

“Ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God, which order was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life. And all those who are ordained unto this priesthood are made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually.” (JST—Hebrews 7:3)

“[The] priesthood continueth in the church of God in all generations, and is without beginning of days or end of years.” (D&C 84:17)

Prelude to Receiving the Priesthood

After hundreds of years God’s priesthood power returned to the earth in a series of remarkable visions and angelic visitations. Oliver Cowdery played an important role in the restoration of the priesthood. He had come to Palmyra, New York in the winter of 1829 to serve as the teacher of a school over which Hyrum Smith was a trustee. Upon his arrival Oliver asked to be a boarder at Joseph Smith, Sr.’s home. In the process of time Oliver began to hear about the golden plates that Joseph Smith, Jr. had in his possession in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Eager to learn more he continued to ask Joseph, Sr. all about the plates until his searching was satisfied. Soon thereafter Oliver received the impression that it would be his opportunity to serve as scribe for the Prophet. As soon as the school term was completed in early spring, Oliver put his affairs in order and set out for the 135 mile journey to Harmony, Pennsylvania with Joseph’s younger brother Samuel. These two brethren were relatively young at the time, being respectively twenty-two and twenty-one years of age. As a testimony of the zeal of these men, Lucy Mack Smith recalled:

The weather, for some time previous, had been very wet and disagreeable—raining, freezing, and thawing alternately, which had made the roads almost impassable, particularly during the middle of the day. But Mr. Cowdery was determined not to be detained by wind or weather and persevered until they arrived at Joseph’s house, although Oliver froze one of his toes and he and Samuel suffered much on the road from fatigue.

When they arrived there, Joseph was not at home. He had been so hurried with business and writing, etc., that he could not proceed with the work [of the translation] as fast as it was necessary for him to do. There was also another disadvantage under which he had to labor. Emma had of much of her time taken up with the care of her house that she could write but little for him. Accordingly, two or three days before the arrival of Oliver and Samuel, Joseph called upon his Heavenly Father to send him a scribe as the angel had promised, and he was informed that the same should be forthcoming in a few days.

When Oliver was introduced to Joseph, he said, “Mr. Smith, I have come for the purpose of writing for you.” This was not at all unexpected to Joseph, for although he had never seen Mr. Cowdery before, he knew that the Lord was able to perform, and that he had been faithful to fulfill, all his promises.¹

The Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood

Joseph and Oliver quickly became deeply engaged in translating the ancient record known as the Book of Mormon. On the May 15, 1829 they came across several passages that caused them to desire proper baptism in the kingdom of God. Wanting to know how to proceed, Joseph and Oliver decided to ask the Lord for further light and knowledge. So they retired to a secluded spot in the woods not far from Joseph and Emma’s home and not far from the banks of the Susquehanna River² to seek knowledge from the Lord. Oliver expressed the marvelous result in these terms:

On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace to us, while the

veil was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the Gospel of repentance.³

This angel of glory sent from the presence of God was John the Baptist coming to restore the preparatory priesthood to the earth so that baptisms could be performed by the proper authority. D&C 13 records the words that John the Baptist spoke unto them. Joseph later recorded in his journal the events of that moment and the words of John the Baptist:

He said this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter; and he commanded us to go and be baptized, and gave us directions that I should baptize Oliver Cowdery, and afterwards that he should baptize me. Accordingly we went and were baptized. I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me, after which I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronic Priesthood, and afterwards he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same Priesthood—for so we were commanded.

The messenger who visited us on this occasion, and conferred this Priesthood upon us, said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the New Testament, and that he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood he said would in due time be conferred on us, and that I should be called the first Elder of the Church, and (Oliver Cowdery) the second.***

Immediately on our coming up out of the water after we had been baptized, we experienced great and glorious blessings from our Heavenly Father. No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him, and he stood up and prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass. And again, so soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the spirit of prophecy, when standing up. I prophesied concerning the rise of this church, and many other things connected with the church, and this generation of the children of men. We were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation.⁴

Upon receiving the keys of this restored priesthood power Joseph and Oliver immediately used it to build the Kingdom of God. Lucy Mack Smith explains:

