



Faculty Publications

---

2011-01-01

## The Circumference of the Apostleship

Richard Bennett  
patanddickbennett@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

### Original Publication Citation

The Circumference of the Apostleship. A chapter on the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood printed in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*. Eds. David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr. (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 211): 59-82.

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bennett, Richard, "The Circumference of the Apostleship" (2011). *Faculty Publications*. 819.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/819>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## **“The Circumference of the Apostleship”**

**(Given at the Church History Symposium, Feb. 26, 2010, BYU)**

In Robert Bolt’s classic drama, “A Man for All Seasons,” when pressed by the Duke of Norfolk about the reasonability of the Roman Catholic claim to priesthood legitimacy, the ever principled and incomparable Thomas More and England’s most stout defender of the Holy Catholic faith, responded with unflinching conviction: “The Apostolic Succession of the Pope is — Why, it’s a theory yes; you can’t see it; can’t touch it; it’s a theory. But what matters to me is not whether it’s true or not but I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that I believe it . . . I trust I make myself obscure?”<sup>1</sup>

My intention today is to talk of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Of course, only Latter-day Saints believe in this modern-day miracle and one must realize that expecting others to believe in such a thing would first require a conversion to the Gospel of the Restoration as we see and understand it. For those unacquainted with the miraculous, or who are unprepared to accept angelic visitations, all these things are in the field of mere speculation and pure fantasy. Likewise, our friends in other Christian faiths, most notably those of the noble Roman Catholic persuasion, will consider such talk uncomfortable and certainly antithetical to a central tenet of their faith – the apostolic succession since St. Peter.. It takes time and preparation and faith to believe, as I do, that Christ as God called as his apostles Peter, James and John, let alone to accept the uniquely Mormon doctrine that they were instrumental in restoring lost priesthood authority and the attendant keys in these latter days..

The specific details of this event are admittedly difficult to ferret out. In Joseph Smith’s 1832 history he did mention “the reception of the Holy Priesthood by the ministering of angels”

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*. A Play of Sir Thomas More. (Toronto: Bellhaven House, 1960), p. 53.

but offered no other specifics. In his official history of 1838, he did say that John the Baptist “acted under the direction of Peter, James and John who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood he said would in due time be conferred on us.” In this same account he did, however, offer a clue to his silence on the matter: “In the meantime we were forced to keep secret the circumstances of having received the Priesthood and our having been baptized, owing to spirit of persecution which had already been manifested in the neighborhood.”<sup>2</sup> Considering the intense persecution that followed his telling of the First Vision story, such reluctance may be understandable.

Harder to comprehend is the fact the Lucy Mack Smith said little about it in her writings, nor did David Whitmer or arguably William E. McLellin. As Michael Quinn has argued, Whitmer said that he never heard “of such a thing as an angel ordaining them until I got into Ohio about the year 1834 – or later” and purportedly concluded that “I do not believe that John the Baptist ever ordained Joseph and Oliver as stated and believed by some.”<sup>3</sup> William E. McLellin, who like David Whitmer, later left the Church, said “In 1831 I heard Joseph tell his experiences about angel visits many times, and about finding the plates, and their contents coming to light . . . But I never heard one word of John the Baptist, or of Peter, James and John’s visit and ordination till I was told some year afterward in Ohio.”<sup>4</sup> Quinn has even argued that Brigham Young later as president of the Church stated that Joseph Smith “received the Melchizedek Priesthood” after the Church was organized.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>*History of the Church*, 1:40, 43-44.

<sup>3</sup>David Whitmer Interviews by Zenos H. Gurley, 14 January 1885. As cited in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>William E. McLellin statement. As cited in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, 10:303. As cited in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 26.

It has also been argued, by Hiram Page and others, that Joseph Smith was merely “a prophet,” rather than “the prophet,” that at first “nearly everyone regarded Smith as a prophet among prophets, not as *the* prophet.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly David Whitmer later seemed to arrive at such a conclusion, perhaps to justify his own awkward position of leaving the Church. Furthermore, he and others argued that the term “apostle” as used in the very early days of the Church, was not an administrative office but a term suggesting a charismatic calling and that it was used for those who had received special manifestations of the spirit – David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Ziba Peterson, etc., and that they felt comfortable in laying claim to the title of “apostle” (small “a”), independent of any ordination or Priesthood setting apart.<sup>7</sup>

