

GENERAL PRIESTHOOD SESSION

The general priesthood session, the third session of the 168th Semiannual General Conference, convened in the Tabernacle at 6:00 P.M. on Saturday, October 3, 1998. President Gordon B. Hinckley conducted this session.

Music was provided by a combined men's choir from the Tabernacle Choir and Mormon Youth Chorus. Jerold Ottley and Robert Bowden directed the choir, and Richard Elliott was the organist.

President Hinckley opened the meeting with the following remarks.

President Gordon B. Hinckley

We welcome you, brethren, to this general priesthood session of the 168th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

These services are being relayed by closed-circuit and satellite transmission to holders of the priesthood gathered in the Assembly Hall, the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, the BYU Marriott Center, the Missionary Training Center, and in locations in many countries throughout the world. I think that with-

out question there is no gathering of men anywhere as large as this great priesthood meeting.

The singing during this session will be furnished by the Tabernacle Choir and Mormon Youth Chorus combined men's choir, under the direction of Brothers Jerold Ottley and Robert Bowden, with Richard Elliott at the organ.

The choir will open this session by singing "Come, O Thou King of Kings." The invocation will then be offered by Elder John M. Madsen of the Seventy.

The choir sang "Come, O Thou King of Kings."

Elder John M. Madsen offered the invocation.

President Hinckley

The choir will now sing "Awake, My Sons, Awake," and Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve will then speak to us.

The choir sang "Awake, My Sons, Awake."

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

The Aaronic Priesthood and the sacrament

My beloved brethren, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you this evening. I address my remarks to the young men who hold the Aaronic Priesthood and to the bishops and counselors who preside over them. I will speak about the sacred activities of Aaronic Priesthood holders in preparing, admin-

istering, and passing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the members of the Church.

Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood

On May 15, 1829, John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood to the earth. He did so by laying his hands upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and speaking these words:

“Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and this shall never be taken again from the earth, until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness” (D&C 13:1).

Later the Lord revealed these further truths:

“The lesser priesthood . . . holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel;

“Which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins” (D&C 84:26–27).

What does it mean that the Aaronic Priesthood holds “the key of the ministering of angels” and of the “gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins”? The meaning is found in the ordinance of baptism and in the sacrament. Baptism is for the remission of sins, and the sacrament is a renewal of the covenants and blessings of baptism. Both should be preceded by repentance. When we keep the covenants made in these ordinances, we are promised that we will always have His Spirit to be with us. The ministering of angels is one of the manifestations of that Spirit.

Baptism and the sacrament

We begin with the doctrine as taught by the Lord. During His ministry, Jesus taught that baptism is necessary for salvation. “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Baptism is the first of the saving ordinances. When we are baptized, we covenant that we will take upon us the name of Jesus Christ and serve Him and keep His commandments.

At the conclusion of His ministry, Jesus introduced the sacrament of the

Lord’s Supper. He broke bread and blessed it and gave it to His disciples, saying, “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26). “This do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). He took the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, “This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

The Holy Ghost and the sacrament

When He introduced the sacrament, the Savior also gave teachings and promises about the Holy Ghost. On that sacred occasion known as the Last Supper, Jesus explained the mission of the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost. The Comforter would testify of Him and reveal other truths. Jesus also explained that He had to leave His disciples in order for the Comforter to come to them. When I depart, He told them, “I will send him unto you” (John 16:7). After His Resurrection, He told His Apostles to tarry in Jerusalem until they were given “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). That power came when “the promise of the Holy Ghost” was “shed forth” upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33).

Similarly, when the Savior introduced the sacrament in the New World, He promised, “He that eateth this bread eateth of my body to his soul; and he that drinketh of this wine drinketh of my blood to his soul; and his soul shall never hunger nor thirst, but shall be filled” (3 Nephi 20:8). The meaning of that promise is evident: “Now, when the multitude had all eaten and drunk, behold, they were filled with the Spirit” (3 Nephi 20:9).

