

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**



“Organizing and Systematizing” the Temple Ceremony in a Worldwide Church

R. Stephen Marshall

Article Print

Pages 165–204

© 2026 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

“Organizing and Systematizing” the Temple Ceremony in a Worldwide Church

R. Stephen Marshall

Abstract: *The evolution of temple ceremonies in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reflects an ongoing effort to make sacred ordinances accessible and consistent throughout a worldwide Church while preserving their underlying covenants and doctrines. Beginning with Joseph Smith’s administration of the first endowment in Nauvoo in 1842 and his charge to Brigham Young to organize and systematize the ceremonies, this paper traces historical precedents for adjustments to temple worship. Drawing particularly on President Russell M. Nelson’s 2021 address “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” the study explains how continuing revelation guides procedural changes necessitated by expanding temple construction, diverse languages and cultures, and changing circumstances. Historical examples involving endowments, sealings, proxy ordinances, baptism, the sacrament, and healing blessings illustrate the distinction between adaptable methods and enduring spiritual principles. The analysis further examines temple symbolism, distinguishing the outward presentation of ordinances from the eternal realities they represent, including humanity’s progression toward the presence of God. By connecting historical developments with recent temple reforms, the author argues that procedural adjustments are consistent with the continuing Restoration and serve the larger purposes of facilitating temple participation, deepening spiritual understanding, and preparing God’s children for exaltation.*

Under the leadership of President Russell M. Nelson, the sweep of the gospel throughout the earth was matched by a remarkable

increase in temple-building. In the April 2025 general conference, Nelson announced the construction of fifteen new temples to be built in various places around the globe. That brought to 200 the number of temples that he announced during his tenure as Church president.¹ This “acceleration of temple-building,”² as Nelson referred to it, is founded on the conviction that the ordinances and covenants of the temple are essential to the spiritual lives of all Church members throughout the world. President Nelson often emphasized the blessings that come through temple covenants and continued that theme in most of his general conference sermons during his administration. In his first sermon as Church President, he explains, “We want to bring temples closer to the expanding membership of the Church”³ and he clearly viewed that goal with a worldwide lens. “Temple work makes these exquisite blessings available to *all* of God’s children regardless of *where* or *when* they lived or now live.”⁴ In answer to the question of why the Church is building temples at such an unprecedented pace, he answered, “Because the Lord has instructed us to do so.”⁵ Speaking of the temple in the context of preparing for the Second Coming, Nelson writes, “We do not know the day or the hour of His coming. But I do know that the Lord is prompting me to urge us to get ready for that ‘great and dreadful day.’”⁶ As a case in point, Nelson explains the decision to build a temple in India. Originally, he said, “Our plans were to announce six new temples at conference time.” But, he adds, “The Lord told me on the eve of conference: ‘Announce a temple in India.’ . . . That was the Lord’s doing.”⁷ The number of temples has

1. Scott Taylor, “A by-the-numbers look at the 200 temples announced by President Nelson,” *Church News*, 10 April 2025, [thechurchnews.com/temples/2025/04/10/by-the-numbers-look-200-temples-announced-president-nelson-7-years/](https://www.thechurchnews.com/temples/2025/04/10/by-the-numbers-look-200-temples-announced-president-nelson-7-years/).

2. Russell M. Nelson, “Confidence in the Presence of God,” *Liahona*, May 2025, 128, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2025/05/57nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2025/05/57nelson).

3. Russell M. Nelson, “Let Us All Press On,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 119, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/05/sunday-afternoon-session/let-us-all-press-on](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/05/sunday-afternoon-session/let-us-all-press-on).

4. Russell M. Nelson, “Rejoice in the Gift of Priesthood Keys,” *Ensign*, May 2024, 121, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2024/05/57nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2024/05/57nelson).

5. Russell M. Nelson, “The Lord Jesus Christ Will Come Again,” *Liahona*, November 2024, 121, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2024/11/57nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2024/11/57nelson).

6. Nelson, “Confidence,” 128.

7. Russell M. Nelson, quoted in Sarah Jane Weaver, “In India, the story of the India LDS temple announcement is revealed,” *Deseret News*, 19 April 2018, [deseret.com/2018/4/19/20644156/in-india-the-story-of-the-india-lds-temple-announcement-is-revealed/](https://www.deseret.com/2018/4/19/20644156/in-india-the-story-of-the-india-lds-temple-announcement-is-revealed/).

been guided by revelation to take the blessings of the temple to members throughout the world and to prepare for the Second Coming of the Savior. Elder Quentin L. Cook proclaims, “I also personally testify that President Russell M. Nelson has received profoundly important revelations relating to temples and temple work.”⁸

The imperative of bringing temples closer to Church members worldwide creates immense challenges given the substantial variety in the cultures and languages of Saints throughout the Church. Fulfilling that imperative has necessitated adjustments to the administration of temple ordinances over the years. Some may wonder why such adjustments are necessary since, as President Nelson has taught, the temple endowment was “given by revelation.”⁹ But, like other priesthood ordinances, the temple ceremonies need to be adjusted, depending on circumstances, to fulfill the underlying spiritual purposes of the ordinances. The covenants, which are an extension of the Abrahamic covenant, are not changed and the doctrine is not changed, but the manner of their presentation and the specific wording of the covenants continue to be adjusted to fit the circumstances.

In his October 2021 general conference sermon, “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” President Nelson speaks about the revisions that had recently been made to the ceremonies of the temple, which he referred to as “procedural adjustments.”¹⁰ He explains that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have often asked the Lord “if there are better ways to take the blessings of the temple to His faithful children. We seek guidance regularly on how to ensure world-wide accuracy and consistency of temple instruction, covenants, and ordinances despite differences in language and culture.” Nelson clarifies that adjustments “are continuing evidence that the Lord is actively directing His Church.”¹¹ In this context, he describes three truths:

1. The Restoration is a process, not an event, and will continue until the Lord comes again.

8. Quentin L. Cook, “Great Love for Our Father’s Children,” *Liahona*, May 2019, 79, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2019/05/43cook.

9. John A. Widtsoe, quoted in Russell M. Nelson, “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” *Liahona*, November 2021, 96n18, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2021/11/47nelson.

10. Nelson, “The Temple,” 95.

11. Nelson, “The Temple,” 94–95.

2. The ultimate objective of the gathering of Israel is to bring the blessings of the temple to God's faithful children.
3. As we seek how to accomplish that objective more effectively, the Lord reveals more insights. The ongoing Restoration needs ongoing revelation.¹²

These truths underlie the purpose for adjustments to the temple ceremonies, which are guided by revelation as part of the ongoing Restoration. The process of the Restoration includes revising temple ceremonies as inspired by the Lord.

This paper focuses on the changes to temple ordinances that have been made over the years and especially under President Nelson's administration. The ordinances are sacred and, although greater transparency has been authorized for limited discussion outside the temple,¹³ this paper will not address details of the adjustments that have been made. Instead, it will discuss the changes more broadly—the *fact* of the changes, rather than the *substance*. The changes made to the endowment ceremony under the various First Presidencies and Quorums of the Twelve Apostles are consistent with Church teaching and historical precedent alike. They were and are executed under divine priesthood authority.

This paper emphasizes President Nelson's teachings regarding adjustments to the temple ceremony. As of the date of this publication, no adjustments have yet been made to the presentation of the temple ceremony under the administration of President Dallin H. Oaks. However, it should be noted that, as first counselor to President Nelson, he participated fully in all of the inspired decisions regarding temple practices. It is reasonable to expect that President Oaks may continue the process of refining the temple programs as inspired by the Lord and approved by his counselors and the Quorum of Twelve Apostles.¹⁴ Consequently, this paper focuses on President Nelson's

12. Nelson, "The Temple," 94.

13. The *General Handbook* and the Church's website both describe the five covenants that a person makes in the endowment ceremony. *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 27.2, "Temple Ordinances for the Living," [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/27-temple-ordinances-for-the-living](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/27-temple-ordinances-for-the-living); "About the Temple Endowment," [churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/what-is-temple-endowment](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/what-is-temple-endowment). See also David A. Bednar, "Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing," *Ensign*, May 2019, 103, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/05/54bednar](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/05/54bednar).

14. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Family-Centered Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Liahona*, November 2025, 120, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2025/11/58oaks](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2025/11/58oaks).

teachings about changes to the temple ceremony with an emphasis on 2021 address. No other prophet has publicly given such a careful explanation for temple changes, their history and background, and why the adjustments to the temple ceremony do not invalidate the covenants made therein.