Unless additional information is discovered, we simply do not know precisely when or where this Priesthood was restored. Until that time, reputable scholars of good intent will probably continue to defend alternative positions while those who harbor malice towards the Church will persist in arguing that such a manifestation never occurred, that it was a later contrived construct to justify the legitimacy of priesthood claim by later leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Be that as it may, my purpose today is to re-examine what we do know about this remarkable event in Church history and to present my persuasion that whatever the contrary positions may be, the second witness of the Restoration, Oliver Cowdery, and very many members of the original Quorum of the Twelve certainly believed a) that the vision of Peter, James and John was a reality; b) that the gift of the Holy Ghost could not have been conferred without prior Melchizedek Priesthood restoration; c) that such authority had to have been

---

<sup>6</sup>Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, pp. 10-12.

restored before the Church was organized at Fayette, New York on 6 April 1830; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, d) that more than mere Priesthood, the visit of Peter, James and John included the restoration of priesthood keys, that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the office of Apostle (capital “A”) before the Quorum of the Twelve had even been organized, and that by right of such ordination, Joseph Smith laid claim to the right of President of the Church, thereby establishing very early on the pattern of apostolic succession.

### **“The Blindness That Had Happened”**

One cannot discuss the restoration of priesthood authority without first reviewing what early missionaries said about the apostasy. With the Church still in its infancy, many of its newest converts sought to spread the word while at the same time gather to Zion. Jonathan Crosby, for instance, prayed that, “the Lord would rend the heavens and come down, and remove the darkness which covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.”<sup>8</sup> Among the doctrines these earliest converts preached, the apostasy was prominent, if not paramount.<sup>9</sup> These included the loss of truth, resultant false religion, the absence of authority, and the scattering of Israel.

The early missionaries spoke of the apostasy in very strident tones. They taught that it was a reality, long prophesied and now fulfilled, that the Christian world had lost its way, the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Evening and Morning Star*, August 1834, 2:24:181. Letter from Jonathan Crosby, Jr.

<sup>9</sup> Of 16 missionaries who served in the period from 1830 to 1834, according to their diaries 75% of them taught various elements of the apostasy. These included Calvin Beebe, Jonathan Crosby, Jr., Peter Dustin, William Draper, William Huntington, Joseph G. Hovey Orson Hyde, Joel Hills Johnson, Wandle Mace, William E. McLellin, John Murdock, W. W. Phelps, Parley P. Pratt, Samuel H. Smith, Sylvester Smith, and Brigham Young.

results of which were spiritually and morally devastating. Wrote Samuel Smith, Joseph's younger brother:

I have written . . . to prove that the Gentiles have broken the everlasting covenant and that darkness has covered the earth since the days of the Apostles and to show the calamity that is coming upon them and to prove that while in this situation, the Lord was to lift up a standard to the people which should ... come forth to throw light into the minds of the people and to deliver them from the darkness that happened unto them and to show the way of deliverance from the judgments that are coming upon the Gentiles.<sup>10</sup>

Orson Hyde spoke in 1832 of “the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that was delivered to the Saints.”<sup>11</sup> And Sylvester Smith, writing in May 1833 from his missionary assignment in southern New York state, added the following:

...I am sensible that the word will not grow and flourish upon the barren rocks of pride and unbelief, which is almost the only characteristic of the old churches. When I view the situation of the sectarians of the day, my heart cries, wo, wo, wo, to the scribes and pharisees, hypocrites, who build and garnish the sepulchers of the apostles! But alas! Their building upon the old covenant will not save them if they reject the new! Their crying out against the murders of Christ and his apostles will not save them, while they stone those whom the Lord sends to warn them of the desolation which await the wicked.<sup>12</sup>

In 1834 William McLellan quoted from Jude 1:3 when he addressed a congregation “about an hour and ¼ on the situation or confusion of the world and on the faith once delivered

---

<sup>10</sup> Journal of Samuel H. Smith, 1832, pp. 22-23.