As they were on their return to the house [from the river], they overheard Samuel [Smith], in a secluded spot, engaged in secret prayer. They had now received the authority to baptize, and Joseph said that he considered it a sufficient testimony of Samuel’s honesty of heart and zeal for religion that they had found him privately bowing before the Lord in prayer, and that he thought it was an evidence of readiness for baptism. Oliver was of the same opinion, and they spoke to Samuel, who went with them straightway to the water and was baptized.⁵

The Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood

John the Baptist had instructed Joseph and Oliver concerning the higher priesthood (the Melchizedek priesthood) and had promised them that in due time it would be their privilege to have that priesthood power as well. Although we do not know the exact date, it was not many days later that Joseph and Oliver once again prayed unto the Lord in order to learn more about the higher priesthood. In response to this prayer of faith they were again blessed with an angelic visitation. Peter, James and John, who had held the keys of the presidency of the Melchizedek Priesthood in New Testament times, appeared unto Joseph and Oliver. They laid hands upon the heads of these two Elders and bestowed the gifts, keys and powers of the Melchizedek priesthood. The fullness of priesthood power was once again upon the earth to be used to bless the souls of every child of God and help them on the path to exaltation. Truly it was a remarkable and powerful experience. Joseph said of this singular event:

Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of.⁶

With this new found zeal for the gospel, missionary efforts quickly materialized throughout the summer and fall of 1829. Additionally, the Book of Mormon translation was completed and prepared for publication. These two factors laid the groundwork for founding the Church in April 1830.

Section 20—Restoring the Church of Christ in the Latter-days

Joseph Smith received a revelation that the propitious date for establishing the Church of Christ was April 6, 1830. Meeting in Peter Whitmer, Sr.’s home⁷ on this day was a large gathering of people including individuals who had already received the baptismal covenant and those who were seeking the truth. The Church was organized according to the laws of the state of New York, which required six individuals to sign their names as founding members. The first six baptized individuals (Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith, Jr., Samuel Smith, Hyrum Smith, David Whitmer and Peter Whitmer, Jr.) were chosen as the founding members. The meeting opened with songs and a prayer and then the principles found in Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants were read to the congregation. Section 20 establishes the order, duties and organization of the priesthood body. This organization has remained with us until the present day.

A Marvelous Sacrament Service Foretold

Several months later in August of 1830, Joseph was in Harmony, Pennsylvania preparing for sacrament services when he received a revelation from the Lord indicating that it was not necessary for him to use wine in sacrament ordinances. The Lord further explained that he himself would not partake of the fruit of the vine until that great day when, “I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (D&C 27:13). The Lord indicated that at that great gathering noble prophets from past dispensations such as Moroni, Elias, John the Baptist, Elijah, Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Adam, Peter, James and John would be present to participate in that marvelous sacrament service. It is in this same section of the Doctrine and Covenants that we have a canonized reference to Joseph receiving the keys of the higher priesthood under the hands of Peter, James and John, the summer before in 1829.

The Priesthood in Ancient Times

The Church continued to grow and expand throughout 1830, 1831 and 1832. In the spring of 1831 Church headquarters, along with a majority of the saints, relocated to Kirtland, Ohio.⁸ There the saints continued their missionary efforts to “Lamanites and Gentiles” alike sending forth the brethren both East and West and North and South. In September of 1832 as a group of missionaries returned from the field of labor, Joseph Smith received in Kirtland Ohio, Section 84, which gives further light and knowledge concerning the history, covenants, responsibilities and doctrines of the priesthood. Two and a half years later in March of 1835 Joseph received an additional revelation on the priesthood while meeting with the Quorum of the 12 before they departed on their missions. These two sections offer us much invaluable knowledge about the Priesthood in ancient times.

The record tells us that “The Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God... was instituted in the days of Adam” (D&C 107:3, 41). “The order of this priesthood was confirmed to be handed down from father to son, and rightly belongs to the literal descendants of the chosen seed, to whom the promises were made” (D&C 107:40). Great prophets of old such as Adam, Seth, Enoch and Noah were chosen as high priests for the Lord and ordained unto the holy order of the priesthood to administer saving ordinances and preach the gospel of salvation. The priesthood that they received and by which they administered is what we today call the Melchizedek priesthood. Again, the scriptural record explains that because “Melchizedek was such a great high priest...[and] out of respect or reverence to the name of the Supreme Being, to avoid the too frequent repetition of his name, they the church, in ancient days, called that priesthood after Melchizedek, or the Melchizedek Priesthood” (D&C 107:2, 4).