As noted, it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all of the changes to the temple ceremonies that have been made over the years. The development of the ceremonies has been discussed by other authors.¹⁵ Notably, Jonathan Stapley has recently detailed the development of doctrines and practices relating to the temple.¹⁶ Stapley observes that, "the liturgies of the temple have continued to evolve over time, with church leaders regularly adapting, adjusting, and revising to the present."¹⁷ He explains that "change in the Latter-day Saint temple is buffered within a narrative of unchanging religious experience by the principle of 'ongoing revelation.' An overarching desire for accessibility to the work of the temple has driven a large proportion of this dynamism."¹⁸ Without purporting to give a "detailed description of every adjustment in the liturgy,"¹⁹ he reviews three periods of liturgical change—the Brigham Young era, the twentieth century, and the twenty-first century.²⁰ Stapley observes that "change for

15. See Richard E. Bennett, *Temples Rising: A Heritage of Sacrifice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019); Jennifer Ann Mackley, *Wilford Woodruff's Witness: The Development of Temple Doctrine* (Seattle: High Desert Publishing, 2014); Devery S. Anderson, *The Development of LDS Temple Worship: 1846–2000, A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011); Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, 1842-1845: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005); *The Nauvoo Endowment Companies, 1845-1846: A Documentary History*, ed. Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005); David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994); David John Buerger, "The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1–2 (Spring Summer 2001): 75–122, dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V34N0102_87.pdf.

16. Jonathan A. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord: Latter-day Saint Temple Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025). See also Stapley's interview regarding the temple, Keystone, "LDS historian reveals what we get wrong about the endowment," YouTube, 8 September 2025, [youtube.com/watch?v=U9fmwbPX-AY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9fmwbPX-AY).

17. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 72.

18. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 73.

19. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 72.

20. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 73–92.

the Latter-day Saints is always a possibility, and that it is their belief in ongoing revelation that integrates it into the unchanging work of God.”²¹

This paper mentions several temple changes by way of illustration but not as an effort to exhaustively address the numerous changes that have been implemented. Some of the changes have been identified by the Church itself, but the bulk of them are not mentioned in any official Church publication.²² Temple rites are generally not discussed outside the temple, nor is the written text of the rites available from official Church sources. Kathleen Flake observes that “news of change and its explanation come from the newspaper, not Church Administration.”²³ Although it may be newsworthy, the Church generally leaves it to members to learn of adjustments when they attend the temple.²⁴

The First Endowment as Given by Joseph Smith in 1842

A discussion of changes to the temple ceremony must begin with the first endowments administered by Joseph Smith. There he set the stage for the adjustments that would follow. Joseph administered the first endowment to nine Church leaders in the somewhat cramped upper room of the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, Illinois, on 4 May 1842.²⁵

21. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 92, citing David F. Holland, “Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 149–63. See also Bennett, *Temples Rising*, 311.

22. See, *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Adjustments to Temple Work,” churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/adjustments-to-temple-work.

23. Kathleen Flake, “‘Not to be Riten’: The Mormon Temple Rite as Oral Canon,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 8, mormonstudies.as.virginia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Jrn-Ritual-Studies-Temple-as-Oral-Canon.pdf.

24. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 85.

25. “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” *Joseph Smith Papers*, p. 1328, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/502; B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974); 5:1–4, Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1976), 237. Regarding the first endowment, see *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (2018), 453–55, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/saints-v1/37-we-will-prove-them; Andrew F. Ehat, “‘Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?’ Sesquicentennial Reflections of a Sacred Day: 4 May 1842,” in *Temples of*

Orson Hyde, one of the Twelve Apostles, notes that Joseph made the statement that “there is something going to happen; I don’t know what it is, but the Lord bids me to hasten and give you your endowment before the temple is finished.” Elder Hyde added a description of delivering the ordinances to the Twelve:

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 says, 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, as fast as you will be able to build it up; and now says he on your shoulders will the responsibility of leading this people rest, for the Lord is going to let me rest a while.²⁶

After Joseph administered that first endowment, he gave the ordinance to many other Church members including to the sisters of the Relief Society.²⁷

President Nelson refers to a conversation between Joseph Smith and Brigham Young following that first endowment:

Until his martyrdom, Joseph Smith continued to receive revelations that furthered the restoration of the endowment and sealing ordinances. He recognized, however, that further refinement was needed. After administering the endowment to Brigham Young in May 1842, Joseph told Brigham, “This is not arranged right, but we have done the best we

the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism, ed. Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research Mormon Studies and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1994), 48–52, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/76/; Andrew F. Ehat, “Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question” (Master’s Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 25–30, ia600504.us.archive.org/16/items/EhatIntroOfTempleOrdinances2/Ehat_Intro%20of%20Temple%20Ordinances%202.pdf; Lisle G. Brown, “The Sacred Departments for Temple Work in Nauvoo: The Assembly Room and the Council Chamber,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 362–65, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-sacred-departments-for-temple-work-in-nauvoo-the-assembly-room-and-the-council-chamber; Mackley, *Wilford Woodruff’s Witness*, 68–69.

26. “Trial of Elder Rigdon,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 17 (15 September 1844): 651, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/41e052b0-64ba-40f2-b8e7-29b4ec74f235/0/11.

27. Ehat, “Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances,” 106–10.

could under the circumstances in which we are placed, and I wish you to take this matter in hand and organize and systematize all these ceremonies.”²⁸

As support for his quotation of Joseph, Nelson cites volume 1 of *Saints*.²⁹ That book, in turn, cites the diary of L. John Nuttall for 7 February 1877.³⁰ His diary is a valuable source regarding Brigham Young’s instructions relating to temple ordinances.

Adaptations at the St. George Temple

The Saints were forced to abandon the Nauvoo Temple in early 1846 as they began their westward exodus. The next temple to be completed was in St. George, Utah. Before the dedication of the St. George Temple, the Church performed some temple ordinances in the Council House and in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City.³¹ With the dedication of the St. George Temple, Brigham had the opportunity to complete the task given to him by Joseph Smith: organizing and systematizing the temple ordinances. This was necessary because the Church was sending missionaries throughout the world and multiple temples were being built. Brigham saw the need for consistency and uniformity in the temple ordinances as well as the need for clarity in the endowment. The explanatory power of the endowment would only be as great as the ability to communicate the ordinance.

28. Nelson, “The Temple,” 94, emphasis added.

29. *Saints*, 1:454, n43. Also in *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 2, *No Unhallowed Hand, 1846–1893* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 428, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/saints-v2/part-3/28-until-the-coming-of-the-son-of-man](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/saints-v2/part-3/28-until-the-coming-of-the-son-of-man).

30. L. John Nuttall, 7 February 1877, in *Diary of L. John Nuttall (1834–1905), Dec. 1876–Mar. 1884*, 18, archive.org/details/diaryofljohnnutt01nutt/page/n135/mode/2up. Nuttall was secretary to John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff and was involved in the dedicatory proceedings for the St. George Temple. He became the first stake president of the Kanab Stake in 1877 and was the first recorder for the St. George Temple.

31. Lisle G. Brown, “‘Temple Pro Tempore’: The Salt Lake City Endowment House,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (2008): 63n202, digitalcommons.usu.edu/mormonhistory/vol34/iss4/1; *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Church Headquarters,” [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/church-headquarters](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/church-headquarters); *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Endowment House,” [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/endowment-house](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/endowment-house); Gil Bradshaw and Fred E. Woods, “The Council House as a House for Sacred Ordinances in the Early Church,” *Journal of Undergraduate Research* 2014, no.1 (2014): scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jur/vol2014/iss1/1338.

