

DISCOURSE

BY

ELDER ORSON PRATT,

At the General Conference, Sunday
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REPORTED BY GEO. F. GIBBS.

I HAVE been asked by Prest. Taylor to address the congregation this morning on a particular subject, in which we are all interested, namely, the divine authority of the priesthood, divine callings, ordinances, etc.

We have in this Church several thousand male members who hold authority and power which they say is from heaven. If it be from heaven, as we testify, and have testified ever since the rise of the Church, then the Lord our God has manifested His power, and in His mercy has once more bestowed authority upon the children of men to administer His holy ordinances, and to occupy the positions to which we have severally been called. On the other hand, if the views of the world are correct—they do not consider us to have any authority—we are then on the same ground and platform with the rest of the religious world, there is no authority upon the earth. One or the other is true.

There never was a principle more clearly proven than that the inhabitants of the earth are destitute of all divine authority, among all religious denominations, whether Pagan, Mahometan or so-called Christian; the authority cannot be found throughout all the various denominations that have existed through the long period of time called the dark ages, until the Lord, in His mercy, has organized His Church again on the earth and bestowed that authority, and if He has not done it, as the world say He has not, there are no persons upon this whole earth that have any authority from the heavens; and therefore we are just as well off as the balance of them.

We are not indebted to man for the various authorities in this Church; this is our testimony. Man did not commence this work, man is not the originator of this work, neither is he the origin of the authority by which we administer. The Lord did not see proper to organize the authority of this Church all at once in all the various councils and authorities that, from time to time, have been ordained among this people; it was a gradual work. Authority was bestowed before there was any Church. First (not the authority of the Priesthood) but the authority to bring forth the plates of the Book of Mormon, and to translate them by the Urim and Thummim, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. This was the first authority conferred upon the one whom the Lord chose to commence this great work. The authority of the Priesthood was not conferred upon him at that time, but He revealed unto him concerning the everlasting gospel contained in the ancient records kept by the Nephites, or Israelites, upon this great Western Continent.

Joseph Smith, when he translated these records by the aid of the Urim and Thummim, had not yet received any Priesthood, so far as his temporal existence was concerned. But now, do not misunderstand me in regard to this position. He did hold the Priesthood before he came here upon the earth. I remarked that Joseph, so far as any ordination here in the flesh was concerned, held no Priesthood at the time that he brought forth the plates of the Book of Mormon and translated them; but he did hold the Priesthood, which was conferred upon him in the councils of eternity, before this world was formed. You will find this recorded in a sermon delivered by the Prophet Joseph, showing that not only he, but also all of the faithful that have received the Priesthood here in this life, were ordained before the foundation of the world. Consequently, they had the ordination; that ordination was after the order of Him who is from all eternity to all eternity, an everlasting Priesthood, without father, without mother, without beginning, without end; having been handed down from all eternity. That Priesthood was conferred upon Joseph Smith before he came here; he was among those that are spoken of in "The Pearl of Great Price," whom the ancient prophets saw in heaven. Moses saw them, and Abraham saw them, namely, the spirits that existed before the world was made; and they saw that among that vast number of spirits there were some choice ones, some that were noble in the sight of God, prob-

ably because of their integrity and steadfastness in upholding truth; among those noble ones were those whom the Lord chose before the foundation of the world to come forth upon the earth in their second estate, and to hold authority and power in the various dispensations, and to administer the plan of salvation to the human family. Abraham was among that number. The High Priests that lived from the days of Adam down to the flood were among that number, who were then chosen and then ordained, according to the fore-knowledge of God. It is recorded in the Book of Alma regarding the Priesthood, that the ordinances of the Priesthood and the calling to the Priesthood were without beginning or end. There may be a beginning to the person who is called, but that Priesthood existed before that person was called, and there was no beginning to the calling, no beginning to the ordinances of the Priesthood, no beginning to the Priesthood itself, being handed down from all eternity, being in existence in all of the worlds that were worthy of having the Priesthood and authority from God. The reason for my making this observation is to clear up one point which may perhaps trouble the minds of some of the Latter-day Saints.

