

*Teachings Concerning*  
***Priesthood Keys***

## What is the Purpose of Priesthood?

### **Wilford Woodruff**

What is the priesthood for? It is to administer the ordinances of the gospel, even the gospel of our Father in heaven, the eternal God, the Eloheim of the Jews and the God of the Gentiles, and all he has ever done from the beginning has been performed by and through the power of that priesthood, which is “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life,” and the administration of his servants holding this priesthood is binding, being the savior of life unto life or death unto death. (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, p.67)

## What Are Priesthood Keys?

### ***Church Handbook of Instructions***

The exercise of priesthood authority is governed by those who hold its keys (see D&C 65:2; 124:123). These keys are the right to preside over and direct the Church within a jurisdiction. (Book Two, p. 161 [Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1998])

### **Joseph F. Smith**

The Priesthood in general is the authority given to man to act for God. Every man ordained to any degree of the Priesthood, has this authority delegated to him. But it is necessary that every act performed under this authority shall be done at the proper time and place, in the proper way, and after the proper order. The power of directing these labors constitutes the keys of the Priesthood. (*Gospel Doctrine*, p.136)

### **Joseph Fielding Smith**

These keys are the right of presidency; they are the power and authority to govern and direct all of the Lord’s affairs on earth. Those who hold them have power to govern and control the manner in which all others may serve in the priesthood. All of us may hold the priesthood, but we can only use it as authorized and directed so to do by those who hold the keys. (“Eternal Keys and the Right to Preside,” *Ensign*, July 1972, p. 87)

### **James E. Faust**

To be efficacious and valid, every act in the Church must be performed under the authority of the keys at the appropriate time and place, and in the proper manner and order. The authority and power to direct all of the labors of the kingdom of God on earth constitute the keys of the priesthood. Those who possess them have the right to preside over and direct the affairs of the Church in their jurisdiction. (“The Keys That Never Rust,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, p. 73)

### **Russell M. Nelson**

Preparation, priesthood service, and keys are all related, but different. Service of any type requires preparation. But proper authorization to give that service requires keys. May I illustrate?

Prior to my call to the Twelve, I served as a medical doctor and surgeon. I had earned two doctor’s degrees. I had been certified by two specialty boards. That long preparation had consumed many years, yet it carried no legal permission. Keys were required. They were held by authorities of the state government and the hospitals in which I desired to work. Once those holding proper authority exercised those keys by granting me a license and permission, then I could perform operations. In return, I was obligated to obey the law, to be loyal, and to understand and not abuse the power of a surgeon’s knife. The important steps of preparation, permission, and obligation likewise pertain to other occupations. (“Keys of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, p. 36)

## Only President of Church Holds Priesthood Keys in Fulness

### ***Church Handbook of Instructions***

The Lord Jesus Christ holds all the keys of the priesthood. He has given His Apostles the keys that are necessary for governing His Church. Only the senior Apostle, the President or the Church, may use (or authorize another person to use) these keys for governing the entire Church (see D&C 43:1-4; 81:2; 132:7). (Book Two, p. 161 [Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1998])

### **Joseph F. Smith**

In their fulness, the keys are held by only one person

at a time, the prophet and president of the Church. He may delegate any portion of this power to another, in which case that person holds the keys of that particular labor. Thus, the president of a temple, the president of a stake, the bishop of a ward, the president of a mission, the president of a quorum, each holds the keys of the labors performed in that particular body or locality. His Priesthood is not increased by this special appointment, for a seventy who presides over a mission has no more Priesthood than a seventy who labors under his direction; and the president of an elders' quorum, for example, has no more Priesthood than any member of that quorum. But he holds the power of directing the official labors performed in the mission or the quorum, or in other words, the keys of that division of that work. So it is throughout all the ramifications of the Priesthood -- a distinction must be carefully made between the general authority, and the directing of the labors performed by that authority. (*Gospel Doctrine*, p.136)

#### **Joseph Fielding Smith**

- This priesthood and these keys were conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James, and John, and by Moses and Elijah and others of the ancient prophets. They have been given to each man who has been set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve. But since they are the right of presidency, they can only be exercised in full by the senior apostle of God on earth, who is the president of the Church. ("Eternal Keys and the Right to Preside," *Ensign*, July 1972, p. 87)
- I wish we could get it firmly fixed in our minds that only one man upon the face of the earth at a time holds, in their fulness, the powers, the keys, the authorities, of this glorious priesthood. The man who holds these keys by virtue of his right, that right which God himself has vested in him, has the right to delegate authority and to withdraw authority as he sees fit and receives inspiration so to do.

