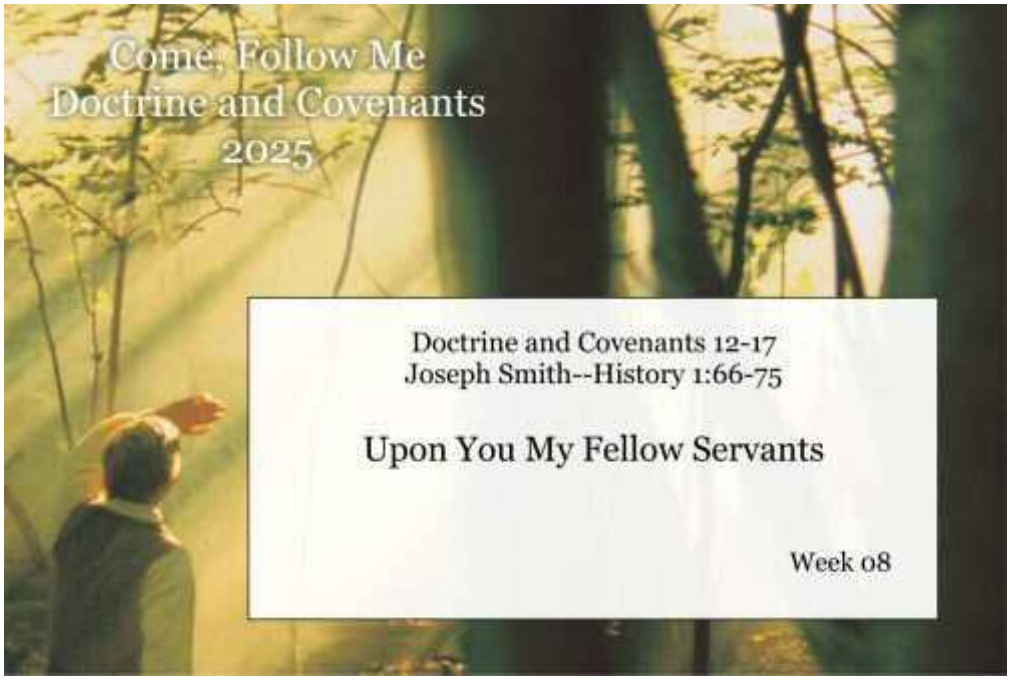

There are a number of probing and significant questions asked by the Come, Follow Me manual in this week's lessons. I will only explore a little of what there is to study here.

First I'll talk about the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood then I'll talk about being a "fellow servant." We'll see what happens when I have addressed just these two topics.

Restoration of the Aaronic priesthood

Let's start with a scriptural aside. If you aren't familiar with the aside it is the part in a play where all the action stops, and people freeze in their positions so that one character can face the audience, step out of character, and speak directly to them. It is like letting them in on a little secret the other actors don't know about. Here is my aside to you. It has nothing to do with this week's Come, Follow Me lessons. I just want to point out what I learned.

The nature of scriptures

When you finish with Joseph Smith--History 1:66-75 don't forget that there are several paragraphs of writing included afterward that Oliver Cowdery wrote. Read all the way to the end of the chapter to get Oliver's take on what happened to them when John the Baptist gave them the priesthood. These are in verse form, but are not numbered.

Scriptures are written by a priesthood holder to communicate spiritual truths and important events. The scriptures we have in the form of the Book of Mormon, for example, were compiled by mainly one man. He told all the stories and selected which prophets and their writings he would include in his narrative. This gives the whole book a sense of unity, even though the original records were built from the writings of dozens of men over centuries of time. This week's lessons provide us with a wonderful example of what kind of differences we could expect in the scriptures if someone other than the one we know about had written the same record.

The Joseph Smith account of receiving the Aaronic priesthood is the official record of the Church, but Joseph also includes at the end of his own record the record of Oliver Cowdery's account of that same experience. You can tell that Oliver was far more educated than Joseph, for his language is more flowery and descriptive. Oliver conveys the same events, but notice how different the details are and how many personal expressions of joy Oliver includes that Joseph did not. This made me wonder what the scriptures might look like in the Doctrine and Covenants if Oliver was tasked with recording them instead of Joseph Smith. The events are still true. The doctrine still sound. We just get to see how differently people express themselves when talking about spiritual events.

This is the end of my aside. Back to the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood.

To start with I give you my fair warning that I don't know anything but academic knowledge of the ministering of angels. I have no personal experience with them, so I am not qualified to talk about them. My apologies. Moving on.

Read the following three verses and see what connections you make from them. I'll discuss what occurred to me after you read the verses.

> 69 *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.*
>
> 70 He 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; and he commanded us to go

> and be baptized, and gave us directions that I should baptize Oliver Cowdery, and that afterwards he should baptize me.
>
> 71 Accordingly we went and were baptized. I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me—after which I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronic Priesthood, and afterwards he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same Priesthood—for so we were commanded.

