

Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church

Dallin H. Oaks

*Dallin H. Oaks was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve
Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when
this conference address was given at the Conference Center in
Salt Lake City in October 2005.*

For further information contact:

BYU Broadcasting, 2000 Ironton Boulevard, Provo, Utah 84606.

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My subject is priesthood authority in the family and in the Church.

I.

My father died when I was seven. I was the oldest of three small children our widowed mother struggled to raise. When I was ordained a deacon, she said how pleased she was to have a priesthood holder in the home. But Mother continued to direct the family, including calling on which one of us would pray when we knelt together each morning. I was puzzled. I had been taught that the priesthood presided in the family. There must be something I didn't know about how that principle worked.

About this same time, we had a neighbor who dominated and sometimes abused his wife. He roared like a lion, and she cowered like a lamb. When they walked to church, she always walked a few steps behind him. That made my mother mad. She was a strong woman who would not accept such domination, and she was angry to see another woman abused in that way. I think of her reaction whenever I see men misusing their authority to gratify their pride or exercise control or compulsion upon their wives in any degree of unrighteousness (see D&C 121:37).

I have also seen some faithful women who misunderstand how priesthood authority functions. Mindful of their partnership relationship with their husband in the family, some wives have sought to extend that relationship to their husband's priesthood calling, such as bishop or mission president. In contrast, some single women who have been abused by men (such as in a divorce)

mistakenly confuse the priesthood with male abuse and become suspicious of any priesthood authority. A person who has had a bad experience with a particular electrical appliance should not forego using the power of electricity.

Each of the circumstances I have described results from misunderstanding priesthood authority and the great principle that while this authority presides in both the family and the Church, the priesthood functions in a different way in each of them. This principle is understood and applied by the great Church and family leaders I have known, but it is rarely explained. Even the scriptures, which record various exercises of priesthood authority, seldom state expressly which principles only apply to the exercise of priesthood authority in the family or in the Church or which apply in both of them.

II.

In our theology and in our practice, the family and the Church have a mutually reinforcing relationship. The family is dependent upon the Church for doctrine, ordinances, and priesthood keys. The Church provides the teachings, authority, and ordinances necessary to perpetuate family relationships to the eternities.

We have programs and activities in both the family and the Church. Each is so interrelated that service to one is service to the other. When children see their parents faithfully perform Church callings, it strengthens their family relationships. When families are strong, the Church is strong. The two run in parallel. Each is important and necessary, and each must be conducted with careful concern for the other. Church programs

and activities should not be so all-encompassing that families cannot have everyone present for family time. And family activities should not be scheduled in conflict with sacrament meeting or other vital Church meetings.

We need both Church activities and family activities. If all families were complete and perfect, the Church could sponsor fewer activities. But in a world where many of our youth grow up in homes where one parent is missing, not a member, or otherwise inactive in gospel leadership, there is a special need for Church activities to fill in the gaps. Our widowed mother wisely saw that Church activities would provide her sons with experiences she could not provide because we had no male role model in the home. I remember her urging me to watch and try to be like the good men in our ward. She pushed me to participate in Scouting and other Church activities that would provide this opportunity.

In a church where there are many single members, who do not presently have the companionship the Lord intends for all of his sons and daughters, the Church and its families should also have special concern for the needs of single adults.

III.

Priesthood authority functions in both the family and the Church. The priesthood is the power of God used to bless all of His children, male and female. Some of our abbreviated expressions, like "the women and the priesthood," convey an erroneous idea. Men are not "the priesthood." Priesthood meeting is a meeting of those who hold and exercise the priesthood. The blessings of the

priesthood, such as baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, the temple endowment, and eternal marriage, are available to men and women alike. The authority of the priesthood functions in the family and in the Church, according to the principles the Lord has established.

When my father died, my mother presided over our family. She had no priesthood office, but as the surviving parent in her marriage she had become the governing officer in her family. At the same time, she was always totally respectful of the priesthood authority of our bishop and other Church leaders. She presided over her family, but they presided over the Church.

IV.

There are many similarities and some differences in the way priesthood authority functions in the family and in the Church. If we fail to recognize and honor the differences, we encounter difficulties.

Keys. One important difference between its function in the Church and in the family is the fact that all priesthood authority in the Church functions under the direction of the one who holds the appropriate priesthood keys. In contrast, the authority that presides in the family—whether father or single-parent mother—functions in family matters without the need to get authorization from anyone holding priesthood keys. This family authority includes directing the activities of the family, family meetings like family home evenings, family prayer, teaching the gospel, and counseling and disciplining family members. It also includes ordained fathers giving priesthood blessings.

However, priesthood keys are necessary to authorize the ordaining or setting apart of family members. This is because the organization the Lord has made responsible for the performance and recording of priesthood ordinances is the Church, not the family.

Boundaries. Church organizations like wards, quorums, or auxiliaries always have geographic boundaries that limit the responsibility and authority of the callings associated with them. In contrast, family relationships and responsibilities are not dependent upon where different family members reside

Duration. Church callings are always temporary, but family relationships are permanent.