John Nuttall's diary entries relate some of the events surrounding the dedication of the St. George Temple. A preliminary service occurred on 1 January 1877 to dedicate portions of the Temple for ordinance work before the official dedication.³² A month later, on 7 February 1877, Brigham Young spoke to a small gathering in his St. George home, which included Wilford Woodruff and John Nuttall. Nuttall notes that "Prest Young was filled with the spirit of God & revelation."³³ Brigham spoke of the first endowment administered by Joseph Smith. He described the limitations which Joseph had in administering the ordinances of the endowment. Brigham recalled, "we had only one room to work in with the exception of a little side room or office w[h]ere we were washed and anointed had our garments placed upon us and received our New Name."³⁴ Following the administration of those initiatory ordinances, they went up into the room over the store in Nauvoo to receive the endowment. As recorded by Nuttall, Brigham explains what then transpired:

Joseph divided up the room the best that he could hung up the veil, marked it gave us our instructions as we passed along from one department to another giving us signs, tokens, penalties with the Key words pertaining to those signs and after we had got through. Bro Joseph turned to me (Prest B Young) and said Bro Brigham *this is not arranged right but we have done the best we could under the circumstances in which we are placed, and I wish you to take this matter in hand and organize and systematize all these ceremonies* with the signs, tokens penalties and Key words I did so and each time I got something more so that when we went through the Temple at Nauvoo I understood and Knew how to place them there. we had our ceremonies pretty correct.³⁵

32. *Saints*, 2:426; Scott Taylor, Joel Randall, "The path to 200 houses of the Lord: Temple Nos. 1–20," *Church News*, 18 August 2024, thechurchnews.com/temples/2024/08/18/path-to-200-houses-of-the-lord-temples-1-to-20-st-george-salt-lake-logan-manti/.

33. Nuttall, *Diary*, 7 February 1877, 18.

34. Nuttall, *Diary*, 7 February 1877, 18.

35. Nuttall, *Diary*, 7 February 1877, 18–19, emphasis added. The penalties that Brigham Young mentioned have since been removed from the endowment. See "Question: Why were 'Penalties' Removed from the Endowment?," *FAIR* (website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Why_were_%22penalties%22_removed_from_the_Endowment%3F; Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 63, 85.

President Nelson quoted the italicized part of this statement from Nuttall's diary in his October 2021 conference talk. Brigham Young's comments indicate that the temple ceremony should not be considered static or unchangeable. It can be adjusted—as needed and depending on circumstances—so the ordinances can be administered in the most effective way possible. Brigham “organized and systematized” the ceremony so that the endowment would be standardized.

Following Joseph Smith's martyrdom, the ordinances were performed in the Nauvoo Temple both day and night between December 1845 and the departure of the Saints in February 1846.³⁶ Those who administered the ordinances had received them from Joseph Smith or under his direction. From 1842 to 1877, the endowment ceremony was taught to ordinance workers orally and was preserved only in their memories. It was first written at the direction of Brigham Young following dedication of the St. George Temple. This was done “to ensure consistency over time and between temples.”³⁷ It was in the context of overseeing the formal transcription of the temple ceremonies that Brigham stated how Joseph Smith had charged him to “organize and systematize” the endowment.

The reluctance of early Church leaders to record the temple ordinances is reflected in an 1842 letter from Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, who was then on a mission in England. He wrote the letter just over a month after receiving his endowment in the Red Brick Store. Because Parley was on a mission at the time, he was unable to be endowed. Heber writes that, “we have received some pressious things through the Prophet on the preasthood that would caus your Soul to rejoice I can not give them to you on paper fore they are *not to be riten*.”³⁸

Administering the ordinances by memory apparently worked well enough at first, but with the dedication of the St. George Temple and with other temples to follow, reliance on fallible memories created a risk that the ceremonies might not be administered correctly or that they would differ in some way from one endowment ceremony to another.

36. *Saints*, 2:13–14.

37. *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Temple Endowment,” churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/temple-endowment. See *Saints*, 2:427–28.

38. Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, 17 June 1842, Parley P. Pratt Correspondence, 1842–1855, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/707c7146-38a5-41e6-98d8-1cad8d89bcc5/0/1. Also quoted in *Saints*, 1:455, emphasis added.

Brigham Young foresaw the day when “there will be hundreds of them built” throughout the earth.³⁹ He, therefore, directed Wilford Woodruff and others to write the ceremonies:

President Brigham Young requested me to take charge of the temple, which I did. He also requested me to write all the ordinances of the Church, from the first baptism and confirmation through every ordinance of the Church. G. Q. Cannon assisted some in this writing. And when I had finished it to the satisfaction of the President, he said to me: — “Now you have before you an ensample to carry on the endowments in all the Temples until the coming of the Son of Man.”⁴⁰

Regarding this time, Richard E. Bennett observed:

What followed in the days and weeks thereafter was nothing less than a schooling in matters of the temple. One month later, on February 12, [1877,] Alonzo Raleigh recorded that he was “engaged all day and evening with President Woodruff, [John D. T.] McAllister, and [L. John] Nuttall under the direction of President B. Young in reorganizing parts of the endowment” — a reference to their perceived need to make certain needed adjustments for proxy work.⁴¹

The effort to write down the temple ceremonies commenced a new era in temple service. Not only was there now uniformity, but having the temple ceremonies written also made it easier to make additional appropriate adjustments to the wording of the ordinances, as inspired by the Lord.

The need to have a definitive record of the endowment continued even past 1877. Wilford Woodruff—then President of the Church—recorded on 17 October 1893 that he met with Joseph F. Smith,

39. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 10:254, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/4122/rec/11.

40. “Temple - History of the St. George Temple, 26 March 1883,” p. 3, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/NXNN. See also “Journal (January 1, 1873 – February 7, 1880),” January 14, 1877 - January 18, 1877, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/BLQY.

41. Richard E. Bennett, “‘Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept’: Reflections on the 1877 Commencement of the Performance of Endowments and Sealings for the Dead,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 62, byustudies.byu.edu/article/line-upon-line-precept-upon-precept-reflections-on-the-1877-commencement-of-the-performance-of-endowments-and-sealings-of-the-dead.

several of the Twelve, and John D. T. McAllister, David H. Cannon, Marriner W. Merrill, and Lorenzo Snow (the presidents of the four operating Utah temples) and “spent three hours in harmonizing the Different Modes of ceremonies in giving Endowments.”⁴² Notice that, in President Woodruff’s description of their meeting, it was *modes* that were harmonized, which is similar in meaning to *procedures*, the word President Nelson used to describe adjustments to the endowment ceremony. The effort to harmonize the endowment as presented in the four operating temples reflected the desire of Church leaders at that time for consistency and uniformity.

Even though the temple ceremony was now written, the text remained unavailable to general Church membership. Kathleen Flake notes that Church members “treat their temple canon in a manner most analogous to an oral tradition and in practical effect it operates as such among the faithful.” She explains:

The price of access to the rite and its specific contents is the same for all: participation in the ritualized social body which is created by the ritual and creative of the ritual as it is handed down personally, even orally, from generation to generation.⁴³

The nondisclosure of the text of the temple ceremonies, except in the temple itself, underscores the sanctity of the wording. Even so, the Church’s efforts to record and preserve the text of the endowment was a crucial step in fulfilling the Prophet’s instruction that the endowment should be organized and systematized.

Symbols and Reality

From the St. George Temple to the present day, the Church has continued the process of refining the presentation of temple ordinances. In his teachings about temple changes, President Nelson cites the sacrament as an example of inspired adjustments:

Consider how administering the sacrament has changed over the years. In earlier days, the water of the sacrament was offered to the congregation in one large vessel. Everyone drank from it. Now, we use individual disposable

42. “Journal (January 1, 1893 – April 18, 1897),” October 13, 1893 - October 23, 1893, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/DQ1K.

43. Flake, “Not to be Riten,” 6-7.

cups. The procedure changed, but the covenants remain the same.⁴⁴

Nelson quoted from a 1971 sermon in which Harold B. Lee pleaded with the Saints to have enough faith to understand why procedures and policies in the administration of temple ordinances continue to change and not to resist those changes. "Even in the matter of temple ordinances, there is sometimes a resistance to order." Instead, he says, a person should "trust in the Lord's way . . . as we move ahead with Church programs to meet the challenges of the day in which we live." President Lee explains:

Keep in mind that the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ are divine. Nobody changes the principles and doctrines of the Church except the Lord by revelation. But *methods change* as the inspired direction comes to those who preside at a given time. If you will analyze all that is being done and the changes that are taking place, you will realize that the fundamental doctrines of the Church are not changing. The only changes are in the *methods of teaching* that doctrine to meet the *circumstances of our time*. You may be sure that your brethren who preside are praying most earnestly, and we do not move until we have the assurance, so far as lies within our power, that what we do has the seal of divine approval.⁴⁵

Teachings about changes to the temple ceremony distinguish between *principles* and *doctrines* on the one hand and *methods* and *procedures* on the other hand. Procedures include, for example, matters relating to the design and color of ceremonial clothing. White clothing was not used in the temple until 1 February 1877. On that date, Wilford Woodruff and Lucy Bigelow Young dressed in white clothing to administer in the St. George Temple. Woodruff recorded, "I dressed in pure white Doe skin from head to foot to officiate in the Priest Office, white pants vest & c[coat] the first Example in any Temple of the Lord in this last dispensation. Sister Lucy B Young also dressed in white in officiating as Eve."⁴⁶ Other more recent modifications include the

44. Nelson, "The Temple," 94.

45. Harold B. Lee, "God's Kingdom—a Kingdom of Order," *Ensign*, January 1971, 10, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/01/gods-kingdom-a-kingdom-of-order, emphasis added.