The close relationship between partaking of the sacrament and the companionship of the Holy Ghost is explained in the revealed prayer on the sacrament. In partaking of the bread, we witness that we are willing to take upon us the name

of Jesus Christ and always remember Him and keep His commandments. When we do so, we have the promise that we will always have His Spirit to be with us (see D&C 20:77).

Repentance and the sacrament

To have the continuous companionship of the Holy Ghost is the most precious possession we can have in mortality. The *gift* of the Holy Ghost was conferred upon us by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood after our baptism. But to realize the blessings of that gift, we must keep ourselves free from sin. When we commit sin, we become unclean and the Spirit of the Lord withdraws from us. The Spirit of the Lord does not dwell in "unholy temples" (see Mosiah 2:36-37; Alma 34:35-36; Helaman 4:24), and no unclean thing can dwell in His presence (see Ephesians 5:5; 1 Nephi 10:21; Alma 7:21; Moses 6:57).

A few weeks ago I used a chain saw to cut down a tree in my backyard. It was a dirty job, and when I was done I was splattered with a filthy mixture of sawdust and oil. In that condition I did not want anyone to see me. I just wanted to be cleansed in water so I would again feel comfortable in the presence of other people.

Not one of you young men and not one of your leaders has lived without sin since his baptism. Without some provision for further cleansing after our baptism, each of us is lost to things spiritual. We cannot have the companionship of the Holy Ghost, and at the final judgment we would be bound to be "cast off forever" (1 Nephi 10:21). How grateful we are that the Lord has provided a process for each baptized member of His Church to be periodically cleansed from the soil of sin. The sacrament is an essential part of that process.

We are commanded to repent of our sins and to come to the Lord with a broken heart and a contrite spirit and partake of the sacrament in compliance with its covenants. When we renew our baptismal covenants in this way, the Lord renews the cleansing effect of our baptism. In this way we are made clean and can always have His Spirit to be with us. The importance of this is evident in the Lord's commandment that we partake of the sacrament each week (see D&C 59:8-9).

We cannot overstate the importance of the Aaronic Priesthood in this. All of these vital steps pertaining to the remission of sins are performed through the saving ordinance of baptism and the renewing ordinance of the sacrament. Both of these ordinances are officiated by holders of the Aaronic Priesthood under the direction of the bishopric, who exercise the keys of the gospel of repentance and of baptism and the remission of sins.

The ministering of angels

In a closely related way, these ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood are also vital to the ministering of angels.

"The word 'angel' is used in the scriptures for any heavenly being bearing God's message" (George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist [1987], 54). The scriptures recite numerous instances where an angel appeared personally. Angelic appearances to Zacharias and Mary (see Luke 1) and to King Benjamin and Nephi (see Mosiah 3:2; 3 Nephi 7:17-18) are only a few examples. When I was young, I thought such personal appearances were the only meaning of the ministering of angels. As a young holder of the Aaronic Priesthood, I did not think I would see an angel, and I wondered what such appearances had to do with the Aaronic Priesthood.

But the ministering of angels can also be unseen. Angelic messages can be delivered by a voice or merely by thoughts or feelings communicated to the mind. President John Taylor described "the action of the angels, or messengers of God, upon our minds, so that the heart can conceive . . . revelations from the eternal world" (*The Gospel Kingdom*, sel. G. Homer Durham [1943], 31).

Nephi described three manifestations of the ministering of angels when he reminded his rebellious brothers that (1) they had "seen an angel," (2) they had "heard his voice from time to time," and (3) also that an angel had "spoken unto [them] in a still small voice" though they were "past feeling" and "could not feel his words" (1 Nephi 17:45). The scriptures contain many other statements that angels are sent to teach the gospel and bring men to Christ (see Hebrews 1:14; Alma 39:19; Moroni 7:25, 29, 31–32; D&C 20:35). Most angelic communications are felt or heard rather than seen.

How does the Aaronic Priesthood hold the key to the ministering of angels? The answer is the same as for the Spirit of the Lord.