You have read in the revelation given on the 22nd day of September, 1832, that without the Priesthood and the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is not manifested unto men in the flesh. You have also read in that same revelation, that without the ordinances of that Priesthood and the power thereof to administer to the children of men no man could see the face of God the Father and live. When you read this plain saying your minds may have reverted back to the days when there was no Priesthood so far as ordination was concerned, on this earth, I mean the ordination that took place here. You find a little boy, Joseph Smith, calling upon the name of the Lord, in the spring of the year 1820, before he was not yet 15 years of age; and the result of his calling upon the name of the Lord was that a pillar of fire appeared in the heavens above him, and it continued to descend and grow brighter and brighter, until it reached the top of the trees that were growing around about where he was praying; and so great was the glory of this light that this lad, this youth, this boy, seemed to feel almost fearful lest the trees themselves would be consumed by it. But it continued to descend until it rested upon this lad, and immediately his mind was caught away from the surrounding objects, was swallowed up in a heavenly vision, in which he saw two glorious personages, one was the Father, the other was the Son.

"No man without the Priesthood can behold the face of the Father and live."

Now, this has troubled the minds of some of the Latter-day Saints. "How is it, (say they) that Joseph lived, after having seen the face of the Father, after having heard the words of His mouth, after the Father had said unto him, 'He is my beloved Son, hear ye him.'"

If you had thought upon this other subject, namely, that Joseph had been already ordained before this world was made,—to what Priesthood? To the Priesthood after the Order of an Endless Life, a Priesthood that is everlasting, a Priesthood handed down, that had no beginning, a Priesthood after the holiest Order of God, a Priesthood that was after the Order of His Only Begotten Son. If you had only reflected that that same Priesthood had been conferred upon him in the councils of the holy ones before the world was made, and that he was ordained to come forth in this dispensation of the fulness of times to hold the keys of authority and power of that high and holy Priesthood,—that he was ordained to come forth and perform the work that God intended to accomplish in the latter times, then the mystery would have been cleared up to your minds. He was not without the Priesthood in reality; but was a man chosen, a man ordained, a man appointed from before the foundation of this world, to come forth in the fulness of times to introduce the last dispensation among the children of men; to come in order to organize that kingdom, that was predicted by the ancient Prophets, that should stand for ever; to come to fulfill the great and glorious work of preparation for the coming of the Son of God to reign in righteousness upon the earth; he could see the face of God the Father and live. But after having received this heavenly vision, after having brought

forth the Book of Mormon, and translated it, (the Lord having prepared a way by which the book could be printed,) and having received the command of the Almighty to organize the Church, and having received the Priesthood re-conferred upon him by Peter, James and John, and prior to that having received the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood, on the 15th day of May, 1829,—having all these preparations here in the flesh as well as having been pre-ordained to this mission, he was prepared to begin the work that should be everlasting, or in other words, the establishment of the kingdom of God that should never again be taken away from the earth.

The Apostleship being conferred—the Aaronic Priesthood having been previously conferred—all the powers of the Priesthood rested upon this man, and he had the right to the authority to administer, not only in the introductory principles of the Gospel of the Son of God, by which people might be born into the Kingdom, but also had the authority and the power from the heavens to administer in all the sacred ordinances of this Kingdom, at least so far as the building up of the Church was concerned, and of officiating in the various offices of the Priesthood. After having conferred this authority and power, the Lord was prepared to give little by little, one portion or degree of Priesthood after another, until by and by, in accordance with the revelation given in June, 1829, He called twelve men to be Apostles, some three or four years after the revelation was given, when it was predicted that such should be the case. What did we know about the callings and duties of this council of the Twelve? Nothing, only as God revealed it through His servant Joseph.