<sup>11</sup>Journal of Samuel H. Smith, 27 August 1832, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>*Evening and Morning Star*, July 1833, 2:14:109. Letter from a missionary serving in Chenango Point, New York.

to the saints.”<sup>13</sup> Orson Hyde referencing the same scripture but on another account, “show[ed] them the blindness that had happened in consequence of the falling away from the faith that was delivered to the Saints.”<sup>14</sup>

Said W. W. Phelps in 1834:

The world . . . was to wander far from God, and righteousness was so far to depart from the earth and the true principles of the religion of heaven to be so neglected, as to leave the world in a state of apostasy . . . Isaiah says in [60:2], ‘For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people.’ . . . Any man who will read this . . . will see . . . it was at this time that darkness was to cover the earth and gross darkness the minds of the people.<sup>15</sup>

Orson Pratt, active in proselyting activity since late 1830, summarized his teachings of the apostasy and of “the falling away of the Church” of Christ,<sup>16</sup> and the

---

<sup>13</sup>*The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836*. Edited by Jan Shipps and John W. Welch. BYU Studies, Provo, Utah, 31 August 1834, p.136.

<sup>14</sup>Journal of Samuel Harrison Smith, 27 August 1832, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>*Evening and Morning Star*, June 1834, 2:22:162 and July 1834, 2:23:169. Again from Phelps:

“In consequence of the religious world having lost the power of getting revelations for themselves they have fallen into their present state of confusion, each partly manufacturing duties for themselves. For instance, the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, the Methodist, and the Catholic god with the god of some other sects, requires them, (or at least they think he does,) to sprinkle their children, while the Baptist . . . god is greatly offended with it.”

<sup>16</sup>*The Orson Pratt Journals*. Compiled and Arranged by Elden J. Watson. (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, publisher, 1975). 13 March, 1835, p. 52 and 2 June 1835, p. 65.

fact that “there could not but one church be correct. ”<sup>17</sup> In the following jubilant letter of 1835, he wrote to Oliver Cowdery: “Who could have supposed five years ago that truth would have spread so rapid . . . it moves in majesty and power, and continues its steady course, pulling down the strongholds of Babylon, and leaving her mighty towers, exposing the creeds, systems and inventions of men, exhibiting the extreme ignorance, follies and errors of all sects, which causes their priests to rage and their mighty ones to tremble.”<sup>18</sup>

Admitted Parley P. Pratt,

At the commencement of 1830, I felt drawn out in an extraordinary manner to search the prophets, and to pray for an understanding of the same... I began to understand the things which were coming on the earth—the restoration of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and the glory that should follow. I was so astonished at the darkness of myself and mankind on these subjects that I could exclaim with the prophet: surely “*darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people.*”<sup>19</sup>

The apostasy, then, they believed had thoroughly corrupted virtually all of mankind. And because of it “surely, gross darkness covers the earth, and wickedness greatly prevails among the people, and the truth makes them angry, for they are joined to their idols.”<sup>20</sup> More than a loss of truth or even priesthood, it had ushered in a time of sin and corruption, a terrible state of affairs which these early missionaries viewed as

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Orson Pratt Journals*, 23 August 1835, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> *The Orson Pratt Journals*. Letter of Orson Pratt to Oliver Cowdery, 16 February 1835, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, p.33. Italics preserved from original.

<sup>20</sup> *Evening and Morning Star*, February 1833, 1:9:69. Letter from “Calvin and Peter,” missionaries serving in Union, Missouri. Understood to be Brothers P. [Peter] Dustin, and C. [Calvin] Beebe from a letter dated Cole County, Missouri, December 11, 1832, 1:8:63.

confirmation of that calamity. Such talk of the apostasy begged the need for a restoration of priesthood authority and priesthood keys.

### **“The First Light of the Morning”**

Of all the early visions to the Prophet Joseph Smith the two most discussed by early missionaries were first: the visitations of the angel Moroni and because of it the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and secondly, the return of John the Baptist and his restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood on 15 May 1829. In the Sixth General Epistle of the Church, written in 1851, we read the following:

. . . The first light of the morning of this age, and the time referred to by the Savior, was the angel who had the everlasting gospel, which was to be preached to all the people, preaching and administering to others, even as he had received of the angel; and the light continued to shine and spread, as others believed in the testimony of Joseph, for they repented of their sins, and were baptized by him; and he, having received the Holy Priesthood from the angels, conferred the same Priesthood on the believers.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, there was more talk in the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints concerning the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood than is perhaps popularly realized. In comparison, there was much more discussion about it than there was concerning the return of Elijah, Elias and Moses to the Kirtland Temple in 1836. In fact, one is hard pressed to find any mention of this later Kirtland vision in any official Church minutes of conferences, in sermons, in missionary teachings, or in

---

<sup>21</sup> Sixth General Epistle of the Church . . . to the Saints Scattered Abroad.” Church Historians Office. History of the Church. See also Journal History of the Church,, 22 September 1851, p. 71.

correspondence at any time during the Kirtland, Nauvoo or exodus era of Church History. It would appear that it was not until the publication of the History of the Church in the *Deseret News* in the early 1850s that there was solid reference to this 1836 vision, and not until 1876 and the completion of the St. George Temple and the publication of a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that Section 110 even made its way into a book of scripture. Like the recovery and reclamation of Joseph F. Smith's 1918 "Vision of the Dead" that did not make it into the canon of scripture for another 58 years, the vision in the Kirtland Temple in April 1836 was a recapturing of our history that came over a long period of time.

