

Institute 4-14-20**April 1842: Joseph Ordained Relief Society Sisters to Healing the Sick****“Gifts of the Priesthood”**

In Joseph’s journal notes that became the *Manuscript History of the Church* from April 28, 1842, he spoke again to the Relief Society gathered upstairs in the Red Brick Store. In that record, he introduces a non-biblical phrase, “gifts of the priesthood” to describe the Gifts of the Spirit.

[I, Joseph] gave a lecture on the Priesthood shewing how the sisters would come in possession of the privileges, blessings, and gifts of the Priesthood, and that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick, casting out devils and that they might attain unto these blessings by a virtuous life and conversation and diligence in keeping all the commandments” (Ehat and Cook, *Words of JS*, 119; Apr 28, 1842).

In these citations, I see Joseph offering a very broad definition of the priesthood—as the power of God. He does not reserve the “gifts of the priesthood” or power of God to male church officers. Rather, in these citations, access to the priesthood as a spiritual power is open to believing men and women, young and old, the initiated and novice. Of course, elsewhere, Joseph *does* reserve some priesthood roles (namely keys, administration, and the performing of certain ordinances) to male office holders (D&C 107:15-16; 128:9; etc.).

Relief Society became Initiation for Priestesses

Despite Joseph Smith’s requests to keep the organization of the Relief Society a small, select group that are carefully screened (in preparation to their initiation to the endowment the next year and later work as priestesses in the Nauvoo Temple), it grew rapidly. Too many good women sought to be more involved in building the kingdom of God. Without organized wards and callings, the women yearned to be of more service. I counted the members from the minutes of the Relief Society and organized them into the chart below.

Numbers at First Relief Society Meetings:

Mar 17	Mar 24	Mar 30	April 14	April 19	April 28	Mar 1844
20 members	68 members		88 members	(Healings Referenced)	>151 members	1,341 members

April 19, 1842 (5th Meeting)

In our last handout I included notes from the first few Relief Society meetings. You can also access them online at JosephSmithPapersProject.org. This week, I will start by repeating minutes from the fifth meeting. They refer back to something that happened, but was not recorded at the April 14th meeting. It appears that something was said or done about female healing. Perhaps the Prophet Joseph or another RS leaders gave instructions for the sisters to give blessings, because the minutes from April 19 include an account of healing that occurred after April 14.

Mrs. [Elizabeth Davis] Durfee bore testimony to the great blessing she received when administered to, after the close of the last meeting, by Prest. E. Smith & Councillors [*sic*] Cleveland and Whitney. she said she never realized more benefit thro’ any administration— that she was heal’d, and thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren” (*Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 79, handwriting of Eliza R. Snow).

From this entry on, most meetings include healings. Later healing became part of the preparation for child birth, Visiting Teaching, and even Temple prayer circles where women joined in.

Sickness Historically

Remember that illness and pain were part of nearly everyone’s daily life in past centuries. If you didn’t have a tooth-ache, you ate or drank something that didn’t agree with you. Without clean water, sewage, refrigeration, and immunizations, serious diseases and death plagued children and many adults. Nearly everyone suffered from serious illnesses—one in ten died of small pox, cholera ran rampant, typhus, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and even strep throat could kill one.

Medicine was not yet a series of applications tested by the scientific method. In fact, some medical practices caused more problems as germs were passed along from one patient to the next. This is one reason why healings were needed, and why faith was exerted to be healed. For women, this was especially the case during labor and delivery.

