come in possession of the privileges, blessings, and gifts of the priesthood, and that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick, casting out devils, &c., and that they might attain unto these blessings by a virtuous life, and conversation, and diligence in keeping all the commandments.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, the temple seemed to connect mortal with immortal, earth, and heaven. The temple was necessary to fulfill Joseph’s and the Lord’s calls for members to become priests and kings, priestesses and queens and to create a holy nation.

In September of 1843, Emma Smith became the first woman to receive her endowment in this dispensation, and shortly after, she administered the ordinance to other women. These women and men who had received their endowments, united as a whole, would be termed “anointed quorum,” “Holy Order,” “Council,” or simply “Quorum.”<sup>24</sup> Bathsheba W. Smith, who was later called as the Relief Society general president and a member of the Relief Society during the time of Joseph Smith and who also received her endowment from him prior to the completion of the Nauvoo temple, explained in 1905 that the prophet “wanted to make [them], as the women were in Paul’s day, ‘A kingdom of priestesses.’” She continued, “We have that ceremony in our [temple] endowments as Joseph taught.”<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, there were two priesthood organizational structures: one in which only men were ordained to priesthood offices in a hierarchal structure, and the other, a familial or patriarchal structure, in which both men and women had priesthood power and authority and which was more private and sacred.

In the temple, women performed and were given priesthood privileges and responsibilities. In fact, for many years, the Relief Society president was also the head of the female temple officiators. This included women like Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, Zina Young, and Bathsheba Smith. “In these women, the ecclesiastical authority of the Relief Society president was coupled with the ritual authority of the leading female

temple officiator. Snow was known by her contemporaries both as ‘a Priestess in the House of the Lord’ and as ‘President of all the Relief Societies in the Church.’”<sup>26</sup> The women of the Relief Society were clearly taught their role in the temple and were able to distinguish their roles and responsibilities in the Church with those of the temple.

It is also significant to note that in the days of Joseph Smith, women’s priesthood power and authority was not necessarily associated with their husbands, and their relationship with God was not dependent on any mortal intermediary.

Following the death of Joseph Smith, however, the principles of women’s use of priesthood seemed to have a stronger connection to the women’s husbands. For example James E. Talmage once said,

It is a precept of the Church that women of the Church share the authority of the priesthood with their husbands, actual or prospective; and therefore women, whether taking the endowment for themselves or for the dead, are not ordained to a specific rank in the Priesthood. Nevertheless there is no grade, rank, or phase of the temple endowment to which women are not eligible on an equality with men. True, there are certain of the higher ordinances to which an unmarried woman cannot be admitted, but the rule is equally in force as to a bachelor. The married state is regarded as sacred, sanctified, and holy in all temple procedure; and within the House of the Lord the woman is the equal and the help-meet of the man. In the privileges and blessings of that holy place, the utterance of Paul is regarded as a scriptural decree in full force and effect: ‘Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.’”<sup>27</sup>

In no way does he minimize women’s role in the priesthood, but he does seem to tie it to men as the prophet Joseph did not. This perhaps was a cultural concept that seemed to have perpetuated for decades; yet, throughout the teachings of President Nelson, it does not seem prevalent if present at all. In fact, through President Nelson’s recent talks and temple ordinance changes, it would seem that women’s temple covenants and priesthood privileges are more in line with what Joseph Smith taught than at any other time since then.

## Contemporary

### **Church, Ecclesiastical, and Administrative Priesthood**

Like Joseph Smith and his contemporaries, many Church leaders today have encouraged both women and men to better understand the priesthood in terms of the priesthood power, authority, and privileges. In our day, there seems to be a greater focus on the distinction between women performing priesthood duties and women using the priesthood privileges in the ecclesiastical and administrative structure of the priesthood and in the temple. For example, in his landmark talk to the men of the Church “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” then Elder Dallin H. Oaks, now the first counselor in the Church’s First Presidency, declared,

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.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, although perhaps not widely understood at the time, President Oaks made it clear that women perform a priesthood function and use the priesthood that has been given to them as they fulfill their callings in the Church. This is a significant shift for both men and women in their understanding of priesthood power and authority. Perhaps President Joseph F. Smith’s definition of priesthood makes sense here, especially if the term man is understood, in this case, to include both men and women. He described the priesthood as: “the power of God delegated to man by which man can act in the earth for the salvation of the human family.”<sup>29</sup> Tying this description with President Oaks’ furthered understanding of the priesthood in regard to women, therefore, makes sense. Women, as well as men, according to President Oaks, use God’s authority, and therefore God’s power, for the “salvation of the human family.”<sup>30</sup>

Sunday School teachers, regardless of priesthood ordination or gender, therefore, use the same priesthood and have the same authority to teach, as both receive that authority under the direction of one who has priesthood keys. A man who has been ordained to a priesthood office and who serves as a joint Sunday school teacher does not possess any more authority or power to teach in that calling than his female counterpart. His ordination to a priesthood office gives him the authority to perform a priesthood ordinance or other priesthood function. That is not given to women, but it by no means excludes women from using the priesthood authority they have been given.