After this Apostleship was given, some were faithful therein, others were not; some lost the authority of the Priesthood, others retained it, and the blessings of God were upon those that were faithful in their calling, while the curse of an offended God followed those who abused this sacred trust, and their Priesthood was taken from them and conferred upon others that were worthy of it. The Lord also, about the same time that He called the Twelve Apostles, was prepared to call Seventies to minister under the direction of the Twelve; and many were ordained to this Apostleship, and they were men who had proven themselves faithful before the Lord; and others were perhaps ordained who had not been fully proven, and therefore the opportunity was afforded them, acting upon the agency they had in common with all men, of proving themselves before God. Some of them were faithful, others were unfaithful; those that were unfaithful apostatized eventually and left the Church, while those that were faithful continued in their office and calling until many of them passed down to the tomb; and having magnified the good office and calling that had been conferred upon them, they will claim, in the eternal worlds, the blessings appertaining to their several offices.

And what did we know about these Seventies and their particular calling? Were there specified duties assigned to that body of men anciently, whose call by the Savior is recorded in the New Testament? No, we were ignorant. The Prophet himself, the Twelve and all that had been called, knew nothing in relation to the duties of these Seventies until the Lord revealed what they were, and at the same time He pointed out the duties of the Presidency of the Seventies, both the duties of the seven men constituting the Presidency of all the Seventies, and also those of the seven men that were to preside over each Council of the Seventies. The Lord made manifest these things not all at once, but from time to time, as the people progressed and were counted worthy in His sight to receive further knowledge upon these things. You may ask, why it was that the Lord did not give the whole pattern at once, why He did not unfold everything all in a moment? It was because we were as little children then, and indeed I am of the opinion that many of us are little children still,—and we could not bear all things at once; therefore He revealed unto us enough from time to time to set our minds reflecting; He revealed sufficient to cause us to be stirred up in our minds to pray unto Him; and when we prayed unto Him about any of the duties of the Priesthood, then He would reveal it. But He would be sought unto by His people

before He would reveal a fulness of knowledge upon these important subjects. This seeking unto the Lord to obtain little by little, and precept by precept in the knowledge of the things of God is just the way a wise parent would instruct his own sons. Our parents would not tell us all about the various branches of education when we were two or three, or four years old; but they taught us as children, giving us line upon line until we could understand more fully those things that pertained to a good education. So the Lord dealt with His people, as a wise, judicious, kind-hearted parent, imparting just according to the faith of the Latter-day Saints, and according to their wants, and according to His own mind and will, and good pleasure.

By and by, after the Church was organized and there being no Bishops the Lord saw that it was necessary to introduce some kind of a plan in relation to the property of His people in the State of New York. What did the Lord say to us under those circumstances, when we were not fully organized? Said He to the Church in the State of New York, in the General Conference, through the mouth of His servant Joseph, in a revelation given on the 2nd day of January, 1831, He said, Let my Church in this land flee out from the State of New York; let them go westward to the land of Kirtland and join my people in the State of Ohio; let them do this immediately, lest their enemies come upon them, etc. The Lord understood what was in the hearts of the enemies of His people; He understood what they were doing in their secret councils, in their secret chambers to bring to pass the destruction of the Latter-day Saints that were in the States of New York and Pennsylvania. How shall this work be done? No Bishop to take charge of the properties. The Lord said, Let certain men among you in the State of New York be appointed to take charge of the properties of my people, that which you cannot dispose of or sell in time to flee out; let them have charge of it to sell it in after times for the benefit of the Church. Here, then, was a revelation appointing certain men without ordination, without the Bishopric, to handle properties, to do that which Bishops were afterwards required to perform. Now, here is a lesson for us. Because the Lord does one thing in the year 1831, and points out certain men according to the circumstances in which people are placed, that is no evidence that He will always continue the same order. The Lord deals with the children of men according to circumstances, and afterwards varies from that plan according to His own good will and pleasure. When these men had fulfilled their duties in relation to the properties of the Saints, and the Saints had gathered out from New York and Pennsylvania to the land of Kirtland, then it became necessary for a regular Bishop to be called and ordained, also his Counselors. Did the Lord point out that these Bishops should be taken from the High Priesthood? No.

"And again, I have called my servant Edward Partridge, and give a commandment, that he should be appointed by the voice of the Church, and ordained a Bishop unto the Church." And with regard to choosing his Counselors, the Lord said they should be selected from the Elders of His Church. Why did He say the Elders? Because the High Priests at that time had not been ordained; that is, they had not been ordained under that name. Although the Apostleship had been conferred upon Joseph and Oliver, even they were called Elders; the word High Priest was not known among them to be understood and comprehended until a long time after Bishops were called; and that is the reason why the Lord said to Bishop Partridge, "select from the Elders of my Church." "But," says one who has read the Doctrine and Covenants, "you will find in the revelation given on the 6th of April, 1830, something about Bishops, High Priests, etc."

[The speaker was here stopped that an important notice might be given out.] I was saying that at the time that Bishop Partridge was called and ordained a Bishop, on the 4th of February, 1831, that at that time there were no High Priests, they were not known under that name, but were known under the name of the Apostleship, etc., and hence Elders were specified to be called as Counselors. I was also saying that in the revelation given on the 6th day

of April, 1830, there was nothing said about High Priests at the time the revelation was given; neither about Bishops. But you will find two paragraphs in that revelation which mention them, which paragraphs were placed there several years after the revelation was given, which the Lord had a perfect right to do; and if it were necessary we might quote examples from Scripture to show that the Lord adds to any revelation when He sees proper, in order to make it more fully understood. For instance, you recollect that Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah a lengthy revelation regarding the king of Israel and the house of Israel. And that when the revelation was given to the king of Israel and when he "had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed. Did the Lord give it over again? Yes, "and," says the scripture, "there were added besides unto the many like words," not in the revelation. If the Lord took method in the days of Jeremiah, there anything inconsistent in the Prophet Joseph, in years afterwards, adding the words, "Bishops and High Priests," in order that the people might more fully understand my motive in mentioning the things is that the people may understand the ways of the Lord. His ways are not as the ways of man, neither are His thoughts limited by our limited thoughts or conceptions. But He does as He pleases.

By and by the time came when the Lord saw proper to make manifest something in relation to the name and the authority and the power of this High Priesthood, showing us that it was after the order of His Only Begotten Son, that it holds the keys to power, etc., on the earth.

Well, after the first Bishop had been chosen, and two Elders selected by him to operate with him, his duties began to be more fully made manifest. I shall not have time on this occasion to point out the various duties that were assigned to Bishop Edward Partridge, in the land of Zion, in Jackson County, Missouri, and other duties devolving upon him, while he yet remained at Kirtland. Perhaps it might be well enough, however, to just briefly touch upon his duties, that were more fully made manifest when he was required to go out from Kirtland about a day's journey to the southeast, and organize the Colesville branch in the town of Thompson. The Lord told him how to organize the people, and that there was a man in the Church whose name was Leman Copley, who had a large tract of land, and he covenanted before God that if the Colesville Branch would go upon his land, they might have their inheritances, etc., and that they might enter into the Order of God, as should be pointed out by the voice of the Prophet. And when the Prophet Joseph went out to Thompson and undertook to organize the Branch according to this promise and covenant that was made, Bishop Partridge was there, and he had pointed out to him how he should deal with that particular organization, that they should all be made equal, and should receive their stewardship, and should consecrate all of their property into the hands of the Bishop; and that was made a sample for all other churches throughout the Lord's vineyard. You may judge whether we have kept it or not. And his duties were also made manifest in the latter part of the summer of 1831. And many of the first Elders were commanded to go west of Kirtland about one thousand miles; and the promise was that the land which the Lord intended to give to His people should be made known, and it should be told them where the city should be built. In the months of July and August of that year, the Lord pointed out more fully the duties of Bishop Partridge in regard to dividing the land, that is, the land that had been purchased by the Church, dividing it out among the various families of the Saints. The first families, with the exception of some that had been baptized in that land, were faithful ones among the Colesville branch, one of the earliest organizations of the Church. They were commanded to flee from the town of Thompson, because the rich man had broken his covenant. They went up to Jackson County, and Bishop Partridge was commanded to divide off to them inheritances by the law of consecration. Here then was a Bishop whose duties were made known and speci-