

Faith and Devotion in Building the Kirtland Temple

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As the number of Latter-day Saints in Kirtland grew, the need for an adequate meeting place increased. In December 1832 the Lord commanded the Saints to “establish a house” in which to meet (D&C 88:119). They would build not just an ordinary meeting-house but a temple. This project would consume much of their energy for the next three years.

On June 1, 1833, the Lord admonished the Saints to move forward with the building of the temple in which He would “endow” them “with power from on high” (D&C 95:8). He instructed that this sacred structure should not be built “after the manner of the world” (v. 13), but promised to reveal a pattern. The Lord specified that the temple’s main floor should be a chapel where the Saints might fast, pray, and partake of the sacrament. The second floor was to be a school for those called into the Lord’s service (see vv. 16–17).

At a council meeting two days later, Joseph Smith and his counselors were appointed to obtain the design for the temple. Shortly afterward, the First Presidency saw the temple in vision. “After we had taken a good look at the exterior,” Frederick G. Williams recalled, “the building seemed to come right over us.” Thus they were able to see both its exterior and interior.¹ Some favored constructing the temple of logs or lumber, but the Prophet responded: “I have a better plan than that. I have a plan of the house of the Lord, given by himself.”²

Even though the Kirtland Temple may have looked something like the New England meetinghouses of the time, it was the revealed design of the “inner court,” or interior, that made the building truly

unique. Four levels of pulpits at both ends of these auditoriums were a unique feature of the Kirtland Temple. Those on the west were for the Melchizedek Priesthood, while those on the east were for the Aaronic Priesthood. Initials on each pulpit represented the priesthood office held by the individual occupying it. These initials helped Church members to understand the relative authority of various priesthood leaders.³

West End Initials

MPC	Melchizedek Presiding Council (First Presidency or stake presidency)
PMH	Presiding Mechizedek High Priesthood (the Twelve or high council)
MHP	Melchizedek High Priests
PEM	Presidency Elders Melchizedek

East End Initials

BPA	Bishop Presiding Aaronic
PAP	Presidency of Aaronic Priests
PTA	Presidency of Teachers Aaronic
PDA	Presidency of Deacons Aaronic

Actual construction of the Kirtland Temple began in June 1833. On the sixth of that month, a council of high priests directed the building committee to procure materials so the work could begin. The Prophet 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.

Eager to start, Hyrum Smith and Reynolds Cahoon went to work digging by hand the trench for the foundation. 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.”⁴ Nevertheless, the Prophet acknowledged, “Our unity, harmony and charity abounded to strengthen us to do the commandments of God.”⁵ On Wednesday, July 23, 1833, Joseph Smith and other elders laid cornerstones for the Kirtland Temple “after the order of the Holy Priesthood,” beginning with the southeast corner.⁶

A major interruption came during the summer of 1834. At the time of the year when the weather was most favorable for construction, few workmen were available because many had joined Joseph Smith in the march of Zion's Camp to Missouri. Following the return of Zion's Camp, work on the temple went forward more rapidly. In October 1834 Joseph Smith recalled, "Great exertions were made to expedite the work of the Lord's house, and notwithstanding it was commenced almost with nothing, as to means, yet the way opened as we proceeded, and the Saints rejoiced."⁷ At this time the temple walls were four feet high, and they rose quickly during the winter of 1834–35.

Almost all able-bodied men, except those away on missions, worked on the temple. Joseph Smith set the example, serving as foreman in the quarry. "Come, brethren," he admonished, "let us go into the stone-quarry and work for the Lord."⁸ On Saturdays a number of men brought teams and wagons, quarried the rock, and hauled enough to the building site to keep the masons busy during the coming week.