46. "Journal (January 1, 1873–February 7, 1880)," February 1, 1877–February 6,

removal of shoes, the practice of veiling, the wording used in the presentation of the endowment, and the use of video versus still images.

Some of these and other procedural changes have doctrinal import but do not constitute a doctrinal change. As an example, the larger speaking role given to Eve during the endowment represents a procedural change that includes the presentation of additional doctrine from the scriptures. That doctrine adds meaning to the temple narrative and represents a deeper level of change. Different levels of adjustments can be discerned in the endowment. For example, whether to remove and replace shoes seems of lesser importance while including scriptural teachings spoken by Eve is of deeper import. Although adjustments to language are sometimes made to facilitate or improve the presentation, they do not drift from the doctrines presented during the endowment.

In his 2021 sermon about temple adjustments, President Nelson distinguishes between *procedure* and *doctrine*. This seems a natural progression from his teachings in 2001 about *symbols* and *reality*. He explains that, in the temple, “we are taught in the Master’s way. His way differs from the modes of others. His way is ancient and rich with symbolism. We can learn much by pondering the *reality* for which each *symbol* stands.”⁴⁷ Nelson used the word *reality* to describe the thing that is represented by a symbol. The distinction between a symbol and the underlying reality comes into play in considering “temple procedures.”⁴⁸ Procedures, which specify the way priesthood holders administer ordinances, are symbols and, as such, lead or point templegoers toward reality. Procedures enable the presentation of sacred covenants to increase commitment and understanding of principles. Procedure — as distinguished from the spiritual substance of temple ceremonies — invites consideration both of *form* (the performance of ordinances) and of *substance* (the covenants and doctrine) in temple administration. It also invites a discussion of the way in which symbols are used in the presentation of eternal truths and the underlying spiritual reality.

In his sermons on the temple, President Nelson cites the teachings

1877, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/G5gJ.

47. Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 33, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2001/05/personal-preparation-for-temple-blessings, emphasis added. See also “Why Symbols?” *Ensign*, February 2007, 12, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/02/why-symbols.

48. Nelson, “The Temple,” 95.

of John A. Widtsoe, who served in the Quorum of the Twelve from 1921 to 1952.⁴⁹ Widtsoe addressed the symbolism of the temple and of the need to see beyond the symbol to the reality symbolized when he taught that, through the rituals of priesthood ordinances, a person is entitled to spiritual blessings. He explains that "an ordinance is an *earthly symbol* of a *spiritual reality*. It is usually also an act of symbolizing a covenant or agreement with the Lord."⁵⁰ He describes the symbolic meaning of ordinances:

All requirements for man's earthly guidance have their eternal spiritual counterparts. The earthly ordinances of the Gospel are themselves the reflections of heavenly ordinances. For instance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and temple work are *merely earthly symbols of universal realities* and of truths that must be recognized if the Great Plan is to be fulfilled. The acceptance of these earthly symbols is part and parcel of correct earth-life, and being distinctly of the earth, cannot be performed elsewhere than on earth.⁵¹

Summarizing Elder Widtsoe's teaching, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen write that "the essential earthly ordinances anticipate or, perhaps more precisely, *prefigure heavenly ordinances* in which eternal truths and blessings will be taught and bestowed in a more perfect and finished form."⁵² The symbols of the temple ceremony, Bradshaw observes elsewhere, "point to meanings beyond themselves."⁵³

49. See John A. Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 12 (April 1921): 62, archive.org/details/utahgenealogical12gene/page/62/mode/2up.

50. John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 348, archive.org/details/priesthoodchurch0000john_v5k6/page/348/mode/2up, emphasis added.

51. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 150–51, archive.org/details/rationaltheologywidtsoe/page/n161/mode/2up.

52. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, " 'By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified': The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 162, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/by-the-blood-ye-are-sanctified-the-symbolic-salvific-interrelated-additive-retrospective-and-anticipatory-nature-of-the-ordinances-of-spiritual-rebirth-in-john-3-and-moses-6, emphasis added.

53. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 41.

Widtsoe emphasizes the distinction between symbol and reality by using Santa Claus as an example:

There are men who object to Santa Claus, because he does not exist! Such men need spectacles to see that Santa Claus is a symbol; a symbol of the love and joy of Christmas and the Christmas spirit. In the land of my birth there was no Santa Claus, but a little goat was shoved into the room, carrying with it a basket of Christmas toys and gifts. The goat of itself counted for nothing; but the Christmas spirit, which is symbolized, counted for a tremendous lot.⁵⁴

Elder Widtsoe adds:

The endowment itself is symbolic; it is a series of symbols of vast realities, too vast for full understanding. Those who go through the temple and come out feeling that the service is unbeautiful have been so occupied with the outward form as to fail to understand the inner meaning. It is the meaning of things that counts in life. . . . No man or woman can come out of the temple endowed as he should be, unless he has seen, beyond the *symbol*, the mighty *realities* for which the symbols stand.⁵⁵

For those who fail to see beyond the symbols, temple ordinances may be less meaningful. For example, Blake Ostler describes a twenty-year period of his life during which he went to the temple regularly but was “bored out of [his] gourd.”

I kept going; but I did not get much out of it. The endowment was just the same endless repetition that held no meaning for me. However . . . all the boredom that I created in my encounter with the endowment changed with a change of my heart. Something changed drastically. Virtually every time I went, I began to experience breakthroughs and insights and revelations and inspiration that I had longed for during those prior twenty years.⁵⁶

Those breakthroughs involved experience with the Atonement of

54. Widtsoe, “Temple Worship,” 62. In recounting the customs “in the land of [his] birth,” Widtsoe was referring to Norway.

55. Widtsoe, “Temple Worship,” 61–62, emphasis added.

56. Blake T. Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon: A Meditation on the Endowment and Love of Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), x–xi.

Jesus Christ, as well as understanding the symbols presented during the endowment. He came to understand, for example, that “we are all as Adam and Eve.” That insight from the temple unlocked a view of mortality in which “the story of Eden is the story of life for mankind and is the necessary starting place to grasp the meaning of Joseph Smith’s thought.”⁵⁷ In the same vein, Hugh Nibley famously describes his own experience in the temple:

I write this almost fifty years to the day since the bewildering experience of my own endowment; I have just returned from the temple again where this day I made a most surprising and gratifying discovery. If I went to the temple five times and nothing happened, I would stop going. But I’ve gone hundreds of times, and the high hopes of new knowledge with which I go up the hill every week are never disappointed.⁵⁸

These examples mirror the experiences of countless temple-goers throughout the Church who faithfully attend the temple and who glimpse the eternal realities represented in the ordinances. Though the ordinances are but symbols of higher realities, they guide participants toward those spiritual blessings.

Variability in the Performance of Symbolic Acts

Since the performance of an ordinance is a ritual act involving symbolic meaning, there is sometimes variation over time in the way ordinances are performed. This variability usually depends on circumstances. In the restored gospel, it is the *substance* of the ordinances, as opposed to their *manner*, that is indeed unchanging. Adaptation, adjustment, and amendment such as have occurred recently have, in fact, graced many Church ordinances since the Restoration in 1830. As noted earlier, President Nelson cited Joseph Smith’s statement to Brigham Young, following the first endowments in the Red Brick Store, that “we have done the best we could *under the circumstances in which we are placed*.”⁵⁹ Circumstances matter. Priesthood ordinances have, on

57. Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon*, 48.

58. Hugh W. Nibley, “An Intellectual Autobiography: Some High and Low Points,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), xxxviii, rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/Autobiography.pdf.

59. Nelson, “The Temple,” 94, emphasis added.

occasion, been performed differently than they are currently practiced. Several examples are provided in the sections that follow.