No man, I do not care who he is or how much priesthood he holds, has any right to officiate in any ordinance of this gospel for any soul contrary to the sanction and the approval of the man who holds the keys of authority in this Church. Now the Lord has told us that. (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:135)

#### **Bruce R. McConkie**

The keys of the kingdom of God—the right and power of eternal presidency by which the earthly kingdom is governed—these keys, having first been revealed from heaven, are given by the spirit of revelation to each man who is both ordained an Apostle

and set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve.

But since keys are the right of presidency, they can only be exercised in their fulness by one man on earth at a time. He is always the senior Apostle, the presiding Apostle, the presiding high priest, the presiding elder. He alone can give direction to all others, direction from which none is exempt.

Thus, the keys, though vested in all of the Twelve, are used by any one of them to a limited degree only, unless and until one of them attains that seniority which makes him the Lord's anointed on earth. ("The Keys of the Kingdom," *Ensign*, May 1983, 22–23)

## **Who Receives Delegated Priesthood Keys?**

### ***Church Handbook of Instructions***

The President of the Church authorizes presidents of temples, missions, stakes, and districts; bishops and branch presidents; and quorum presidents to hold the priesthood keys they need to preside. A person who serves in one of these positions holds the keys only until he is released. Counselors do not receive keys, but they do receive delegated authority by calling and assignment. No priesthood keys exist on earth except with the officers of the Church. (Book Two, p. 161 [Published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1998])

## **What Are the Keys of the Kingdom?**

### **Joseph Fielding Smith**

We also hold the keys of the kingdom of God on earth, which kingdom is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These keys are the right of presidency; they are the power and authority to govern and direct all of the Lord's affairs on earth. Those who hold them have power to govern and control the manner in which all others may serve in the priesthood. All of us may hold priesthood, but we can only use it as authorized and directed so to do by those who hold the keys. This priesthood and these keys were conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James, and John, and by Moses and Elijah and others of the ancient prophets. They have been given to each man who has been set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve. But since they are the right of presidency, they

can only be exercised in full by the senior apostle of God on earth, who is the president of the Church. (Joseph Fielding Smith, Conference Report, April 1972, 98-99)

## Joseph Smith Received All Priesthood Keys

### Wilford Woodruff

Every key relating to this dispensation was given to the Prophet Joseph, and they remain with the priesthood today. (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, p.71)

## Joseph Smith Gave Keys to the Twelve Apostles

### Wilford Woodruff

All that President Young or myself, or any member of the quorum need have done in the matter was to have referred to the last instructions at the last meeting we had with the Prophet Joseph before starting on our mission [to the eastern states]. I have alluded to that meeting many times in my life.

The Prophet Joseph, I am now satisfied, had a thorough presentiment that that was the last meeting we would hold together here in the flesh. We had had our endowments; we had had all the blessings sealed upon our heads that were ever given to the apostles or prophets on the face of the earth. On that occasion the Prophet Joseph rose up and said to us: “Brethren, I have desired to live to see this temple built. I shall never live to see it, but you will. I have sealed upon your heads all the keys of the kingdom of God. I have sealed upon you every key, power, principle that the God of heaven has revealed to me. Now, no matter where I may go or what I may do, the kingdom rests upon you.”

Now, don’t you wonder why we, as apostles, could not have understood that the prophet of God was going to be taken away from us? But we did not understand it. The apostles in the days of Jesus Christ could not understand what the Savior meant when he told them “I am going away; if I do not go away the Comforter will not come.” Neither did we understand what Joseph meant. “But,” he said, after having done this, “ye apostles of the Lamb of God, my brethren, upon your shoulders this kingdom rests; now you have got to round up your shoulders and bear off the kingdom.” And he also made this very strange remark, “If you do not do it you will be damned.” (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, pp .71-72)

## How Have the Keys Been Passed On to the Present?

See **Bruce R. McConkie**, “The Keys of the Kingdom,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 21-23

### James E. Faust

Prior to the martyrdom, no doubt with a sense of foreboding, the Prophet Joseph prepared for his death. President Joseph Fielding Smith states:

“The Prophet declared that he knew not why, but the Lord commanded him to endow the Twelve with these keys and priesthood, and after it was done, he rejoiced very much, saying in substance, ‘Now, if they kill me, you have all the keys and all the ordinances and you can confer them upon others, and the powers of Satan will not be able to tear down the kingdom as fast as you will be able to build it up, and upon your shoulders will the responsibility of leading this people rest’ “ (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56], 1:259).