I see a few things that we often take for granted in these scriptures. Remember that there was no church at this time. The organization of the church was still almost a year away, and there certainly weren't any organization customs or procedures in place yet, since nothing existed in that way up to this point in time.

1. John the Baptist was alone when he ordained Joseph and Oliver to the Aaronic priesthood. We rarely see someone perform an ordination solo today, but God sent him to do the work of passing on his keys to the young prophet, so who are we to question how it was done?
2. The keys given to Joseph and Oliver holds the power to govern the administration of three things - the ministering of angels in this dispensation, the gospel of repentance, and baptism by immersion for the remission of sins. Is it just me or is the core of Christ's whole gospel and its message Aaronic in nature? (I revisit this again at the bottom of this article, so this isn't my last word on this topic.) The prophets have been taught that in this generation we are to teach nothing but repentance and baptism for the remission of sins. That pretty much covers all the essentials of the gospel.
3. We learn in verse 70 that the Aaronic priesthood is limited in its scope, for the gift of the Holy Ghost can't be given by someone only holding the Aaronic priesthood. The gift of the Holy Ghost must be given by one holding the higher priesthood, the Melchizedek priesthood. I am guessing this was new doctrine to Joseph and Oliver who were just beginning to learn about the two priesthoods and how they operate.
4. The question arises by those new to the concepts of priesthood, which is more important here, he who gets baptized first or he who does the baptizing first? John the Baptist clarifies that by pointing out that the First Elder of the church (see verse 72 where John gives them these titles) should be the first to exercise his priesthood responsibilities. This is why Joseph baptized Oliver first. Only after Joseph had used his priesthood first did the Second Elder of the church respond by baptizing Joseph. The focus here is on the use of the priesthood, not on the

receipt of the ordinance. This in no way diminishes the importance of the baptism itself. John the Baptist was demonstrating a principle of how to use the priesthood since they were both completely unaware of how to use the priesthood. They were most likely completely unaware that there were proper ways to use the Lord's priesthood. This experience was their first exposure to these lessons. This same pattern was followed with their ordinations to the priesthood, the First Elder of the church performing the ordinance then the Second Elder doing likewise.

5. John the Baptist gave them the keys to the Aaronic priesthood, but they had not yet been ordained to an office of the priesthood (which they knew nothing about). This is why they had to ordain each other to the office of Priest, though I don't know the wording they used. It had to be to that office, for only Priests can perform baptisms in the Aaronic Priesthood. At this time I am guessing they knew of only one office in the priesthood, and that was the office of Priest. I don't honestly know when the other offices were revealed to them. They probably didn't even use the word "office" when they ordained each other, since they hadn't been taught that there were various offices available in that priesthood. Their original assumption would have to have been that to receive the priesthood of Aaron automatically gave you the ability to baptize someone. The Restoration is after all a work in progress.
6. Lastly note that the pattern given by John the Baptist is that we must be baptized first and then we can be ordained. He had to give them the keys of the priesthood in the general sense so they could go and properly be baptized then ordained, in that order.

That is a lot of information in just three short verses. We see examples of how to use the priesthood of God even though we aren't given much in the way of explanations. Much of what Joseph was taught about the priesthood came about in this way. He was given instructions on how the Lord wanted him to do things, but Joseph was left to figure out how these instructions fit in with other instructions he had been given in other circumstances. This is all part of the restoration of all things. That doesn't mean Joseph also received the explanation of all things at the same time.

How often are we given a piece of information by God, but no explanation at that time? We have to go and live the principle or live with the information given and try to figure

out how it applies or fits in with everything else we know. The Lord wants us to be involved in our own learning. That makes it more meaningful to us.

Fellow servants

Reading and rereading this week's sections has caused me to think about the breadth of God's love and mercy. For example, when we think about the degrees of glory, aren't we told that even the telestial kingdom is so glorious that we would kill ourselves to get there if we knew just how wonderful it is? Yet do we ever hear the prophet tell us to strive for this kingdom? The obvious answer is no, because we don't have to do anything to get there. In fact, even the terribly wicked will go there after their stint in hell. That is how much our Father in Heaven loves His children.

The Terrestrial kingdom requires some thought and effort, for we have to at least try to be good people and not mess things up. But if we want that which is truly amazing and wonderful (the Celestial kingdom) we must spend our lives trying to become more like our Savior. All covenants are designed for those who want to live with God again. Nothing lower than the Celestial kingdom needs a covenant to get there. Our covenants make it possible to make the needed changes to become more Christlike, and we have to make deliberate choices to become better than we currently are. This reward takes real work. The prophets only talk about the Celestial kingdom because it offers the highest level of eternal happiness. Why would they try to steer us anywhere else?

So we see that all the bases are covered from no effort, to moderate effort, to real work. God will give us what makes us happy, even if He wants more than we are willing to strive for. He is more concerned with our happiness than with His own desires for us.

Let's revisit a portion from our lessons just two weeks ago. In Doctrine and Covenants 7:5-8 the Lord is discussing with Peter John's request to stay and keep finding souls to bring to Christ.