### **The Witness of Oliver Cowdery**

Not so the story of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Let us begin with a re-examination of the testimonies of one of the two witnesses to this restoration, Oliver Cowdery. In an 1846 impassioned plea to defend his reputation as a man of integrity and a credible witness, Cowdery wrote the following to his dear friend, Phineas Young, two years before his return to the Church:

I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after that I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not blush for the private character of the man who bore that testimony. I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit; but I ought to be so – you would be, under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John, with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood – and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witnessed the effects these two must produce – you would feel what you have never felt, were wicked men

conspiring to lessen the effects of your testimony on man, after you should have gone to your long sought rest.<sup>22</sup>

At his return to the Church at Kaneshville, Iowa in 1848, Cowdery, after having been out of the Church for 10 years, sought permission to enter in at the door of baptism and be restored to membership in the Church. George A. Smith, in a letter to Orson Pratt in October 1848 described Oliver's comments this way:

Oliver Cowdery, who had just arrived from Wisconsin with family, addressed the meeting. He bore testimony in the most positive terms of the truth of the Book of Mormon – the restoration of the priesthood to the earth and the mission of Joseph Smith as the Prophet of the last days; and told the people if they wanted to follow the right path to keep [to?] the main channel of the stream – where the body of the Church goes, there is the authority; and all these lo here's and lo there's, have no authority; but this people have the true and holy Priesthood; for the angel said unto Joseph Smith, Jr., in his hearing, that 'this priesthood shall remain on the earth until the end!' His testimony produced quite a stir among the gentlemen present, who did not belong to the church, and it was gratefully received by all the Saints.<sup>23</sup>

Oliver gave even more precise details not just of one but of two priesthoods in a follow-up letter to Samuel W. Richards in 1849. "While darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people," he wrote:

---

<sup>22</sup> Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 23 March 1846. Church History Library. As cited in Scott H. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery." In *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*. Eds. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2006), p. 331.

<sup>23</sup>From Minutes of the Church Historian's Office, 31 October 1848, p. 78.

long after the authority to administer in holy things had been taken away, the Lord opened the heavens and sent forth his word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfillment of the sacred Scripture the everlasting Gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel [Moroni], who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This Gospel is the ‘stone taken from the mountain without hands.’ John the Baptist, holding the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood; Peter, James and John, holding the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood, have also ministered for those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these ministrations ordained men to the same Priesthoods. These Priesthoods with their authority, are now, and must continue to be, in the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blessed is the elder who has received the same and thrice blessed and holy is he who shall endure to the end. Accept assurances . . . of him who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations.<sup>24</sup>

Oliver Cowdery died soon after these testimonials, a member of the Church he once helped to establish. It was a deliberate act on his part to come back and to bear testimony to what he had seen and heard - the restoration of both the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods. His personal integrity would allow him to do no less.

### **“The Gift of the Holy Ghost”**

I move now to my second point. Well known in Church History is the fact that after Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had baptized one another under the direction of John the Baptist, that each began to prophesy, although neither one had yet received the

---

<sup>24</sup> From a letter from Oliver Cowdery to Samuel W. Richards, 13 January 1849. Published in the *Improvement Era*, October 1914 and reprinted in the “Journal History of the Church, 13 January 1849, p. 2.

gift of the Holy Ghost.. “Accordingly we went and were baptized, I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me. . . . The messenger . . . said that he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John, who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood, he said, would in due time be conferred on us.” Immediately after their baptism, the Holy Ghost fell upon them with Oliver prophesying of “many things which should shortly come to pass” and Joseph prophesying “concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church, and this generation of the children of men.” They then began to have the “scriptures laid open” to their understandings, “and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed “ in a manner “which we never could attain to previously.” Thus even though they had been working with the Urim and Thummim as a remarkable instrument of translation and revelation, it was now the Holy Ghost that began to instruct them in ways marvelous to behold.