### **Temple and Family Structure of the Priesthood**

That understanding of women's priesthood power and authority through her callings is helpful and empowering, but it pales in comparison to the priesthood power and authority that a woman receives as a result of her temple covenants. This topic has also been addressed by leaders of the Church, but as it is sacred in nature applying to the temple and family, it is perhaps explained and discussed in a more sacred or private manner. Understanding the relationship between women, men, and the priesthood as a result of temple ordinances and covenants is a critical factor in women's abilities to learn of, teach about, call upon, and take advantage of their priesthood privileges as they have recently been asked to do by the prophet and other Church leaders. This will be discussed later as we analyze current Church leaders' teachings regarding women, priesthood, and the temple.

Why is it so important that we understand the history of the temple in our dispensation and its relationship to women? President Ballard said very, very clearly again in 2015:

Although the church plays a pivotal role in proclaiming, announcing, and administering the necessary ordinance of salvation and exaltation, all of that, as important as it is, *is really just the scaffolding* being used in an infinite and eternal construction project to build, support, and strengthen the family. And just as scaffolding is eventually taken down and put away to reveal the final, completed building, so too will the mortal, administrative functions of the Church eventually fade as the eternal family comes fully into view. In that context, it's important to remember that our Church assignments are only temporary, and that at some period we will all be released, either by our leaders or by death. But we

will never be released from our eternal callings within the family.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the most enduring priesthood unit in eternity is the family. Those who will have the priesthood are women and men who have entered into the patriarchal order of the priesthood together so they could raise their family with priesthood power and authority. The structure of the Church as we see it today is no longer going to be in effect in the next life, and we are seeing that being fulfilled even in our day.

If we look carefully at the talks that President Nelson has given, we will see that he has been carefully talking about the temple in regard to women, not only in a nuanced manner but in a very open manner, trying to help people understand their roles in a way they never have before. In 2015, when President Nelson was called to be the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he significantly declared,

We, your brethren, need your strength, your conversion, your conviction, your ability to lead, your wisdom, and your voices. The kingdom of God is not and cannot be complete without women who make sacred covenants and then keep them, women who can speak with the power and authority of God!<sup>32</sup>

Again, we witness the leaders of the Church teaching of priesthood power, of priesthood authority, and of women being able to speak with such. President Nelson, also said,

We need women who are devoted to shepherding God's children along the covenant path toward exaltation; women who know how to receive personal revelation, who understand the power and peace of the temple endowment; women who know how to call upon the powers of heaven to protect and strengthen children and families; women who teach fearlessly.<sup>33</sup>

How do women do this? Through their temple endowment. Note President Nelson's constant and clear reference to the temple endowment. He's talking about the temple, covenants, and the priesthood power that are associated with those covenants. When President Oaks spoke about women and priesthood authority, he made this statement: "What other authority can it be?"<sup>34</sup> When women have power coming through their endowments, of course, what other power would it be? I submit to you that anytime President Nelson or any of the leaders of the Church speak

about women having priesthood or having power and authority, what other power and authority could it be than that of the priesthood? Note then, this statement and invitation to women by President Ballard in 2015,

You have been baptized into the Lord's Church. You have received the gift of the Holy Ghost, and many of you have been endowed and some of you have been sealed in the house of the Lord.

Like faithful sisters in the past, you need to learn how to use the priesthood authority with which you have been endowed to obtain every eternal blessing that will be yours.<sup>35</sup>

So again, emphasis on the temple. By saying, "Like faithful sisters in the past," he was referring to those sisters who were in England as the early Church was starting. He was referring to the authority these early saints received through their temple covenants and was instructing women of our day to use the same.

I want to make it very clear that the brethren are talking about priesthood power and authority in the temple in a different way than they are talking about priesthood power and authority that is received through priesthood callings or callings within the Church structure.

Only a few years later, but now as the prophet of the Church, President Nelson voiced the following concern in the April 2018 general conference: "Too many of our brothers and sisters do not fully understand the concept of priesthood power and authority." He later continued, "I fear that too many of our brothers and sisters do not grasp the privileges that could be theirs."<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that although the talk was directed to the men of the Church, President Nelson was specifically stating that even the women were not taking advantage of the priesthood privileges that were theirs.

What are these privileges that the women and men are not taking advantage of? Although he specifically cited examples of men in this talk, in his footnote President Nelson opened the door to a further, more specific understanding of the privileges that belong to both genders. In the official publication of President Nelson's talk, footnote 3, which references the above quote, significantly cites Doctrine and Covenants Section 84:19–22 and Section 107:18–19. Thus, while sections 84 and 107 have typically been used in reference to men and their priesthood roles and responsibilities, by tying this footnote to women, President Nelson expanded the typical paradigm to include women and their priesthood

responsibilities. What priesthood privileges then apply to both women and men? Section 84:19-22 reads,

This greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.

I have come to recognize that this revelation from the Lord through Joseph Smith is often misunderstood and perhaps takes more looking into than we often do. For example, although women are not ordained to a priesthood office in the ecclesiastical structure of the Church, they do enter into an order of the Priesthood in the temple. According to President Benson, all members who enter into the temple receive the key of the knowledge of God.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore critical to recognize that this key is not a key of presidency or even a key like Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received in the Kirtland temple but is rather a key of knowledge. Beyond the knowledge of how to access the priesthood power that women have been endowed with in the temple, women also gain an even clearer knowledge during the ordinances of the temple of who they are and what they ultimately can become. The Lord has revealed that “the power of godliness,” including the power to become like Him, is manifested through priesthood ordinances (Doctrine and Covenants 84:20). Thus, both women and men are able to ultimately become exalted beings like their Heavenly Parents. President Joseph Fielding Smith instructed, “Because of that priesthood and the *ordinances thereof*, every member of the church, men and women alike, may know God.”<sup>38</sup> I do not believe that we, as members of the Church, recognize the impact it has on us to literally know that we are children of divine parents and that have the potential to be like them.

President Nelson also asks the members of the Church—both women and men—to better understand their priesthood privileges as shown in Section 107, which says,

The power and authority of the higher, or Melchizedek Priesthood, is to hold the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church—To have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, to have the heavens opened unto them, to commune with the general assembly and church of

the Firstborn, and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. (Doctrine and Covenants 107:18–19)

Do these promises and blessings not apply to women as well when women enter into the highest level of the Melchizedek priesthood and make covenants associated therein? Do not all the blessings of the temple apply to both men and women? Do we correctly understand and teach that women as well as men have the privilege of “receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:19)? Are we empowering the women in our day as Joseph empowered the women in his? It seems that President Nelson is trying desperately to do so.

In October of 2019, President Nelson said the following:

The heavens are just as open to *women* who are endowed with God’s power flowing from their priesthood covenants as they are to men who bear the priesthood. I pray that truth will register upon each of your hearts because I believe it will change your life. Sisters, you have the right to draw liberally upon the Savior’s power to help your family and others you love.<sup>39</sup>

He continued in the talk by once again asking the women of the Church to study sections 84 and 107 in the Doctrine and Covenants as well as Section 25 to better understand the priesthood and how to call upon the priesthood power with which they have been endowed. He added, “When a man understands the majesty and power of a righteous, seeking, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, is it any wonder that he feels like standing when she enters the room?”<sup>40</sup> Where does this happen? In the temple and perhaps even in our homes and other places where the importance of these principles is understood.

So what does this mean, this endowment with power? President Nelson instructed,

Every woman and every man who makes covenants with God and keeps those covenants, and who participates worthily in priesthood ordinances, has direct access to the power of God. Those who are endowed in the house of the Lord receive a gift of God’s priesthood power by virtue of their covenant, along with a gift of knowledge to know how to draw upon that power.<sup>41</sup>

Sheri Dew’s book *Women and the Priesthood* has incredible insights about the importance of priesthood power, and I invite you to read her



book to study more about priesthood power and authority. From her book and from many other sources from Church leaders, I have come up with this short list of the powers that are available for both women and men:

- The power of enlightenment, testimony, and understanding
- The power to thwart the forces of evil
- The power that enables us to use our gifts and abilities with greater effectiveness and increased intelligence
- The power to overcome the sins of the world
- The power to become even better qualified to teach
- The power with which to strengthen our earthly families
- The power of personal revelation to strengthen and bless our lives with knowledge, understanding, light, beauty, and truth from on high
- The power to protect children

If you think about your temple endowment, is it not both men and women who are taught how to thwart the forces of evil? What about the greater powers to teach, the power to strengthen our families, and the power of knowledge and light and beauty? When you associate with these powers through the temple, you increase these powers and these possibilities substantially.

So again, how do you increase this power? Section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants tells us that Christ learned line upon line, grace for grace. It's the same that we need today. Doctrine and Covenants 84, a revelation that President Nelson has now asked the sisters of the Church twice to study, states, "For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him. And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood" (D&C 84:36–39).

Do not women do these same things? Do not women receive the servants of the Lord? Do not women make covenants with God when they receive their endowment, including the initiatory, and does the Lord not give them an oath or guarantee? Imagine the strength given to covenant-keeping women to know that "all that [the] Father hath shall be given unto [them]. (Doctrine and Covenants 84:38)" Imagine the peace and hope and joy this statement in and of itself gave to the early pioneer women, who as they left Nauvoo, looked back at their burning temple with the fire of this covenant burning in their hearts. Clearly, the Lord's timing is manifest when we realize he had the women receive

their temple endowments before crossing the plains. Imagine what a difference it makes for covenant-keeping women of all situations to know that in the future they are promised to receive “all that my Father hath,” and that God has promised that He will “go before your face.” That He “will be on your right hand and on your left,” and that his “Spirit shall be in your hearts and [his] angels round about you, to bear you up” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:38, 88).

Can we imagine the strength this truth gives to our single sisters who are living away from home, working, in school, on missions, raising children, or living in their own homes as adult mature women with no male in the home who has been ordained to a priesthood office? Can we recognize the assurance this may give to a divorced woman or single mother who made and continues to keep sacred temple covenants? I know for me, as a single sister until I was forty, this knowledge of having God by my side and angels round about me was real and significant.

### **United in Saving Souls**

During the days of Adam and Eve, those of Emma and Joseph, and in our day, the purpose of the priesthood has been and always will be to save souls. Regardless of ordination or temple covenant, both women and men are given the directive and duty to save souls. Working hand-in-hand, we draw these things together. “My dear sisters, your power will increase as you serve others. Your prayers, fasting, time in the scriptures, service in the temple, and family history work will open the heavens to you.”<sup>42</sup> The importance of saving souls in a united fashion on both sides of the veil cannot be underestimated.

Elder Bednar said the following:

Across the generations, from the Prophet Joseph Smith to President Russell M. Nelson, the doctrinal purposes of temple ordinances and covenants have been taught extensively by Church leaders...to keep the law of obedience, the law of sacrifice, the law of the gospel, the law of chastity, and the law of consecration.<sup>43</sup>

We have been asked by leaders of the Church to understand these laws, to speak about these laws, to use these laws, and to abide by these laws for our own salvation and exaltation and to save others, perhaps and especially those in our family.

Continuing, Elder Washburn, a previous General Authority, said,

We go to the temple to make covenants, but we go home to keep the covenants that we have made. The home is the testing ground. The home is the place where we learn to be more Christlike. The home is the place where we learn to overcome selfishness and give ourselves in service to others.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding this idea of both women and men using their priesthood privileges to bless their family, Elder Andersen testified,

As you worthily participate in the ordinances of the priesthood, the Lord will give you greater strength, peace, and eternal perspective. Whatever your situation, your home will be “blessed by the strength of priesthood power” and those close to you will more fully desire these blessings for themselves.<sup>45</sup>

This priesthood power that is talked about is given to every woman in the Church regardless of marital status through their covenants. In fact, in mentioning some of the false teachings regarding the priesthood and women, President Nelson, speaking to the sisters, clarified,

If you are endowed but not currently married to a man who bears the priesthood and someone says to you, “I’m sorry you don’t have the priesthood in your home,” please understand that that statement is incorrect. You may not have a priesthood bearer in your home, but you have received and made sacred covenants with God in His temple. From those covenants flows an endowment of His priesthood power upon you.<sup>46</sup>

Sister Bingham talks about the importance of women and men working together for the salvation of souls. Quoting President Nelson, she says,

Today, “we need women who have the courage and vision of our Mother Eve” to unite with their brethren in bringing souls unto Christ. Men need to become true partners rather than assume they are solely responsible or act as “pretend” partners while women carry out much of the work. Women need to be willing to “step forward [and] take [their] rightful and needful place” as partners rather than thinking they need to do it all by themselves or wait to be told what to do.<sup>47</sup>

And then referring to partners, President Eyring actually talks about the role of nurturing in the Church especially for women.

Part of the Lord's current sharing of knowledge relates to accelerating His pouring out eternal truth on the heads and into the hearts of His people. He has made clear that the daughters of Heavenly Father will play a primary role in that miraculous acceleration. One evidence of the miracle is His leading His living prophet to put far greater emphasis on gospel instruction in the home and within the family...

In the proclamation, He gave sisters charge to be the principal gospel educators in the family in these words: "Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children." This includes the nurture of gospel truth and knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

So who in the home has a primary responsible to teach the gospel? The women. The women who have made covenants in the temple, who have received priesthood power and authority, and who have been given that ability to teach and to write and to speak those things of God.

### Conclusion

Sister Jones, speaking at the last general conference said that one of the greatest things that she wished she knew when she was younger was how important the priesthood was to her and how she had the power to use it.<sup>49</sup> I testify that this Church is the Church of God and that He does have this power and authority given to both women and men on the Earth. And I say that in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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