After learning of the deaths of the Prophet Joseph and the Patriarch Hyrum, Wilford Woodruff reports his meeting with Brigham Young, who was then the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as follows: “I met Brigham Young in the streets of Boston, he having just returned, opposite to Sister Voce’s house. We reached out our hands, but neither of us was able to speak a word. ... After we had done weeping we began to converse. ... In the course of the conversation, he [Brigham Young] smote his hand upon his thigh and said, ‘Thank God, the keys of the kingdom are here’ “ (“The Keys of the Kingdom,” *Millennial Star*, 2 Sept. 1889, p. 546).

When Brigham Young returned to Nauvoo, Sidney Rigdon, who had been a Counselor to Joseph Smith, challenged the leadership of Brigham Young and the Apostles. Said Brigham Young to the Saints in meeting assembled, “If the people want President Rigdon to lead them they may have him; but I say unto you that the Quorum of the Twelve have the keys of the kingdom of God in all the world.” He continued: “I know where the keys of the kingdom are, and where they will eternally be. You cannot call a man to be a prophet; you cannot take Elder Rigdon and place him above the Twelve; if so, he must be ordained by them” (*History of the Church*, 7:233).

Brigham Young, as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, subsequently became the President of the Church, following the Prophet Joseph Smith. So it was with President Howard W. Hunter following the death of

President Ezra Taft Benson. As President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote:

“There is no mystery about the choosing of the successor to the President of the Church. The Lord [page 73] settled this a long time ago, and the senior apostle automatically becomes the presiding officer of the Church, and he is so sustained by the Council of the Twelve which becomes the presiding body of the Church when there is no First Presidency. The president is not elected, but he has to be sustained both by his brethren of the Council and by the members of the Church” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:156).

On the fifth of June 1994, the Quorum of the Twelve, of which President Hunter was then President, collectively holding all of the keys of the kingdom, convened in the Salt Lake Temple. President Howard W. Hunter was then ordained and set apart by the Twelve, with President Gordon B. Hinckley as voice for the Twelve. President Hunter thus became the President and legal administrator of the Church, and the only man authorized to dispense, oversee, and exercise all of the keys of the kingdom of God on earth. He also became the successor to the keys held by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, and Ezra Taft Benson. [“The Keys That Never Rust,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, p. 73]

## A List of Some of the Priesthood Keys Restored to Joseph Smith

[For an excellent article concerning this see, Bruce R. McConkie, “This Final Glorious Gospel Dispensation,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1980, pp. 21-25.]

### **Moroni**

“Behold, this is wisdom in me; wherefore, marvel not, for the hour cometh that I will drink of the fruit of the vine with you on the earth, and with Moroni, whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon, containing the fulness of my everlasting gospel, to whom I have committed the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim” (D&C 27:5)

### **John the Baptist**

“Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the

remission of sins; 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.” (D&C 13)

### **Peter, James, and John**

“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 and of the same things which I revealed unto them; Unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and a dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times, in the which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (D&C 27:12-13).

“Peter, James, and John, who were the First Presidency in their day, brought back the Melchizedek Priesthood including the holy apostleship; they restored the keys of the kingdom; and they conferred the keys of the dispensation of the fulness of times.” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Ensign*, April 1980, p. 22)

“The keys or power to go forth and proclaim the gospel was restored to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery when Peter, James, and John conferred upon them the Melchizedek Priesthood before the organization of the Church. It is true that John the Baptist had conferred upon them the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood before the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored. This was necessary because the time had come for them to be baptized and hold this priesthood preparatory to the coming of the higher priesthood. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants that the Aaronic Priesthood holds the keys of the preparatory gospel; that is to say, the teaching of faith, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins. This authority was given on the fifteenth day of May, 1829, but there was no commandment given for Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to go forth to teach and baptize until the Church was organized, although a few earnest souls who were acquainted with the restoration had sought baptism and had been baptized. It remained for Peter, James, and John to come with the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood to complete the authority to proclaim the gospel to the world.” (Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 1:132)

### **Moses**

“After this vision closed, 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.” (D&C 110:11)

“Question: “What is the difference between the keys of the missionary work given the Prophet Joseph Smith by Peter, James, and John and the keys restored by Moses for the gathering of Israel?”

