

Introduction

THE PRIESTHOOD IS FUNDAMENTAL to the operations and organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at every level. Every ward and every stake is led by the priesthood. This book is a collection of essays that represent my lifetime of research on the history of the restored priesthood. The chapters have been gathered from many publications, some of which were fairly obscure, so most of the information presented here will be new to the vast majority of readers.

The topic of priesthood is important to every Church member. Some are priesthood holders, some are married to such, and some are raising young members of the priesthood. In branches, wards, and stakes, all members interact regularly with priesthood leaders. Understanding the historical origins of priesthood policies and operations gives all people useful perspectives and insights into why things are done the way they are in the order of the Church. God works in various ways (not all of them mysterious) his wonders to perform, and looking closely at those efforts brings awareness of what God wants accomplished and how.

While other historians are experts on certain Church presidents or broad historical periods, I have concentrated my research career on how the Church has functioned decade by decade at grass-roots levels. My interest has been in the operations of the Church's local units and programs.



Because the Church has been guided by revelation, these ward operations, priesthood assignments, and quorum structures have seen significant alterations and redirections since the Church was first organized.

INTRODUCTION AND ESTABLISHMENT

Joseph Smith started the Church in 1830 but did not establish it all at once. The organization developed line upon line. For example, it did not have stakes until 1834, so what were local Church operations like before there were stakes? The first wards were organized in Nauvoo, so how were local operations conducted before there were wards and ward bishops? Nauvoo's nearly eleven thousand Saints attended church meetings on Sundays not in church buildings (chapels) but in private homes or outdoors in groves. In the mid-nineteenth century, people used the terms *stake* and *branch* interchangeably, such that some branches, for example, had high councils. We find that some Utah wards during the 1850s had a bishop and a president. Under President Brigham Young's direction, Melchizedek Priesthood men, not boys, filled the Aaronic Priesthood ranks by serving as *acting* deacons, *acting* teachers, and *acting* priests. Only after 1877 did Church leaders expect boys to receive at least one lesser priesthood ordination before becoming elders, and only after 1908 did boys, as a rule, advance through all three Aaronic Priesthood ranks before adulthood. The sixth Article of Faith says that we believe in the office of pastor, and in the 1850s and 1860s pastors were an important leadership position in the Church in the British Isles. Between the two world wars, in some locations women prepared the sacrament tables by baking the bread and laundering, starching, and ironing the tablecloths. During World War II, a Salt Lake City bishop enlisted Beehive girls to collect fast offerings because he lacked deacons. Thousands of men once received ordination, not as elders, but as seventies when they were called on stake missions. When I was young, we attended stake conferences quarterly, at which the sacrament was administered during the Sunday afternoon session. Not very long ago, Church leadership included Assistants to the Twelve, and more recently Regional Representatives served throughout the world.

Early in the Utah pioneer period the first meetinghouses of log or adobe were so small that only a small percentage of a ward's members attended sacrament meetings. For more than two decades, pioneer wards had no Relief Society, Primary, or Mutuals, and the Sunday School was only

for children, not adults. By the 1880s, many wards had a meetinghouse, an amusement hall, a Relief Society building, a granary, and a bishop's tithing office. In time, the first three buildings became consolidated under one roof housing a chapel, amusement hall, and Relief Society room. Soon after 1900, most members rejoiced when individual glass sacrament cups replaced the common goblet that was passed down a row from which everyone took turns sipping. From the 1890s until the 1940s, not silence but vocal solos and musical numbers accompanied the passing of the sacrament.

Such past practices, since replaced, show that leaders in the restored Church regularly adapt operations to various circumstances. Articles in this volume examine most of the interesting developments just mentioned; they present Church history from an administrative perspective, particularly regarding how directives at the top actually became implemented, or not, at the ward, quorum, and member level.

For Church members and leaders, a guiding principle needs to be made clear. As explained in a revelation given to Church President John Taylor on April 14, 1883, that announced revisions in Seventies work, the Lord can, in essence, redeploy his troops as he sees fit:

Thus saith the Lord unto the First Presidency, unto the Twelve, unto the Seventies and unto all my holy Priesthood, let not your hearts be troubled, neither be ye concerned about the management and organization of my Church and Priesthood and the accomplishment of my work. Fear me and observe my laws and I will reveal unto you, from time to time, through the channels that I have appointed, everything that shall be necessary for the future development and perfection of my Church, for the adjustment and rolling forth of my kingdom, and for the building up and the establishment of my Zion. For ye are my Priesthood and I am your God. Even so. Amen.¹

A similar expression of priesthood adaptability came when the First Council of Seventy objected to seventies quorum presidents being taken into bishoprics without the First Council's permission. Wasn't it wrong not to consult with the First Council, they asked? President John Taylor and counselor George Q. Cannon answered that it was discourteous but not wrong, and then admonished, "It is not wise to have cast iron rules by which to fetter the Priesthood. The Priesthood is a living, intelligent principle, and must necessarily have freedom to act as circumstances may dictate or require."² In



