

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE RESTORATION OF TEMPLE SERVICE

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President Gordon B. Hinckley declared that “no member of the Church has received the ultimate which this Church has to give until he or she has received his or her temple blessings in the house of the Lord.”¹ President Thomas S. Monson, in like spirit, affirmed that the construction of temples “is the ultimate mark of maturity” of the Church in a given area.² In former dispensations, sacred temples had at least two major functions. First, they were regarded as places of contact between heaven and earth, or of communication between God and man (see, for example, Exodus 25:8, 22). Second, these sacred structures were also places for performing holy priesthood ordinances (see D&C 124:38). Both of these significant functions would need to be a part of the “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21) when the Lord would “gather together in one all things” during “the dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10). Joseph Smith would be intimately involved in this restoration of temple service, and it would constitute a major contribution of his ministry.

In 1823 the angel Moroni anticipated the restoration of temple service when he told Joseph Smith about the existence of the Book of Mormon record. The angelic visitor emphasized that the gospel needed to go forth so that a people might be prepared for Christ’s millennial reign.³ The angel then cited several biblical prophecies

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related to the Second Coming, including the words of Malachi, which he paraphrased: “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (D&C 2:1). The priesthood keys which Elijah restored thirteen years later (see D&C 110:13–16) were essential to the work done in temples.

The first known specific reference to a latter-day temple came one year after the restored Church was organized. When Joseph Smith and a group of elders went to Missouri during the summer of 1831, the Prophet learned that Independence in Jackson County was to be the “center place” for the future city of Zion and that the temple lot was to be situated just west of the courthouse (see D&C 57:1–3). On August 3 he placed a cornerstone marking the location of the future temple.⁴ Meanwhile, the Latter-day Saints had begun settling around Kirtland in northeastern Ohio.

THE KIRTLAND TEMPLE AND THE RESTORATION OF TEMPLE WORSHIP

An 1832 revelation instructed Joseph Smith to convene the “school of the prophets” to prepare those who would go forth to preach. In many ways the meetings of this school, which was called a “solemn assembly,” foreshadowed temple worship. For example, only the worthy were to attend. This spiritual preparation of those present was symbolized by sacred initiatory ordinances: “Purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me that I may make you clean” (D&C 88:74; see also vv. 70, 75, 127, and 134).

The Lord directed the brethren to “establish a house” to accommodate the school (D&C 88:119). Six months later, on June 1, 1833, the Lord chastised the Saints for their failure to move forward with the building of this house, in which He would “endow” them “with power from on high.” The temple was not to be built “after the manner of the world,” the Lord emphasized, but according to a plan He promised to reveal (D&C 95:8, 13–14). In a conference that convened just two days later, Joseph Smith and his counselors were appointed to obtain a “draft” or plan for the building.⁵

Frederick G. Williams, second counselor in the First Presidency, described how the Lord gave them a vision in fulfillment of His promise. After the Presidency saw in vision the building’s exterior, it

seemed to move right over them so they could equally well see its interior. Later, while speaking in the completed temple, Williams testified that the hall in which they were convened coincided in every detail with the vision given to the Prophet.⁶

The Lord had specified that the temple should include a chapel on the ground floor and a similar hall on the second floor for educational purposes (see D&C 95:15–17). An unusual feature of these rooms would be multiple pulpits at each end bearing initials identifying the respective authority of the priesthood officers seated in them. The Lord not only revealed the size and use of the temple's two main rooms, Elder Orson Pratt affirmed, but He also revealed "the order of the pulpits, and in fact everything pertaining to it was clearly pointed out by revelation. God gave a vision of these things, not only to Joseph but also to several others, and they were strictly commanded to build according to the pattern revealed from the heavens."⁷ Seating in each auditorium was reversible, enabling the congregation to face either end of the room. Truman O. Angell, a supervisor of construction, later recalled that "the leading mechanic" urged Joseph to modify the seating arrangements in the temple. Joseph refused because "he had seen them in vision."⁸