And yet even with this, they had not yet received the gift of the Holy Ghost. “He [John the Baptist] ‘said this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter,” a clear indication that a further priesthood endowment was forthcoming. As simple as it may appear, they looked forward to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood as the essential prerequisite to receiving the Gift of the Holy Ghost, without which no officer in the Church could be called or established, or lasting testimony secured.

According to revelation given the day the Church was organized, Joseph Smith had been “inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundation thereof, and to build it up

unto the most holy faith.”<sup>25</sup> And again as per the Articles and Constitution of the Church (D&C 20), no officer in the new church – whether elder, priest, teacher or deacon – could have been ordained unless “by the power of the Holy Ghost, which *is in the one* who ordains him” (D&C 20:60 italics added). Put another way, there could have been no ordinations and no church without first the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Ghost upon the first and second elders of the church. As George Q. Cannon much later remarked: “[Joseph] was unable to seal the gift of the Holy Ghost or to ordain an elder until after Peter, James, and John had endowed him with the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek.”<sup>26</sup>

Unlike their baptism under the direction of John the Baptist, Joseph and Oliver recorded very little about the formal bestowal of the Holy Ghost upon them. If, however, Peter, James and John acted in accordance with the previous pattern, they would have first conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood upon both men and then directed them to ordain one another and bestow upon each other the gift of the Holy Ghost by the power and authority of their newly received Priesthood.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> D&C 21:2; *The Joseph Smith Papers*, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup>Cannon, *Life of Joseph, the Prophet* p. 75. According to the private journal of Oliver B. Huntington, President Wilford Woodruff once grappled with the question of the timing of the restoration of the Higher Priesthood. “Some people suppose that [1831] was the time that Joseph and Oliver [were] ordained to the Apostleship by Peter, James and John, thereby inferring that the Church was organized before [the] Melchizedek Priesthood was given; which is all wrong simply because some people want to criticize and find something wrong. The Melchizedek Priesthood was given before the Church was organized, in 1829 or March 1830.” From the diary of Oliver B. Huntington, 3 March 1883, pp. 210-211. Copy in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

<sup>27</sup>Clark, *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life*, p. 144.

### **“The Voice of Peter, James, and John”**

If this matter of the Holy Ghost attains, it stands to reason that the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored some time before the organization of the Church. The exact date and place of the restoration of this higher priesthood authority, what B. H. Roberts has called the “fourth vision” of the Restoration, have yet to be discovered; however, there are clues. As Professor Larry Porter has skillfully argued, it was likely restored near Harmony, Pa. “The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times.” (D&C 128:20) Just where the spot was between Harmony, Pa. and Colesville, New York, a distance of 27 miles, is impossible to say.

In a now famous 1882 letter to President Joseph F. Smith, Addison Everett, a bishop of the Church in Winter Quarters and later in Salt Lake City, recalled hearing the Prophet in Nauvoo relate the circumstances surrounding the restoration of the priesthood. “Said as they ware tran[s]lating the Book of Mormon at His Father In Laws in Susqauhanah County Penny. T[h]ey ware thretned By a Mob and in the same time Falther Kn[i]ghts came Down from Cole[s]vill[e] County New York and Desired them to go home with him and preach to them in his Neighbourhood And on Account of the Mob Spirit prevailing they concluded to goe.” Everett recalled that even in Colesville persecution continued, forcing the pair to return to Harmony. His letter continues:

And they wandered in a dense Forest all night and often times in Mud and water up to thare Knees. And Brother Oliver got quite exausted in the After Part of the night and Brother Joseph had to put his arm arround him and allmost carry him. And Just as the day Broke in the East Brother

Oliver gave out Entirely and he[,] Br Joseph [,] leaned him against an Oake tree Just out side a field fenc[e] Br Oliver Crying out how long O Lord O how Long Br Joseph hav[e] we got to suffer these things [?] Just this moment Peter James & John came to us and Ordained [us to] the Holy Apostleship and gave [unto] us the Keys of the Disp[er]nsation of the fullness of times. And we had some 16 or 17 miles to goe to reach our place of residence and Brother Oliver could travel as well as I could. . . Now as to time and Place. I heard the Name of the Banks of the Susquehanah river spoken [of] But whare it was pla[c]ed I cannot till. No doubt the Oake tree and the field fence was ajacent to the river. As to time I cannot Be Very Explsit. But as the Mob spirit had not abated when they returned they had to remove to Father Whitmores [Whitmers] [Fayette, Seneca Co] to finish the Translation.<sup>28</sup>

How much credence can be given to a reminiscence written almost 40 years after the fact is debatable. Nonetheless it is true that the Knights assisted in the translation with paper and provisions; that persecution attended the translation; that by the 1 June 1829, Joseph and Oliver had removed north to Harmony; and that the two were never together again in the wilderness of the Susquehanna.

