

What Is Women's Relationship to Priesthood?

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“As a righteous, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, you speak and teach with power and authority from God,” declared President Russell M. Nelson in October 2019. Women are “endowed with God’s power flowing from their priesthood covenants.” The endowment, he taught, bestows “a gift of God’s priesthood power” and “a gift of knowledge” about how to draw upon that power.¹ These teachings came at the close of a decade in which questions about the relationship of women and priesthood in the Church received intensifying discussion by leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

While the idea of female ordination to ecclesiastical offices does not seem to be an open topic in official Church discourse, there have been various formulations in thinking over time about where women fit into the larger picture of priesthood in the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Discussions about women and priesthood in the Church have played out over the past two centuries within specific historical contexts. While much more could be said in terms of analysis and interpretation, this essay takes a descriptive, contextual approach to tracing key inflection points in Latter-day Saints’ discussions of women’s relationship to the priesthood. The period divisions are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and the examples discussed should be construed as representative rather than comprehensive. Moreover, as the following discussion will show, it should be noted at the outset that the meaning and usage of many priesthood-related terms—such as “ordain,” “set apart,” “confer,”

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 77, 79.

“keys,” and “preside”—have changed over time, and such terms were often used with less precision than in current practice and publications.² For that matter, definition and understanding of priesthood itself has evolved over time.³ My hope is that a clearer sense of the origins and development of the discussion over time will provide better ground for its continuance.

1840s: “The Ancient Priesthood”

The essential starting point, and seemingly inexhaustible seedbed, for all discussions about women and priesthood is Joseph Smith’s teachings to the Nauvoo Relief Society in 1842. In these sermons, we find three entangled threads pertaining to priesthood: ecclesiastical authority to lead and administer the organization, initiation into the order of the priesthood bestowed through temple ordinances, and charismatic power to administer healing rituals.⁴

I use the word “entangled” to describe the relationship of these threads because they were heavily entwined and largely undifferentiated. The primary reason for this entanglement is that Joseph used language that has been associated, then and now, with priesthood. Records of his words also contain significant ambiguity, providing room for differing interpretations according to the changing contexts within which his language has been cited.

In regard to ecclesiastical authority, Joseph clearly envisioned an integral place for women in the Church. He said that Emma and her counselors were to be “ordained” to their positions and “preside” over

2. See “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/joseph-smiths-teachings-about-priesthood-temple-and-women?lang=eng>.

3. See Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Cosmology and Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995); Roger Terry, “Authority and Priesthood in the LDS Church, Part I: Definitions and Development,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 1–37; Roger Terry, “Authority and Priesthood in the LDS Church, Part 2: Ordinances, Quorums, Nonpriesthood Authority, Presiding, Priestesses, and Priesthood Bans,” *Dialogue* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 1–40.

4. This analysis is influenced by Jonathan Stapley’s formulation of temple priesthood as “cosmological” and authority to administer ordinances as “liturgical.” Stapley, *Power of Godliness*. See, for example, Joseph Smith, Journal, April 28, 1842, in Andrew H. Hedges and others, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 52.

the Society—"just as the Presidency, preside over the church." Other officers could be "appointed and set apart" if needed, "as Deacons, Teachers &c. are among us [that is, in the male priesthood quorums]."⁵ Joseph suggested that he expected the women to be largely self-governing and to take initiative both to "relieve the poor" and to "save souls."⁶

Establishment of the Relief Society incorporated women's organization and leadership into the formal structure of the Church, a significant departure from previous practice. Still, while Joseph established the precedent of female presidencies analogous to male priesthood presidencies, he did not establish—nor did Emma and the women of the Relief Society establish—quorums or priesthood offices for women. Moreover, Joseph repeatedly affirmed the need for order and even subordination within the Church. It was necessary, he said, for "every individual [to act] in the sphere allotted to him or her" and "aspire only to magnify his own office." He also cautioned that the Society was to "get instruction thro' the order which God has established—thro' the medium of those appointed to lead."⁷ Note that he did not explain whether "the medium of those appointed to lead" referred to the Relief Society presidency, the priesthood hierarchy, or both.

Priesthood's relationship to the temple is the overarching context for Joseph's teachings to the women of Nauvoo. In the months following the organization of the Relief Society, he delivered several sermons to the women in which priesthood language and concepts figured prominently. The most significant of these was the discourse of April 28, 1842, which Joseph characterized in his journal as "a lecture on the priesthood" showing "how the Sisters would come in possession

5. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1842," in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed., Jill Mulvay Derr and others (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 31.

Joseph Smith's statement about officers for the Relief Society parallels the recollection of Sarah M. Kimball, who said that Joseph told her he would organize the women "in the Order of the Priesthood after the pattern of the church," likely referring to the established pattern of appointing a president and counselors over the various priesthood quorums. "4.10 Sarah M. Kimball, Reminiscence, March 17, 1882," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 495. Eliza R. Snow sometimes referred to the Relief Society as a "quorum." See, for example, "3.6 Eliza R. Snow, 'Female Relief Society,' [*Deseret Evening News*,] April 18, 1868," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 271.

6. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," June 9, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 79.

7. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 54, 58–59.

of the privileges & blessings [*sic*] & gifts of the priesthood.”⁸ He affirmed that the “keys of the kingdom” were about to be given to the women as well as to the elders, and he declared, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”⁹

“Key,” of course, was a crucial term in Joseph Smith’s lexicon: the revelations often connected “keys” with priesthood (for example, D&C 81:2; 84:19, 26; 107:18, 20) but also referred to “keys” of revelation, restoration, and translation (for example, D&C 27:5–6, 9, 12–13; 64:5). If Joseph intended to give “priesthood keys” to the Relief Society or its leaders in some sense, he did not explain it. We do know that he used the term “keys of the kingdom” during this same period in reference to the temple, and this seems the mostly likely meaning for his statements to the women.¹⁰ Indeed, just one week after speaking these words to the women of the Relief Society, Joseph introduced the endowment to nine close male associates.¹¹

It would be sixteen months before women received all the temple ordinances and thus joined the “temple quorum,” largely due to Emma Smith’s vacillating feelings about plural marriage.¹² Nonetheless, it is clear that Joseph always intended to include women in the temple and expressed this intention to others. In remarks to the Relief Society shortly after becoming one of the first to receive the endowment, Bishop Newel K. Whitney exulted, “Without the female all things cannot be restor’d to the earth it takes all to restore the Priesthood.”¹³ That restoration would include ordinances of washing and anointing (adapted from the Kirtland Temple and later called the “initiatory”), endowment, marriage sealing

8. Joseph Smith, Journal, April 28, 1842, in Hedges and others, *Journals*, Volume 2, 52.

9. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 57, 59.

10. For example, see Joseph Smith, “Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards,” 94, Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-1-may-1842-as-reported-by-willard-richards/1#source-note>; see also Elizabeth A. Kuehn and others, eds., *Documents*, Volume 10: May–August 1842, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2020), 6–7: “The keys are certain signs & words by which false spirits & personages may be detected from true.— which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.” See also “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women.”

11. See Joseph Smith, Journal, May 4 and 5, 1842, in Hedges and others, *Journals*, Volume 2, 53–54, especially n. 198.

12. See discussion of this event, including the term “temple quorum,” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 75 n. 188.

13. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” May 27, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 75–76.

(monogamous or polygamous), and a culminating ordinance known as the second anointing. The latter two ordinances had to be received jointly by a husband and wife.

By the time of Joseph Smith's death, a few dozen men and women had received these ordinances and related instruction from him, meeting together often as a group. Contemporary journals of some participants refer to the group as the Council, the Quorum, the Holy Order, and the Holy Priesthood.¹⁴ These people called themselves "the priesthood," reflecting the collective sense of priesthood as comprising priests and priestesses. That is, they understood themselves to have entered into the highest order of the priesthood by making covenants and receiving temple ordinances, as reflected in Joseph's now-canonized teachings referring to these ordinances as an "order of the priesthood" (D&C 131:2). In this context, it is worth stressing, "the priesthood" included women.