Call and release. Another contrast concerns the initiation and termination of positions. In the Church, a priesthood leader who holds the necessary keys has the authority to call or release persons serving under his direction. He can even cause that they lose their membership and have their names "blotted out" (see Mosiah 26:34–38; Alma 5:56–62). In contrast, family relationships are so important that the head of the family lacks the authority to make changes in family membership. That can only be done by someone authorized to adjust family relationships under the laws of man or the laws of God. Thus, while a bishop can release a Relief Society president, he cannot sever his relationship with his wife without a divorce under the laws of man. Again, his sealing for eternity cannot be ended without a cancellation procedure under the laws of God. Similarly, a youth serving in a class or quorum presidency can be released by priesthood authority in the

ward, but parents cannot divorce a child whose life choices are offensive to them. Family relationships are more enduring than Church relationships.

Partnership. A most important difference in the functioning of priesthood authority in the family and in the Church results from the fact that the government of the family is patriarchal, whereas the government of the Church is hierarchical. The concept of partnership functions differently in the family than in the Church

The family proclamation gives this beautiful explanation of the relationship between a husband and a wife: While they have separate responsibilities, "in these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners" ("The Family: A Proclamation to the World," Liahona, Oct. 2004, 49; Ensign, Nov. 1995, 102; emphasis added).

President Spencer W. Kimball said this: "When we speak of marriage as a partnership, let us speak of marriage as a full partnership. We do not want our LDS women to be silent partners or limited partners in that eternal assignment! Please be a contributing and full partner" (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, ed. Edward L. Kimball [1982], 315).

President Kimball also declared, "We have heard of men who have said to their wives, 'I hold the priesthood and you've got to do what I say.' " He decisively rejected that abuse of priesthood authority in a marriage, declaring that such a man "should not be honored in his priesthood" (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, 316).

There are cultures or traditions in some parts of the world that allow men to oppress women, but those abuses must not be carried into the families of the Church of Jesus Christ. Remember how Jesus taught: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, . . . but I say unto you . . ." (Matthew 5:27–28). For example, the Savior contradicted the prevailing culture in His considerate treatment of women. Our guide must be the gospel culture He taught.

If men desire the Lord's blessings in their family leadership, they must exercise their priesthood authority according to the Lord's principles for its use:

"No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge" (D&C 121:41–42).

When priesthood authority is exercised in that way in the patriarchal family, we achieve the "full partnership" President Kimball taught. As declared in the family proclamation:

"Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, [and] compassion" (Liahona, Oct. 2004, 49; Ensign, Nov. 1995, 102).

Church callings are performed according to the principles that govern all of us in working under priesthood authority in the Church. These principles

include the persuasion and gentleness taught in the 121st section, which are especially necessary in the hierarchal organization of the Church.

The principles I have identified for the exercise of priesthood authority are more understandable and more comfortable for a married woman than for a single woman, especially a single woman who has never been married. She does not now experience priesthood authority in the partnership relationship of marriage. Her experiences with priesthood authority are in the hierarchical relationships of the Church, and some single women feel they have no voice in those relationships. It is, therefore, imperative to have an effective ward council, where male and female ward officers sit down together regularly to counsel under the presiding authority of the bishop.

V.

I conclude with some general comments and a personal experience.

The theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints centers on the family. Our relationship to God and the purpose of earth life are explained in terms of the family. We are the spirit children of heavenly parents. The gospel plan is implemented through earthly families, and our highest aspiration is to perpetuate those family relationships throughout eternity. The ultimate mission of our Savior's Church is to help us achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom, and that can only be accomplished in a family relationship.

No wonder our Church is known as a family-centered church. No wonder we

are distressed at the current legal and cultural deteriorations in the position of marriage and childbearing. At a time when the world seems to be losing its understanding of the purpose of marriage and the value of childbearing, it is vital that Latter-day Saints have no confusion about these matters.

The faithful widowed mother who raised us had no confusion about the eternal nature of the family. She always honored the position of our deceased father. She made him a presence in our home. She spoke of the eternal duration of their temple marriage. She often reminded us of what our father would like us to do so we could realize the Savior's promise that we could be a family forever.

I recall an experience that shows the effect of her teachings. Just before Christmas one year, our bishop asked me, as a deacon, to help him deliver Christmas baskets to the widows of the ward. I carried a basket to each door with his greetings. When he drove me home, there was one basket remaining. He handed it to me and said it was for my mother. As he drove away, I stood in the falling snow wondering why there was a basket for my mother. She never referred to herself as a widow, and it had never occurred to me that she was. To a 12-year-old boy, she wasn't a widow. She had a husband, and we had a father. He was just away for a while.

I anticipate that glorious future day when the separated will be reunited and all of us will be made complete as the Lord has promised. I testify of Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father, whose priesthood authority and whose Atonement and

Resurrection make it all possible, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.