1926, Elder Rudger Clawson, as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, dealt with a question about how bound the Church should be to revelations given in an early era. Previous revelations, he said, “must be construed with reference to the whole text of our law and the principles which control our government. In such a construction it will not be difficult to reconcile present practice or such further policies which may be adopted with the letter and spirit of the texts [of the revelations].” Further, he said,

The doing of the work of the Lord must always be of chief concern. The whole organization of the Church is, in the last analysis, a facility, an agency for that high purpose. So that, while we do not desire to be understood to make an effort to minimize the value and importance of adhering to the general directions given in the revelations for the organization and maintenance of the quorums, we do express the firm conviction that these scriptural directions are, as hereinbefore stated, subject to the interpretation of the inspired servants of the Lord who preside over the Church, whose interpretations will always be made with reference to the needs of the Church and the progress of the work.³

Based on this, we should actually expect adaptations to continue to be introduced as new administrative needs and circumstances arise.

EARLY PRIESTHOOD STUDIES

Soon after Leonard Arrington became the Church Historian in 1972, he hired me and a half dozen other historians to form the History Division in the Church Historical Department. In our first meetings, we explored what research area each should focus on. Those knowledgeable in specific arenas, such as Dean C. Jessee with expertise about Joseph Smith, were assigned to pursue those subjects. One night Leonard said he awoke feeling impressed that I should tackle priesthood history. “Bill,” he said, “why don’t you write histories, maybe forty pages each, of the deacons, the teachers, and the priests?” That assignment launched my priesthood-related research.

I found only three books in 1972 that dealt with Church government. Eight years earlier, Lee A. Palmer had published *Aaronic Priesthood through the Centuries*, which briefly highlighted several priesthood turning points since 1829, giving me some research starting points. A standard source by

then out of date was Elder John A. Widtsoe's *Priesthood and Church Government*, first published in 1939, which explained Church operations then current but not how those came to be, historically. Helpful for understanding Church operations at the turn of the twentieth century was Joseph B. Keeler's small 1904 handbook, *The Lesser Priesthood and Notes on Church Government*. Beyond those, I identified a handful of theses and dissertations that tackled Church governance historically and read a few dated, celebratory histories about the Sunday School and the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA). I found there existed a dearth of serious studies of past organizational and priesthood developments. My research from then on constantly probed major developments in the past not recognized as such and hence not studied or written about.

In 1973 a Melchizedek Priesthood Committee of the Twelve created a Research Task Committee to research and report about various Church operations and practices and how they came to be. In May of that year, I was called to serve on that task committee, whose responsibility was "bringing together the basic research necessary to give an historical understanding and perspective of priesthood roles, callings, duties and other similar priesthood and Church government information."⁴ That calling required my release from ward or stake callings for two years, and I spent many Sundays in the Church Archives researching priesthood issues. Our task committee received a list of fundamental questions to research as soon as possible. For example, What is a quorum? What is a stake? Can all Melchizedek Priesthood holders attend the same quorum? Do bishopric counselors need to be high priests? What is the work of the elders quorums? What has been the relationship between the Presiding Bishop and Aaronic Priesthood quorums? In response we submitted a series of research reports. So by career and by Church-service assignment, I became immersed in studying the Church's organizational development.

Our History Division, after seven years, was transferred to Brigham Young University and became the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, where, for the next quarter century, we continued to carry out our First Presidency–assigned mission to write responsible history about the Church. I kept studying Church offices, programs, and operations until my retirement from the university in 2009.

I retired before finishing several studies I had started, among them a history of ward teaching, a study of tithing operations while William B. Preston



was Presiding Bishop, and an examination of local Church administration between 1877 and 1908 that I call “When Stakes Were in Full Flower.” Many more such studies are needed; hopefully, other scholars will tackle these one day—scholars who, like me, find such topics the opposite of boring.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

Part One contains two essays focusing on priesthood restoration. Chapter 1 shows that *restore* means not only to bestow but also to implement. Similar to a tree, priesthood at first was a sprout, then a seedling; it eventually developed a trunk, branches, leaves, and blossoms, all of which are explored here. Joseph Smith was both a priesthood restorer and priesthood bearer. Chapter 2 tracks what baptized members were expected to do before the Church was formally organized.