The idea that "it takes all to restore the priesthood" and that salvation (or "exaltation," as it began to be called) could only be received jointly by a sealed man and woman was certainly a radical one that opened new spiritual avenues and status to women. But it was implemented in the context of an androcentric culture that accepted as fundamental New Testament teachings about the subordination of women. This context becomes especially clear in sources dating to the postmartyrdom period when Smith's successors sought to implement temple ordinances more broadly as the temple neared completion. For example, Heber C. Kimball's journal, which records multiple meetings of the temple quorum in 1845, is riddled with statements underscoring the subordinate status of women.¹⁵ Moreover, Brigham Young's hostility to Emma Smith and the Relief Society undoubtedly prompted his edict disbanding the Relief Society and his declaration that women "must be led" into the celestial kingdom by men and that they "never can hold the keys of the Priesthood apart from their husband."¹⁶ This pervasive rhetoric of male headship adds another layer

14. These references are ubiquitous in the primary sources in Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, ed., *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, 1842-1845* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005). See also "The Quorum," Glossary, Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/quorum-the>. In the Utah era, this group also came to be known as the Anointed Quorum.

15. See the compilation in appendix 1 of David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 181-201.

16. "1.13 Brigham Young, Discourses, March 9, 1845 (Excerpts)," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 171. See also Brooke R. LeFevre, "I Would Not Risk My Salvation to

of complexity to interpretations of the Nauvoo-era and postmartyrdom understanding of temples, priesthood, and women.

The third thread of connection between women and priesthood in Joseph Smith's teachings to the Relief Society was ritual authority to lay on hands and bless the sick. He insisted that women's participation in these practices was "according to revelation" and that "it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith." "If the sisters should have faith to heal the sick," he said, "let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on."¹⁷

Healing had been considered one of the restored gifts of the gospel, as outlined anciently in the New Testament, but there was a great deal of variation in the ritual among Latter-day Saints. The practice of laying on hands (by both men and women) existed alongside the admonition to call "the elders of the church," with no clear distinction about when one or the other was preferred.¹⁸ Joseph Smith's affirmation of women's healing practices, then, authorized their participation in rituals that could also be identified with priesthood.

Addressing the Relief Society on the subject of healing, Smith exhorted the sisters to see that "wherein they are ordaind, it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer'd on them."¹⁹ This statement may refer to women who were specially "ordained and set apart" to administer to the sick.²⁰ It could also apply to Emma Smith and her counselors, a rebuke to those who evidently criticized these sisters for laying on hands to bless.²¹ As recorded, though, Joseph's statement offers no explicit explanation of who had been "ordaind" or what "authority" had been "confer'd" upon them.

Moreover, it is important to understand that Joseph Smith envisioned the temple as the ultimate site for healing; salvific ordinances adapted

Any Man': Eliza R. Snow's Challenge to Salvific Coverture," *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 2 (2021): 48–74.

17. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 55, 59.

18. Doctrine and Covenants 42:44; see also James 5:14–15. For the development of early Mormon healing practices, see Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "The Forms and the Power: The Development of Mormon Ritual Healing to 1847," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 42–87; see also "Healing," Church History Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/healing?lang=eng>.

19. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 55.

20. Elizabeth Ann Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7, no. 12 (November 15, 1878): 91, quoted in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 55 n. 157.

21. See Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 84.

to healing—such as baptism for health and washing and anointing the sick—were implemented as part of the temple liturgy.²² This seems to be the most pertinent context for his remarks to the Relief Society on healing. “The time had not been before, that these things [that is, laying on hands to bless the sick] could be in their proper order,” he said, “and cannot be until the Temple is completed.”²³

However, even if we understand the temple as the context for Joseph's endorsement of female ritual healing, some ambiguity remains. Did he mean that women's healing practices were intended to take place within the temple? Or did he mean that the endowment to be received in the temple would impart the necessary power for them to bless the sick in any setting? For that matter, if his statement referred specifically to Emma and her counselors, did he believe that their “ordination” to leadership conferred authority to heal? He did not say. In any case, the practice flourished in subsequent decades, followed by controversy.

By the mid-1840s, then, Latter-day Saints' understanding of women and priesthood encompassed the threads of ecclesiastical office and authority, sacral power bestowed through the temple, and performance of ordinance and ritual, including both healing and temple ceremonies. Much subsequent development in priesthood practice and discourse would consist of disentangling these threads.

1850–1900: “In Connection with Their Husbands”

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the three threads of women's connection to priesthood persisted and solidified, but they were also somewhat disentangled.

In regard to the first thread—ecclesiastical—women's authority to lead within the Church expanded over the course of the last third of the nineteenth century. After a few localized revivals of the Relief Society in early Utah, Brigham Young commissioned Eliza R. Snow in 1868 to reorganize the Relief Society throughout the Church, beginning the process of establishing groups in every local unit.²⁴ In 1870, a Retrenchment Association was organized to promote thrift and economic and social solidarity among Latter-day Saint women; a Young Ladies' Department—later renamed the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement

22. See Stapley and Wright, “Forms and the Power,” 75–80.

23. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 54.

24. See “3.5 Eliza R. Snow, Account of 1868 Commission, as Recorded in ‘Sketch of My Life,’ April 13, 1885 (Excerpt),” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 266–69.

Association—followed. In 1878, the Primary Association was established to provide religious and moral training for children.²⁵ All of these organizations were headed by women and came to feature presidencies, boards, and other leadership positions at the ward, stake, and general levels, and they functioned together as a vibrant women's sphere within the Church.

It became customary for women leaders to be commissioned for their service by receiving a blessing from a male priesthood leader by the laying on of hands, and the expressions “ordain” and “set apart” came to be used in such blessings, seemingly interchangeably. In organizing the first general presidencies of the women's organizations in July 1880, President John Taylor demonstrated this practice. In the blessing he pronounced upon Eliza R. Snow, he used both terms: “I set thee apart to preside over the Relief Societies,” he said, and “ordain thee to this office.” He “ordained” one of Eliza's counselors and “set apart” the other.

On that same occasion, however, President Taylor felt it necessary to offer clarification. Referring to the “ordination” of Emma Smith and her counselors in the original Relief Society, which was explicitly invoked as the precedent for his actions in 1880, he observed, “The ordination then given did not mean the conferring of the Priesthood upon those sisters.”²⁶ Taylor's clarification reflected a trend toward codification of priesthood language: “ordain” and its cognates increasingly referred specifically to priesthood ordination, while “set apart” applied to any calling or capacity. The latter—including all offices held by women—were still official positions within the Church and were generally filled with some involvement of priesthood leaders, but they were not priesthood offices and did not require priesthood ordination; indeed, they were subject to governance by priesthood leaders. This understanding has continued to govern women's service in the Church to the present day.

A significant new development in the ecclesiastical thread occurred around the turn of the century when the calling of the first single sister missionaries opened a new arena of service for women. While there was never any consideration of ordaining women missionaries to priesthood offices or permitting them to perform priesthood ordinances such as baptism or confirmation, they did receive a call and commission that was otherwise parallel to that given to men. This new opportunity raised

25. See introduction to part 3 and documents 3.5, 3.6, 3.16, 3.18, and 3.30, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 235–47, 266–75, 343–49, 353–57, 427–34.

26. “4.5 General Relief Society Meeting, Report, July 17, 1880,” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 476–77.

all manner of questions about priesthood, gender, and precedence. Male leaders acted quickly to “domesticate” women’s missionary work and to maintain boundaries between men’s and women’s functions. Nonetheless, women missionaries went forward in increasing numbers, gaining visibility and credibility as official representatives of the Church.²⁷

When John Taylor stated in 1880 that Emma Smith’s “ordination” did not include conferral of the priesthood, he added a clarification that speaks to the temple thread of women and priesthood. He said, “Yet the sisters hold a portion of the Priesthood in connection with their husbands.” This expression—that women held the priesthood, or a “portion” of the priesthood, “in connection with their husbands”—was rather commonplace in Latter-day Saints’ discourse in the last half of the nineteenth century.²⁸ This language was reflected in revisions to the Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes when they were edited by Church historians for inclusion in the *History of the Church*, which recast Joseph Smith’s language regarding women and priesthood as advocating male headship.²⁹ Nonetheless, expressions of women holding priesthood “in connection with their husbands” seem to reflect the lingering influence of Nauvoo-era temple theology: by being sealed together in the temple, women and men jointly entered into an “order of the priesthood,” giving women some sense of priesthood status (D&C 131:2).