And further to the matter of timing, as early as June 1829, the revelations speak of Joseph and Oliver having already received the apostleship. “And I speak unto you, even as unto Paul mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he

---

<sup>28</sup>See letter of Addison Everett to Oliver B. Huntington, 17 February 1881, St. George, Utah, recorded in the “Oliver Boardman Huntington Journal #14, under backdate of 31 January 1881, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Additional information is found in “O. B. Huntington Diary #15,” 18 February 1883, 44-47, where the letter is again recorded with few additional particulars. See also the letter of Addison Everett to Joseph F. Smith, 16 January 1882, Joseph F. Smith Collection, Personal Papers, MS 1325, Church History Library. I am indebted to Professor Larry C. Porter for the above information. For a full discussion of the Everett letters and the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood, see Larry C. Porter, “The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods,” *The Ensign*, December 1996, pp. 30-47.

was called.” (D&C 18:9) In the “Articles and Covenants” of the Church – Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants – reference is made to Joseph and Oliver as having already been “called of God, and ordained an Apostle of Jesus Christ” *before* the Church was organized on 6 April 1830. (D&C 20:2)<sup>29</sup>

### **The Keys of the Apostleship**

I now come to my fourth and in some ways most important point. A careful reading of scriptural text and of the statements of the earliest Church apostles reveals the fact that Joseph and Oliver received from Peter, James and John something even more, however, than priesthood authority, as great as that was; they also received the “keys” pertaining to and governing over that priesthood. While some may err in thinking that this is unnecessary nuance and an overly subtle differentiation, it is of great importance to distinguish between the two for it meant everything to the form of government in the Church, the matter of apostolic succession, and even the timing or chronology of the coming of Peter, James and John.

If priesthood is Christ’s delegated authority given unto man to perform ordinances, miracles and other works in His stead, then keys represent the governing authority, the power over the priesthood, the permitting or consenting power to direct, comment, confirm, revoke, and be accountable for, all matters of ecclesiastical administration and ordination. They may also represent sealing powers that “whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18)

---

<sup>29</sup> In the original Book of Commandments, the original Section 20 shows the word “apostle” capitalized - “Apostle”. See *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*. Eds. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper. (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), p. 77.

Just as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had obtained not only the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist but also the “keys” pertaining thereto, so now they received from the apostles Peter, James and John the keys of the apostleship which they themselves possessed. Section 27, given circa August 1830, states as follows:

And also with Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry and of the same things which I revealed unto them;

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

The “same things” which God had revealed unto his ancient apostles, the same powers, commissions, and endowments given unto them were now to be entrusted with these modern apostles. Joseph and Oliver were to be more than mere disciples or followers, but apostles, leaders, and directors over the work of the Lord in this, the final time or dispensation before Christ’s second coming.

This is not my original argument but that presented by many of the early apostles of this Church, which is really all I am trying to show. In the original Book of Commandments which we now have available for study, the “Articles and Covenants” speaks of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery having been “called of God and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of this church.” (D&C 20: 2; *Joseph Smith Papers*, pp. 76-77) Their ordination to the apostleship had preceded their being called, set apart and sustained by the membership at the inauguration of the Church on 6 April 1830 in Fayette, New York. In fact, they could not have become the first or second presiding elders over the Church nor have even organized and established the Church without

first having been Apostles. At least this is how many of the original Quorum of the Twelve came to understand the process. To the argument that the original “Apostles,” Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, were mere disciples, no more or no less than other early members, a sort of egalitarianism and charismatic co-equals, Parley P. Pratt, a member of the original Quorum of the Twelve and a member of the Church since 1830, responded this way: “Who ordained our first founders to the Apostleship, to hold the keys of the kingdom of God, in these the times of restoration? Peter, James and John from the eternal world.”<sup>30</sup> Added Heber C. Kimball, another original Quorum member: “Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God, a Seer, a Revelator, an Apostle of Jesus, and was ordained directly under the hands of Peter, James and John.”<sup>31</sup>