Part Two provides five essays dealing with the Aaronic Priesthood. Chapter 3 documents when, why, and how the offices of deacon, teacher, and priest, filled by men in the nineteenth century, shifted from men to boys gradually, and sometimes informally, in response to practical needs. Chapter 4 explains why in the nineteenth century high priests, seventies, and elders filled the Aaronic Priesthood offices, serving as *acting* deacons, *acting* teachers, and *acting* priests, and how quorums then were stake, not ward, entities. Chapter 5 gives a history of how the work of the office of bishop adapted and altered over time to accommodate changing Church needs, including what bishops did before wards existed, and how bishops received, stored, and disbursed tithing in kind. As the next chapter shows, Newel K. Whitney’s successor as Presiding Bishop, Edward Hunter, assumed an office barely developed, and during the next thirty-three years he firmly carved the Presiding Bishopric’s niche into the Church’s General Authority hierarchy. One of Bishop Hunter’s major contributions, the subject of chapter 7, was revamping the tithing system between 1852 and 1855 by making ward bishoprics, not the Presiding Bishopric, responsible to receive tithes and make individual tithing settlements with the saints.

Part Three contains five chapters dealing with Melchizedek Priesthood operations. Biographies of Brigham Young devote much attention to the move west, colonizing, emigration, missionary outreach, economics, Indian relations, politics, and theology, but rarely assess him carefully as a leader of the priesthood or explore in detail how stakes, wards, and

quorums—the Church’s fundamental organizational units—functioned during his administration. Chapter 8 fills that gap while identifying twelve historically important contributions he made to the shape and development of priesthood operation in the Church. Starting in 1852 and continuing into the 1860s, pastors filled a leadership layer between mission president and conference president in the British Mission. Chapter 9 defines, explains, and illustrates the office and calling of a pastor in that mission between 1852 and 1855 when the office was introduced, implemented, and defined.

Just before he died in August 1877, President Brigham Young engineered a thorough and massive priesthood reorganization, which chapter 10 explains and evaluates. This reorganization involved every stake, 241 wards, hundreds of quorums, and more than a thousand leadership positions. His detailed instructions for that reorganization provided the Church’s first comprehensive handbook of instructions regarding priesthood and Church government.

During most of the nineteenth century, men called on missions were ordained as nongeneral authority seventies, belonging ever after to a specific quorum of seventies, even if they moved from where their original quorum was located. Chapter 11 concentrates on two uncanonized revelations to President John Taylor in the 1880s that led to a Churchwide restructuring and revitalizing of the seventies’ work. Chapter 12 shows that organized and systematic priesthood work as we know it today actually dates from the period between 1908 and 1922, when a specially called General Priesthood Committee instituted a Churchwide priesthood reform and reorganization movement under President Joseph F. Smith. The energetic program established ordination ages for boys to be deacons, teachers, and priests and gave them boy-level duties to perform; ward priesthood meetings replaced letting quorums meet separately at different times during the week; a new ward teaching program standardized, boosted, and monitored monthly home visits; and for the first time the Church published lesson manuals for the quorums.

In the book’s fourth and final part, eight chapters examine the Church’s organizational and administrative history broadly. Chapter 13 provides an overview and synthesis of specific developments that previous chapters have discussed. Chapter 14 contains examples and an overview history of baptisms and baptizing since 1829, and chapter 15 shows how Saints have observed the Sabbath Day, including types of sacrament, fast, and conference



meetings and sacrament customs since 1830, such as the use of the common cup. Chapter 16 demonstrates how the terms *stake* and *branch* were used interchangeably during the Joseph Smith and early Brigham Young periods and how the terminology for Church units became specific only over time. Chapter 17 treats the pivotal Nauvoo years when Church leaders introduced wards as an administrative unit (so fundamental and encompassing now) primarily for tithing and assisting the poor; this was at a time when a stake had but one quorum each of deacons, teachers, priests, and elders. Chapter 18 gives readers an overview of Mormon wagon and handcart emigration, showing how Church leaders and members consistently tried to honor covenants made in Nauvoo to assist the poor to emigrate, culminating in the 1860s in a brilliant “down and back” system of sending Utah wagons and teams, loaned in return for tithing credits, to retrieve emigrants waiting to cross the plains. Chapter 19 answers the question of what it meant in the pioneer era to be “active in the church,” before auxiliaries existed, when wards had few jobs to be filled, Utah had no temples, and meetinghouses were too small for all in the ward to attend sacrament meeting. A final chapter contains the dramatic story of Dutch members at the end of World War II overcoming their bitterness toward Germany when a wise mission president convinced them to grow welfare potatoes and send barrels of herring to starving German Saints.

These previously published chapters have undergone only minimal editing, mostly for consistency within this volume. Whenever possible, the editors tried to include the original illustrations; however, some of those images were no longer available so many additional ones have been added.

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NOTES

1. “Revelation Given through John Taylor,” James R. Clark, ed., *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, Utah: Bookcraft, 1965), 2:354.
2. First Council of Seventy Minutes, December 15, 1886, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
3. Rudger Clawson to President Heber J. Grant, Extracts of Council of the Twelve Minutes and First Council of the Seventy, 1888–1941, December 9, 1926, microfilm, Church History Library.
4. Melchizedek Priesthood Committee of the Twelve to the author, May 9, 1973, filed in the author's loose-leaf 1973 diary.