Work on the temple went forward but not without difficulty. Under the cover of darkness, vandals attempted to destroy the walls then under construction. Because of further threatened mob violence, those who worked on the temple by day guarded it at night to protect what they had built. Night after night for many weeks, Heber C. Kimball recalled, "We . . . were not permitted to take off our clothes, and were obliged to lay with our fire locks in our arms."⁹ Sidney Rigdon later described how the Saints "had wet those walls with their tears, when, in the silent shades of the night, they were praying to the God of heaven to protect them, and stay the unhallowed hands of ruthless spoilers, who had uttered a prophesy [*sic*] . . . that the walls should never be erected."¹⁰

By November 1835 the exterior plastering commenced. Crushed glassware (most of which had probably been discarded, though some may have been contributed specifically for this purpose) was mixed with the stucco to give the walls a glistening appearance. This covering included "weather-resistant natural cements that had recently been discovered and used in building the nearby Ohio Canal."¹¹

The women, under Emma Smith's direction, "made stockings, pantaloons and jackets" for the benefit of the temple workmen.

“Our wives were all the time knitting, spinning and sewing,” Elder Heber C. Kimball recalled years later, and “were just as busy as any of us.”¹² The women also made curtains and carpets for the Lord’s house. Polly Angell, wife of architect Truman O. Angell, recalled how Joseph Smith told the sisters: “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.”¹³

While the temple was being built, the Church was in constant financial distress. Funds were needed to support the temple workers, so Saints in the United States and Canada were invited to make contributions as they could. Vienna Jacques, a single sister, was one of the first to donate, giving much of her material resources. John Tanner lent money to pay for the temple site and then sold his 2,200-acre farm in the state of New York in order to give three thousand dollars to buy supplies. He continued to give “until he had sacrificed nearly everything he owned.”¹⁴ In the midst of their difficulties, the Saints spent from forty to sixty thousand dollars and were forced to borrow more money to complete the project.

The Saints’ faith and devotion in building the Kirtland Temple was rewarded. Truly “sacrifice” brought forth “the blessings of heaven.”¹⁵ Remarkable spiritual experiences during early 1836 confirmed that the Lord accepted the structure. On January 21, two months before the temple was dedicated, the First Presidency met during the afternoon in an upper room in the schoolhouse/printing office—a building immediately west of the temple—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.” He saw “the blazing throne of God” and the “beautiful streets of that kingdom, which had the appearance of being paved with gold” (D&C 137: 1–4). He learned that “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” (v. 7).

These wonderful spiritual experiences continued during the next several weeks. Saints reported seeing heavenly messengers in at least ten different meetings. At five of these meetings, individuals even testified that they beheld the Savior Himself. Many received visions, prophesied, or spoke in tongues.¹⁷

These Pentecostal experiences climaxed with the dedication of the temple on March 27. Latter-day Saints from Missouri and other parts of North America crowded into Kirtland, anticipating the great blessings the Lord had promised to bestow upon them, including a special gift or endowment of power from on high. Early that morning, hundreds gathered outside the temple, hoping to attend the dedicatory service. The doors were opened at 8:00 a.m., and the First Presidency assisted in seating the congregation of nearly a thousand people, about double the building's usual capacity. With the leaders seated in the elevated pulpits and benches at each end of the hall and all the available seats in the temple filled, the massive doors were closed. Many still remained outside, including some who had sacrificed much for the temple construction and had come long distances to attend the dedication. Sensing their disappointment, the Prophet directed them to hold an overflow meeting in the schoolhouse nearby. (The dedicatory service would be repeated the following Thursday for their benefit.)

The service commenced at 9:00 a.m. A choir, seated in the four corners of the hall, provided music. President Sidney Rigdon then spoke eloquently for two and a half hours, declaring that the temple was unique among all the buildings erected for the worship of God, having been "built by divine revelation." After he concluded, the choir sang a hymn by Elder W. W. Phelps, "Now Let Us Rejoice." Following a twenty-minute intermission, the congregation sustained the officers of the Church, with the various priesthood quorums voting individually. Joseph Smith then prophesied that if the Saints would "uphold these men in their several stations, . . . the Lord would bless them; yea, in the name of Christ, the blessings of heaven should be theirs."¹⁸

The climax of the day was the dedicatory prayer, which had been given to the Prophet by revelation. After expressing gratitude for God's blessings, with tears flowing freely, Joseph prayed 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” (D&C 109:5). He petitioned that the blessings promised in the Lord’s 1832 command to build the temple (see D&C 88:117–20) might now be realized. The prayer also asked that Church leaders, members, and the leaders of nations might be blessed and that the promised gathering of “the scattered remnants of Israel” (D&C 109:67) might be accomplished.

Following the prayer the choir sang “The Spirit of God,” a hymn written by Elder 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.” Eliza R. Snow felt that the shout in Kirtland was given “with such power as seemed almost sufficient to raise the roof from the building.”¹⁹ After seven hours, the service ended at 4:00 p.m.

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. He 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; many began to speak in tongues and prophesy; others saw glorious visions; and I beheld the Temple was filled with angels, which fact I declared to the congregation.”²⁰

David Whitmer testified that “he saw three angels passing up the south aisle.”²¹ People living in the area heard “an unusual sound” coming from the Lord’s house and saw “a bright light like a pillar of fire resting upon the Temple.” Others reported seeing angels hovering over the temple and hearing heavenly singing.²²

On Wednesday, March 30, approximately three hundred Saints attended a special meeting in the temple, which continued until early the following morning. “The Savior made His appearance to some, while angels ministered to others, and it was a Pentecost and an endowment indeed, long to be remembered.”²³ An even more

significant experience occurred on Sunday, April 3, when the Savior appeared to accept the temple, which had been dedicated one week earlier, and the ancient prophets Moses, Elias, and Elijah restored keys of authority (see D&C 110).

Following these wonderful events in Kirtland, it is easy to imagine the sorrow Joseph Smith must have experienced less than two years later when apostasy from within and attacks from without forced him and other faithful Saints to leave their beloved homes and temple as they fled for their lives.

I am grateful for the rare privilege and honor to have been invited to speak in this sacred place. On behalf of all of us, I express gratitude to our brothers and sisters in the Community of Christ for the loving care they have given this special building. I testify that it was here that the keys were restored which empower the great labor of love done in temples today. Through the Lord's direction and blessing, prophecy is being fulfilled as temples increasingly dot the earth.

NOTES

This talk was given in the Kirtland Temple on June 25, 2004.

¹Truman O. Angell Autobiographical Sketch, manuscript, 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT; see also Marvin E. Smith, "The Builder," *Improvement Era*, October 1942, 630.

²Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:352; Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 230; Elwin C. Robison, *The First Mormon Temple* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 8; also on page 24 note 2, Robison states that Joseph Smith described his vision of the temple at a meeting on June 4, 1833, even though nothing is mentioned of it in *History of the Church*, 1:352. Perhaps he is linking that event with the meeting described in Lucy Mack Smith's history.

³For a more complete discussion of the Kirtland Temple's pulpits and their relationship to the twenty-four temples in Zion, see Richard O. Cowan, "The House of the Lord in Kirtland: A 'Preliminary' Temple," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio* (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1990), 112–18.

⁴Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Mesa, AZ: 21st Century Printing, 1992), 16.

⁵Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:349.

⁶Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:400.

⁷Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:167.

⁸Quoted by Heber C. Kimball in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:165.

⁹Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:2.

¹⁰Nicolas G. Morgan, comp., *Eliza R. Snow: An Immortal* (Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan Foundation, 1957), 59.

¹¹Robison, *First Mormon Temple*, 79.

¹²Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:165.

¹³Joseph Smith, as quoted in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormonism* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 76.

¹⁴Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1938* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 151–53.

¹⁵W. W. Phelps, "Praise to the Man," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.

¹⁶Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:379.

¹⁷Backman, *Heavens Resound*, 285.

¹⁸Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:415, 418; see 2:410–26.

¹⁹Morgan, *Eliza R. Snow*, 62; see also Lael Woodbury, "Origin and Uses of the Sacred Hosanna Shout," in *Sperry Lecture Series, 1975* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 18–22.

²⁰Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:428.

²¹George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:10.

²²Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:428; Backman, *Heavens Resound*, 300.

²³Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:432–33.