Elder Franklin D. Richards made perhaps the most forceful statement in this vein. Speaking in 1888 to the Relief Society of the Weber Stake, over which his wife Jane presided, Richards addressed the men in the audience directly.³⁰ Other than ordination to priesthood office, he

27. See Matthew McBride, “‘Female Brethren’: Gender Dynamics in a Newly Integrated Missionary Force, 1898–1915,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 4 (October 2018): 40–67.

28. “4.5 General Relief Society Meeting, Report, July 17, 1880,” 475–76. For two examples, see “14 November 1876: Bountiful Relief Society; Bountiful Tabernacle, Bountiful, Utah Territory,” Discourses of Eliza R. Snow, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow/1870s/1876/11/1876-11-14?lang=eng>; “Well do we not my Sisters hold a portion of the Priesthood with the Brethren”; and Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter, “Grain Meeting,” *Woman’s Exponent* 6, no. 13 [December 1, 1877]: 102: “They have the Priesthood—a portion of priesthood rests upon the sisters.”

29. For a full discussion of this incident and the full text of the revised minutes, see “2.2 Joseph Smith, Discourses to Nauvoo Female Relief Society, March 31 and April 28, 1842, as Revised for ‘History of Joseph Smith,’ September 5 and 19, 1855,” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 198–208.

30. Jane Snyder Richards married Franklin D. Richards in Nauvoo in 1842. They later participated in plural marriage. See entries for both in “Biographical Directory,” Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 667–68.

insisted, “our sisters share with us any and all of the ordinances of the holy anointing, endowments, sealings, sanctifications and blessings that we have been made partakers of.” “Is it possible,” Richards continued, “that we have the holy priesthood and our wives have none of it?”³¹

All such assertions made a positive claim—women had “priesthood”—alongside a qualification of the claim—“in connection” or “a portion.” Elder Richards’s strong assertions about women’s inclusion in priesthood, based on temple ordinances and echoing ideas that had circulated since Nauvoo, demonstrated that the understanding of a connection between temple and priesthood lingered but also that its implications were contested.³² Richards made a powerful case that women’s temple ordinances had bestowed a form of priesthood upon them, but like the authors of many similar statements scattered throughout contemporary sources, he envisioned women’s “priesthood” as shared and did not claim that it bestowed any specific authority.

During this period, the threads of ritual authority and temple priesthood remained entwined because the temple continued to serve as a site for physical healing. Indeed, this was a primary purpose for which many Latter-day Saints attended the temple.³³ Baptisms for health, performed by men, and anointing and blessing the sick, performed by both women and men, offered a vibrant healing liturgy within the temple and a sanctioned status for women who administered the rituals.³⁴ Moreover, both inside and outside of the temple, the late nineteenth century was the high point for women’s participation in rituals that involved laying on hands. Women blessed the sick, washed and anointed each other in preparation for childbirth, and gave blessings of comfort and prophecy. Some women were set apart under the auspices of the Relief Society to administer to the sick or to serve as midwives and medical

31. “4.20 Franklin D. Richards, Discourse, July 19, 1888,” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 552.

32. See Elder Richards’s statement in this discourse that some men considered women’s work in the Church as being “out of their line and place” and that some men had “feelings of envy and jealousy” and “would like to keep [women] back.” Such brethren “withhold blessings from themselves,” Richards asserted. Richards, Discourse, 546–47.

33. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine L. Wright, “‘They Shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 94; Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 11, 17–19. The St. George temple was dedicated in 1877, Logan in 1884, Manti in 1888, and Salt Lake in 1893, giving members several options for temple attendance, facilitated by railroad service.

34. See Stapley and Wright, “They Shall Be Made Whole,” esp. 92–105.

practitioners within their communities, offering both physical care and spiritual administration.³⁵

Both women and men consistently expressed confidence that these practices were legitimate, but questions repeatedly emerged about the authority by which women performed them. In 1880, the Quorum of the Twelve drafted a circular letter affirming that "all faithful women and lay members of the church" had the privilege "to administer to all the sick or afflicted in their respective families, either by the laying on of hands, or by the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord." This should be done "not by virtue and authority of the priesthood, but by virtue of their faith in Christ, and the promises made to believers."³⁶

While Eliza R. Snow repeatedly affirmed this understanding—that women did not administer to the sick by priesthood authority—she sometimes suggested that women's administration was authorized or enabled by the endowment, an assertion that the First Presidency did not endorse.³⁷ The practice of anointing and blessing by men, invoking priesthood authority, existed side by side with the more general practice of healing by faith, with the same people engaging at different times in the various forms without anyone explaining why one was preferred in a given instance.³⁸ Questions and disagreements show the beginning of a long process of

35. Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing," 23–27.

36. "4.8 Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Draft Circular Letter, October 6, 1880 (Excerpt), in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 489. In 1888, President Wilford Woodruff affirmed essentially the same principle with specific reference to washing and anointing expectant mothers. He cautioned that such practices should not be called "ordinances" in order to retain a distinction between them and the washings and anointings performed in the temple. "4.19 Wilford Woodruff, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, April 27, 1888," in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 542.

37. Eliza R. Snow said, "Any and all sisters who honor their holy endowments, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty, whenever called upon to administer to our sisters in these ordinances." "4.14 Eliza R. Snow, 'To the Branches of the Relief Society,' September 12, 1884," *Woman's Exponent* 13, no. 8 (September 15, 1884): 61, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 516; see note 256 on that page for the First Presidency's correction of Snow. See also discussion of this question in Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing," 36–40.

38. For example, see Melissa Lambert Milewski, ed., *Before the Manifesto: The Life Writings of Mary Lois Walker Morris* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007), 226, 230, 238, 247–48. The now-standard ritual form for administering to the sick was not codified until after the turn of the century. See Jonathan A. Stapley, "'Pouring in Oil': The Development of the Modern Mormon Healing Ritual," in *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scripture, History, and Practice*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 283–316.

disentangling the various ritual forms of administering to the sick and of asserting the primacy of priesthood administration, a process that would unfold over the next half-century.³⁹

1900–1940: “The Blessings of the Priesthood”

In the first half of the twentieth century, the threads of women’s relationship to priesthood were further disentangled, and discussions about women and priesthood reached a point of stability that has more or less undergirded all subsequent discourse. Women did not “hold” the priesthood in any sense, but they shared in all its blessings. This understanding came to be expressed through a paradigm that posited priesthood and motherhood as parallel and equivalent callings.

The key backdrop to these developments was the priesthood reform movement initiated by President Joseph F. Smith and continued by President Heber J. Grant, which served to bring the modern Church into being. This movement involved “administrative modernization,” theological compilation and elaboration, and standardization of ritual practices. Priesthood was a central concern in all these efforts.⁴⁰ Animated by progressive impulses to create order and rational organization, this movement emphasized the week-to-week ecclesiastical applications of priesthood in the local congregation and elevated priesthood quorums over auxiliaries as “the ruling, presiding, authority in the Church.”⁴¹ The results carried implications for all three threads of women’s relationship to priesthood.

Priesthood reform coalesced around President Joseph F. Smith’s definition of priesthood as “the power of God delegated to man by which man can act in the earth for the salvation of the human family.”⁴² Smith

39. See “4.19 Wilford Woodruff, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, April 27, 1888,” 539–42, especially nn. 328–29.

40. Key sources on this transformation are Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and William Hartley, “The Priesthood Reform Movement, 1908–1922,” *BYU Studies* 13, no. 2 (1973): 137–56. The phrase “administrative modernization” is Alexander’s. See also Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 152–83.