In general, the blessings of spiritual companionship and communication are available only to those who are clean. As explained earlier, through the Aaronic Priesthood ordinances of baptism and the sacrament, we are cleansed of our sins and promised that if we keep our covenants we will always have His Spirit to be with us. I believe that promise not only refers to the Holy Ghost but also to the ministering of angels, for "angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ" (2 Nephi 32:3). So it is that those who hold the Aaronic Priesthood open the door for all Church members who worthily partake of the sacrament to enjoy the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord and the ministering of angels.

Do not do anything that would distract

The doctrines I have just discussed are contained in the scriptures. From the scriptures we also know that those who officiate in the priesthood act in behalf of the Lord (see D&C 1:38; 36:2). I will now suggest how teachers and priests and deacons should carry out their sacred responsibilities to act in behalf of the Lord in preparing, administering, and passing the sacrament. I will not suggest detailed rules, since the circumstances in various wards and branches in our worldwide Church are so different that a specific rule that seems required in one setting may be inappropriate in another. Rather, I will suggest a principle based on the doctrines. If all understand this principle and act in harmony with it, there should be little need for rules. If rules or counseling are needed in individual cases, local leaders can provide them, consistent with the doctrines and their related principles.

The principle I suggest to govern those officiating in the sacrament—whether preparing, administering, or passing—is that they should not do anything that would distract any member from his or her worship and renewal of covenants. This principle of nondistractation suggests some companion principles.

Be clean and reverent

Deacons, teachers, and priests should always be clean in appearance and reverent in the manner in which they perform their solemn and sacred responsibilities. Teachers' special assignments in preparing the sacrament are the least visible but should still be done with dignity, quietly and reverently. Teachers should always remember that the emblems they are preparing represent the body and blood of our Lord.

Speak the sacrament prayers clearly

To avoid distracting from the sacred occasion, priests should speak the sacrament prayers clearly and distinctly. Prayers that are rattled off swiftly or mumbled inaudibly will not do. All present should be helped to understand an ordinance and covenants so important that the Lord prescribed the exact words to be uttered. All should be helped to focus on those sacred words as they renew their covenants by partaking.

On this subject I feel to share a painful experience from my youth. As a 16-year-old priest, I was just beginning a part-time job as a radio announcer at a local station. After I offered a prayer at the sacrament table in our ward, a girl who was present told me I sounded like I was reading a commercial. Can you imagine the shame I felt? After 50 years that rebuke still stings. Brethren, remember the significance of those sacred prayers. You are praying as a servant of the Lord in behalf of the entire congregation. Speak to be heard and understood, and say it like you mean it.

Be orderly

Deacons should pass the sacrament in a reverent and orderly manner, with no needless motions or expressions that call attention to themselves. In all their actions they should avoid distracting any member of the congregation from worship and covenant making.

Be well groomed and modestly dressed

All who officiate in the sacrament—in preparing, administering, or passing—should be well groomed and modestly dressed, with nothing about their personal appearance that calls special attention to themselves. In appearance as well as actions, they should avoid distracting anyone present from full attention to the

worship and covenant making that are the purpose of this sacred ordinance.

Be worthy to participate

This principle of nondistractedness applies to things unseen as well as seen. If someone officiating in this sacred ordinance is unworthy to participate, and this is known to anyone present, their participation is a serious distraction to that person. Young men, if any of you is unworthy, talk to your bishop without delay. Obtain his direction on what you should do to qualify yourself to participate in your priesthood duties worthily and appropriately.

Sing the sacrament hymn

I have a final suggestion. With the single exception of those priests occupied breaking the bread, all who hold the Aaronic Priesthood should join in singing the sacrament hymn by which we worship and prepare to partake. No one needs that spiritual preparation more than the priesthood holders who will officiate in it. My young brethren, it is important that you sing the sacrament hymn. Please do so.

These ordinances are vital

The Aaronic Priesthood holds the keys of “the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins” (D&C 84:27). The cleansing power of our Savior’s Atonement is renewed for us as we partake of the sacrament. The promise that we “may always have his Spirit to be with [us]” (D&C 20:77) is essential to our spirituality. The ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood are vital to all of this. I testify that this is true, and I pray that our brethren of the Aaronic Priesthood will understand the importance of their sacred responsibilities and act worthily in them, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.