

## CHAPTER FIVE

# JOSEPH SMITH'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL MARRIAGE

DOUGLAS E. BRINLEY

President Boyd K. Packer taught Church members in three separate general conference addresses that “true doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior.” He explained that “the study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.”<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, he provided this illustration of how doctrine influences both attitudes and behavior:

Once we accept the truth of the doctrine that *we are the children of God*, that realization *changes us*. Thereafter we cannot *willingly* injure another or transgress against him. *That simple, profound doctrine has a very practical value*. It brings a feeling of self-worth, of dignity, of self-respect. Then self-pity and depression fade away. We then can yield to self-discipline and to the discipline of a loving Father and accept even the very hard lessons in life. The gospel is good medicine.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will discuss five principles or concepts relative to the doctrine of eternal marriage restored by Joseph Smith that have power to positively influence a spouse or parent to make a more determined effort to succeed in marriage and family relationships. The Prophet taught that marriage is to be an eternal compact. Among

---

Douglas F. Brinley is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

those professing Christianity in our day, however, this doctrine is typically rejected because of a misunderstanding of the Savior's interchange with the Sadducees in Matthew 22.<sup>3</sup> This doctrine of eternal marriage is unique to Latter-day Saint theology and is found in both scripture attributable to Joseph Smith and in his sermons and writings.

**DOCTRINE 1. WE LIVED IN A PREMORTAL STATE AS SINGLE ADULT BROTHERS AND SISTERS, SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF HEAVENLY PARENTS. MORTALITY IS OUR FIRST OPPORTUNITY TO MARRY AND EXPERIENCE PARENTHOOD.**

Joseph Smith taught the doctrine that we were spirits before we were born (see Abraham 3:22–28; D&C 77:2; Ether 3:16–17; D&C 93:23, 29; Moses 3:5–7). To my knowledge, the Prophet did not discourse publicly that we were the *literal offspring* of heavenly parents, but the concept is inherent in his teachings about spirits, and he certainly taught it privately. For example, Eliza R. Snow's singular poem that now constitutes the lyrics to the Church hymn "O My Father" was inspired by the Prophet's comments to her. Her poem reads: "In the heav'ns are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare! Truth is reason; truth eternal tells me I've a mother there."<sup>4</sup>

An account by Susa Young Gates provides insight to the origin of this idea:

An interesting sidelight is given to this time [during which the hymn "O My Father" was written] through a possible glimpse of the thought-kernel which grew into such fragrant bloom in the full-voiced poem of Sister [Eliza R.] Snow. It was told by Aunt Zina D. Young to the writer as to many others during her life. Father Huntington lost his wife under the most trying circumstances. Her children were left desolate. One day, when her daughter Zina was speaking with the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning the loss of her mother and her intense grief, she asked the question:

"Will I know my mother as my mother when I get over on the Other Side?"

"Certainly you will," was the instant reply of the Prophet. "More than that, you will meet and become acquainted with your eternal Mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven."

“And have I then a Mother in Heaven?” exclaimed the astonished girl.

“You assuredly have. How could a Father claim His title unless there were also a Mother to share that parenthood?”<sup>5</sup>

It was about this time that Sister Snow learned the same glorious truth from the same inspired lips, and at once she was moved to express her own great joy and gratitude in the moving words of the hymn “O My Father,” which includes the powerful couplet:

Truth is reason; truth eternal  
Tells me I’ve a mother there.

Statements by subsequent future First Presidencies help clarify the point that spirits are the literal offspring of resurrected, exalted parents: “So far as the stages of eternal progression and attainment have been made known through divine revelation, we are to understand that *only resurrected glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring*. Only such exalted souls have reached maturity in the appointed course of eternal life; and these spirits born to them in the eternal worlds will pass in due sequence through the several stages or estates by which the glorified parents have attained exaltation.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1995 the First Presidency and members of the Quorum of Twelve stated: “Each [male and female] is a beloved *spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents*, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”<sup>7</sup>

As the offspring of heavenly parents and as male and female, every couple has a model to inspire them to succeed in marriage and family relations. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said: “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.”<sup>8</sup> The significance of understanding our relationship to our Eternal Father gives meaning and purpose to marriage and provides an incentive for a couple to strive together to attain eternal life. They will make better decisions when their eternal goal is clear. On another occasion, Elder Oaks explained the value of knowing this basic principle: “There are few things more important in this life than knowing your place in mortality and your potential in eternity.”<sup>9</sup>

The principle of how spirit children are the offspring of resurrected beings was best explained by Elder Melvin J. Ballard:

What do we mean by endless or eternal increase? We mean that through the righteousness and faithfulness of men and women who keep the commandments of God they will come forth with celestial bodies, . . . and unto them, through their preparation, there will come children, who will be spirit children. I don't think that is very difficult to comprehend and understand. *The nature of the offspring is determined by the nature of the substance that flows in the veins of the being. When blood flows in the veins of the being, the offspring will be what blood produces, which is tangible flesh and bone; but when that which flows in the veins is spirit matter [as in resurrected beings], a substance which is more refined and pure and glorious than blood, the offspring of such beings will be spirit children.*<sup>10</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith commented that resurrected beings will “be raised by the power of God, having spirit in their bodies, and not blood.”<sup>11</sup> He taught that resurrected beings have tangible bodies: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also” (D&C 130:22). Resurrected parents produce immortal spirit children that receive a mortal body created by earthly parents. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, “A child is an adult spirit in a newly born body, a body capable of growing and maturing according to the providences of Him whose spirit children we all are.”<sup>12</sup> Thus we understand that we have been children twice in our existence, once in the premortal sphere and now again in mortality.

Perhaps one of the most profound revelations of the Prophet pertains to Heavenly Father having passed through stages of progression similar to our own. In a well-known address in Nauvoo, he said: “*God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. . . . It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did.*”<sup>13</sup>

*Application.* From the above statements, a married couple can draw several conclusions: We are the literal offspring of heavenly parents. Our Heavenly Father is a husband and a parent. He passed through a mortal experience. We waited a long time as God's spirit

children before this life to come to earth and obtain a body of earthly element as a counterpart to our spirit body.

When a married couple understands these concepts, they will do their best to treat each other in a manner so that each will want to be eternal partners. They will seek both individually and as a couple, through prayer, counsel from a perfect Husband and Father concerning marital or parenting difficulties. They will want to remain on the path that leads to eternal lives (see D&C 132:24). They will understand the sanctity of procreation as a special privilege granted for the first time to them, and sexual sins would be a tragic choice.

With this doctrinal understanding, what married couple would be critical or sarcastic with each other? To fight and quarrel with each other would be hurtful to the marriage, besides offending the Spirit of God. To be angry or caustic in their treatment of each other would indicate a lack of appreciation for the wonderful privilege they have been granted to finally be capable of marriage and parenthood. They would be humbled by the knowledge that in their first opportunity to marry, they must learn from each other how to function as a spouse and parent. It is in marriage that they learn the roles of husband, father, wife, mother, lover, therapist, and so forth. They will be more inclined to be supportive of each other, knowing that their ultimate goal of exaltation is unattainable alone. They would be more willing to apologize, to take responsibility, to make personal adjustments, to do whatever is needed to keep their relationship strong and viable. Divorce would thwart their goals both here and beyond this life.

**DOCTRINE 2. HEAVENLY FATHER HAS A PLAN FOR HIS CHILDREN TO GAIN EXALTATION AND BECOME LIKE HIM.**

Our Heavenly Father's experience with marriage and parenthood was no doubt instrumental in His formulating the plan of salvation under which we now apprentice (see Moses 1:39). The Prophet Joseph Smith said of our premortal existence: "At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it."<sup>14</sup> "We," in this case, refers to us as God's spirit children in our premortal habitation. On another occasion, the Prophet said: "God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, . . . saw proper to

institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself."<sup>15</sup>

The Father's plan outlines the curriculum that mortals pass through to attain exaltation. An important part of the plan, not unlike that of mortal parents, calls for children to "leave home," to move away from parental controls and influences in order to find out for themselves if what their parents taught is true. The earth was framed so that we could leave home and participate in a laboratory that includes agency in choosing between good and evil. It was intended that Adam and Eve fall as a part of the plan. After both spouses had partaken, Elohim said to Jehovah, "Behold, *the man is become as one of us to know good and evil*" (Moses 4:28; emphasis added). We cannot become like God, and consequently cannot gain exaltation, without knowing good from evil.

Our birth into mortality indicates that we sustained the Father's plan in our premortal habitation. Satan rejected the divine plan, thereby preventing him and his followers from ever marrying or creating offspring, for spirits are incapable of procreation. Joseph Smith explained: "The Devil has no body, and herein is his punishment. He is pleased when he can obtain the tabernacle of man and when cast out by the Savior he asked to go into the herd of swine showing that he would prefer a swine's body to having none."<sup>16</sup>

Heavenly Father entrusts married couples with procreative powers to rear His spirit children who inhabit the bodies we create for them. Understanding whose children they are rearing, every couple would give their best efforts in parenting their children. No one would dare abuse or mistreat God's own children. If we fail to care for those whom the Lord assigns to us, we fail in one of the most important areas of our mortal stewardships. In fact, the penalty for violating this sacred trust, either as a spouse or a parent, is to live in a degree of glory where marriage and family relations are no longer open to us (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:17). Therefore, every Latter-day Saint couple has an incentive to be effective sweethearts and parents, because they know that if they do well in these responsibilities in this life, family associations will continue throughout eternity.

"We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom," said the latter-day seer. "The great principle of happiness consists in having a body."<sup>17</sup>

When we were born into mortality we became a child for the second time in our existence. After we were born as spirit children in the premortal life, our spirit bodies grew to adulthood (Ether 3:17). In mortality, our earthly bodies grow to their adult stature. This union of spirit and earthly bodies provides us with the opportunity to marry and experience parenthood—a primary objective our Father had in creating the earth (see D&C 49:16–17). Joseph Smith revealed that “the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and people it.”<sup>18</sup> It is in this probationary state that we find a companion, marry, and consummate a marriage.

To introduce us to His plan, God called a council in which He outlined His plan. There, in that premortal existence, we learned the terms and conditions of His plan whereby we would step into mortality for a brief time to marry. At the end of our probation, we would return back to the Father’s presence as married adult couples, having proven ourselves capable of living in a society with other glorified, exalted couples. For some of God’s children, of course, the blessings of marriage and children are delayed till the next life, but the blessings *will* come.

*Application.* An understanding of the Father’s plan of salvation helps a couple understand the following concepts: Heavenly Father wants us to become as He is, and His plan outlines the path we must follow to obtain eternal life. We left our premortal home to receive this endowment of flesh and bones. Understanding these concepts should cause every couple to bring their behavior into harmony with the elements of the Father’s plan and to understand the importance of marriage and parenting as a sacred stewardship. In short, to be the mortal parents of Heavenly Father’s spirit children should cause each parent to treat each other and each child kindly and charitably.

### **DOCTRINE 3. WITHOUT THE RESURRECTION, AN ETERNAL MARRIAGE WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE.**

The plan of the Father requires a Savior to redeem us from physical and spiritual death, which are the penalties for sin. Marriage and parenthood test our very souls. What spouse or parent feels completely adequate in marriage and parenting challenges? In addition, our memory of the premortal life was taken from us at birth,

allowing Satan to tempt us to make decisions inconsistent with the plan of happiness. Disobeying the laws of God and not repenting result in long-range limitations that include a loss of procreative power (see D&C 131:3–4).

It was in the premortal setting that Jesus volunteered to be the Redeemer for all who repent. The penalties for sin could not be paid by a mere mortal; it required one who would be both the Son of God and of a mortal mother, one who would work out the infinite Atonement on our behalf.

Without the Savior's gift of Resurrection, death would keep us in a spirit existence similar to our premortal state, but we would be devils or angels to a devil, as Jacob explained (see 2 Nephi 9:6–8). Like Satan, we would remain spirits forever, incapable of further marriage and parenthood. President Boyd K. Packer explained Satan's damnation: "The adversary is jealous toward all who have the power to beget life. He cannot beget life; *he is impotent*. He and those who followed him were cast out and forfeited the right to a mortal body."<sup>19</sup> In the Resurrection we are incapable of death (see Alma 11:45). Marriage and family life will continue for those who are worthy, who married in the right place, by the right authority, and are faithful to their baptism and temple covenants (see D&C 132:19–25).

The Savior restores our souls. Joseph Smith explained: "The spirit and the body are the soul of man. And the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul" (D&C 88:15–16). A mortal soul, therefore, is the combination of a mortal body created by mortal parents combined with a spirit body from immortal parents. Procreation and birth unite these two bodies for an individual's mortal probation. At death, these bodies separate, one going back to "dust," while the spirit, unable to die, moves to the spirit world. Now the good news: Jesus Christ makes it possible for our bodies to be reunited in a resurrected state with the power to create spirit children as our heavenly parents once created us.

This earth will someday become a celestial world, the habitation of those who attain exaltation, where "bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it made and created, and for this intent are they sanctified" (D&C 88:20).

*Application.* Latter-day Saint married couples appreciate the

Redeemer because without His death, Atonement, and Resurrection, they could not remain married in eternity. The Resurrection restores both their earthly and spirit bodies, thus allowing them to continue the powers of life and procreation in the celestial kingdom. A couple with this doctrinal understanding would not want to frustrate the Savior's efforts in their behalf to be married beyond this life. They would feel a desire to live the principles of the gospel in a way that both would be thrilled to be married companions. Surely the hearts of both husband and wife would be softened by the realization that without the Savior's gift of Resurrection, their only opportunity to marry and be parents would be in this brief span of mortality. Because of Him, family associations organized in mortality may last forever.

**DOCTRINE 4. MARRIAGE IS ESSENTIAL TO EXALTATION  
(SEE D&C 49:15–17; 131:1–4).**

The Prophet Joseph taught this principle: "Except a man and his wife enter into an everlasting covenant and be married for eternity, while in this probation, by the power and authority of the Holy Priesthood, they will cease to increase when they die; that is, they will not have any children after the resurrection. But those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life . . . continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory."<sup>20</sup>

If marriage were limited to this life only, how devastating death would be to family members! What soul would want to worship a God who designed such a useless and frustrating plan that has us come to earth, marry, and create children, only to have these profound feelings of love for each family member end at death? Were that the plan of God, Christianity would be a miserable philosophy. To put it frankly, if the Atonement of Jesus Christ did not have the power to resurrect men and women with immortal bodies, it would be of little use. There would be little purpose in life, marriage, or parenthood. Thankfully, God does not command marriage to be a temporary, once-in-eternity phenomenon. Without the assurance the restored gospel provides of the knowledge that marriage and family life continue beyond this probationary period, mortals would live in constant fear that a family member's death would cut short any association with that person—forever.

*Application.* When a couple understands that eternal marriage is exaltation, they will make their marriage a high priority to merit eternal life. They will do their best to live together in love and serve each other. Would not every husband and wife who understands these principles want to conform to the principles that lead to an eternal relationship? With an eternal perspective, couples will be more forgiving, more charitable, and more willing to sacrifice their own wants in an effort to contribute more to their own marriage.

**DOCTRINE 5. ONE OF SATAN'S PRIMARY GOALS IS TO DESTROY LATTER-DAY SAINT MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES.**

A doctrine clearly misunderstood by Christian theologians is the identity and motivation of why Satan, or Lucifer, wants to destroy marriages. The Bible is unclear in its teachings about him and his origin. For example, he is said to be a snake in Genesis (see Genesis 1:1–4, 13–14), a son of the morning in Isaiah (see Isaiah 14:12), and a fallen star in Revelation (see Revelation 8:10). Without Joseph Smith's contribution to our understanding of Lucifer's identity, Latter-day Saints would not understand Satan's motivations. Through revelation, the Prophet contributed this understanding of Lucifer's rebellion:

That Satan . . . is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me. I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

But, behold my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:1–4)

And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil—for, behold, the devil was before Adam, for he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency;

And they were thrust down, and thus came the devil and his angels. (D&C 29:36–37)

Without an opportunity to ever marry or become a parent himself, no wonder Satan has such disdain for marriage and parenthood. Through his rebellion he forfeited the right to obtain a body of flesh and bone, thus preventing himself and his followers from ever being married or experiencing parenthood. Joseph Smith explained that Lucifer “sought for things which were unlawful. Hence he was sent down, and it is said he drew many away with him; and the greatness of his punishment is that he shall not have a tabernacle.”<sup>21</sup>