41. Joseph F. Smith, “Editor’s Table: On Church Government,” *Improvement Era* 6, no. 9 (July 1903): 705.

42. Joseph F. Smith, in *Seventy-Fifth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1904), 5. Smith’s definition was not sui generis but brought together elements of

consciously distinguished between priesthood as the power of God or “the principle of power” animating priesthood office and what he called priesthood’s “ordinary meaning” of “a class or body of men set apart for sacred duties, or holding the priestly office” (that is, priesthood in the collective sense).⁴³ This distinction, which gave rise to the practice of first conferring the priesthood upon a man and then ordaining him to a specific office in the priesthood, served to elevate an abstract concept of priesthood that further distanced Latter-day Saints from the sacral, collective sense that could include women, as reflected in Nauvoo-era temple ordinances.⁴⁴

Priesthood reform was in part a response to the significant expansion of auxiliary organizations and programs within the Church, which continued apace in the early twentieth century. This expansion opened even more opportunities for women to serve in recognized Church positions, but the fundamental understanding remained that setting women apart for those positions did not constitute priesthood ordination.

The most significant development in women’s ecclesiastical relationship to priesthood during this era occurred on the structural level. Joseph F. Smith made it clear that the women’s organizations (along with the Sunday Schools and Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations) were *auxiliaries*, subordinate to governing priesthood lines of authority at all levels. He predicted a day when “there will not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations, because it will be done by the regular quorums of the Priesthood.”⁴⁵ In principle, women’s organizations had always affirmed their subordination to priesthood leadership; priesthood reform put that principle into practice in expanded, concrete ways that meant a diminished role for the Relief Society as an umbrella for women’s organizations and a loss of some autonomy and latitude for women’s leadership.⁴⁶

his own and earlier authorities’ discourse about priesthood and articulated them in a concise formulation.

43. Joseph F. Smith, “Restoration of the Melchisedec Priesthood,” *Contributor* 10, no. 8 (June 1889): 307.

44. See Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 23–26. Stapley describes the crucial shift from “viewing priesthood as channeling the power of God” to describing priesthood “as the power of God.” Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 12, emphasis in original.

45. Joseph F. Smith, in *Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1906), 3.

46. See Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo,

The sense of women “sharing” something received in the temple lingered, but what was it they shared? President Joseph F. Smith was adamant that women did *not* share or “hold” the priesthood with their husbands; they did, however, jointly “enjoy the benefits therefrom.”⁴⁷ Elder James E. Talmage, considered the doctrinal expert among the Twelve in this era, took up the subject as well. In his book about the temple, he acknowledged the lingering influence of earlier views. “It is a precept of the Church that women of the Church share the authority of the Priesthood with their husbands,” he wrote. This sharing of priesthood authority made it unnecessary for women to be “ordained to specific rank in the Priesthood.”⁴⁸ Note that in this formulation, “priesthood” has taken on an entirely ecclesiastical meaning; the sense of a priesthood associated with the temple is gone. Two years later, Talmage expressed this view even more clearly, in terms more parallel to President Smith’s: “It is not given to woman to exercise the authority of the Priesthood independently; nevertheless, in the sacred endowments associated with the ordinances pertaining to the House of the Lord, woman shares with man the blessings of the Priesthood.”⁴⁹

In this same article, Elder Talmage set forth an essentialist view of gender that he believed explained the priesthood order in this life. Men and women retain their “sex” (in his terms) “fundamentally, unchangeably, eternally.”⁵⁰ Given this truth, Talmage taught, “woman occupies

Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1992), 180–223; Dave Hall, *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women’s Activism, 1872–1959* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 56–59, 65–66; Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 448–51.

47. Joseph F. Smith, “Questions and Answers,” *Improvement Era* 10, no. 4 (February 1907): 308. This column was part of the monthly Editor’s Table section, written (and usually signed) by Joseph F. Smith. Many pieces from this series were later collected in *Gospel Doctrine*. The question was “Does a wife hold the priesthood in connection with her husband? and may she lay hands on the sick with him, with authority?” I will discuss the question of healing below.

48. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912), 94.

49. James E. Talmage, “The Eternity of Sex,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 25, no. 10 (October 1914): 602.

50. Talmage, “Eternity of Sex,” 600, 602. A shorter article by the same title and containing much of the same content was published in 1922: James E. Talmage, “The Eternity of Sex,” *Millennial Star* 84, no. 34 (August 24, 1922): 539–40. From this piece, Dallin H. Oaks quoted the assertion that sex is an “essential characteristic of our pre-existent condition” in a 1993 sermon. It is possible that this source influenced the similar statement in the 1995 document “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign* 23, no. 11 (November 1993): 72.

a position all her own in the eternal economy of the Creator; and in that position she is as truly superior to man as is he to her in his appointed place.”⁵¹ Whatever that “position all her own” might be (Talmage did not elaborate), women’s subordination was part of the plan: “It is part of woman’s mission in this life to occupy a secondary position of authority in the activities of the world, both in the home and in the affairs of public concern.” This arrangement was rational: “In every organization, however simple or complex, there must needs be a centralization of authority, in short, a head.” A gender hierarchy, at least in this mortal realm, is ordered by God’s wisdom; priesthood assignment flows from that order.⁵²

Proxy temple work and regular temple attendance were expanding dramatically during this period, under the umbrella of priesthood reform and liturgical modernization.⁵³ Talmage’s teachings reflect the profound shift in understanding this movement had effected. All priesthood was now seen through the lens of ecclesiology and liturgy. Rather than the temple being a *source* of priesthood, the emphasis was on priesthood as the authority that *enabled* temple ordinances. As Joseph F. Smith taught, women did not “hold the priesthood in connection with their husbands”⁵⁴—that is, temple ordinances did not bestow priesthood upon participants—but women shared in all the *blessings* of the priesthood (that is, all blessings made available through the priesthood, including the ultimate blessings promised in the temple, were available to women). In one sense, President Smith’s reformulation could be seen as a refutation of those earlier understandings about women holding the priesthood in connection with their husbands, but it also made plain something that had always been implied in those expressions: if *priesthood* meant ecclesiastical office and authority, women clearly did not *hold the priesthood*.

Men were not the only ones to examine priesthood theology in this era. Susa Young Gates—a prominent figure among Latter-day Saint women who served on the Relief Society general board, founded and edited the *Relief Society Magazine*, and relentlessly advocated genealogy

51. Talmage, “Eternity of Sex,” 602.

52. Talmage, “Eternity of Sex,” 602. He did not cite a source for this “Divine requirement.”

53. See James B. Allen, Jessie L. Embry, and Kahlile B. Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers: A History of the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1894–1994* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995).

54. Joseph F. Smith, “Questions and Answers,” *Improvement Era* 10, no. 4 (February 1907): 308.

and temple work—had grappled with questions about gender and priesthood throughout her life. In the 1920s, she collaborated with her daughter, Leah Widtsoe, to articulate a rationale for the gendered order, echoing the terms expressed by Joseph F. Smith and James E. Talmage. “Women do not hold the priesthood, but they do share equally in the blessings and gifts bestowed on the priesthood in temple courts, in civic, social and domestic life,” they wrote in 1926.

Gates and Widtsoe went beyond this assertion, seeking a rationale. In short, women did not hold the priesthood because they were mothers: “No woman could safely carry the triple burden of wifehood, motherhood, and at the same time function in priestly orders. Yet her creative home labor ranks side by side, in earthly and heavenly importance, with her husband’s priestly responsibilities.”⁵⁵ That is to say, men have priesthood; women have motherhood. Gates and Widtsoe seem to be the origin of this paradigm, which they considered wholly satisfactory.

The priesthood/motherhood paradigm has proven to be extremely durable in Latter-day Saint thought. Leah Widtsoe elaborated and popularized the idea through a series of articles in the Church news section of the *Deseret News*, published in 1934. Like Talmage, she was a progressive thinker who emphasized the need for a rational, efficient line of accountability and “division of responsibility” in society, home, and church. Motherhood would consume all of the energies of a righteous woman, she argued; “the added burden” of priesthood “would be just that much too much in her life of home building and conservation.”⁵⁶ Righteous mothers would have “no time nor desire for anything greater, for there is nothing greater on earth!”⁵⁷

Leah’s husband, Elder John A. Widtsoe, gave the priesthood/motherhood paradigm official imprimatur when he incorporated key passages from her articles into his important work, *Priesthood and Church Government*.⁵⁸ This extremely popular and influential book served as a

55. Susa Young Gates and Leah D. Widtsoe, *Women of the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1926), 5.

56. Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, Church News section, February 3, 1934, 3. See Kathryn Shirts, “The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 2 (April 2018): 104–39.

57. Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, Church News section, January 13, 1934, 7.

58. John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939). The bulk of chapter 7, “Priesthood and the Home,” consists of excerpts of Leah’s “Priesthood and Womanhood” articles.

course of study, a standard reference work, and a source for curriculum writers for the rest of the twentieth century.

In this work, John Widtsoe argued that women's sharing of priesthood blessings with men was made clear in the temple. "The ordinances of the Temple are distinctly of Priesthood character," he wrote, "yet women have access to all of them, and the highest blessings of the Temple are conferred only upon a man and his wife jointly."⁵⁹ He did not explain what it meant for temple ordinances to be "of Priesthood character," but this statement reflects the fundamental understanding that those ordinances were essential to salvation and necessarily required joint inclusion of women and men. Where the earlier understanding of temple, priesthood, and marriage had been entwined with plural marriage and a more communal understanding of salvation, emphasis had now shifted to "temple marriage" within the framework of monogamy and the ideal of partnership in marriage as the basis for modern middle-class American life. Temple marriage became a subject of emphasis in discourse aimed at young people, complete with startling statistics about the number of Latter-day Saints marrying outside the temple.⁶⁰

As these normative understandings of priesthood in the Church and temple solidified, sanction for women's participation in healing rituals came to an end. In a 1914 circular letter, the First Presidency under Joseph F. Smith endorsed women's blessing of the sick, affirming that "any good sister, full of faith in God and in the efficacy of prayer, may officiate." In the same letter, however, they emphasized that women should "confirm" rather than "seal" anointings—presumably because "sealing" was associated with priesthood—and that "the command of the Lord is to call in the elders to administer to the sick," giving primacy to priesthood blessings.⁶¹

59. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government*, 83. Widtsoe is quoting from his book *The Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1936), 79.

60. See "Editorial: For Time and Eternity," *Young Woman's Journal* 25, no. 6 (June 1914): 389–90; Melvin J. Ballard, "'Be Ye Not Unequally Yoked Together': 2 Cor. 6; 14," *Young Woman's Journal* 24, no. 6 (June 1913): 340–42; John M. Whitaker, "Marriage," *Young Woman's Journal* 24, no. 6 (June 1913): 343–47; Rudger Clawson, "Marriage an Investment," *Young Woman's Journal* 31, no. 6 (June 1920): 301–3; Joseph Fielding Smith, "Marriage Ordained of God," *Young Woman's Journal* 31, no. 6 (June 1920): 304–8.

61. Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, and Charles W. Penrose, "To the Presidents of Stakes and Bishops of Wards," October 3, 1914, quoted in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:312–17 (October 3, 1914).

This pattern of emphasizing priesthood administration without explicitly forbidding women to bless the sick continued in successive decades; meanwhile, the ritual form for administering to the sick was codified in priesthood manuals and handbooks as a Melchizedek Priesthood ordinance.⁶² An important step toward the end of sanctioned women's healing practices came with the reformation of temple liturgy and practice in 1922. Under the leadership of President Heber J. Grant and Elder George F. Richards (Apostle and president of the Salt Lake Temple), healing rituals were removed from the temple, and the men and women who had served as temple healers were released. This removed a visible, authorized place for women to administer blessings at a time when the emphasis on priesthood reform had already rendered such practices increasingly anomalous.⁶³ Women did, however, continue to lay on hands as part of officiating in certain temple ordinances, something that continues to the present.

To be sure, some leaders made strident statements explicitly discouraging women's healing practices. Speaking in general conference in 1921, President Charles W. Penrose decried what he called "a revival of the idea among some of our sisters that they hold the Priesthood." Penrose affirmed that women shared the blessings of the priesthood when they were sealed to their husbands, but he stated unequivocally, "The sisters are not ordained to any office in the Priesthood and there is authority in the Church which they cannot exercise; it does not belong to them."⁶⁴

Penrose allowed that women had authority to bless the sick "in one way"—quoting from Jesus's exhortation about spiritual gifts—and said it might be appropriate on "occasions," alluding to blessing pregnant women. "But when women go around and declare that they have been set apart to administer to the sick and take the place that is given to the elders of the Church by revelation," he said, "that is an assumption of authority and contrary to scripture."⁶⁵ Penrose's talk seems to have

62. Published instructions outlining a standard procedure for administering to the sick went back at least as far as the 1902 YMMIA manual. *Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations Manual: 1902–1903* (Salt Lake City: General Board YMMIA, 1902), 58–59.

63. See Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing," 66–69.

64. Charles W. Penrose, "How Revelation from God to the Church Is Received," *Improvement Era* 24, no. 8 (June 1921): 678. It is not clear what perceived "revival" prompted Penrose's denunciation.

65. Penrose also denounced women holding meetings to speak in tongues and prophesy without permission of priesthood authorities. Penrose, "Revelation from God," 678–79.

been a turning point after which women's healing practices decreased significantly.⁶⁶

In 1946, general Relief Society leaders asked Joseph Fielding Smith, Apostle and doctrinal authority who had spoken forcefully in favor of priesthood administration, to draft a letter in response to queries about women's healing practices. This letter presumably provided authoritative answers that could be sent out over the signature of the women. The fact that the women felt it necessary to have such a letter suggests that they continued to receive questions about women's administration to the sick, likely reflecting uneven practice and understanding in the Church at large; the fact that they turned to a male authority to answer the questions indicates that they considered healing practices to be under the purview of the priesthood. Smith wrote that "the authorities" feel "it is far better for us to follow the plan the Lord has given us and send for the elders of the Church to come and administer to the sick and afflicted." Women had "greatly abused" and "improperly done" these things in the past, Fielding Smith's letter asserted, referring specifically to washing and anointing pregnant women, the one remaining form of female ritual healing that had maintained some legitimacy to that point.⁶⁷

For their part, women leaders said little publicly about healing. Relief Society general president Louise Robison, who served from 1928 to 1939, told one correspondent in a 1935 letter that "this beautiful ordinance" of washing and anointing expectant mothers should be done "very quietly" and only when priesthood authorities did not take "a definite stand" against it.⁶⁸ Joseph Fielding Smith's 1946 letter certainly seemed to constitute a "definite stand," even though some of his other writings were more equivocal.⁶⁹

66. Stapley and Wright note that "after this point, washing and anointings for child-birth make up the preponderance of documented female-only rituals." Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing," 72.

67. Joseph Fielding Smith, Letter, July 29, 1946, Relief Society Washing and Anointing File, CR 11 304, box 1, fd. 1, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, quoted in Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing," 81.

68. Louise Y. Robison and Julia A. F. Lund to Mrs. Ada E. Morrell, December 5, 1935, cited in Linda King Newell, "Gifts of the Spirit: Women's Share," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 137.

69. For example, in *Doctrines of Salvation*, Joseph Fielding Smith emphasized priesthood administration and outlined proper procedures, but he also quoted Joseph Smith's sermon to the Relief Society and his own father's (Joseph F.) qualified endorsement of a

It is impossible to discern now how much women's healing practices were stamped out and how much they simply faded, perhaps along generational lines due to changing sensibilities. Charismatic practices were increasingly seen as old-fashioned, and with the Relief Society vigorously promoting progressive engagement in medicine and social work, calling in the sisters to anoint and bless an expectant mother, for example, must have seemed incongruous with the modern worldview taking hold. Moreover, in cases where a belief in such practices and a desire to engage in them continued, the disapproving rhetoric of priesthood leaders likely drove them underground or stopped them altogether. The result was that in official discourse and lay practice, the idea of women laying on hands to bless the sick all but disappeared, and this thread of women's connection to priesthood was severed.