The Lord also explained to Joseph Smith that throughout ancient times the Melchizedek priesthood was passed down from father to son (or to other chosen individuals) until the day of Moses, who received his ordination under the hands of his father-in-law, Jethro (see D&C 84:6-16). The Lord revealed that

Without the ordinances [of the gospel], 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. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not endure 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 fulness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also; and the lesser priesthood [the Aaronic priesthood] continued, which priesthood holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel; which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments, which the Lord in his wrath caused to continue with the house of Aaron among the children of Israel until John [the Baptist]. (D&C 84:21-27)

Keys of the Priesthood

Even though Joseph Smith had received both the Aaronic and the Melchizedek priesthood in 1829, specific keys were yet to be given him so that he might move the work of God forward and fulfill the ancient promises. These revelations converged with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836.

Completing the Kirtland Temple stood as a testimony of the perseverance, faith, sacrifice, dedication and loyalty of the early saints. They labored on this sacred edifice for nearly 3 years in the most difficult of times. Apostasy disrupted the faith of some while persecution followed the saints from New York to Kirtland, Ohio and persecution in Missouri led to the formation of Zion’s camp, which effectively divested Kirtland of a majority of the able-bodied men who could build the structure. On top of all of this, no one was paid for their labors; rather, they were expected to give of their time, talents and means to building this sacred edifice. Heber C. Kimball explains the circumstances in the following way:

Our women engaged in knitting and spinning, in order to clothe those men who were laboring at the building; and the Lord only knows the scenes of poverty, tribulations, and distress which we passed through to accomplish it.⁹

But what joy accompanied these faithful saints when they received a fulfillment of their years of sacrifice at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Eliza R. Snow recorded:

The ceremonies of that dedication may be rehearsed, but no mortal language can describe the heavenly manifestations of that memorable day. Angles appeared to some, while a sense of divine presence was realized by all present, and each heart was filled with joy inexpressible and full of glory.¹⁰

Within a week of this momentous dedicatory service, Joseph Smith saw Moses, Elias and Elijah in vision that each delivered unto him various keys essential to directing the work of God in the Latter-days. The singular power of this event is such that a simple summary would not be appropriate. So I will end with Joseph’s record of this sacred experience found D&C 110:11-16

The heavens were again opened unto us; and Moses appeared before us, and committed unto us the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth, and the leading of the ten tribes from the land of the north. After this, Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed. After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon us; for Elijah the prophet, who was taken to heaven without tasting death, stood before us, and said: Behold, the time has fully come, which was spoken of by the mouth of Malachi—testifying that he [Elijah] should be sent, before the great and dreadful day of the Lord come—To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse—Therefore, the keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands; and by this ye may know that the great and dreadful day of the Lord is near, even at the doors. (D&C 110:11-16)

1. *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, edited by Scot Facer Proctor & Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), p. 184. [?](#)
2. [Click here for a Google Map view of the approximate location of the baptismal site of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.](#) [?](#)
3. *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1 (October 1834), p. 15. [?](#)
4. William Edwin Berrett, *The Restored Church: A Brief History of the Growth and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4th edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1944), p. 95. [?](#)
5. *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, pp. 185-186. The History of the Church records the event somewhat differently. Samuel’s baptism did not take place until the 25th of the month after Joseph and Oliver reasoned with Samuel from the Bible and Samuel prayed to receive a confirmation of truth. [?](#)
6. Berrett, p. 96. [?](#)
7. [Click here for a Google Map view of the Peter Whitmer Sr. home and farm.](#) [?](#)
8. [Click here for a Google Map view of Kirtland, Ohio.](#) [?](#)
9. Berrett, p. 179. [?](#)
10. In Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York, 1877), p. 95 as quoted in *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, p. 339, footnote 1. [?](#)