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Lesson VII. The Priesthood Among the Nephites

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Abstract: Introduction—The question of authority—Purpose of the present lesson—Divine authority necessary—The beginning of divine authority upon the earth—The antiquity of the Priesthood—The Priesthood open to all men in righteousness—The Priesthood abhors evil—The name of the Priesthood—The manner of conferring the Priesthood—The name of the Church of Christ—The officers of the Church, and of the Priesthood—What the Priesthood meant to the Nephites—Alma's exhortation.

GUIDE DEPARTMENT.

Teachings of the Book of Mormon.

LESSON VII.

THE PRIESTHOOD AMONG THE NEPHITES.

There is perhaps no other principle upon which the doctrine of Christianity insists more strenuously than it does upon that of authority. The sense of authority present with the Lord Jesus himself has been recognized as remarkable. He was wont to say that He did nothing except what He had seen His Father do; that He spoke not of Himself, but of his Father; that His Father had given Him authority hitherto; that as He had been sent, even so did He send His own disciples. The disciples in their turn were jealous of the authority that had been conferred upon them, and looked askance upon any who presumed to officiate in holy things, concerning whose authority they knew nothing. And from the time of the apostles to the present day the question of the authority of the Church and of the Scriptures has occupied more attention than has almost any other question of Christian theology. Today nothing more gratifying could come to a Christian denomination than a complete assurance of its divine authority. Such an assurance would allay forever every question concerning the identity of the Church of Christ.

Now, the peoples of the Book of Mormon claimed to be recognized as the children of God. They averred that they received revelation from God, that they were

taught the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that they worshiped according to that gospel. Surely, they must have possessed some degree of divine authority. In the present lesson we shall try to discover what the Nephite theology taught of the necessity of authority, of the founding and the duration of the priesthood, of the calling of men to officiate in the priesthood, of the manner of conferring authority, of the officers of the Church of Christ, and of such other matters as pertain particularly to the subject of divine authority and priesthood.

It was recognized from the very beginning of Nephite history, and for that matter of Jaredite history, that men must be called of God, and empowered by Him, to represent Him among men. Lehi, the father of the Nephite nation, was commanded in a dream to depart from Jerusalem, and to journey to a promised land.^a The first Nephi was specially chosen by the Lord to become "a ruler and a teacher" over his brethren.^b Jacob and Joseph, the children of the wilderness, were called of God and were ordained and consecrated, to become priests and teachers in the land of the Nephites.^c Abinadi, on his own testimony, was commanded by the Lord

^aI Nephi 2:1-3.

^bI Nephi 2:19-22; 3:29.

^cII Nephi 5:26; 6:2.

to prophesy. The sons of Mosiah taught with the power and the authority of God.^d And in the days of Alma, only those who had been ordained "by the holy order of God" were permitted to preach and to perform the ordinances of the gospel.^e Thus, throughout the thousand years of the national existence of the Nephites no other truth was more generally known, nor more thoroughly understood than this, that a man must be called of God, by prophecy and by the laying on of hands, to preach the gospel and to administer in its ordinances.

Concerning the nature of divine authority, too, the Nephites had a very definite understanding. In a really wonderful sermon, delivered by Alma in the land of Ammonihah, the great Nephite High Priest urged the people who heard him to let their minds go forward to the time when God first gave commandments to His children. At that time, declared Alma, God ordained priests, "after His holy order," to teach the people that they might learn to look forward to the atoning sacrifice of His Son. For this holy order had existence in and through the atonement of the Only Begotten Son. Therefore, it was called after the order of the Son.^f In the very dawn of human history, then, according to Nephite theology, divine authority was conferred upon men; and only those who were so endowed were empowered to act for God.

But the authority, or priesthood, conferred upon the race, was older than the dawn of human history. This holy calling was "prepared from the foundation of the world for such as would not harden their

hearts." In other words, "the High Priesthood of the holy order of God" was known in the Nephite theology to exist from eternity to eternity. It was co-existent with God Himself. Not only was it "from the foundation of the world," but it was "without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to [God's] foreknowledge of all things."^g Thus did the Nephite prophets understand thoroughly the nature and eternal duration of the Holy Priesthood.