1960s: "The Home Is the Basis"

By the mid-twentieth century, Latter-day Saint discourse about women and priesthood had taken familiar and lasting form. Priesthood was power and authority from God; it was the governing principle of the Church. Men were ordained to the priesthood in accordance with a divinely appointed division of assignments that ensured order and reflected essential gendered characteristics. Women's assignment as mothers was parallel to men's assignment as priesthood holders. Women had access to and shared in the ultimate realization of all of the blessings of the priesthood through their husbands, the ecclesiastical system of the Church, and the ordinances of the temple. Women served as ordinance workers in the temple, based on authority delegated from priesthood leaders. Likewise, they held positions of recognized authority in their auxiliary organizations, but those organizations were subject to governance by priesthood authority. This understanding has remained remarkably stable and continues to undergird discourse about priesthood even now.

husband and wife unitedly administering to their children. Joseph Fielding Smith allowed that "a woman may lay hands upon the head of a sick child and ask the Lord to bless it, in the case when those holding the priesthood cannot be present" but reiterated that "a woman would have no authority to anoint or seal a blessing." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:178. Fielding Smith's familiarity with the teachings of Joseph Smith, reflected in his popular compilation of the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, may have kept him from making the blanket prohibition against female ritual healing he might otherwise have preferred. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 224–25.

The mid-century Priesthood Correlation movement headed by then Elder Harold B. Lee has rightly been seen in terms of its administrative, ecclesiastical, and structural implications for the Church. In practical terms, Correlation's emphasis on priesthood governance resulted in further subordination of women's organizations and severely curtailed women's autonomy and influence.⁷⁰ But it is important to understand that Correlation was rooted in a particular view of priesthood that enshrined it as the basis of the home and family. Lee himself expressed this view: The purpose of Correlation, he said, was to place "the Priesthood as the Lord intended, as the center core of the Kingdom of God, and the auxiliaries as related thereto; including a greater emphasis on the Fathers in the home as Priesthood bearers in strengthening the family unit."⁷¹ The key to the whole movement, Lee explained, was found in a First Presidency statement: "The home is the basis of a righteous life and no other instrumentality can take its place nor fulfil its essential functions."⁷² The vision of efficient Church organizations was related to the vision of righteous homes, and vice versa, with priesthood as the central and unifying element.

At the height of the Correlation movement in the 1960s and '70s, "priesthood" became a ubiquitous term and a frequent subject of emphasis.⁷³ Priesthood referred collectively to the men who held it and to the (male) governing structure of the Church. It is not always possible to tell which sense any given speaker was employing. Women were to honor and follow the priesthood—in their homes, in their personal lives, and collectively in their organizations. "There can be nothing more fundamental in the Church than a faithful sister supporting the priesthood, whether it be her husband, or her designated authority in the ward, stake, or mission," declared Presiding Bishop Robert L. Simpson in 1967.⁷⁴

70. See Bowman, *Mormon People*, 190–97; Derr, Cannon and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 330–36, 340–46.

71. Harold B. Lee, regional representatives seminar, 2–3, in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 325. Lee was speaking at a regional representatives' training seminar. Note that his statement regarding the auxiliaries echoes Joseph F. Smith's 1906 statement quoted above.

72. Harold B. Lee, in *One Hundred Thirty-Second Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962), 72.

73. See A. Theodore Tuttle, "A New Emphasis on Priesthood," BYU devotional, June 12, 1973, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/theodore-a-tuttle/new-emphasis-priesthood>.

74. Robert L. Simpson, "Relief Society: Arm in Arm with the Priesthood," address, September 28, 1967, Stake Board Session of the Relief Society Annual General Conference, printed in *Relief Society Magazine* 55, no. 3 (March 1968): 167.

An address by Elder Mark E. Petersen to Relief Society leaders expresses many themes typical of this era. He taught that the priesthood was “the divinely established foundation of a happy home life.” Temple ordinances assured each family of “the presence of the priesthood in the home.” When men and women are married in the temple, he said, “they jointly and together enter into the same covenants under the priesthood and receive the same promises of divine beneficence,” and they take this priesthood into their home.⁷⁵ Note the slight but consequential difference in wording here from the previous century: instead of entering into an order of the priesthood, the couple enters into “covenants under the priesthood.”

Elder Petersen defined priesthood as “the power of God transmitted to mankind.” While he no doubt would have included “authority” as part of priesthood, this definition rendered priesthood a wholly abstract concept—a power that bestowed blessings. Priesthood was “the source of peace and happiness” in the home. But “priesthood” had also become interchangeable with “men” in women’s lives. Sisters were to encourage husbands and sons to magnify their callings and to recognize their husbands as “the priestly presidents of the family.”⁷⁶

The intensity of the efforts around this vision of priesthood-centered homes helps to explain the intensity of the response to feminism and the ERA in the 1970s and beyond.

1970–2000: Feminism and Responses

From the 1970s onward, discussions about women and priesthood have taken place along two general tracks, in definite if somewhat unacknowledged dialogue with each other. I will call these the feminist and the orthodox tracks, recognizing that such terms elide a great deal of diversity in opinion and tone and that the examples I cite are representative of many others. Whether specifically advocating priesthood ordination for women or not, most feminist voices have seen problematic inequality and asymmetry in gender relations in the Church, rooted in the male-only priesthood structure. Voices in the orthodox track, on the other hand, have seen themselves as defending women’s divinely appointed identity and the Church’s revealed lines of authority.

75. Mark E. Petersen, “The Blessings and Power of the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine* 57, no. 1 (January 1970): 7–8.

76. Petersen, “Blessings and Power,” 9.

As the women's movement gained steam in the United States at large, many Latter-day Saint women felt invigorated and challenged by the questions of feminism. Informed by their own experience in life and in the Church, they began to explore questions about women's status. Most of these women were committed, lifelong members of the Church who genuinely saw themselves as "somewhere inbetween" ultraconservative traditionalism and ultraradical feminism.⁷⁷ Inevitably, however, their work spurred a wave of awareness and discussion, with implications for discussions about women and priesthood that grew to take on a life of their own.

Common denominators among Latter-day Saint feminists—both in the 1970s and subsequently—included a willingness to bring intellectual and scholarly analysis to bear on the subject, to question the status quo, and in some cases (but certainly not all) to directly criticize Church leaders. Many argued that women's ordination or inclusion in priesthood was necessary for full equality and participation of women. The priesthood/motherhood paradigm came under particular scrutiny: Isn't the parallel to motherhood fatherhood? And if so, what is the female parallel to priesthood?

Such questions were often seen as threatening and disloyal, coming in the wake of the Correlation-era emphasis on priesthood in the home and the Church and against the backdrop of strident feminism in the larger culture. Orthodox voices denounced "worldly voices" or the "women of the world" in implicit contrast to "faithful" women, characterizing such worldly voices as selfish and rebellious, rejecting marriage, motherhood, and homemaking.⁷⁸ These orthodox discussions rested, implicitly or explicitly, on the belief that motherhood is women's parallel to priesthood and that women share all the blessings of the priesthood through temple covenants and sealing to their husbands. Within this framework, motherhood was extolled as the ultimate, godly identity of women, an eternal blessing made possible through the priesthood. Not far under the surface of these discussions, as well, was an affirmation of support for the priesthood order of the Church and the authority of its

77. Grethe Ballif Peterson, "Somewhere Inbetween," *Dialogue* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 74–76. Peterson's essay was part of a special issue of *Dialogue* (sometimes called the "pink issue") edited and written by women specifically to explore the intersections of the women's movement and Latter-day Saint belief and culture.

78. "We are not a sisterhood seeking power as are some women of our time," said Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith in 1976. "A Conversation with Sister Barbara B. Smith, Relief Society General President," *Ensign* 6, no. 3 (March 1976): 8.

leadership, in implicit contrast to those who would criticize. By the mid-1990s, the atmosphere had become tense and polarized, and the tension and polarization intensified when several prominent feminist writers were excommunicated.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, a vibrant wave of work on women's history took shape in this same period.⁸⁰ Scholars and interested readers began rediscovering primary sources such as the *Woman's Exponent*, institutional records, and the life writings of early leaders and Saints, where they found much that startled and challenged them: Latter-day Saint women were the first to vote in the nation and were activists in the national woman's suffrage movement. They laid on hands to bless and heal. They ran their organizations with a great deal of autonomy. Many of these sources included the language and practices related to priesthood as described above.