Historical Evidence of Female Gift of Healing Before Relief Society (1830-1842)

Lucy Mack Smith

Lucy Mack Smith records in her memoirs the stories of her own healing, and the raising of her daughter from the dead. We can read her records in the Lucy Book or <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/9#16093690021553631233>

I was taken sick, The physician declared my case to be confirmed consumption . . . my Husband came to my bed and caught my hand and exclaimed as as well as he could amid sobs and tears <Oh!> [“]Lucy! My Wife! My wife! you must die the doctors have all given you up they <and> all say you cannot live[.”] I looked to the lord and begged and plead with the Lord that he would spare my life that I might bring up my children and comfort the heart of my husband, thus I lay all night my <mind> at one moment <Time> slowly raising gradually borne away to Heaven above all hight then reverting back again to my babes and my Companion at my side and <I> covenanted with God if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained from heaven by prayer and Faith At last a voice spoke to me and said seek and ye shall find knock and it shall be opened unto you let your heart be comforted ye believe in God.

Again a few years later, in 1813, Lucy’s first daughter, Sophronia, tottered around death. Lucy and Joseph Sr., prayed mightily, and Sophronia returned to life. After 90 days of suffering from Typhus Fever, little Sophronia “lay utterly motionless with her eyes hal wide open with that peculiar set which most strikingly exhibits the hue of Death”

Her Father was with me[,] we clasped our hands together [*sic*] and fell upon our knees by the bed side and poured our grief and suplications into the His ears who hath numbered the hair upon our heads then think if not strange if he heard us— he did hear us and I felt assured that he would answer our prayers but when we rose to our feet the appearance was far otherwise my child had apparently ceased to breathe I seized a blanket threw it round her and caught her in my arms and commenced pacing the floor those present remonstrated with me saying Mrs Smith it all of no use you are certainly crazy Your child is dead but I would not for one instant relinquish the hope of seeing her breathe again and . . . would you then feel to deny that God had power to save to the uttermost— all who call on him I did not then and I do not now at last She sobbed I still pressed her to my breast [p. [10], bk. 2] and walked the floor she sobbed again and then looked up into my face with an appearance of natural life breathing freely (ibid. p. 9 bk. 2).

Lucy also gained a reputation for healing in Palmyra and in the early church. For example, in 1838 in Far West, Missouri, Lucy was voice in calling on God’s power to heal Mary Isabella Horne’s daughter. Mary recorded that her daughter “was taken very ill, and her life despaired of, in fact it seemed impossible for her to get better. The mother of the Prophet, Mrs. Lucy Smith, came and blessed the child, and said she should live. This was something new in that age, for a woman to administer to the sick” (Stapley, Jonathan A. and Wright, Kristine, *Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism* (January 1, 2011). *Journal of Mormon History*, Vol. 37, pp. 1-85, Winter 2011. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1754069>).

D&C 46—March 8, 1831

In 1831, Joseph Smith received a revelation on the need for the Gifts of the Spirit to bless others known as section 46 of the Doctrine Covenants. This legitimized woman exercising healings in the early 1830s. “For example in early Kirtland, Sarah Leavitt clearly viewed herself as both able and qualified to receive and act upon a personal revelation to heal her daughter. An angelic visitation instructing Leavitt to lay hands on her daughter not only sanctioned her to act within the limits of her own conscience, but also within her developing Mormon community” (Ibid., 4). Interestingly, at this time, consecrated olive oil was not used for healing blessings.

Joseph Smith Sr., 1830s

In Kirtland, Father Joseph Smith Sr. gave patriarchal blessings to women with instructions to practice the gifts of the Spirit. By 1837, we can find examples of patriarchal blessings that instructed women to administer to the sick with the laying on hands. Interestingly, the earliest examples of healings would place the healer’s hands on the area of the body that needed healing. In this sense, it shared similarities with the ritual anointings in early Christianity and in the Kirtland Temple (where washings and anointings were first introduced to certain men).

The first church service that women performed in the restoration was healings. We have an in 1838, “while on a mission in Maine, Phoebe Woodruff administered to her sick husband, Wilford. The apostolic missions appear to have spread the practice of female ritual healing as British women were also anointing the sick by 1838” (ibid. 5).