The Holy Priesthood was not restricted, in the Nephite theology, to any class of men. It was for all "such as would not harden their hearts." However, it was required of those who would possess the keys of the priesthood that they should have faith in its power, and faith in the word of God. In the beginning, even, only those were called and ordained who had shown great faith and many good works.^h At the same time, others rejected the Spirit of God because "of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds; while, if it had not been for this, they might have had as great privilege as their brethren."ⁱ It is to be remembered, then, that according to the teachings of the Book of Mormon the High Priesthood of the holy order of God might be obtained by anyone through faith, repentance, and righteousness. There was no priestly caste. And those who were called after the holy order of the Son of God became thereby sanctified, "and their garments were washed white through the blood of the lamb."^j

It was not enough, in the theology

^dMos. 28:1-7; Alma 18:3.

^eAlma 49:30.

^fAlma 13:1, 5, 7.

^gAlma 13:5-7.

^hAlma 13:3.

ⁱAlma 13:4.

^jAlma 13:10, 11.

of the Nephites, that one should exercise faith and live a righteous life in order to receive the Holy Priesthood. Having been sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having had one's garments made white through the blood of the lamb, one was further required to eschew evil thenceforth and forever. Nay, more; having become pure and spotless before God through the sanctifying virtue of the Holy Priesthood, one could not thereafter look upon sin except with abhorrence. That is, the very nature of the Holy Priesthood after the order of the Son of God is such that it creates a feeling of revulsion against sin. No one who holds the Holy Priesthood and is magnifying his calling therein can do evil without remorse of conscience, and abhorrence of the evil he has done. To retain the virtue of the priesthood, one must refrain from evil, one must not look upon sin "save it [be] with abhorrence."^k

Another point concerning the Holy Priesthood was apparently well understood by the Nephites. The Holy Priesthood was after the order of the Son of God. But it was not so known amongst men. From the time of Abraham, the Holy Priesthood has been known as the Priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. In the Book of Mormon it is explained that Melchizedek was a king over the land of Salem; that he received the office of the High Priesthood; that he established peace in the land; that he was called the prince of peace; that he reigned under his father; that there were none greater than he; and that, therefore, "of him they have more particularly made mention." However, "there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards "who exercised

^kAlma 13:12.

the authority of the Holy Priesthood."^l But the Priesthood was named after Melchizedek because of his greatness. This fact is stated thus in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants: The Holy Priesthood "is called the Melchizedek Priesthood * * * because Melchizedek was such a great High Priest,"^m and also to avoid the too frequent use of the name of God.

Since the Nephites understood so well that divine authority is necessary if one would act for God; since they knew so thoroughly the history, the eternal duration, and the nature, of priesthood, it becomes interesting to learn how they conferred the priesthood upon those whom they considered worthy, and what offices they recognized in the priesthood. Nephi First records that he consecrated his brothers Jacob and Joseph "that they should be priests and teachers;" and Jacob declares that he was called of God, "and ordained after the manner of this holy order."ⁿ Consecration and ordination usually connote the laying-on of hands. If there were no further proof, we should be safe in concluding on the evidence of these passages that the Nephites conferred the Holy Priesthood by the laying-on of hands. But there is further proof. In a later writing, Jacob himself testifies that his ordination, and that of his brother Joseph, were accomplished "by the hand of Nephi."^o So also it is recorded that Alma ordained priests and elders in the city of Zarahemla "by laying on his hands according to the order of God."^p And Moroni records in full the manner in which priests and

^lAlma 13:14-20; Hela. 8:18; Eth. 12:10.

^mDoc. and Cov. 107:2-4.

ⁿII Nephi 5:26; 6:2.

^oJacob 1:18.

^pAlma 6:1.

teachers were ordained in the Nephite church. He writes:

"After they had prayed unto the Father in the name of Christ, they laid their hands upon them, and said,

"In the name of Jesus Christ I ordain you to be a Priest; (or, if it be a teacher), I ordain you to be a Teacher, to preach repentance and remission of sins through Jesus Christ, by the endurance of faith on His name to the end."^q

In the Nephite church, then, the Priesthood was conferred by the laying on of hands.