In the light of these revelations concerning the Kirtland Temple, Joseph Smith drew up similar plans for the temple at Independence. On June 25, 1833, he sent his plat for the city of Zion to the Saints in Missouri.⁹ The following month, however, attacks against the Saints in Jackson County escalated, ending any hopes for building a temple there at that time. The Saints in Kirtland enjoyed more success in building their temple. Actual construction began in June 1833. Joseph Smith personally led a group in search of suitable stone for the temple. A source was found two miles south of the building site, and they immediately quarried a wagonload. The Saints were so impoverished at this time, an early member recalled, that "there was not a scraper and hardly a plow that could be obtained."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Prophet observed, "Our unity, harmony and charity abounded to strengthen us to do the commandments of God."¹¹ Following the return of Zion's Camp in the fall of 1834, work on the temple went forward more rapidly. "Great exertions were made to expedite the work of the Lord's house," the Prophet noted, "and notwithstanding it was commenced almost with nothing, as to

means, yet the way opened as we proceeded, and the Saints rejoiced."¹² Joseph Smith continued to lead the way: "Come, brethren," he admonished, "let us go into the stone-quarry and work for the Lord."¹³

Throughout construction, women played a key part. Under Emma Smith's direction, they "made stockings, pantaloons and jackets" for the benefit of the temple workmen.¹⁴ Polly Angell, the construction supervisor's wife, recalled how Joseph Smith remarked, "Well sisters, you are always on hand. The sisters are always first and foremost in all good works. Mary was first at the resurrection; and the sisters now are the first to work on the inside of the temple."¹⁵

Great spiritual blessings followed this period of sacrifice. On January 21, 1836, the First Presidency met during the afternoon in the room above the printing office and were washed "in pure water." That evening "at early candle-light," the Presidency and others met in the west room of the temple attic, Joseph Smith's office, where they anointed one another with consecrated olive oil and pronounced blessings and prophecies.¹⁶ Then "the heavens were opened," the Prophet recorded, and he "beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof." When he saw his brother Alvin in that kingdom, he "marveled" because Alvin had died before the gospel was restored and consequently had not been baptized by proper priesthood authority. But the Lord declared: "All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God" (D&C 137:6–8). This revealed assurance would become the doctrinal foundation for performing vicarious ordinances in behalf of the dead.

Concerning this occasion, the Prophet testified: "Many of my brethren who received the ordinance [of washing and anointing] with me saw glorious visions also. Angels ministered unto them as well as to myself, and the power of the Highest rested upon us, the house was filled with the glory of God, and we shouted Hosanna to God and the Lamb. . . . Some of them saw the face of the Savior, and . . . we all communed with the heavenly host."¹⁷

Some of the most memorable spiritual experiences occurred on Sunday, March 27, 1836, the day Joseph Smith dedicated the temple. The climax of the daylong service was the dedicatory prayer, which

had been given to the Prophet by revelation. After expressing gratitude for God's blessings, Joseph prayed with tears flowing freely that the Lord would accept the temple which had been built "through great tribulation . . . that the Son of Man might have a place to manifest himself to his people." Specifically, he prayed: "We ask thee, Holy Father, that thy servants may go forth from this house armed with thy power, and that thy name may be upon them, and thy glory be round about them, and thine angels have charge over them" (D&C 109:5, 22). This prayer would become a pattern for other temple dedicatory prayers.

Following the prayer, the choir sang "The Spirit of God," a hymn written by William W. Phelps in anticipation of the temple's dedication. After the sacrament was administered and passed to the congregation, Joseph Smith and others testified that they saw heavenly messengers present during the service. The dedication concluded with the entire congregation standing and rendering the sacred "Hosanna Shout": "Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to God and the Lamb, amen, amen, and amen."

That evening more than four hundred priesthood bearers met in the temple. Joseph Smith instructed the brethren that they should be prepared to prophesy when directed by the Spirit. The Prophet recorded: "Brother George A. Smith arose and began to prophesy, when a noise was heard like the sound of a rushing mighty wind, which filled the Temple, and all the congregation simultaneously arose, being moved upon by an invisible power."¹⁸

One week later, on April 3, which was Easter Sunday, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ appeared, accepted the temple, and promised to manifest Himself therein "if my people will keep my commandments, and do not pollute this holy house" (D&C 110:8). Moses, Elias, and Elijah then bestowed special priesthood keys. Interestingly, this was also Passover weekend, and for centuries Jewish people had anticipated that Elijah would return at Passover time. Through the sealing keys restored by Elijah, priesthood ordinances performed on earth can be "bound" or "sealed" in heaven; also, Latter-day Saints can perform saving priesthood ordinances in behalf of loved ones who died without the opportunity of accepting the gospel in person. In this way, the hearts of the children are turning to their fathers.

Thus, the Lord's house in Kirtland certainly was a place of

revelation between God and man—the first of the two basic functions of temples. Yet there were no specific provisions for ordinances. The Kirtland Temple was more of a multipurpose building intended for general meetings and education. Specifically, Brigham Young pointed out, it “had no basement in it, nor a font, nor preparations to give endowments for the living or the dead.”¹⁹ Hence, as Elder Boyd K. Packer wrote in summary: “The design of the temple was preliminary. It was built as a house wherein the Lord could reveal Himself to His servants, where other heavenly beings could restore priesthood keys essential to the salvation of mankind, and where the faithful Saints would be blessed with an increase of spiritual power and enlightenment.”²⁰ In fact, Elder Harold B. Lee believed that the restoration of these keys was “sufficient justification for the building of [this] temple.”²¹

Thus, in Kirtland, Joseph Smith laid the foundations for temple service that would be built upon in later years. Brigham Young explained that the ordinances as administered in the Kirtland Temple were not as complete as they would be in later times. He noted that in Kirtland the “first Elders . . . received [only] a portion of their first endowments, or we might say more clearly, some of the first, or introductory, or initiatory ordinances, preparatory to an endowment.”²²

Unfortunately, the glorious period in Kirtland did not last long. By 1837, the spirit of apostasy divided Church members. In January 1838 Joseph Smith and other faithful Saints were forced to flee for their lives. They established their homes at Far West in northern Missouri, where the Saints who were earlier expelled from Jackson County were also gathering. Here Joseph received a revelation directing them to build another temple. It was to be for “the gathering together of my saints, that they may worship me” (D&C 115:8). Thus, this building, like the Kirtland Temple, was for general purposes rather than specifically for ordinances. Cornerstones were laid on July 4, but in October, Governor Lilburn W. Boggs’s order that the Mormons be exterminated or driven from the state of Missouri prevented any further work on this temple.

THE NAUVOO TEMPLE AND THE RESTORATION OF ORDINANCES

The Saints found a new home in Illinois, where they built their city of Nauvoo. The practice of vicarious baptisms for the dead was

taught for the first time in the present dispensation on August 15, 1840, at the funeral of Seymour Brunson.²³ Joseph Smith noted that in the congregation there was a widow whose son had died without baptism. He read from 1 Corinthians 15:29 on baptism for the dead “and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy” to this widow and to all mankind. He indicated that the Saints “could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God.”²⁴ Almost immediately Church members eagerly began performing the ordinance of baptism in the Mississippi River in behalf of deceased loved ones.

“Brother Joseph has opened a new and glorious subject of late, which has caused quite a revival in the Church; that is being baptized for the dead,” Vilate Kimball wrote to her husband, Heber, who was away on a mission. “Since this order has been preached here, the waters have been continually troubled. During the conference there were some times from eight to ten elders in the river at a time baptizing.”²⁵

Joseph Smith continued to give emphasis to this principle. Minutes of a conference held in 1842 record that he referred to “the wisdom and mercy of God in preparing an ordinance for the salvation of the dead. . . . Those Saints who neglect it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.”²⁶

Typically these baptisms were done for family members. Of sixty-six names in one record, sixty were grandparents or even closer relatives. Members of Joseph Smith’s own family, for example, received baptism in behalf of close relatives: Hyrum was baptized for his brother Alvin. Emma received the ordinance for her father, mother, two sisters, an uncle, and an aunt. The Prophet’s mother, Lucy, was baptized for a sister, her parents, and all four of her grandparents. Samuel H. Smith was baptized for an uncle, while his brother Don Carlos received this ordinance in behalf of General George Washington as “friend.”²⁷

Elder Wilford Woodruff later reflected the enthusiastic spirit in which these early ordinances were performed: “How did we feel when we first heard [that] the living could be baptized for the dead? We all went to work at it as fast as we had an opportunity, and were baptized for everybody we could think of, without respect to sex. I

went and was baptized for all my friends, grandmothers, and aunts, as [well as for] those of the male sex; but how was it? Why, by-and-by, it was revealed, through the servants of the Lord, that females should be baptised for females, and males for males."²⁸ This is an illustration of how the Lord unfolded His work "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30).

By 1844, the year of the Prophet's martyrdom, some 15,722 baptisms had been performed in behalf of the dead. With gratitude, one Saint wrote: "What a glorious thing it is that we believe and receive the fulness of the gospel as it is preached now and can be baptized for all of our dead friends. . . . Oh, mother, if we are so happy as to have a part in the first resurrection, we shall have our children just as we laid them down in their graves."²⁹ While these ordinances were being inaugurated, the Saints had already turned their attention to building the temple. A revelation received January 19, 1841, directed the Saints to build a house "for the Most High to dwell therein" and restore that which had been lost. The Lord also declared that the ordinance of baptism for the dead "belongeth to my house" (D&C 124:27-30). Hence, the Nauvoo Temple, like holy sanctuaries in former dispensations, was to serve the dual purpose of being a place of contact between God and man and also an edifice where sacred priesthood ordinances could be performed.

At about this same time, Joseph received several proposals for the temple's design, but none pleased him. When William Weeks, a recent convert who was an architect and builder from New England, came in with his plans, "Joseph Smith grabbed him, hugged him and said 'you are the man I want.'"³⁰ Later, when Weeks questioned the appropriateness of placing round windows on the side of the building, the Prophet responded: "I wish you to carry out *my* designs. I have seen in vision the splendid appearance of that building . . . and will have it built according to the pattern shown me."³¹ The Nauvoo design followed the general plan of the earlier temple in Kirtland with the addition of a baptismal font in the basement and facilities for other sacred ordinances in the attic story.

Cornerstones were laid during a solemn ceremony on April 6, 1841. Joseph Smith declared: "This principal corner stone in representation of the First Presidency, is now duly laid in honor of the Great God; and may it there remain until the whole fabric is

completed; and may the same be accomplished speedily; that the Saints may have a place to worship God, and the Son of Man have where to lay His head."³²

On November 8, the Prophet dedicated a temporary font in the temple's basement. In coming weeks he and members of the Twelve frequently officiated in the temple. On December 28, 1841, for example, Joseph Smith recorded: "I baptized Sidney Rigdon in the font, for and in behalf of his parents; also baptized Reynolds Cahoon and others."³³

While the Saints were sacrificing to build the temple, the Lord was unfolding important temple-related blessings. Endowment instructions were first given in the large "assembly room" on the second floor of Joseph Smith's red brick store. On May 4, 1842, he "spent the day in the upper part of the store . . . in council with [seven brethren], instructing them in the principles and order of the Priesthood, attending to washings, anointings, endowments and the communication of keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchisedek Priesthood, setting forth . . . [the] principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fulness of those blessings which have been prepared for the Church of the First Born."³⁴

After giving these first endowments, the Prophet turned to Brigham Young and remarked: "Brother Brigham, this is not arranged perfectly; however we have done the best we could under the circumstances in which we are placed. I wish you to take this matter in hand: organize and systematize all these ceremonies."³⁵

By means of two letters written during the first week of September 1842, the Prophet gave yet further instructions concerning work for the dead. He emphasized the importance of having a recorder present, not only to keep an accurate record but also to ensure that each ordinance is done properly (see D&C 127:6; 128:3). The Prophet linked this keeping of proper records with the power to bind or loose on earth and have this action recognized in heaven (see D&C 128:8–9; compare Matthew 16:18–19). Finally, expanding on the writings of Paul, Joseph Smith declared that "they [the fathers] without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect," and that there must be "a welding link" established through ordinances for the dead (D&C 128:15, 18).

Among the other blessings unfolded during these years was eternal marriage. In May 1843 the Prophet instructed the Saints that in order to attain the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, one must enter the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (see D&C 131:1–4). Two months later he recorded a revelation that, among other things, declared: “If a man marry him a wife in the world, and he marry her not by me nor by my word, and he covenant with her so long as he is in the world and she with him, their covenant and marriage are not of force . . . when they are out of the world” (D&C 132:15). On the other hand, the Lord promised:

If a man marry a wife by my word which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood; and it shall be said unto them—Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths . . . it shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. (D&C 132:19)

Reflecting on what Joseph Smith had taught him about this principle, Parley P. Pratt recorded: “During these interviews he taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God . . . and the heavenly order of eternity. It was at this time that I received from him the first idea of eternal family organizations. . . . It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity. . . . I had loved before, but I knew not why. But now I loved—with a pureness—an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this groveling sphere and expand it as the ocean.”³⁶

The Lord had revealed that the temple needed to be built so that “the fulness of the priesthood” might be revealed (D&C 124:28). Joseph Smith taught that this can be achieved only through temple

ordinances. During the final year of his life, the Prophet communicated to others, particularly the Twelve, all the power needed to build the kingdom of God on the earth. Orson Hyde later recalled: “He conducted us through every ordinance of the holy priesthood, and when he had gone through with all the ordinances he rejoiced very much, and [said], now if they kill me you have got all the keys, and all the ordinances and you can confer them upon others, and the hosts of Satan will not be able to tear down the kingdom.”³⁷ Nearly a half-century later, President Wilford Woodruff recalled the Prophet’s instructions given in March 26, 1844, just three months before his martyrdom:

He stood upon his feet some three hours. The room was filled as with consuming fire, his face was as clear as amber, and he was clothed upon by the power of God. . . . “I have had sealed upon my head every key, every power, every principle of life and salvation that God has ever given to any man who ever lived upon the face of the earth. . . . Now,” said he addressing the Twelve, “I have sealed upon your heads every key, every power, and every principle which the Lord has sealed upon my head. . . . I tell you, the burden of this kingdom now rests upon your shoulders; you have got to bear it off in all the world, and if you don’t do it you will be damned.”³⁸

The Lord had explained that the Melchizedek Priesthood holds “the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the Church—to have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, to have the heavens opened” and thereby “to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (D&C 107:18–19). Earlier, he had explained that this priesthood “holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God,” and specifically that “in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest” (D&C 84:19–20). It is through the ordinances of the temple endowment and of eternal sealings, put in place through the Prophet Joseph Smith, that these promises are fulfilled.

During Joseph Smith’s lifetime, a total of sixty-five living individuals (thirty-six men and twenty-nine women) received the endowment. Following the Prophet’s martyrdom, when the Nauvoo Temple

was sufficiently completed, some five thousand additional individuals received their endowment. But the Prophet had anticipated a further expansion of this work to include even performing these ordinances in behalf of the dead. Elder Wilford Woodruff recorded Joseph's words on January 21, 1844: "How are [the Saints] to become Saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah."³⁹

In fulfillment of the Prophet's vision, the restoration of temple service continued. Endowments for the dead were inaugurated early in 1877. Then in 1894, when Church leaders were instructing the Saints to be sealed to their progenitors as far back as possible, an organization now known as the Family History Department was established to provide needed help with genealogical research. During the twentieth century, computers remarkably facilitated this work. As the twenty-first century was dawning, the Lord through President Gordon B. Hinckley made temples accessible in an unprecedented way to Latter-day Saints worldwide. All these developments built on the foundation established through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

NOTES

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5. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:352.
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11. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:349.
12. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:167.
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31. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:196–97.
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33. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:446–47, 454, 486.

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39. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:184; compare *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, January 21, 1844, 2:341–42.