“Answer: The answer to this question is a simple one. When Moses was called to gather Israel and lead them back to the land that the Lord had given to Abraham for an everlasting possession, they were members of the Church. Moses was not sent to restore to them the priesthood, nor to convert them, for they were all versed in the knowledge that they were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and without doubt had ministers among them. They had been trained in the teachings of Jacob and Joseph. So the work of Moses was to gather Israel who were in a compact body. His mission was to lead them to the land of their fathers and see that they were established there according to the commandment of the Lord. It is verily true that through him the Lord gave many laws and commandments for their government and spiritual development as well as the “carnal law.”

In these latter days when Israel has been scattered, Moses was sent to restore the keys of the gathering, not the preaching of the gospel. It was after people were converted that the spirit of gathering entered their souls, and it was due to the influence of the Spirit of the Lord, based upon the restoration of the keys given to Moses, that the members of the Church, when they were brought into the Church, obtained the desire to gather to the body of the Church. So these two things went hand in hand.

You will recall the fact that it was immediately after the organization of the Church that the spirit entered into the brethren to go forth and preach the gospel. The coming of Moses was not until April 1836, six years following the sending forth of missionaries to convert the world. So if it were dependent on the restoration of the keys held by Moses for the preaching of the gospel, then it would seem that Moses should have come April 6, 1830, at the beginning, but the work of proselyting commenced immediately following the organization of the Church. (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, 3:153-154)

“What was the object of gathering the Jews, or the people of God in any age of the world? . . . The main object was to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation; for there are certain ordinances and principles that, when they are taught and practiced, must

be done in a place or house built for that purpose.” (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.307-308)

### **Elias**

“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.” (D&C 110:12)

“And so, the Lord be praised, the marriage discipline of Abraham was restored; it is the system that enables a family unit to continue in eternity; it is the system out of which eternal life grows.” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Ensign*, April 1980, p. 23)

### **Elijah**

“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 110:13-16)

“Elijah restored the keys of the sealing power, by which the ordinances in the temple are bound in heaven as well as on earth, for both the living and the dead.” (Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:234)

Elijah restored to this Church and, if they would receive it, to the world, the keys of the sealing power; and that sealing power puts the stamp of approval upon every ordinance that is done in this Church and more particularly those that are performed in the temples of the Lord. Through that restoration, each of you, my brethren, has the privilege of going into this house or one of the other temples (I believe most of you have done so) to have your wife sealed to you for time and for all eternity, and your children sealed to you also, or better, have them born under that covenant.” (Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:129)

“The keys of Elijah’s work and ministry are extremely interesting. His coming was the fulfilling of the promise made through Malachi. It is the planting in

the hearts of the children the promises made to their fathers, that in these last days, the children should do the work which was denied the fathers upon which their salvation depends. Many members of the Church have thought that the keys restored by Elijah were keys pertaining to the dead, and therefore Elijah practiced in his day ordinances in behalf of the dead. This is an error. There was no work performed for the dead by Elijah or any other prophet before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The keys held by Elijah were the keys of the sealing power by which all ordinances are sanctioned and approved and upon which the eternal seal of authority is placed.” (Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Signs of the Times*, p.188)

“Now for Elijah. The spirit, power, and calling of Elijah is, that ye have power to hold the key of the revelations, ordinances, oracles, powers and endowments of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood and of the kingdom of God on the earth; and to receive, obtain, and perform all the ordinances belonging to the kingdom of God, even unto the turning of the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the hearts of the children unto the fathers, even those who are in heaven. . . Then what you seal on earth, by the keys of Elijah, is sealed in heaven; and this is the power of Elijah, and this is the difference between the spirit and power of Elias and Elijah; for while the spirit of Elias is a forerunner, the power of Elijah is sufficient to make our calling and election sure; and the same doctrine, where we are exhorted to go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, &c.” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp.337-338)