Brigham Young, while later President of the church, elaborated further on the perfect sequence of events so far discussed and the order and importance of the Priesthood and its keys:

When the Lord called upon His servant Joseph, after leading him along for years until he got the plates, from a portion of which the Book of Mormon was translated, “bye and by,” said he, “you are going to organize my church and establish my kingdom. I am going to have a church on the earth. All these churches you have inquired about are wrong; they have truth amongst them, but not the Priesthood. They lack a guide to direct the affairs of the Kingdom of God on the earth – that is the keys of the priesthood of the Son of God.” This tells the story. We possess the Priesthood. The Lord sent John to ordain Joseph to the Aaronic Priesthood, and when he commenced to baptize people he sent a greater power – Peter, James and John, who ordained him to the apostleship, which is the highest office pertaining to the Kingdom of God that any man can possess on the face of the earth, for it holds the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and has power to dispense the blessings of the kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 2:44.

<sup>31</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 6:256.

<sup>32</sup> *Journal of Discourses* 12:70.

In light of the fact that the initial Quorum of the Twelve was not selected and put into place until 1835, men in large part chosen by Joseph Smith with the aid of the Three Witnesses – Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris – Brigham Young’s choice of words – that they received and were ordained to the “office” of apostleship – is significant. In other words, he and most of his colleagues believed that there were Apostles before there was a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, indeed *before* there was, or could have been, an organized Church. The argument that the bureaucracy or government of the Church was a later self-imposition of authority to justify the claims of second generation Church leaders, and that if Peter, James and John, if they ever did appear, gave them no special governing authority or commission, disregards the statements of a great many original Church leaders.

Said Orson Pratt, another original member of the Twelve:

This Church never could have arisen had the Lord stopped with the mere translation of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the lesser priesthood. It is true that with the latter we could baptize, but it does not impart the power to confer the Holy Ghost; and that this Church might have the power to administer in every ordinance of the Gospel, the apostleship was again restored, which holds all the keys, authorities and powers to administer, not only in the outward ordinances, but also to confer the spirit of the living God.<sup>33</sup>

One of the finest and most comprehensive statements on the nature of this apostleship and of the sequence of events culminating in the final organization of the Church was given by yet another member of the original Quorum, President Brigham Young in 1853 while laying the cornerstone of the Salt Lake Temple:

I speak thus to show you the order of the Priesthood. We will now commence with the apostleship—where Joseph commenced. Joseph was

---

<sup>33</sup> *Journal of Discourses*, 12:361.

ordained an apostle, that you can read and understand. After he was ordained to this office, then he had the right to organize, build up the kingdom of God, for he had committed unto him the keys of the Priesthood, which is after the order of Melchizedek, the High priesthood, which is after the order of the Son of God. And this, remember, by being ordained an Apostle.

Could he have built up the kingdom of God without first being an Apostle? No, he never could. The keys of the Eternal Priesthood, which is after the order of the Son of God, is comprehended by being an Apostle. All the Priesthood, all the keys, all the gifts, all the endowments, and everything preparatory to entering back into the presence of the Father and the Son, is in, composed of, circumscribed by, or I might say incorporated within the circumference of the Apostleship.

Now, who do we set, in the first place, to lay the Chief, the southeast cornerstone: the corner from whence light emanates to illuminate the whole fabric that is to be lighted? We begin with the First Presidency, with the Apostleship, for Joseph commenced, always, with the keys of the Apostleship; and he, by the voice of the people, presiding over the whole community of Latter-day Saints, officiated in the Apostleship, as the First President.

. . . I know that Joseph received his Apostleship from Peter, James and John before a revelation on the subject was presented, and he never had a right to organize the Church before he was an Apostle.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently Joseph Smith was the “first,” the “chief”, the “gigantic” or senior Apostle *before* he was established, confirmed and set apart as President of the Church. “Joseph Smith was the first Apostle of this Church and was commanded of Jesus Christ to call and ordain other apostles.” Brigham Young later affirmed, and

these other Apostles are Apostles of Jesus Christ and of Joseph Smith the chief Apostle of this last dispensation . . . Joseph told us that Jesus was the Christ, the Mediator between God and men, and the Savior of the world. He told us that there was no other name in the heavens nor under the heavens, neither could there be, by which mankind could be saved in the presence of the Father, but by and through the name and ministry of Jesus Christ, and the atonement he made on Mount Calvary. Joseph also told us that the Savior requires strict obedience to all the commandments, ordinances and laws

