

The RLDS Priesthood System

A part from an understanding of Joseph Smith's occult orientation, there is perhaps no greater single RLDS topic worth exploring than his concept of a restored priesthood. And the Christian will lose nothing by such exploration, for in the process, the power of Jesus' unique role in history and in our salvation becomes even more beautiful and vivid. In addition, the topic of priesthood may well be the most fruitful area of discussion with RLDS. Unlike Joseph Smith's occult life, which relies on historical documentation and can always be objected to as inaccurate, discussions on priesthood come primarily from scripture. And once Joseph's priesthood is shown to be un-Christian, then his fundamental claim of having authority from God becomes moot. Practically all RLDS are at least aware of their priesthood orders and offices. And so the topic of priesthood also provides a good point of entry for discussion with them.

Exclusive Authority

As we have discussed in previous chapters, Joseph Smith claimed to be the channel through which God was restoring primitive first century Christianity to the earth again. The central feature of this "restored" church was the institution of an intricate system of priesthood offices together with their *exclusive* authority to represent God on earth through the ordinances of the church.¹ We cannot, therefore, overstate the importance of the RLDS priesthood system, for it completely embodies their claim of authority to represent God on earth—to the exclusion of virtually all other churches.² This is an amazing claim. If it is true, we would expect the RLDS priesthood system to pass the most rigorous Biblical scrutiny with flying colors. We would then have some reason to evaluate more of Joseph Smith's other claims and teaching. But if this priesthood system fails the scrutiny of the Bible, we are compelled to reject Joseph Smith as a false prophet. And we would then have no reason to consider either him or his claims any further.

The RLDS Priesthood System—an Overview

Origin. Nowhere is Joseph's claim of restoring first century Christianity more evident than in his account of how priesthood authority itself was restored. This authority came in two stages, (1) the Aaronic priesthood and (2) the Melchisedec priesthood.

In May 1829 Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery report that in response to their prayers, a messenger claiming to be John the Baptist came to them, laid his hands on them and conferred upon them the Aaronic priesthood with these words, "Upon you, my fellow servants, in the name

1. D&C 83:3.

2. D&C 1:5e; 20:1b.

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; and this shall never be taken again from the earth, until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness.”³ This messenger said he was acting under the direction of the apostles Peter, James and John who held the Melchisedec priesthood. He further indicated that this Melchisedec priesthood would also be conferred, but at a later time.⁴

Later in 1829 Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery report that they indeed received this Melchisedec priesthood through additional supernatural instruction. But the historical accounts of this event are at best vague, and at worst contradictory. There are at least three different versions of it: (1) the word of the Lord came to simply give ordination instructions, (2) an holy angel came to confer this priesthood and (3) the apostles Peter, James and John came and ordained Joseph and Oliver. The first version is given to us by Joseph Smith himself in his personal history, “we had not long been engaged in solemn and fervent prayer when *the word of the Lord came unto us* in the chamber, commanding us that I should ordain Oliver to be an elder [a generic title occasionally used by Joseph to refer to Melchisedec priesthood members] in the Church of Jesus Christ, and that he also should ordain me to the same office, and then to ordain others as it should be made known unto us, from time to time.”⁵ The second version comes from Oliver Cowdery in his own account of the same event, “I was also present with Joseph when *the higher or Melchisedec priesthood was conferred by the holy angel from on high*. This priesthood was then conferred on each other, by the will and commandment of God.”⁶ The third version comes from a revelation Joseph received the following year, 1830, “For the hour cometh that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth...and also with *Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you* and confirmed you to be apostles and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry.”⁷ So how did it happen, simply by a word of instruction by the Lord, by a single angel or by the three named apostles? A variety of theories have been debated over the years in an attempt to harmonize these divergent accounts, which we will not go into here. Because in the final analysis it really doesn’t matter what happened (if indeed anything happened at all), as we will discover in chapters 13 and 14. But it is interesting to note that there are such different accounts being given on such a foundational experience for the church. And by the very people who were involved. There were only two people involved who have generated three different accounts of the same event.

Structure. The RLDS priesthood system continues to be divided into these two major priesthood orders, Melchisedec and Aaronic. The Melchisedec order is often referred to as the “higher” priesthood, while the Aaronic order is referred to as the “lesser” priesthood.⁸ These two orders are comprised of five primary priesthood offices, High Priest, Elder, Priest, Teacher and Deacon. Secondary offices include Seventy, Bishop, Apostle, Evangelist/Patriarch and Prophet,

3. RHC 1:34–35.

4. *Ibid.*, p.36.

5. *Ibid.*, p.60, emphasis mine.

6. *Ibid.*, p.64, emphasis mine.

7. D&C 26:2a,3a.

8. D&C 104:9a,10.

Seer and Revelator/President of the High Priesthood.⁹ For example, High Priests may also become ordained to the yet higher offices of Apostle or Bishop. And Elders may be additionally ordained as Seventy. The President of the church, also known as the Prophet, has the dual designation of Prophet, Seer and Revelator as well as President of the High Priesthood. RLDS pastors do not receive an additional ordination as such, but are normally Elders or High Priests who have been selected to serve as the congregational leader for a specific term, and are generally referred to as Presiding Elders.¹⁰ With fairly minor exceptions, this organization is identical to that of the Utah Mormon church as well.¹¹ This overall structure is illustrated in the following chart.

The RLDS Priesthood Structure

Aaronic Priesthood			Melchisedec Priesthood	
Deacon	Teacher	Priest	Elder	High Priest
			Presiding Elder (Pastor)	Evangelist/ Patriarch
			Seventy	Bishop
				Apostle
				Prophet, Seer and Revelator and President of the High Priesthood

Authority. The RLDS church teaches that the authority to represent God was restored once again to earth by John the Baptist and by Peter, James and John, as described above. It had been removed from the earth centuries before due to the complete apostasy of the early Christian church. This authority was first conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, who were to then transmit this authority to others. The key, then, to the continuation of this restored priesthood authority is a carefully preserved transmission from one generation to another. Successful transmission is based, at least in part, on an acceptable degree of continued doctrinal purity.

⁹. See *D&C* 83:1–6 and 104 for the rationale behind these major priesthood orders and offices.

¹⁰. For a detailed discussion of the specific duties of each office see *D&C* 17:7ff. Joseph Smith occasionally referred to Melchisedec priesthood generically as “elders” (*D&C* 17:8b). This designation is not to be confused with the specific office of *Elder*.

¹¹. One exception is that Mormon Bishops usually fulfill the function of a local pastor over a congregation, or “ward” as they are called in the Mormon church.

The RLDS church is not the only institution claiming to have preserved this authority. As recently as 1982, over 100 organizations claim to be the faithful followers of Joseph Smith, having preserved the purity of his restored gospel and the authority of the priesthood.¹² For the most part, each of these groups do not recognize the priesthood authority of the others. Why? Because of doctrinal disputes. For example, the RLDS church does not recognize the authority of the Utah Mormon priesthood. This is because RLDS believe that under Brigham Young the Mormon church apostatized from the original doctrine, and consequently lost their priesthood authority.

Since 1984 priesthood authority has once again become a central issue for RLDS. At that time the church, after a hotly debated controversy, voted to begin ordaining women to priesthood. That action triggered a major split in the church which led to many people leaving authorized congregations to meet independently.¹³ As a result of this falling-out a number of new formal church organizations have developed over the years. Each new group claims to have preserved Joseph's priesthood authority. The major question in the midst of all this reorganizing is: Who has priesthood authority, and who doesn't? The underlying question is really: Who has maintained the pure doctrine? Whoever is deemed to have maintained the pure doctrine has also preserved the spark of priesthood authority and the ability to pass it on to future generations. Whoever is thereby deemed to have Joseph's priesthood authority has the exclusive right to represent God on earth.

Calls to Priesthood. No one may become a RLDS priesthood member of their own initiative. They must receive a priesthood "call" from one in authority above them. According to the RLDS *Epitome of Faith* (Appendix C) "5. *We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands, by those who are in authority to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.*" RLDS proudly quote Heb. 5:4 in defense of this system, "And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron" (KJV). This is a popular RLDS proof-text which has been taken out of its original context and consequently does not support their system of priesthood calls in any way. We will discuss this scripture at length in its proper context in our discussion of the Melchizedek priesthood in chapter 13.

RLDS therefore believe that each priesthood member needs to be "called of God, as was Aaron." The normal expectation, therefore, is that each call to priesthood be supernaturally manifested, thereby evidencing its divine origin. In a normal congregational environment, priesthood calls are supposed to come through the pastor, or presiding elder. After deliberation, the call is then presented to the candidate for either acceptance or rejection. If accepted, the candidate is presented to the congregation for acceptance and then ordained.