April 28, 1842 (6th Relief Society Meeting, over 151 Members)

Six days after this RS meeting, on May 4th, the Prophet Joseph offered the first endowment to a few select men in the upper floor of eh Red Brick Store. This is especially significant in context of this message to the women on the Priesthood.

April 28, 1842, RS Minutes in the handwriting of Eliza R. Snow

President Smith arose and said that the purport of his being present on the occasion was, to make observations respecting the Priesthood, and give instructions for the benefit of the Society That as his instructions were intended only for the Society . . . 12th Chap. of 1st Cor. ‘Now concerning spiritual gifts’ . . .

He continued to read the Chap. and give instructions respecting the different offices, and the necessity of every individual acting in the sphere allotted him or her; and filling the several offices to which they were appointed— Spoke of the disposition of man, to consider the lower offices in the church dishonorable and to look with jealous eyes upon the standing of others— that it was the nonsense of the human heart, for a person to be aspiring to other stations than appointed of God— that it was better for individuals to magnify their respective callings, and wait patiently till God shall say to them come up higher. He said the reason of these remarks being made, was, that some little thing was circulating in the Society, that some persons [p. 35] were not going right in laying hands on the sick &c. Said if he had common sympathies, would rejoice that the sick could be heal’d: that the time had not been before, that these things could be in their proper order— that the church is not now organiz’d in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed.—

Pres. Smith continued the subject by adverting to the commission given to the ancient apostles “Go ye into all the world” &c.— no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female. He ask’d the Society if they could not see by this sweeping stroke, that wherein they are ordain’d, it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer’d on them— and if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on.

He said, if God has appointed him, and chosen him as an instrument to lead the church, why not let him lead it through? Why stand in the way, when he is appointed to do a thing? Who knows the mind of God? Does he not reveal things differently from what we expect?— He remark’d that he was continually rising— altho’ he had every thing bearing him down— standing in his way and opposing— after all he always comes out right in the end.

Respecting the female laying on hands, he further remark’d, there could be no devil in it if God gave his sanction by healing— that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water— that it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal’d by the administration.

. . . He exhorted the sisters always to concentrate their faith and prayers for, and place confidence, in those whom God has appointed to honor, whom God has plac’d at the head to lead— that we should arm them with our prayers

. . . if you live up to your privilege, the angels cannot be restrain’d from being your associates— females, if they are pure and innocent can come into the presence of God; for what is more pleasing to God than innocence; you must be innocent or you cannot come up before God. . . . You need not be tearing men for their deeds, but let the weight of innocence be felt; which is more mighty than a millstone hung about the neck. Not war, not jangle, not contradiction, but meekness, love, purity, these are the things that should magnify us. . . .

This Society is to get instruction thro’ the order which God has established— thro’ the medium of those appointed to lead— and I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time— this is the beginning of better days, to this Society

When you go home never give a cross word, but let kindness, charity and love, crown your works henceforward. . . .

Pres. S. then offered instruction respecting the propriety of females administering to the sick by the laying on of hands— said it was according to revelation &c. said he never was plac’d in similar circumstances, and never had given the same instruction.

He clos’d his instructions by expressing his satisfaction in improving the opportunity. The spirit of the Lord was pour’d out in a very powerful manner, never to be forgotten by those present on that interesting occasion (*JosephSmithPapersProject.org*)

Reprinting of the Prophet Joseph Smith's Revelation from April 28, 1842 RS Meeting:

- **1850:** Apostles edited of the "Manuscript History of the Church" into the *History of the Church*, with some edits to the Prophet Joseph's Relief Society sermons, but not the April 28, 1842, revelation on female blessing the sick.
- **1850-80** Reprinted periodically—including in the "Woman's Exponent" and "Deseret News".
- **1884** May 17, following the dedication of the Logan Temple, it was reprinted in the "Woman's Exponent".
- **1888** Emmeline B. Wells received support from President Wilford Woodruff and Apostle Franklin D. Richards, and publishes a reiteration of the Relief Society women's role in calling on the gift of healing.
- **1892** Mar 17, at the 50th anniversary of Relief Society, they reprinted it in the official Jubilee Reports. Also it was referenced by Apostle Franklin D. Richards' in Ogden, and by his wife, Jane Snyder Richards, in Logan.
- **1913-15** accounts republished in the Relief Society periodicals.