---

<sup>34</sup> *Journal History of the Church*, 6 April 1853, pp. 6-8.

pertaining to his kingdom, and that if we would do this we should be made partakers of all the blessings promised in his Gospel.<sup>35</sup>

Consistent with what Brigham Young taught his fellow apostles at Winter Quarters in Kaneshville, Iowa in December 1847 while preparing for the reorganization of the First Presidency, some 3½ years after the death of Joseph Smith, the pattern of succession in the presidency was laid down at the very beginning. Joseph Smith could not have become president without first being an Apostle and in his case, the First Apostle or Chief Elder with the keys. Brigham Young with “seven thunders rolling within him,” said that as senior apostle, now to become President in December 1847, he was doing nothing more than what his predecessor, Joseph Smith, had done seventeen years before, for the Twelve collectively had “received my kingdom” (D&C 136:41) and could govern and appoint.

During the intensive deliberations of the Quorum of the Twelve at Winter Quarters in December 1847, Brigham Young as then senior apostle, argued that it was past time for them to re-organize the First Presidency with him, as senior Apostle, as the next president and successor to Joseph Smith. Never one to campaign for the office, Brigham Young nevertheless felt that government by a First Presidency was preferable to that of the Twelve for many scriptural and logistical reasons, efficiency being one of them. Since they collectively held the keys, they had the right to reorganize. “ Oliver Cowdery ordained Joseph an apostle,” Brigham Young argued, and “ Oliver [was] ordained an apostle by Joseph. They received their ordinations by Peter, James and John before there was a Church. . . Peter, James and John constituted a First

---

<sup>35</sup> Brigham Young, 31 August 1862. *Journal of Discourses* 9:364-65.

Presidency, Joseph said so many times.”<sup>36</sup> His convincing argument was that an election or an appointment of any other potential candidate could not preempt what was rightfully now his by ordination. “You can’t make me President: I am President; you can’t give me power because I [already] have it.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus Brigham Young believed that the pattern of apostolic succession was established in the very ordination of Joseph Smith by Peter, James and John: the senior apostle becomes president of the Church upon his ordination as such with the unanimous approval of the remaining Twelve. And while others of the Twelve held to somewhat differing methods of succession, none contested against the argument that Joseph Smith had been first ordained an apostle under the hands of Peter, James and John before he became president of the Church.

Possessing now the keys to the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood of God, Joseph and his assistant disciple, Oliver Cowdery, were prepared to enter into the operation, ordinances, and government of that priesthood, to baptize not only for the remission of sins but also into Church membership, and to both *confer* the gift of the Holy Ghost to believers and to *confirm* them members of the Church; and to set apart and ordain other officers in the Church.

## **Conclusion**

I wish to conclude by restating the key points of this paper. First, the early missionaries of this Church taught repeatedly the reality and awful dimensions of the

---

<sup>36</sup>From Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve and Seventy, 30 November 1847. Brigham Young Papers. Church History Library.

<sup>37</sup>From Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve, 5 December 1847. Brigham Young Papers. Church History Library. See also Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri–Winter Quarters, 1846-1852*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004, p. 210, 308.

apostasy and because of it, the need for a restoration of priesthood authority. The return of the angel Moroni with his message of the Book of Mormon was primary in their early messages, as was their discussion of the restoration of divine authority. And while some have argued that very little was said about a higher priesthood being restored, a great many of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve believed differently, i.e., that the return of Peter, James and John and their restoration of priesthood and priesthood keys were prerequisite to the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, to the organization of the Church, to the ordination of all later priesthood officers, and to a proper understanding of the pattern of succession in the presidency – that Joseph Smith could not have attained to the presidency of the Church without first being the senior apostle of this dispensation. Such discussion has necessitated a re-examination of the timing of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, one which these early apostles contended must have occurred at least sometime before the Church was organized in April 1830.

In the end, I suppose if one could find in the Church History Library bushels of letters and statements about the return of Peter, James and John and priesthood authority, it would not be convincing to those who assert and believe otherwise. To them, the question of when, where, how and why are all academic, and the answers contrived and artificial. Essentially, these are matters of faith made as historically reasonable as possible. Thus to paraphrase Thomas More: “The Restoration of Priesthood Authority in our day? — Why, it’s a historical question yes; you can’t see it; can’t touch it; it’s a history. But what matters to me is not only whether it can or cannot

be substantiated but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it. ”

- Richard E. Bennett