This historical work resonated with both orthodox and feminist thinkers. Because the Church's treatment of women was under scrutiny, stories of the faith and accomplishments of previous generations could work through orthodox channels to counter the image of downtrodden Latter-day Saint women and provide models of faith and commitment for modern women—albeit largely with little acknowledgment of the potentially controversial elements such as healing and priesthood language.⁸¹

For feminist thinkers, historical sources seemed to provide important precedents for the kinds of reforms they advocated. The discovery of Joseph Smith's teachings to the Nauvoo Relief Society—in their original form—proved especially influential.⁸² Out of the historical sources,

79. "Mormons Penalize Dissident Members," *New York Times*, September 19, 1993, 31.

80. Leonard Arrington, who served as Church Historian from 1972 to 1982 and then as director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU from 1982 to 1986, recruited several women who forged the foundation for Latter-day Saint women's history, including Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Jill Mulvay Derr. Independent researchers made significant contributions as well. See, for example, Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press, 1976); and Vicky Burgess-Olson, ed., *Sister Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978).

81. It would be impossible to offer even a short list of the outpouring of women's history titles published by Deseret Book starting in the 1980s, but notable entries include Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (1982); Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, *Elect Ladies* (1990); and Carol Cornwall Madsen, *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo* (1994).

82. The full, unedited text of Joseph Smith's sermons as recorded in the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes was first published in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *The*

particularly those cited above that mention "priesthood" and "keys" in relation to women, feminist thinkers constructed a durable and influential narrative: Joseph Smith had begun establishing a priesthood order that included both men and women; his death and the conservative trajectory adopted by his successors prevented full implementation of that vision and resulted in women's exclusion from priesthood. The logical extension of this narrative, sometimes articulated directly, was that the Church should restore Joseph's vision by including women in priesthood.⁸³

As this narrative gained traction in feminist discussions in the early 1990s, Church leaders spoke out directly in response. Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted the sesquicentennial of the Relief Society with an address in general conference in which he discussed several of the key issues from the Nauvoo minutes. He emphasized that the Relief Society was intended to be "self-governing," but not "an independent organization"; women's authority in that organization came through priesthood channels. Elder Oaks directly asserted that "no priesthood keys were delivered to the Relief Society." Priesthood keys, he taught, "are conferred on individuals, not organizations." Elder Oaks also spoke of women's "laying on hands to bless one another" and noted that over time those practices were properly confined to the temple.⁸⁴

Elder Boyd K. Packer also refuted the feminist narrative, which he characterized as a teaching by some "that priesthood is some kind of a free-floating authority which can be assumed by anyone who has had the endowment." "The priesthood is conferred through ordination," he taught, "not simply through making a covenant or receiving a blessing." Moreover, priesthood ordination was always carried out through established channels with public acknowledgement.⁸⁵ Elder James E. Faust reiterated these principles six months later,⁸⁶ speaking just weeks after the excommunications of several prominent feminists.

Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

83. These arguments and interpretations were brought together in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

84. Elder Oaks quoted from the original, unedited minutes. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Relief Society and the Church," *Ensign* 22, no. 5 (May 1992): 35–36.

85. Boyd K. Packer, "The Temple, the Priesthood," *Ensign* 23, no. 5 (May 1993): 20.

86. James E. Faust, "Keeping Covenants and Honoring the Priesthood," *Ensign* 23, no. 11 (November 1993): 36–39.

Within Church ecclesiology, the correlated structure of the Church remained solid, and women's organizations (along with other auxiliaries) remained firmly subordinated within the governing priesthood structure. In the 1990s, however, Elder M. Russell Ballard opened a line of reform that has proved consequential. Beginning with a conference address in 1993, he stressed the importance of councils in administering the Church and called for "the cooperative effort of men and women officers in the Church." Speaking directly to priesthood leaders, he admonished: "Brethren, please be sure you are seeking the vital input of the sisters in your council meetings."⁸⁷ He spoke again on the same subject six months later, feeling an urgent need for the Church to implement the principle.⁸⁸

While this emphasis did not bring about structural changes in women's ecclesiastical position, it did open up space for increased participation and influence of women at the local level where, it could be argued, most of the work of the Church actually takes place. Updates to the *Handbook of Instructions* and emphasis in leadership training soon began to reflect this focus on councils.

Twenty-First Century: Priesthood "Power" and "Authority"

In the twenty-first century, discussions about women and priesthood among Latter-day Saints have proliferated, fueled by the availability of online venues and sources. More than a generation removed from the second-wave feminist movement of half a century ago, views about gender that were once considered radical, alongside ground-level changes in how people's lives are structured, have come to permeate the culture, even in quite traditional Latter-day Saint families. These trends have unquestionably reshaped some of the contours of the discussions. Moreover, the younger generation is less deferential to authority and more confident about speaking out and balancing their relatively progressive views with their faith commitments.⁸⁹

87. M. Russell Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," *Ensign* 23, no. 11 (November 1993): 76–77.

88. M. Russell Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," *Ensign* 24, no. 5 (May 1994): 24–26.

89. See Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

By the mid-2000s, the advent of the blogosphere and the Bloggernacle provided thriving sites for discussion of Latter-day Saint theology and culture.⁹⁰ Women participated actively in existing blogs and launched new online discussion forums, some of which focused on women's issues and feminism. Discussions of women and priesthood unfolded in this kinetic context. Besides generating new ideas and points of discussion, these online forums disseminated the work of earlier feminist thinkers and historians, giving them new momentum. Online organizing enabled the formation of new groups and facilitated in-person action and protests, such as those launched by Ordain Women.⁹¹

Responses from orthodox and authoritative voices to this new wave of feminist energy were not slow in coming, though in keeping with past precedent, they did not usually engage specific questions or arguments. Within a few months of each other in 2013, for example, notable talks were given by Sister Linda K. Burton, Relief Society General President, and Elders Neil Anderson and M. Russell Ballard (Elder Ballard gave two).⁹² These addresses, which at least tacitly acknowledged that "questions" were being asked, outlined fundamental contemporary definitions of terms like "priesthood" and "keys" and emphasized a distinction between priesthood authority and priesthood power that opened a sense in which priesthood could apply to women. Burton said, "Priesthood authority is conferred by ordination; priesthood power is available to all."⁹³ In these discussions, virtually all spiritual power received by men and women through ordinances and spiritual channels was defined as priesthood power. These ordinances and the attendant blessings they

90. "Bloggernacle" is a term coined to refer to the network of Latter-day Saint-themed blogs. See Mormon Archipelago, <https://www.ldsblogs.org/>, a site that bills itself as the "Gateway to the Bloggernacle."

91. Colleen McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women since the End of Polygamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173–94.

92. Linda K. Burton, "Priesthood: 'A Sacred Trust to Be Used for the Benefit of Men, Women, and Children,'" BYU Women's Conference, May 3, 2013, <https://womensconference.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/lindaburtontalk.pdf> (the quotation in the title of this address comes from Dallin H. Oaks, "Relief Society and the Church," 36, cited in Burton, "Priesthood," 3 n. 13); Neil L. Andersen, "Power in the Priesthood," *Ensign* 43, no. 11 (November 2013): 92–95; M. Russell Ballard, "This Is My Work and Glory," *Ensign* 43, no. 5 (May 2013): 18–21; M. Russell Ballard, "Let Us Think Straight," devotional address, BYU Campus Education Week, August 20, 2013, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/let-us-think-straight-2/>.