> 5 I say unto thee, Peter, this was a good desire; but my beloved has desired that he might do more, or a greater work yet among men than what he has before done.
>
> 6 Yea, he has undertaken a greater work; therefore I will make him as flaming fire and a ministering angel; he shall minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation who dwell on the earth.

> 7 And I will make thee to minister for him and for thy brother James; and unto you three I will give this power and the keys of this ministry until I come.
>
> 8 Verily I say unto you, ye shall both have according to your desires, for ye both joy in that which ye have desired.

Notice that the Lord offers no hint of judgment about what John has requested of him. He says the work he wants to do is greater than that which John has done up to this time, but he never compares it with Peter's work, nor does he state that one work is better than the other. Christ's only comment is that "ye shall both have according to your desires, for ye both joy in that which ye have desired." This was an eyeopener for me.

This is where I tie what I just wrote with this week's lesson.

John the Baptist calls Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery his fellow servants. What does it mean to be a servant of Christ? Don't all of Christ's disciples qualify as his servants, making them all fellow servants? Jesus had some very high praise for the kind of prophet John was in the New Testament, yet John doesn't set himself above any of Christ's other servants. We are among the disciples of Christ, and are also fellow servants with John the Baptist, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery. Each of us has different capacities and different abilities to move God's work forward. And if Christ's comment to Peter is any indication of how he views our contribution, whether great or small, his only real concern appears to be that "ye both joy in that which ye have desired."

This means that we need to make sure that when we reach the day of judgment we are actually going to be ready and worthy of receiving what we believe is what we desire. If I am still not sure of my level of commitment to Christ and his work then I will receive a lesser portion of the rewards that are available, for I haven't done what is necessary to receive more or greater rewards. If, on the other hand, my real desire has become to be received by the Savior as one of his good and faithful servants then my life should reflect that I have striven each day to draw closer to the Christlike ideal. This is what I refer to as deliberate discipleship. There can be nothing haphazard or slipshod about my discipleship if I truly want to be like Christ.

Striving to be Christlike doesn't mean I must be like Christ on the day of judgment. It only means I am still trying. I sometimes need to remind myself that mortality is finite

and temporary. It is in mortality that we set our course, not finish our course. What the Lord wants is for each of us to be working towards His perfection. Once we pass beyond the veil of mortality we will have the rest of eternity to progress. It is during our mortal experience, which includes our brief stay in the post mortal world, that we demonstrate to God where our desire to become like Christ lies on the continuum from not at all to all in. We are all fellow laborers in this effort. We are not alone.

It is a group effort

Satan's plan was a solo effort on his part, and as such he would get all the glory for the work done. Some were fine with that, for it would save them from the responsibility and effort of having to personally become as good as God. But our Father's plan is a family effort. None of us should be trying to do this whole "perfection" thing on our own. We are supposed to be supporting each other, serving each other, and becoming like God together. That is the whole idea and point of becoming a Zion people - one heart and one mind. The plan of salvation as presented to us by our Father in Heaven was always supposed to be a united effort. This is why I believe unity is such a big deal in the gospel of Christ. If we aren't including others and seeking to help each other then we have missed the whole point of the plan.

The manual recommends the following talk by Elder Dale G. Renlund. I highly recommend giving this Conference talk one or two watches. He covers a number of aspects of why we have the priesthood and how to use the priesthood in our lives.

The Priesthood and the Savior's Atoning Power

Revisiting the Aaronic priesthood (as promised)

I promised earlier to revisit this topic, so here is what happened since I wrote that first bit about the Aaronic priesthood being the basic nature of the gospel of Christ. In Doctrine and Covenants 84:26-27 we learn a couple of fundamental truths about the priesthood.

> 26 And the lesser priesthood continued, which priesthood holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel;
>
> 27 Which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments, which the Lord in his wrath caused to continue with the

> house of Aaron among the children of Israel until John, whom God raised up, being filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb.

The Aaronic priesthood is referred to as the preparatory priesthood, for it was a simple form of the priesthood given to the children of Israel to prepare them for the coming of Christ. They did not have the higher priesthood. Only the prophets held that priesthood. Once Christ came a new law was given that required more of the individual than the Mosaic law required. Now each person had offer themselves on the altar of sacrifice in the form of service and personal changes in attitudes and desires.

We still have the Aaronic priesthood with us, along with all of its demands. This is part of the rocket makeup Elder Renlund talks about in the link above. But now we have the higher priesthood paired with the Aaronic priesthood. The Melchizedek priesthood is the source of all our Temple covenants. These covenants not only allow us to bring the saving ordinance of baptism to the world, but with the high priesthood we can also offer the gift of the Holy Ghost and all the Temple covenants that lead to exaltation.

The core of the gospel of Christ begins with the purpose of the lesser priesthood, offering the saving ordinance of baptism to the world. But the rest of that core is comprised of all the higher priesthood covenants that offer personal exaltation to both the living and the dead.

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