The Nauvoo endowment

Joseph Smith's performance of the first endowments in a room outside of a temple is an example of an ordinance being adjusted to fit the circumstances. As noted earlier, Brigham recalled that the Prophet "divided up the room the best that he could[,] hung up the veil, marked it[, and] gave us our instructions as we passed along from one department to another."⁶⁰ Joseph asked Lucius Scovil to help set up the room in preparation for the endowment. In later years, Scovil recalled:

We therefore went to work making the necessary preparations, and everything was arranged representing the interior of a temple as much as the circumstances would permit, he being with us dictating everything. . . . I can and do testify that I know of a surety that room was fitted up by his order which we finished in the forenoon of the said 4th of May, 1842.⁶¹

The men "busily cut canvas for dividing the room into subrooms, built at least one altar, and brought in potted plants, shrubs and small trees to furnish the 'Garden' room—the section of the room that represented the Garden of Eden."⁶² James Henry Rollins, who helped with the set-up, stated that he assisted "in carrying water and other commodities to the room above the store. Afterwards, I found out it was to give endowments to some of the brethren."⁶³ In addition, "The men apparently prepared the room by painting a mural of a pastoral scene in the northwest corner and by arranging sprigs of cassis, olive branches, cedar boughs, and other evergreens about the room."⁶⁴ Lisle Brown

60. Nuttall, *Diary*, 7 February 1877, 18.

61. Lucius N. Scovil, letter to the editor, "The Higher Ordinances," *Deseret Evening News*, 11 February 1884, 2, newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=23177527.

62. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances," 26–27. See also, Church History Matters Podcast, "The Unfolding Restoration Lesson 20: The Presentation of the Temple Endowment," YouTube video, 23 October 2021, 2:53, youtube.com/watch?v=47EWMcV-OTY&t=136s. Anthony R. Sweat delivered a video presentation on the first endowment in Nauvoo and includes a digitally-generated representation of the upper room of the Red Brick Store showing how it was arranged for the first endowment on 4 May 1842.

63. Quoted in Hyrum L. and Helen Mae Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 77.

64. Roger D. Launius and F. Mark Mckiernan, *Joseph Smith, Jr.'s Red Brick*

notes that there is no evidence that the mural painted on the wall of the upper room of Joseph's store was connected with the temple ceremonies conducted in that room. "Nevertheless," he observes, "it is suggestive that a pastoral mural existed on the walls of the very room where the endowment was initially administered."⁶⁵

The *Church History Topic* entitled "Adjustments to Temple Work"⁶⁶ states that, following Joseph's instructions, "Brigham Young introduced changes in late 1845 to establish 'better order in conducting the endowment' as it was being administered in a temple for the first time," citing Heber C. Kimball's journal. Kimball's journal includes a more complete description of the changes made for the Nauvoo Temple:

Last evening an arrangement was made establishing better order in conducting the endowment. Under this order it is the province of Eloheem, Jehovah and Michael to create the world, plant the Garden and create the man and give his help meet. Eloheem gives the charge to Adam in the Garden and thrusts them into the telestial kingdom or the world. Then Peter assisted by James and John conducts them through the Telestial and Terrestrial kingdom administering the charges and tokens in each and conducts them to the vail where they are received by the Eloheem and after talking with him by words and tokens are admitted by him into the Celestial kingdom.⁶⁷

This represented a significant adjustment in the presentation of the endowment since Peter, James, and John were not previously identified as parts to be performed. In his journal for December 1845,

Store (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1985), 28, archive.org/details/josephsmithjrsre00laun/page/28/mode/2up. See also *Saints*, 1:453; and Brown, "Temple Pro Tempore," 63n202.

65. Brown, "Temple Pro Tempore," 63n202.

66. *Church History Topics*, s.v. "Adjustments to Temple Work," churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/adjustments-to-temple-work.

67. Heber C. Kimball, Journal, 13 December 1845, CHL, MS 3469, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/d3fa5858-4a29-4e21-bf13-3ca1637d7284/0; *Nauvoo Endowment Companies*, 21; and William Clayton, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 210, archive.org/details/intimatechronicl0000will/page/210/mode/2up. Note that Clayton's journal was kept not for himself, but recorded by Clayton for Kimball; he was the scribe for Kimball's journal. Thus, even though Clayton is cited as author for *An Intimate Chronicle*, the citations should be understood as referencing Kimball's journal.

Kimball noted who performed the various roles in the endowment ceremony each day in the Nauvoo Temple. In the entry for 10 December, Kimball identified the four parts in the endowment: “H. C. Kimball presides as Eloheem, Orson Hyde as Jehovah and George A. Smith as Michael and N. K. Whitney as the serpent.”⁶⁸ The next day’s journal entry also referred to four parts: “Heber C. Kimball acting as Eloheem, George A. Smith as Jehovah, Orson Hyde as Michael, W. W. Phelps as the serpent.”⁶⁹ The entry for 12 December again identified four parts: “President Young acting as Eloheem P. P. Pratt as Jehovah Orson Hyde as Michael Wm. W. Phelps as the serpent.”⁷⁰ Peter, James, and John—as characters in the endowment—were added the next day, on 13 December. Kimball’s journal for that date identified the roles in the endowment: Brigham Young as Eloheem, John Taylor as Jehovah, Heber C. Kimball as Michael, William W. Phelps as the serpent, Parley P. Pratt as Peter, Amasa Lyman as James, and Orson Pratt as John.⁷¹ The addition of these roles to the endowment ceremony was part of “establishing better order in conducting the endowment” which, in turn, was part of Brigham Young’s process of organizing and systematizing the endowment.

Another example of the effort to refine the endowment ceremony was the elimination of a live actor playing the role of a cherubim with a drawn sword. Years after the Saints left Nauvoo, Ebenezer Robinson recounts that in 1844 he went to the Red Brick Store to speak with the Prophet:

We ran hastily up the stairs to call him out when to our amazement we encountered John Taylor, one of the twelve Apostles, in a long white garment, with a white turban on his head, and a drawn sword in his hand, evidently representing the cherubims and flaming sword which was placed at the east of the garden of Eden, to guard the tree of life.⁷²

It seems reasonable that the role of the angel was eliminated after

68. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 204.

69. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 207.

70. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 209.

71. Kimball, Journal, 13 December 1845. This is the first mention of Peter, James, and John in Kimball’s journal. See also Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 210n18.

72. Ebenezer Robinson, “Utah Not Responsible,” *The Return* 2, no. 4 (April 1890): 252, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3d38faed-c388-4fed-97c0-fa950db8a729/0/12.

Joseph's death but before the endowment was administered in the Nauvoo Temple because the part is not identified in Heber Kimball's diary.

Even though these changes can be documented, it doesn't mean that there were changes to the symbols, covenants, principles, or doctrines conveyed in the temple ordinances. It simply means that the ceremony was adapted to what was available to the Saints and their needs.

Baptisms and sealings in Nauvoo

When the Lord restored the temple ordinance of baptism for the dead, he specifically allowed the ordinance to be performed in the Mississippi River. That only lasted for a short period, however. The Lord revealed that "this ordinance belongeth to my house" and commanded the Saints to build a temple so that baptisms for the dead could be performed there. While the temple was being built, however, he allowed the practice in "the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me" (Doctrine and Covenants 124:30–31). The Lord gave the Church "sufficient time to build a house unto me" and revealed that, during the time of construction, "your baptisms shall be acceptable unto me" (v. 31). At the "end of this appointment" the Saints would no longer be allowed to perform baptisms for the dead outside of a temple (vv. 32–33).⁷³ This is an example of the Lord's allowing leeway in the manner a temple ordinance is performed.

As with the first endowments and baptism for the dead, the first temple sealings for time and eternity were also performed before the temple was dedicated. For example, Joseph and Emma Smith were sealed on 28 May 1843 in the Red Brick Store.⁷⁴ The temple had not yet been completed, but the sealing ordinance needed to be administered.⁷⁵

73. See Alexander L. Baugh, "For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House': The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 47–58, ensignpeakfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/MHS3.1Spring2002Baugh.pdf.

74. "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," *Joseph Smith Papers*, p. 225, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/233; Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances," 61–63; *Saints*, 1:492.