In the Holy Priesthood, several offices were recognized. It is well to remember here that the Priesthood after the order of the Son of God operates through His Church. The officers of the Church are therefore officers of the Priesthood. It is interesting, too, to know that the name of the Nephite Church was the Church of Jesus Christ.^r In the very beginning of Nephite history, Nephi First saw the organization of the Church; and he saw that there were twelve chosen, who were ordained of God.^s In the meridian of time, when Jesus came to the Nephites, the vision was fulfilled. The Church of Jesus Christ was established with twelve apostles at the head, acting under the authority and direction of Jesus.^t In addition to twelve apostles, there were present with the Nephites at all times holy men of God who were filled with the Holy Ghost, and who spoke under its inspiration. These men were called prophets, seers, and revelators.^u In the Holy Priesthood itself there were also several offices. Alma was a high priest; and there were

many others both before and after his day.^v Alma, the High Priest, set in order the divisions of the Church as he traveled from place to place. We read that he consecrated teachers, priests, and elders, to preside over the Church, and to teach and expound the word of God to the people.^w Nephi First and Mosiah also make special mention of the priests;^x and Moroni, as we have already learned, records how both priests and teachers should be ordained.^y Thus, the following officers are named in the Book of Mormon as operating among the Nephites in the authority of the Holy Priesthood: prophets, seers, revelators, apostles, high priests, elders, priests, and teachers.

It is evident that the Nephites understood quite thoroughly the nature and the value of priesthood. To them it was in very deed delegated authority to officiate for God. It gave them power to act in God's stead. Through the power of the Priesthood, the Nephite prophets withstood the elements, and overwhelmed their enemies. In the authority of the priesthood, they rebuked pestilence and defied the power of death. In the exercise of the priesthood they established righteousness, and called down from heaven unnumbered blessings both spiritual and temporal.^z It is small wonder that Alma should be anxious about his people and should urge them to become worthy to receive the blessings of the priesthood.

"Now they [those who through faith had received the priesthood], after being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being

^qMoro. 3:1-4.

^rIII Nephi 27:1-8.

^sI Nephi 12:6, 7.

^tIII Nephi 12:1; 19:4.

^uEnos 1:22; Mos. 8:13-17; III Nephi 3:19.

^vAlma 13:10; Mos. 26:7.

^wAlma 4:7-16.

^xII Nephi 5:26; Mos. 6:3.

^yMoro. 3:1-4.

^zAlma 9:19-22; Hela. 5:20-52.

pure and spotless before God, could not look upon sin, save it were with abhorrence; and there were many, exceeding great many, who were made pure, and entered into the rest of the Lord their God.

"And now, my brethren, I would that ye should humble yourselves before God, and bring forth fruit meet for repentance, that ye may also enter into that rest."^a

OUTLINE.

Introduction—The question of authority—Purpose of the present lesson—Divine authority necessary—The beginning of divine authority upon the earth—The antiquity of the Priesthood—The Priesthood open to all men in righteousness—The Priesthood abhors evil—The name of the Priesthood—The manner of conferring the Priesthood—The name of the Church of Christ—The officers of the Church, and of the Priesthood—What the Priesthood meant to the Nephites—Alma's exhortation.

QUESTIONS.

1. What principle of Christian doctrine is perhaps more strenuously insisted upon than any other?

^aAlma 13:12, 13.

2. What would it mean to a sectarian denomination to receive a complete assurance of its divine authority?

3. Why should we expect to find the knowledge and the recognition of divine authority present with the Nephites?

4. When was it first recognized by the American peoples that they must be endowed with divine authority?

5. Cite instances of divine calling.

6. Who were permitted to preach in the days of Alma?

7. Who first ordained men to the Holy Priesthood?

8. Why is the Holy Priesthood named after the Son of God?

9. When did the Priesthood begin?

10. Who might enjoy the blessings of the Priesthood?

11. Through the exercise of what principle did men receive the Priesthood?

12. What was required of men after they had received the Priesthood?

13. Who was Melchizedek?

14. Why was the Holy Priesthood named after him?

15. How was the Priesthood conferred?

16. What offices of the Priesthood are named in the Book of Mormon?

17. What did the possession of the Priesthood mean to the Nephites?

18. What would have been their condition had they not been endowed with it?

LESSON VIII.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

SOME FIRST PRINCIPLES.

The Gospel is defined to be the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. The belief that brings salvation is further said to be belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, with full confidence in the virtue of His atoning sacrifice. It is really upon the atonement, then, that the Gospel turns. And Jesus Christ, the Mediator, the Redeemer from original sin, is the central figure in the evolutionary Gospel history of man. These points are made clear in the Jewish scripture. It will be inter-

esting to learn what the Nephites taught concerning the Gospel and its fundamental principles. It is purposed, therefore, to learn in this lesson when the Nephites received the Gospel, what it meant to them, and what they knew of its history. It is purposed further to consider what the Nephites taught of the fundamental principles of faith, repentance, baptism, the conferring of the Holy Ghost, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus