

Doctrine & Covenants Section 84

Gospel Doctrine Sunday School, 1 Aug 2021

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The lesson I wish I had given:

I prayed and studied intently during the entire week, listening several times to section 84 on audio. I compiled notes as I listened and as I read through D&C 84 several times. I came to church fasting, and was still pouring through my 15 pages of notes during sacrament meeting, gathering my thoughts. With my head filled with too much information, and my attempts to share some of the insights I had gained from my study over the week, the glazed eyes of the class made it evident that despite my preparations, I still came unprepared. (See D&C 42:14)

Having spent all this effort on study, only to deliver what to me felt like a failed lesson, I've taken further effort to compose my notes into something more coherent. Here is the lesson I wish I had been able to give. (Perhaps reading this may inspire some other, as I know this study has inspired me)

Introduction:

I would like to approach a study of this section by asking you to set aside notions of what you think you know about priesthood and try to read this section (D&C 84) as if you were reading it for the first time without any previous knowledge or ideas about what you think this section is about.

Let's see if a fresh look at the words here can enlighten us in some new way.

Who is the audience for this revelation?

I want to start by asking, to whom is this revelation being addressed? The first verse tells us it is "A revelation of Jesus Christ unto his servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and six elders". I dug around in the Joseph Smith Papers and other histories but could not identify any names. Nevertheless, we know there was Joseph Smith and six others.

It becomes evident that this revelation is about priesthood, but as we read through it, it contains a lot of language that we see associated with apostles and apostleship.

*Therefore, go ye into all the world; and unto whatsoever place ye cannot go ye shall send, that the testimony may go from you into all the world unto every creature. And as I said unto mine apostles, even so I say unto you, for you are mine apostles, even God's high priests; ye are they whom my Father hath given me; ye are my friends;
(verses 62-63)*

Beginning at verse 81 we notice some language familiar to us as coming from the Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore, take ye no thought for the morrow, for what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or wherewithal ye shall be clothed.

But now look at this sermon from Christ's sermon at Bountiful in 3 Nephi 13. Beginning at verse 25:

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he looked upon the twelve whom he had chosen, and said unto them: Remember the words which I have spoken. For behold, ye are they whom I have chosen to minister unto this people. Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

Just before this, the preceding teachings were given to all who were there. Christ changes the audience at this point, and addresses the twelve whom He had given power to baptize.

It is the chosen twelve, and not the multitude, who are told to “take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what he shall drink.” It is those who are to minister who are freed from the earthly cares of providing for their needs. Their lives are to be given over to ministering to others, and not to work for their support. The Lord intends to provide for them.

This is a very narrow group to whom this promise is made. It does not include others in the audience. For the rest, we are required to provide for our families. If we fail to provide for them by laboring for their support, we have denied the faith. (1 Tim. 5:8.) Wives are to be supported by their husband's labor. (D&C 83:2.) Children are to be supported by their parents. (D&C 83:4.) This requires all to labor. (D&C 42:42.) But as to these twelve, their labor is the ministry and their support will come from the Lord.

Why would the Lord give this commandment to the twelve? Why would He do it publicly? What responsibility does that impose upon the twelve? What responsibility does it impose upon the audience? If the twelve today were to be supported by only food given them by believers, clothes provided by followers, material given through donations from those to whom they ministered, would it be different than the system we have in place today?

Turn back to D&C 84 and let's look at verse 86:

Therefore, let no man among you, for this commandment is unto all the faithful who are called of God in the church unto the ministry, from this hour take purse or scrip, that goeth forth to proclaim this gospel of the kingdom.

Who is this requirement for? Does it apply to every new elder ordained into the church? Even if they are being called as a missionary, do we expect they are to go out without purse or scrip? On the other hand, does the Lord expect apostles to live by a different (even higher) standard?

Apostles?

At this point in the restoration in 1832, the word apostle did not mean 12 men belonging to a quorum. That would not be organized until 1835. The word apostle (from the Greek *apóstolos*, *ἀπόστολος*) literally means “someone sent away,” implying that someone with this title is sent to deliver a message. An English equivalent would be “messenger.”

In this revelation the term apostle meant men who were ordained to the High Priesthood who had seen Christ. The priesthood being received by those present on this occasion were told by the Lord:

I now confirm upon you who are present this day, by mine own voice out of the heavens; and even I have given the heavenly hosts and mine angels charge concerning you. (verse 42)

The June 1, 1833 revelation (see D&C 95:17) referred to the School of the Prophets as the "school of my apostles". The school was to "prepare mine apostles" (verse 4). However, the identity of the apostles was expansive, including the officers, or in other words, those who are called to the ministry in the church, beginning at the high priests, even down to the deacon (D&C 88:127), describing those for whom the school of the prophets was to be built. After an appearance of Christ to members of the school of the prophets, Joseph declared:

Brethren now you are prepared to be the Apostles of Jesus Christ, for you have seen both the Father and the Son, and know that They exist, and that They are two separate Personages. (JSP, Documents, Vol. 3:43n259)

It was not membership in a "quorum," but *knowledge* that originally defined the meaning of apostle when used in all notes, minutes, revelations, and preaching before 1835.

No forgiveness of sins?

Let's take a look at verse 41:

But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come.

This would be a very curious statement if your view of "this priesthood" is limited to the ordination you obtain in the Church, which establishes a Melchizedek priesthood holder and an elder. Does that mean that when an elder drifts off into inactivity in the Church, then he is not going to have forgiveness of sins in this world or the world to come? This is referring to nothing of the sort. This is dealing with the covenant established by God the Father, directly. It is talking about something much higher, more directly connected with God, and therefore more holy, requiring that it be taken more seriously in fidelity to the One who sits upon the Throne. (The footnote to this verse takes us to D&C 76:34, which, if you include 34-36, is referring to someone who qualifies as a son of perdition.)

Difference between Aaronic and Melchizedek

Finally, I'd like to skip forward and read verses 114-115:

Nevertheless, let the bishop go unto the city of New York, also to the city of Albany, and also to the city of Boston, and warn the people of those cities with the sound of the gospel, with a loud voice, of the desolation and utter abolishment which await them if they do reject these things. For if they do reject these things the hour of their judgment is nigh, and their house shall be left unto them desolate.

Richard Bushman makes this observation in his history *Rough Stone Rolling*:

Some readers may have missed the implications of the priesthood revelation. John Whitmer was most excited by the verse warning Boston, New York, and Albany of coming desolation. Those verses reflected the millenarian thinking of the gathering to Zion and constructing the New Jerusalem, which had occupied the Saints for the last two years. The part about "exaltation" - the preparation to stand in God's presence and commune with Him - did not register with Whitmer. Eager as the Saints were for spiritual gifts, not all were ready for the mysticism of the priesthood revelation. (Rough Stone Rolling, p. 204-205)

Compare this attitude of John Whitmer with that of the sons of Mosiah:

Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble. (Mosiah 28:3)

This illustrates the difference between Aaronic (or Levitical) and Melchizedek priesthoods. The Aaronic priesthood is a priesthood of condemnation where the Melchizedek priesthood is to bless and can only be controlled upon principals of righteousness (D&C 121:36).

"The law was given under Aaron for the purpose of pouring out judgments and destructions." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 322)

So the Mosaic Law was given, and the priesthood was accommodated in order to pour out judgments and destruction. This helps explain a great deal about the lower or Aaronic/Levitical priesthood.

Priesthood in its highest form is an opportunity, afforded you by God, to serve and to bless others. That's not true of it in other lesser forms. But in its highest form, the priesthood is a call to service. It is a call to save, it is a call to redeem, and it is a call to rescue others from destruction. You can condemn people with very little authority. But to raise them up and offer to them salvation is a far greater work requiring a far greater authority.

Remember, even at times when a Melchizedek priest may pronounce condemnation, the primary purpose is always to save souls by teaching truth to those who live in darkness. The lower, or condemning priesthood is always subordinate to the higher priesthood:

There are two priesthoods spoken of in the scriptures, namely the Melchizedek and the Aaronic, or Levitical. Although there are two priesthoods, yet the Melchizedek Priesthood comprehends the Aaronic, or Levitical priesthood and is the grand head, and holds the highest authority which pertains to the Priesthood (JSP, "Instruction on Priesthood, circa 5 October 1840," p. 1)

Take for example when God said to Nephi:

"And behold, if ye shall say that God shall smite this people, it shall come to pass." (Helaman 10:10)

Then because he knows the nature and character of the man involved in giving this authority, God commands him to smite the people using God's word. Nephi must go out and deliver the threatening message, "Except ye repent ye shall be smitten, even unto destruction." He didn't want to do that,

because that's not the character of the person who, with unwearyingness, would go out and declare the word of God. Such holders of this form of sealing power have in their heart one and only one objective, which is the salvation of the souls of men. But Nephi was told he was required to deliver this troubling message. Yet when he delivered it, he didn't even use the authority he was given. He meekly asks the Lord if the Lord will smite.

Conclusion

The insights I've shared are not meant to imply that D&C 84 doesn't apply to the average priesthood holder in the church. To the contrary. What I believe the Lord is giving in this revelation is an invitation to each of us to become as the apostles of old and receive Christ and see the face of God. (See verses 19-22)

D&C 84 is a revelation rich in light and truth. I hope I have given some keys in this lesson that will encourage a deeper study of these words. Ultimately these things are intended to connect us with God himself. As Joseph Smith wrote from Liberty Jail (in words that belong somewhere between verse 25 and 26 of section 121 in our Doctrine and Covenants):

...the things of God are of deep import, and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Your mind, O man, if you will lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse. You must commune with God. ("History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842][b]," p. 904[b], The Joseph Smith Papers)