75. "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," *Joseph Smith Papers*, p. 226, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary

Addison Pratt's endowment on Ensign Peak

Prior to the dedication of a temple in Utah, Ensign Peak in Salt Lake City was dedicated as a place where temple ordinances could be administered. This is another example of an adjustment in the administration of temple ordinances based on circumstantial needs. B. H. Roberts stated that Ensign Peak

Was dedicated for such purpose and used as a “House of the Lord” for giving the sacred mysteries of the Temple ritual. . . . It [is] a sacred “Mount” . . . And since this western mountain in the edge of a group of mountains was used as a Temple of God, “Mount” is both more euphonious and implies sacredness rather than “Peak” does. Hence the name here used is suggested “Mount Ensign.”⁷⁶

Just before his mission to the South Pacific Islands, Addison Pratt received his endowment on Ensign Peak. Neither the temple nor the Endowment House had been completed when Pratt was called as a missionary in July 1849. Brigham Young records, “Addison Pratt received his endowments on Ensign Hill on the 21st, the place being consecrated for the purpose.”⁷⁷ “This action,” Roberts notes, “was in harmony with the instructions of the Prophet in Nauvoo when he said that these ordinances of the temple *under certain circumstances* might be obtained on the mountain top, as Moses did them.”⁷⁸

Proxy temple work for the dead

The Saints did not perform endowments for the dead by proxy in the Nauvoo Temple. As Richard E. Bennett points out, Joseph Smith's premature death and the shortness of time between the completion of the Nauvoo Temple and the westward exodus left the Saints with little opportunity to perform endowments for the dead in Nauvoo.⁷⁹

/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/234; Ehat, “Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances,” 63.

76. *History of the Church*, 7:iv. See Lynn Arave, “Ensign Peak: Utah's Mount Sinai,” *Church News*, 20 July 1991, 6, thechurchnews.com/1991/7/20/23260423/ensign-peak-utahs-own-mount-sinai/, which refers to the peak as an “out-door temple.”

77. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), 3:386n10.

78. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 3:386–87, emphasis added.

79. See Bennett, “Line upon Line,” 46.

After the Saints arrived in Salt Lake City, Brigham Young authorized temple ordinances for the living in the Council House and later in the Endowment House. The commencement of proxy endowments for the dead was one of the significant changes that was made in the administration of the temple ordinances in the St. George Temple. On 11 January 1877, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and others performed the first proxy endowments in the newly-dedicated St. George Temple.⁸⁰ The commencement of temple work by proxy for deceased persons represented a significant step forward for the Church. Proxy temple work is a major part of gathering Israel "on both sides of the veil."⁸¹

The sealing ordinance of adoption

During the nineteenth century, ordinances were sometimes performed to seal men to Church leaders. This was known as *adoption*.⁸² This practice necessarily had theological ramifications. As James B. Allen explains, "In the life hereafter, then, it would seem that the eternal family would consist of all those sealed to that particular priesthood holder, whether they were his natural descendants or not."⁸³ Adoption of men to other men to whom they were not biologically related caused confusion in the Church and was difficult to administer. In 1894, President Woodruff received a revelation that a man would no

80. See Bennett, "Line upon Line," 39. Some historians cite 9 January 1877 as the date for the first proxy ordinances citing Wilford Woodruff's journal for that date: "This is the day that the first ordinances of the Endowments for the dead was performed in the Temple of God." However, his 11 January 1877 entry states "To day was the first day in which Endowments were given in the Temple at St George," and then he provides counts of how many proxy ordinances were performed on that day. See "Journal (January 1, 1873 – February 7, 1880)," January 7, 1877–January 13, 1877, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/APAI.

81. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Ensign*, November 2020, 92, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/11/46nelson.

82. Gordon Irving, "The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 291–314, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-law-of-adoption-one-phase-of-the-development-of-the-mormon-concept-of-salvation-1830-1900; Jonathan A. Stapley, "Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 53–117, digitalcommons.usu.edu/mormonhistory/vol37/iss3/1/; Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 83; Bennett, *Temples Rising* 125–33.

83. James B. Allen, "Line Upon Line," *Ensign*, July 1979, 36, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1979/07/line-upon-line.

longer be sealed to another unrelated man but that a person should be sealed to his own parents. He says,

When a man receives the endowments, adopt him to his father, not to Wilford Woodruff, nor to any other man outside the lineage of his fathers. That is the will of God to his people. . . . I say let every man be adopted to his father; and then you will do exactly what God said when he declared He would send Elijah the prophet in the last day.⁸⁴

Allen described the consequences of this revelation:

The results of the new revelation were impressive. Before this time relatively little genealogical work had been done among the members of the Church, and little effort had apparently been made to seal parents to children beyond one or two generations back. Now, President Woodruff told the Saints to trace their genealogies as far as they could and to perform sealings in order to “run this chain through as far as you can get it.” A month later the Church-sponsored Genealogical Society of Utah was formed. With this stimulus a greater interest in genealogical research soon spread throughout the Church.⁸⁵

Jonathan Stapley similarly comments that,

The effect of Woodruff’s revelation cannot be overstated. The confusion common for decades ceded to a unified vision of temple work for the dead. Instead of being prohibited from administering proxy temple rituals for one’s ancestors, Church members received a renewed obligation to seek out their relatives for their mutual salvation.⁸⁶

The sacrament of the Lord’s supper

As noted earlier, in his talk on adjustments to temple ordinances, President Nelson uses the sacrament as an example. The sacrament changed when the use of wine was replaced with water. This was

84. “The Law of Adoption,” *The Deseret Weekly* 48, no. 18 (21 April 1894): 543, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews7/id/7446. See also Stapley, “Adoptive Sealing,” 107–15; Bennett, *Temples Rising*, 298–305.

85. Allen, “Line Upon Line,” 36.

86. Stapley, “Adoptive Sealings,” 111.

consistent with the revelation to Joseph Smith that the sacrament is not necessarily limited to bread and wine:

For behold, I say unto you, that it mattereth not what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink when ye partake of the sacrament, if it so be that ye do it with an eye single to my glory—remembering unto the Father my body which was laid down for you, and my blood which was shed for the remission of your sins. (Doctrine and Covenants 27:2)

That revelation allows latitude in the use of alternative symbols to represent the body and blood of Christ. The General Handbook provides current guidance on the administration of the sacrament, specifying that a “bread-like substitute” may be used in place of the bread in order “to ensure the health and safety of a particular member.”⁸⁷

As an example of this, Ezra Taft Benson spoke of the time following World War II when “the French Saints who, unable to obtain bread, used potato peelings for the emblems of the sacrament.”⁸⁸ The body of Christ can be symbolized by bread or by potato peelings and the blood of Christ can be represented by wine or by water. The *method* of administering the sacrament—the physical symbols used to represent Christ’s body and blood—“mattereth not” so long as it is done with an eye single to the glory of the Lord in remembrance of the Savior’s body and blood.

As another example, Zebedee Coltrin described the way in which the sacrament had been administered in the School of the Prophets in 1833, presided over by Joseph Smith. Coltrin explains that Joseph followed the “ancient order” in which

warm bread to break easy was provided, and broken into pieces as large as my fist, and each person had a glass of wine and sat and ate the bread and drank the wine; and Joseph said that was the way that Jesus and his disciples partook of the bread and wine; and this was the order of the Church anciently, and until the Church went into darkness.⁸⁹

87. *General Handbook*, 18.9.3, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/18-priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings?lang=eng#title_number30.

88. Ezra Taft Benson, “Prepare for Days of Tribulation,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 33–34, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1980/11/prepare-for-the-days-of-tribulation.

89. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake City, 3 October 1883, 59,

B. H. Roberts recorded a similar sacrament service with the Church authorities in the newly dedicated Salt Lake Temple on 20 April 1893:

The bread was then broken and passed to the brethren seated at the tables; the wine was passed & each man took so much as he pleased, dipped his bread in it and ate and drank until he was filled. This was the Lord's supper truly — the sacrament, and we ate & drank in memory of Him — our Savior & Redeemer — our advocate with the Father. Every face beamed with happiness, and shone with intelligence. . . . The sacrament as we partook of it was after the ancient pattern as taught to the Saints by the Prophet Joseph.⁹⁰

Brian Stuy gave a separate account of this meeting: "The brethren were invited to 'eat till they were filled' but to use caution and not indulge in wine to excess."⁹¹ These accounts illustrate President Nelson's teaching, noted above, that the sacrament has been administered in different ways. As long as the symbolic emblems point to the spiritual reality of Christ's Atonement and of our covenants, the exact nature of the symbols is adaptable to the circumstances by those servants who are authorized by the Lord to make such adaptations.

Administering to the sick

When administering to the sick, elders are instructed to anoint the head of the person with a drop of consecrated oil and then to seal the anointing, giving "words of blessing as guided by the Spirit."⁹² The acts of anointing and the laying on of hands are symbolic actions through

catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/94111455-7896-451c-8cff-311dfd48c6c6/0/62.