93. Burton, "Priesthood," 4.

bring are available to men and women equally; who administers them is less important and simply reflects the Lord's way of organizing his Church. Sheri Dew, prominent former Relief Society leader and CEO of Deseret Book, made many of these same arguments in her book, also published in 2013, *Women and the Priesthood*. Dew noted that women in the Church already perform many services and functions that would require ordination in other religious traditions.⁹⁴ In 2015, the Church published an official essay, "Joseph Smith's Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women," that addressed many of the historical points embedded in the discussion.⁹⁵

The most consequential entry in recent discussions has unquestionably been Elder (now President) Dallin H. Oaks's 2014 general conference address, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood." In this talk, Oaks explicitly built on previous discussions, endorsing the principles that priesthood power blesses all. He added, "Priesthood keys direct women as well as men, and priesthood ordinances and priesthood authority pertain to women as well as men." It is this latter point that constitutes Oaks's reorienting contribution to the discussion. "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?" he asked. "Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties."⁹⁶ This takes the discussion beyond access to "power" and "blessings" of the priesthood, essentially recasting all authority in the Church as priesthood authority, based on a distinction between keys and authority. In this view, women exercise priesthood *authority* by virtue of being set apart for their callings; they do not exercise priesthood *keys*, which are held by men ordained to priesthood office. President Oaks's framing of these distinctions contrasts with previous understandings: in 1958, for example, Joseph Fielding Smith had taught women that they had "authority" but not "Priesthood."⁹⁷

94. Sheri Dew, *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 85–87.

95. "Joseph Smith's Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women."

96. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2014): 49, 51.

97. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Relief Society—an Aid to the Priesthood," *Relief Society Magazine* 46, no. 1 (January 1959): 4. President Oaks quoted this statement by Smith in 1992. Oaks, "Relief Society and the Church," 36.

President Oaks's characterization of women's authority as priesthood authority has been influential in shifting paradigms about women's relationship to priesthood. In 2018, Elder Dale G. Renlund and his wife, Ruth Lybbert Renlund, published a thorough examination of the Melchizedek Priesthood in which they draw a distinction between priesthood as "the total power and authority of God" and priesthood as "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."⁹⁸ This distinction seeks to clarify what I have called the abstract sense of priesthood ("the power of God") and the collective meaning of priesthood—power and authority as embodied in men who have been ordained to priesthood offices. The Renlunds stress that God has delegated "only a portion of His total priesthood power and authority" to men and quote from Oaks to assert that "through a setting apart by an authorized priesthood holder, women have priesthood authority to use in their callings in their wards and branches throughout the Church. They have all the authority they need to fulfill their callings and stewardships."⁹⁹

The current Relief Society General Presidency likewise drew on President Oaks's formulation in their joint talk at the 2019 BYU Women's Conference. Sister Reyna I. Aburto cited President Oaks and said, "Priesthood authority is conferred by the laying on of hands under the direction of those who have priesthood keys. Women receive this authority in the form of a calling." Sister Sharon Eubank added, "When we serve in *any* calling or leadership position, . . . these are authorized positions of authority in the work of God."¹⁰⁰ These examples suggest that the idea of women having priesthood authority in the Church is taking root.

In addition, recent discourse about women and priesthood has emphasized the availability of priesthood *power* to all endowed women, as reflected in President Russell M. Nelson's statement that women are endowed with priesthood power that flows from their covenants. In this formulation, spiritual power becomes priesthood power when it is channeled through the priesthood covenants of the temple. Relief Society

98. Dale G. Renlund and Ruth Lybbert Renlund, *The Melchizedek Priesthood: Understanding the Doctrine, Living the Principles* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 11.

99. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 13, 18.

100. Jean B. Bingham, Sharon Eubank, and Reyna I. Aburto, "Endowed with Priesthood Power," BYU Women's Conference, May 2, 2019, 7, 9, https://womensconference.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/relief_society_general_presidency_-2019.05.02_-_endowed_with_priesthood_power.pdf.

General President Jean Bingham explained that “priesthood power is spiritual power used for priesthood purposes,” available directly to all endowed women who keep their covenants without need for human intermediaries.¹⁰¹ On another occasion Bingham taught that the priesthood power of God is multifaceted, encompassing keys, offices, authority, and power, and she encouraged women to study the revelations dealing with priesthood and seek spiritual understanding of the differences between these facets.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, a movement to reconsider women’s visibility, influence, and scope of action within present Church policies and structures has gained steam on both official and unofficial levels. Neylan McBaine’s book *Women at Church* was an early, influential entry, and this discussion continues to resonate in online forums.¹⁰³ Within the Church, several significant steps have unfolded. In 2012, the minimum age for sister missionary service, previously twenty-one, was reduced to nineteen, opening a floodgate of young women eager to serve.¹⁰⁴ Shortly thereafter, new leadership councils were implemented in missions, giving women an expanded role as “sister training leaders,” a position somewhat parallel to male zone leaders.¹⁰⁵ In 2019, the role of witness at baptisms and other ordinances, which had previously been filled only by priesthood-ordained men, was opened to women and girls.¹⁰⁶ In 2021,

101. Wendy Ulrich, *Live Up to Our Privileges: Women, Power, and Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), quoted in Bingham, Eubank, and Aburto, “Endowed with Priesthood Power,” 3.

102. Aubrey Eyre, “Why Women in the Church Should Follow President Nelson’s Invitation to Study about the Priesthood,” *Church News*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/why-women-in-the-church-should-follow-president-nelsons-invitation-to-study-about-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

103. Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women’s Local Impact* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

104. “Church Lowers Missionary Service Age,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 6, 2012, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-lowers-age-requirement-for-missionary-service>.

105. “Church Adjusts Mission Organization to Implement ‘Mission Leadership Council,’” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 5, 2013, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-adjusts-mission-organization-implement-mission-leadership-council>.

106. Any baptized member, female or male, could serve as a witness to baptisms of living persons outside the temple or proxy baptisms in the temple, and any endowed member could serve as a witness for marriage sealings in the temple. Sarah Jane Weaver, “Women Can Serve as Witnesses for Baptisms, Temple, Sealings, First Presidency Announces,”

the Church announced that female area organization advisers would be called in areas outside North America to provide training and leadership to women leaders, increase the collaboration of men and women in Church work, and provide for women's voices in councils at all levels.¹⁰⁷

On the general level, women General Officers of the Church (the General Presidents of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary) were appointed to the priesthood leadership councils (Missionary Executive Council, Priesthood and Family Executive Council, Temple and Family History Executive Council) that previously included only male leaders.¹⁰⁸ Most dramatically, perhaps, in January 2019, temple ceremonies were modified to excise some of the elements that emphasized gender differences.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints have maintained a belief in divinely restored priesthood authority and power since the earliest days of the Church. Early Saints understood the term *priesthood* to refer both to the authority bestowed by ordination and to the collective body of men who were so ordained. In any case, priesthood offices were conferred on only men. Over time, the Church's lay priesthood structure expanded to include all worthy men regardless of race. This means that virtually all men who are active in the Church have been ordained to the priesthood. Despite this bedrock association of priesthood with men, dynamic discussions about women's relationship to priesthood have unfolded and intensified over time.

Church News, October 2, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/women-can-serve-as-witnesses-for-baptisms-temple-sealings-first-presidency-announces?lang=eng>; see also First Presidency letter, October 2, 2019.

107. Sydney Walker, "Area Organization Advisers: Women Leaders in International Areas to Provide Instruction, Mentoring," *Church News*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2021-03-17/area-organization-advisers-relief-society-young-women-primary-local-instruction-207196>.

108. Tad Wal ch, "In a Significant Move, Women to Join Key, Leading LDS Church Councils," *Deseret News*, August 19, 2015, <https://www.deseret.com/2015/8/19/20570502/in-a-significant-move-women-to-join-key-leading-lds-church-councils>.

109. Peggy Fletcher Stack and David Noyce, "LDS Church Changes Temple Ceremony; Faithful Feminists Will See Revisions and Additions as a 'Leap Forward,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/01/02/lds-church-releases/>.

The ongoing discussion among Latter-day Saints about women and priesthood has ebbed and flowed and undergone several permutations while maintaining some consistent themes. The most consistent of these themes has been, as Elder Oaks stated in his 2014 address, that Church leaders are “not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern that only men will hold offices in the priesthood.”¹¹⁰ While there is no reason to believe that this understanding will change, discussions about women’s relationship to priesthood and their position in the Church will undoubtedly continue.

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110. Oaks, “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” 50.