May 27, 1842, Portions of 10th Relief Society Meeting: (187 members named)

Bishop Newel K. Whitney "arose and after some preliminary remarks, proceeded to address the congregation by saying that he rejoic'd and did rejoice at the formation of the Society that we might improve upon our talents and to prepare for those blessings which God is soon to bestow upon us.

"In the beginning God created man male and female and bestow'd upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth it takes all to restore the Priesthood. It is the intent of the Society, by humility and faithfulness; in connexion with those husbands that are found worthy. Rejoice while contemplating the blessings which will be pour'd out on the heads of the saints. God has many precious things to bestow, even to our astonishment if we are faithful. I say again I rejoice in the prospect of what lays before. It becomes us to prepare by striving for union one with another . . . if we have intelligence we have pow'r— knowledge is power"

Aug 13, 1843 (Last Relief Society Meeting During Joseph's Life)

After a list of needs and donations, the minutes include a message from Elder Reynolds Cahoon:

". . . There are many Benevolent Societies abroad designd [sic] to do good but not as this ours is according to the order of God connected with the priesthood according to the same good principals & knowledge will grow out of it reproved the Sisters for their fearfulness said they were not acting in the Bishop's place nor intruding upon them in their calling That the Relief Society was organised according to the mind of God that Emma had directed to the appointment of this Comtee. . . there would be a lack in the Church the Order of th[e] Priesthood is not complete without it; let every one act in their place, then all will move on most gloriously the purposes of God will be accomplished chided the Committee who had expressed fears of acting out of their place— In the Bishop's place sa[i]d they were in their place and those who would act perseveringly in their place— Should be bless'd with great blessings more than they could conceive The organisation of this Society & the Church is similar according to the mind & order of God in it every want may be suppli[e]d every place filled— take couredge and use every exertion within your power Every on[e] has their duty and place you may do much good in cheering the hearts of the pilgrim Saints who come to Zion as stran[g]ers a word of consolation may ennoble them to rise up in the Spirit of God with cheerfulness"

Changes From 1880 to 1955

Over the last century, changes developed with new circumstances. The support that Joseph, Brigham and John Taylor's gave women's healings was replaced by concerns, contention, and the world changing. Reactions against Protestant Pentecostal healings, post polygamy identity, temple ritual changes, contention, and clarification of vocabulary used with ordaining—all played a part in the policy changes. Ritual healing blessings no longer fit into the growing church in the same way as the century changed. Yet women were still empowered by God to call on the gift of healing. Jonathan Stapley found the last church wide direction supporting healing in 1955. He concluded:

The last general instruction on female participation in healing rituals was also an instruction on collaborative healing and was delivered by Joseph Fielding Smith, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, in 1955. In response to a question in his regular "Answers to Gospel Questions" column in the Improvement Era, Smith quoted his father, Joseph F. Smith, as saying that it was "no uncommon thing" for a man and women to join their faith in administering to their children together. He also quoted Joseph Smith's 1842 revelation on female healing from his popular *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Stapley, *JMH*, 83).

As the church grew and correlation committees published general guidelines, the protocol changed for women to anoint and administer only in the Temple.

However, in my life, from Pres. Spencer W. Kimball through Russell M. Nelson, women have been encouraged to seek more of God's priesthood power in their lives—to seek the Gifts of the Spirit and call on God to bless them and their loved ones. In April 2020 Conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, said it was not the time to restore female ritual administration of healing blessings. But my experience has led me to believe that prayers of faith bring a similar effect. When disciples of Christ work together through the Spirit to call on God, His power comes to bless those in need.