90. B. H. Roberts, *History's Apprentice: The Diaries B. H. Roberts, 1880-1898*, ed. John Sillito (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, Smith Research Associates, 2004), 283, archive.org/details/HistorysApprenticeBHRoberts/page/n357/mode/2up.
91. Brian H. Stuy, "'Come, Let Us Go Up to the Mountain of the Lord': The Salt Lake Temple Dedication," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 120, dialoguejournal.com/articles/come-let-us-go-up-to-the-mountain-of-the-lord-the-salt-lake-temple-dedication/.
92. *General Handbook*, 18.13.2, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/18-priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings; see also Dallin H. Oaks, "Healing the Sick," *Ensign*, May 2010, 48, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2010/05/general-priesthood-session/healing-the-sick; Spencer W. Kimball, "President Kimball Speaks Out on Administration to the Sick," *New Era*, October 1981, 46, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1981/10/president-kimball-speaks-out-on-administration-to-the-sick.

which priesthood authority is exercised. But scriptures and Church history include accounts of blessings for healing using different methods. Since the ordinance is a symbolic act representing an underlying spiritual reality, it may be administered in various ways, if needed and if approved by those in authority to make such temporary changes. The *Church History Topic* on “Healing” describes some of the variations in the healing practices in the early days of the Church:

Early Latter-day Saints viewed healing as a gift of the Spirit, available to anyone who possessed sufficient faith. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, both men and women performed healing blessings in the name of Jesus Christ, often by laying hands on the affected part of the body but without specifically invoking priesthood authority.

Early Latter-day Saint healing practices were diverse. The use of consecrated oil for anointing the sick was instituted after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, though the manner in which the oil was used changed over time. For example, persons who were sick or injured often applied the oil to the affected areas much like a salve. Rituals commonly employed for other purposes were also adapted for healing. For example, baptisms were sometimes performed for health reasons. In such cases, men and women were immersed in water, not for a remission of their sins but for their physical well-being. These baptisms were performed in temples by men holding priesthood authority until the early 20th century. Other healing ceremonies were performed in temples, including washing and anointing for health; both men and women were set apart to administer those blessings.⁹³

Variations in the physical administrations performed for the sick show that the way the administration occurs is important, but not as important as the exercise of faith. The performance enables the participants to exercise faith, but it is faith in Christ that heals.

93. *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Healing,” churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/healing.

Adjustments to the Temple Ceremony

The variations in the administration of priesthood ordinances mentioned above illustrate the changeability of ordinances to suit the circumstances. The endowments given in Joseph Smith's store and on the top of Ensign Peak and the sealing performed in an upper room show that the manner of giving temple ordinances can be adjusted, but only as needed and authorized.

President Nelson quotes Wilford Woodruff's statement that Brigham Young "did not receive all the revelations that belong to this work; neither did President Taylor, nor has Wilford Woodruff. There will be no end to this work until it is perfected"⁹⁴ As demonstrated by the adjustments made since Nelson's talk, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve similarly recognize that "further refinement" is necessary today and there will be no end to such adjustments from time to time. When Joseph asked Brigham to "organize and systematize all these ceremonies," he opened the door to future refinements to the temple ordinances, a door that is still open. As President Nelson says, "Current adjustments in temple procedures and *others that will follow*, are continuing evidence that the Lord is actively directing His Church."⁹⁵

In connection with modifications made in 2019, the First Presidency issued a statement that the Lord's people have worshiped in temples from the beginning, going back to Adam and Eve. "Prophets have taught that there will be no end to such adjustments as directed by the Lord to His servants."⁹⁶

In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, the First Presidency authorized further changes to the endowment ceremony. They issued a statement saying, "With a concern for all and a desire to enhance the temple learning experience, recent changes have been authorized to the temple endowment ceremony."⁹⁷ Joseph Smith's instruction to organize and systematize the ordinances is still incumbent on the

94. Nelson, "The Temple," 96n14.

95. Nelson, "The Temple," 94, 95, emphasis added.

96. Official Statement, "First Presidency Statement on Temples," Church Newsroom, 2 January 2019, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/temple-worship.

97. Official Statement, "A Message from the First Presidency on Changes to the Temple Endowment, A Message from the First Presidency on Changes to the Temple Endowment," Church Newsroom, 20 July 2020, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-temple-message-july-2020.

leaders of the Church. The goal is to offer the ordinances of the temple to every person in the world "despite differences in language and culture."⁹⁸

As noted above, President Nelson emphasized that Church leaders "seek guidance regularly on how to ensure worldwide accuracy and consistency of temple instruction, covenants, and ordinances despite differences in language and culture."⁹⁹ Hugh Nibley writes, "Any means we can use to convey the information, to convey the knowledge, will fulfill the Lord's purposes."¹⁰⁰ He adds, "So no two temples are built alike. Remember what Brigham Young said when they started to build the Salt Lake Temple with six towers instead of one? 'Now do not any of you apostatize because . . . it will have six towers, and Joseph only built one.'"¹⁰¹

The *Church History Topics* entry entitled "Adjustments to Temple Work"¹⁰² mentions several changes that have been made to the administration of temple ordinances. These include altering the styles of temple garments, including authorizing the use of two-piece garments and, most recently, sleeveless tops for women.¹⁰³ Other significant changes include the construction of variably sized temples, presenting the endowment in a single room, and authorizing women not only to act as witnesses for temple baptisms and sealing ordinances but also presenting at the veil.

The use of film and slides to present the endowment is worth a brief discussion. Although the Church has not provided any explanation for the change to still images, it was likely done because the use of slides makes it easier for the Church to adjust the ceremony to accommodate other languages. All that is needed is a recording of the spoken words by a native speaker instead of the need to make a new film, as when the endowment was presented through a motion picture.

The *Church History Topics* essay includes Harold B. Lee's teaching

98. Nelson, "The Temple," 94–95.

99. Nelson, "The Temple," 94.

100. Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Temple," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond this Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 38, archive.org/details/templecosmosbeyo0000nibl/page/38/mode/2up.

101. Nibley, "The Meaning of the Temple," 38.

102. *Church History Topics*, s.v. "Adjustments to Temple Work."

103. See "First Presidency authorizes redesigned temple garments for members in hot, humid areas," Church Newsroom, 17 October 2024, thechurchnews.com/leaders/2024/10/17/first-presidency-redesign-temple-garments-humid-areas/.

to temple ordinance workers in 1959: “We are having new methods, but the truths are the same regardless of how they are presented. We may expect to have more new methods—but the fundamentals will not be changed.” “In every instance,” the essay concludes, “changes have been authorized by the President of the Church, who holds all the necessary keys for priesthood ordinances.”¹⁰⁴

Under President Nelson, significant changes were made to the temple ceremonies. Without providing a detailed description of the changes, Jonathan Stapley states:

The Presidency of Russell Nelson has been a significant period of reform in temple practice. In December 2017 the First Presidency announced that ordained priests aged fifteen to eighteen could perform baptisms for the dead in the temple and act as witnesses. A month later Nelson [became] the Church president, and within a few years announced that women could also act as witnesses to baptisms and temple ceremonies. This change was actually a return to historic practice, when women served in these roles. The inclusion of women was perhaps a signal that Nelson was focusing on the temple experiences of female Church members. In 2019 the Nelson administration introduced a significant revision of the endowment and sealing ceremonies, updating language that focused on gender relations, making it more egalitarian, and expanding the role of Eve in the drama.

Four years later in February 2023 the First Presidency again released a significantly revised endowment film, with an explanatory introduction, increased gender equality, incorporation of scripture, explicit references to the atonement of Jesus Christ, and revised covenants. In 2024, in apparent response to increased rates of endowed members who do not wear their garments regularly, the First Presidency publicly interpreted the garment as “sacred symbol of Jesus Christ.” At the same time the Church also introduced new styles of garments including without sleeves and skirts for women in Africa, and to be adopted worldwide in the following year. Lastly, also in 2024, Church

104. *Church History Topics*, s.v. “Adjustments to Temple Work.”

leaders reduced the length of the endowment by simplifying language and removing repetition in the liturgy.¹⁰⁵

President Nelson’s expansive view of temple worship focused on bringing people to Christ and preparing them for the Second Coming. As he explained in 2021, future adjustments will continue to facilitate those goals.

