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The Key to Righteous Leadership

A. Paul King

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And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers. (Abraham 1:2)

This scripture teaches us two significant principles: (1) Abraham desired to become a rightful heir of the priesthood; (2) he desired to become an even greater follower of righteousness, seeking greater knowledge, wanting even more instruction, and wanting to keep the commandments more fully.

A brief view of each principle is important to this essay. First is to discuss the importance of righteousness in the holy order of the priesthood. Second is to discover how to become greater followers of righteousness.

The Holy Order of the Priesthood

We learn in Doctrine and Covenants 121:36 that “the rights of the priesthood” can be controlled or handled only “upon the principles of righteousness.” Abraham desired and received the priesthood of God because he was a follower of righteousness; he could be trusted. He

became the great patriarch and leader of the covenant people because he followed in righteousness. We also learn that the order of the holy priesthood is sacred, so sacred that “out of respect or reverence to the name of the Supreme Being, to avoid the too frequent repetition of his name, they, the church, in ancient days, called that priesthood after Melchizedek, or the Melchizedek Priesthood” (D&C 107:4). In formal nomenclature, the priesthood is called “the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3).

The priesthood is holy. Thus the operation of the priesthood is very sacred and can be received only by covenant and by ordination “by the laying on of hands” (Articles of Faith 1:5). Furthermore, while performing priesthood ordinances, “the one who officiates speaks and acts, not of himself and of his personal authority, but by virtue of his ordination and appointment as a representative of the powers of heaven.”¹

Alma gave an inspired vision of the priesthood as he spoke to the people in the land of Ammonihah. Marvelous was his understanding that “the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son. . . . And those priests were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption” (Alma 13:1–2). The power of the Son’s redemption comes through ordinances, which are administered by the priesthood. It is through the priesthood that the ordinances give power to the people to overcome all things: “Now they were ordained after this manner—being called with a holy calling, and ordained with a holy ordinance, and taking upon them the high priesthood of the holy order. . . . There were many who were ordained and became high priests of God; and it was on account of their exceeding faith and repentance, and their righteousness before God. . . . Therefore they were called after this holy order, and were sanctified and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb” (Alma 13:8, 10–11).

The holy priesthood is a religious order modeled by the grace, equity, and truth of both the Father and the Son. It is received by ordination and sacred covenant. The covenants of the priesthood are that those who receive the holy priesthood will continue in their faithfulness, do good works, magnify their calling, learn their duty, and act in their office diligently (see Alma 13:3; D&C 84:33; 107:99). The covenant means being followers of righteousness. In return, the Father covenants by oath that righteous priesthood holders will inherit all His power and glory (see D&C 84:38–40).

“There is no limit to the power of the priesthood which you hold,” President Spencer W. Kimball taught priesthood leaders. “The limit comes in you if you do not live in harmony with the Spirit of the Lord and you limit yourselves in the power you exert.”² Because keeping covenants gives power to man to connect with the powers of the Spirit of the Lord, being an effective priesthood leader means becoming a better follower of righteousness.

Followers of Righteousness

Leaders of the priesthood are to be followers of righteousness in every way. Thus followers of righteousness are actually followers of Christ. He is the model, the Righteous One. The scriptures teach, “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). “When shall the day of the Lord come? When shall the blood of the Righteous be shed? . . . Enoch saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain” (Moses 7:45, 47).

Thus the master key to righteous priesthood leadership is following the Master. Like Abraham, as we become greater followers of righteousness, we are rewarded with greater light and knowledge.

Following the Master involves following His appointed leaders in righteousness. In the kingdom of God, every leader has a leader. Thus:

- The quorum president will do well to follow his bishop and stake president.
- The bishop or branch president is to follow the stake or district president.
- The stake president is to take counsel from his Area President, and the district president from his mission and Area Presidents.
- Area Presidents are loyal to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency.
- The Twelve and First Presidency obey the prophet.
- The prophet holds dearly to the source of righteousness, Jesus Christ.
- Jesus Christ has always given His will to the Father (see John 5:19, 30; see also 6:38; 8:29).

From these thoughts, we may conclude that:

- Every leader has a leader.
- Every leader is, in turn, a follower.
- Good leaders are also good followers.

Thus priesthood leadership, even on the local level of the Church, is following the order of the Son of Righteousness. And how can the Saints receive the Lord's guidance and blessings unless they precisely follow His priesthood leaders in righteousness?

A man is first a follower of righteousness; then he becomes a leader in righteousness. After obtaining great knowledge, a desire for greater knowledge results in greater leadership.

Which Way Do You Face?

If the Church were a democracy, then leaders would represent the people to the Lord. That would be something—telling the Lord by popular vote what to do to obtain righteousness and truth! But the kingdom of God is a theocracy, not a democracy.

Can we imagine an Area President going against the counsel of a member of the Twelve? What if a bishop said to the stake president, "The Saints want to do thus and thus. I believe in them. You may have the wrong inspiration." President Boyd K. Packer has asked priesthood leaders, "Which way do you face?"

Thirty-eight years ago I came from Brigham City to the office I now occupy in the Administration Building to see Elder Harold B. Lee. . . .

[He] had agreed to give me counsel and some direction. He didn't say much, nothing really in detail, but what he told me has saved me time and time again.

"You must decide now which way you face," he said. "Either you represent the teachers and students and champion their causes or you represent the Brethren who appointed you. You need to decide *now* which way you face." . . . It took some hard and painful lessons before I understood his counsel. In time, I did understand, and my resolve to face the right way became irreversible. . . .

Perhaps too many of us are strong advocates of our own specialized work or are such strong protectors of our own turf that we face the wrong way—maybe just sideways. . . . Could you believe other than it is critical that all of us work together and set aside personal interests and all face the same way? . . . The temptation is for us to turn about and face the wrong way and it is hard to resist, for doing it seems so reasonable and right. . . .

Unwittingly we may turn about and face the wrong way. Then the channels of revelation are reversed. Let me say that again: Then the channels of revelation are reversed. In our efforts to comfort [others], we lose our bearing and leave that segment of the line to which we are assigned unprotected.³

With heartfelt obedience, followers of righteousness face leaders in the order of the priesthood. Backs are not turned toward those to whom jurisdiction is given. All leaders are positioned in the midst of the priesthood order to serve those whom they preside over. Leaders are to help those whom they have jurisdiction over and to be in harmony and unity with all leaders. Leaders teach others what they are taught by their leaders. Leaders enforce what their leaders want done. Leaders may counsel with their leaders and share the desires and feelings of those they lead, but they then take counsel from their leaders. Inspired priesthood leaders serve as the voice of the Lord (see D&C 1:14, 38; 21:5; 84:35, 36).

This does not mean priesthood leaders are power hungry. It is quite the reverse. Leaders in the holy order of the priesthood seek to be as the Savior, to do His work in His way with His power. When leaders are loyal to their leaders, then they feel and act more responsibly, for righteous leaders care for the souls of mankind. The Apostle Paul teaches, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy” (Hebrews 13:17).

Submission of Our Will to God

For leaders of righteousness to become true followers in the order of the priesthood, they must be willing to submit their will to their God. This is a great sacrifice. It may be the ultimate sacrifice. Our will is our own private, personal treasure. Our will, or agency, is the one thing that is ours. Even God, who is omnipotent, will never desire to take anyone’s will. By giving our agency to God, the Father can bestow all things unto us, even “my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him” (D&C 84:38).

Jesus has set the example. He was the most favored Son in that He not only sought the will of the Father and sought to glorify the Father but also “finished” all things the Father desired: “Behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, *thy will* be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2; emphasis added). “I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered *the will of the Father* in all things from the beginning” (3 Nephi 11:11; emphasis added).

Thus Jesus could say not only to Matthew but also to all people, “Follow me” (Matthew 9:9). As priesthood leaders follow the Son of

Righteousness, they can also rightfully say, “Follow me.” Priesthood followers will do well to follow the example of Christ.

Jesus sought only the will of the Father and did only what the Father had commanded Him—this is the model and example to followers and leaders of righteousness. In receiving the priesthood ordinances of salvation, in effect, a person offers his or her will to the Father. Each person will someday need to submit his or her personal will to the Father’s will; doing this is really a sacrifice of agency.

Notice how President Packer surrendered his agency in the following manner: “I want to be good. I’m not ashamed to say that—I want to be good. And I’ve found in my life that it has been critically important that this was established between me and the Lord so that I knew that he knew which way I committed my agency. I went before him and said, ‘I’m not neutral, and you can do with me what you want. If you need my vote, it’s there. I don’t care what you do with me, and you don’t have to take anything from me because I give it to you—everything, all I own, all I am,’ and that makes the difference.”⁴

That makes the difference because followership is offered; our will is not forced but given. Thus agency is not eliminated in priesthood followership because of the free-will offering. Giving our will freely is what brings balance and power to the discipleship of the Lord’s servants.

The priesthood of God and the organization of its holy order is a theocracy in which the people sustain the leaders, and the leaders are followers of righteousness. Followers sustain and follow in righteousness and with their agency. They decide for themselves if they want to obey their leaders, on the local level and the general level. Each will be governed by their agency as to their dedication in following leaders. However, that agency cannot be violated by leaders, or it is not righteous leadership. That glorious, personal principle of choice must be protected in righteousness. It cannot be abrogated in unrighteousness. Agency used properly will sustain both followers and leaders of righteousness, for both will be guided by the Holy Spirit to give strength and power to each other. Unity and confidence will thus reign supreme. President Brigham Young cautioned against “reckless confidence”:

I am . . . afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God

in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually.⁵

Followers of righteousness know for themselves by the revelations of Jesus that they are led in the right way. Then all are united as one. “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27). This is righteous followership: having confidence in the local leaders as well as the general leaders. Followers of righteousness also know righteousness and the Son of Righteousness; they do not follow blindly; they follow truth and thus make the people free (see John 8:31–32).

Conclusion

Jesus and the Father are the embodiment of righteousness. Priesthood followers and leaders have been invited to take upon them the righteous character of God, or the divine nature (see 2 Peter 1:4–10). All followers or leaders in the holy order of the Son of God will seek to become like the Savior. The qualities of the character of God are essential for righteous followership in the kingdom.

Ultimately, righteousness is the key to leadership in God’s kingdom. Righteous followership comes first; righteous leadership follows. As we follow the Master, we come to possess greater knowledge, becoming “rightful heirs,” as was Abraham. It is clear that the spiral of priesthood leadership rises and falls upon our personal righteousness and obtaining of godly knowledge. **RE**

Notes

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 64; see also Doctrine and Covenants 36:2.

2. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 498.

3. Boyd K. Packer, All-Church Coordinating Council, May 18, 1993, Office of the Council of the Twelve, 1, 3, 5.

4. Boyd K. Packer, “To Those Who Teach in Troubled Times,” in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 103.

5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1862), 9:150.