A wide variety of supernatural experiences have come to be offered as divine evidence of these calls, including dreams, visions, visitations, audible voices and spiritual impressions. These experiences are supposed to be had primarily by the presiding elder, the one doing the calling. They may or may not be confirmed through related experiences by others, including the candidate. If the candidate has had no such supernatural experience of his own, he is told to rely on the faith and experience of the presiding elder, or others, who *have* had experiences.

12. For a survey of these groups see Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*.

13. The women in priesthood issue was actually seen as the "final straw" in a growing liberal-fundamental conflict which had been brewing in the church since the 1960s.

The processing of priesthood “calls” in the Mormon church, on the other hand, is quite different. There it is a fairly automatic process where boys are routinely ordained as Deacons at age 12, Teachers at 14, Priests at 16 and Elders at 18. This is based on an acceptable level of behavior and commitment to the Mormon church. If a young man is not ordained as an Elder by the time he is 18, it results in a certain amount of humiliation and ostracism, especially by aspiring young Mormon ladies. This is because in their view of the afterlife, the highest “glory” is reserved only for ladies who are married to Mormon Elders.

Function. In the RLDS church, the priesthood alone have the authority to baptize, confirm, bless children, serve communion, call other priesthood, ordain and lay on hands. It is illegal for an unordained RLDS member to perform any of these functions. And not every priesthood office may perform every function. See *D&C 17:8–26* for the functions of each specific office.

Decision Making. Authority in the RLDS priesthood structure is very much “top-down.” Power and authority increase as you move to the right in the above chart. The least powerful office in the church is Deacon; the most powerful is that of Prophet. Decision making power is mediated through an elaborate system of “checks and balances” based on a structure of priesthood “quorums.” Each priesthood office is subdivided into separate groups, called “quorums.” Each of these quorums is to be of a specific size and has a “presidency” comprised of a quorum president and two counselors.¹⁴ This concept of a presidency is carried over to most other jurisdictions of the church as well, including local congregations. Therefore, each congregational Presiding Elder (or Pastor) normally has two counselors, who, together with him form the local leadership.

There is also a well-defined “pecking order” to these priesthood offices. Each office is directed to bow to the authority of higher offices in some well defined ways, each office having its own prerogatives and duties.¹⁵ The whole system is rigidly hierarchal and legalistic.

Outline of Our Approach

At first glance, the collection of offices included in the chart on page 123 looks most impressive. Every one of these names can be found somewhere in the Bible. Here now in one organization, each name represents a unique office to which one can be ordained. And each of these offices has a well defined and unique ministry to perform. Perhaps there is something to this claim of a restored priesthood. After all, there seems to be no other organization on earth which has such a complete and Biblically sounding collection of ministerial offices. One has to ask why no other church has them all.

Yes, each of these names is in fact in the Bible. But the real question is this: does each name represent a legitimate office or function in the Christian church? And were these offices actually a part of the primitive first century Christian church to begin with? The answers to these questions can be quite involved, but well worth the effort. When we are done we will find that Joseph Smith did not in fact restore the original priesthood of the early Christian church. What we will find is that he engaged in a rather convoluted attempt to combine the Old Testament

¹⁴. This decision making system is quite involved and is laid out in *D&C 104:11–15,30–43; 107:46*. Serious disputes in the RLDS church have arisen over the years regarding the proper interpretation of this complex system.

¹⁵. *D&C 17:8–17*.

priesthood of Israel with that of Melchizedek and functions from early Christianity.¹⁶

Our analysis will begin in the next chapter by looking at the actual ministry of the early Christian church. The following two chapters will concentrate on the two major, and comprehensive RLDS priesthood orders, Melchizedek and Aaronic, including the specific offices of High Priest and Priest to see if there is any Biblical basis for them being a part of the Christian church today. We will then look at the basis for Joseph Smith's priesthood system, and examine its departure from the word of God.

We will conclude by looking at the truest sense in which God has declared each Christian a priest, and discover what constituted the actual priesthood of the early Christian church.

16. This, of course, is consistent with Joseph's concept of his church actually *being* the restoration of Israel prophesied to come about just before Christ returns to usher in His millennial reign. This concept of "latter day Israel" is perhaps the central tenet of Joseph Smith's theology and was explored more fully in chapter 3.