Orson Pratt explained Lucifer’s damnation in these simple terms:

Could wicked and malicious beings, who have irradiated every feeling of love from their bosoms, be permitted to propagate their species, the offspring would partake of all the evil, wicked, and malicious nature of their parents. . . . *It is for this reason that God will not permit the fallen angels to multiply: it is for this reason that God has ordained marriages for the righteous only: it is for this reason that God will put a final stop to the multiplication of the wicked after this life: it is for this reason that none but those who have kept the celestial law will be permitted to multiply after the resurrection.*<sup>22</sup>

*Application.* Satan is determined to destroy marriage because he knows that marriage is at the heart of the Father’s plan. When a temple marriage dissolves, Satan must laugh. On the other hand, when a couple understands that by honoring temple covenants Satan has little power over them, they are more determined to avoid his snares. In the book of Moses, there is an account of Satan’s efforts to thwart Moses’ mission to Egypt (see Moses 1:11–22, 26). A couple who understands Lucifer’s intentions will resist any efforts to destroy their marriage. They will be more attentive to contention and efforts to destroy their unity (see 3 Nephi 11:28–29; Mosiah 4:12–23).

When a faithful couple is sealed in the temple by the Melchizedek Priesthood key restored by Elijah, death has no effect

on their marital status. At death they rejoin each other as a married couple in the spirit world, where they await the Resurrection and eventual exaltation. For those who do not attain eternal life, however, the Prophet taught that they will remain “separately and singly” forever (D&C 132:17). Those who qualify for a lesser degree of glory—terrestrial, telestial, or the lower two-thirds of the celestial kingdom—will be alone forever (see D&C 131:1–4).

## SUMMARY

True doctrine assists married couples to understand the purposes of marriage and parenthood in order to deal with the tests of mortality more effectively because they understand the doctrines that comprise the plan of salvation. They gain power to live together in love and happiness because they understand their potential. Doctrine outlines their opportunities to live together forever as sweethearts when they learn to love each other as mortal companions.

Latter-day Saints look to Joseph Smith with a great appreciation for restoring lost doctrines (and ordinances) essential for eternal marriage. Latter-day Saints stand alone in the Christian arena in understanding and teaching the doctrine that marriage and family relations can be eternal. As President Packer explained, such a knowledge will make Latter-day Saints more effective marriage partners and parents because they understand their potential as an eternal companionship. With an eternal perspective, they understand the significance of marriage and parenthood. Obviously without these essential doctrines they would not understand, nor could they appreciate, the plan of salvation and the Savior’s gift of eternal marriage to worthy spouses. This doctrine of eternal marriage alone should cause Latter-day Saint couples to shout hallelujah whenever they hear the name of Joseph Smith!

## NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, “Do Not Fear,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 79; see also his articles “Little Children,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 17, and “Washed Clean,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 9.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “Hope for Troubled Hearts,” in *Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled*, 1–2; emphasis added.
3. For a discussion of the Savior-Sadducee exchange, see Bruce R.

- McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:546–49.
4. “O My Father,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.
  5. Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 16.
  6. First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:34; emphasis added.
  7. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102; emphasis added; herein designated as “proclamation.”
  8. Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 87.
  9. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Gospel in Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 35.
  10. Melvin J. Ballard, “The Three Degrees of Glory,” discourse at the Ogden Tabernacle, September 22, 1922 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, n.d.), 10; emphasis added.
  11. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 4:555.
  12. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Salvation of Little Children,” *Ensign*, April 1977, 3.
  13. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 345–46.
  14. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 60.
  15. Smith, *Teachings*, 354.
  16. Smith, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 60.
  17. Smith, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 60.
  18. Smith, *Teachings*, 349.
  19. Boyd K. Packer, “Our Moral Environment,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 66; emphasis added.
  20. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:391; emphasis added.
  21. Smith, *Teachings*, 297.
  22. Orson Pratt, “Power and Eternity of the Priesthood,” *The Seer*, 1853, 156–57.