A Step-by-Step Ascent into the Eternal Presence

What is the underlying reality that the temple endowment represents? Anthony Sweat explains the distinction: “There is a difference between an endowment and the presentation of the endowment.” “The endowment,” he says, “is a divine power, and the presentation of the endowment is an authorized religious ceremony to facilitate that power.”¹⁰⁶

David O. McKay described the endowment as “the step-by-step ascent into the Eternal Presence.”¹⁰⁷ Those steps into God’s presence are symbolically portrayed through the story of Adam and Eve. Their journey through the Fall, the lone and dreary world, the terrestrial world, and into the celestial kingdom represents the progression of each person into the presence of God. Before the advent of film in the temples, that journey was symbolized by physically moving from one room to another with live actors.¹⁰⁸ The members of the endowment company would follow temple workers who represented Adam and Eve by walking from the creation room to the garden room, the telestial room, the terrestrial room, and finally into the celestial room. Each room represents a spiritual state for Adam and Eve and, symbolically, for a person being endowed. According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*,

The Endowment ceremony . . . portrays the journey of individuals from the premortal existence through mortal life and

105. Stapley, *Holiness to the Lord*, 86.

106. Anthony Sweat, “We Need an Endowment,” BYU Devotional, 5 April 2022, speeches.byu.edu/talks/anthony-sweat/we-need-an-endowment/.

107. Quoted in Truman G. Madsen, “A House of Glory,” BYU Devotional, 5 March 1972, speeches.byu.edu/talks/truman-g-madsen/a-house-of-glory/. President McKay adds, “If our young people could but glimpse it,” he says, “it would be the most powerful spiritual motivation of their lives.”

108. See James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1912), 185–91, archive.org/details/TalmageTheHouseOfTheLord/page/n199/mode/2up; for a description of the endowment rooms in the Salt Lake Temple.

death to life after death . . . Dramatic presentations, special clothing, and symbolic instruction during the temple ceremonies represent various stages in an individual's eternal progression.¹⁰⁹

That progression from one spiritual state to another is now symbolized by viewing the depiction in slides of Adam and Eve making the journey. Whether participants actually walk from room to room or simply watch Adam and Eve doing so on film or slides, the symbolism of the journey is unaffected.

As the culminating symbolic act in the endowment ritual, individuals pass through the veil, symbolized by a curtain,¹¹⁰ into the celestial room. Speaking of the veil of the ancient temple, which was rent at Christ's crucifixion, Bruce R. McConkie states that because of the Atonement, "all men become eligible to pass through the veil into the presence of the Lord to inherit full exaltation."¹¹¹ What is enacted when an individual passes through a symbolic veil, that person hopes to do in reality when passing through an actual spiritual veil into the presence of God. Brigham Young described the endowment as all the ordinances in the temple

which are *necessary* for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation.¹¹²

109. Rex E. Cooper, "Symbols, Cultural and Artistic," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan 1992), 3:1430–31, content dm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/EoM/id/4256.

110. On its website, the Church publishes photographs of a veil room, which depict the curtain that covers the actual veil. See, for example, "Salt Lake Temple Rendering: Veil Room," churchofjesuschrist.org/media/image/FFKR_07_Veil_Room_appr_for_public.-p87fiks; and "Manti Utah Temple Interiors: Pre-Celestial Room," churchofjesuschrist.org/media/image/manti-utah-temple-interiors-pre-celestial-room-aa5e3ac8889911eeb854eeeeac1e290bc69f9c65.

111. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary: The Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973) 1:830.

112. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 2:31, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/9556/rec/3, emphasis added. This statement is quoted in many church talks and publications on the Church's official website. See, e.g., Russell M. Nelson, "Prepare for the Blessings of the Temple," *Ensign*, October 2010, 40, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2010/10/prepare-for-the-blessings-of-the-temple; Boyd K. Packer,

This expansive description shows that the ordinances of the temple are symbolically necessary to return to the presence of God. Regarding the progression through the temple endowment, Jeffrey Bradshaw notes,

One of the most important features of progress through the different spaces of sacredness in the endowment (whether represented as separate rooms or as different phases of existence within the same room) is that movement from one place to another is carefully controlled.¹¹³

Bradshaw describes the symbolism of the journey, which ends “in a divine face-to-face encounter at the heavenly veil” where “those who have endured faithfully to the end of their probation will receive the sure oath of the Father: ‘Ye shall have eternal life.’”¹¹⁴ This is a beautiful description of the reality symbolized by the veil. Bradshaw describes the ordinances of the temple endowment as “preparatory in nature, helping make us ready to ‘behold the face of God,’ as did Moses.” “Indeed,” Bradshaw notes elsewhere, “those who participate in the ordinance of the endowment are shown in ritual what Moses was shown in reality.”¹¹⁵ Notice the connection between *ritual* and *reality*—ritual precedes and typifies reality. Physical ordinances have “spiritual counterparts”¹¹⁶ that are intended to prepare the recipient for “eternal truths and blessings” that “will be taught and bestowed in a more perfect and finished form.”¹¹⁷ “Temple rituals dramatically depict a *figurative* journey into the presence of God.”¹¹⁸

“Come to the Temple,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2007, 20–21, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/10/come-to-the-temple; *Saints*, 2:174–75; *Gospel Topics*, s.v. “Endowment.”

113. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Covenant Path of the Ancient Temple in 2 Nephi 31:19–20,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 64 (2025): 179, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-covenant-path-of-the-ancient-temple-in-2-nephi-3119-20.

114. Bradshaw, “The Covenant Path of the Ancient Temple,” 196n7.

115. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, 35.

116. Widtsoe, “Work for the Dead,” 33.

117. Bradshaw and Bowen, “By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified,” 162.

118. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the Apocalypse of Abraham: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 189, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/moses-1-and-the-apocalypse-of-abraham-twin-sons-of-different-mothers. See also George L. Mitton, “Joseph Smith at the Veil: Significant Ritual, Symbolism, and Temple Influence at Latter-day Saint

Hugh Nibley explains that “the Mormon endowment, like the Egyptian, is frankly a model, a presentation in figurative terms. As such it is *flexible and adjustable*; for example, it may be presented in more languages than one and in more than one medium of communication.” The endowment, Nibley adds, “does not attempt to be a picture of reality, but only a *model* or *analogue* to show how things work, setting forth the pattern of man’s life on earth with its fundamental whys and wherefores.”¹¹⁹ “The ordinances are *mere forms*.”¹²⁰ Nibley notes the distinction between a symbol (which he calls a “model or analogue” or a “mere form”) and the reality that is represented by the symbol. Jeffrey Bradshaw similarly writes that temple symbolism “employs an invariable succession of covenants, names, relationships, roles, virtues, ordinances and priesthoods, and types of clothing as *figurative signposts* corresponding to different stages of existence and their associated glories.”¹²¹

Andrew Ehat has also addressed the distinction between the symbolic representation of the temple endowment and the underlying spiritual reality.¹²² The “actual endowment,” he writes, “is not a *mere representation* but is the *reality* of coming into a heavenly presence and of being instructed in the things of eternity.” Ehat explains that, “in temples, we have a staged representation of the step-by-step ascent into the presence of the Eternal while we are yet alive.”¹²³ It is intended to prepare participants for the actual endowment, which is “the temporary transporting of an individual into the presence of the Lord.”¹²⁴ He cites the teaching of Doctrine and Covenants 76:114–19, where the Lord reveals that the mysteries of the kingdom are bestowed on “those who love him, and purify themselves before him.” To them he “grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves; that through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh,

Beginnings,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 58 (2023): 51–106, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/joseph-smith-at-the-veil-significant-ritual-symbolism-and-temple-influence-at-latter-day-saint-beginnings.

119. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), xxix, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=mi, emphasis added.

120. Nibley, “The Meaning of the Temple,” 26, emphasis added.

121. Bradshaw, “The Covenant Path of the Ancient Temple in 2 Nephi 31:19–20,” 178, emphasis added.

122. Ehat, “Who Shall Ascend,” 48–62.

123. Ehat, “Who Shall Ascend,” 54, emphasis added.

124. Ehat, “Who Shall Ascend,” 61n10.

they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory" (vv. 117–18). The ordinances of the endowment precede and prepare a person for this spiritual reality—entering the presence of God, having been proved true and faithful.

The Endowment as a Parable

The symbolic nature of the performance of temple ordinances is also a way by which sacred truths are protected from being disclosed to those who are not yet ready to receive them. This is necessary since, as must be acknowledged, not everyone who enters the temple is worthy to enter the house of the Lord. Despite the Church's concern that details about the temple ceremonies not be made public, some have recorded, published, and even posted the endowment ceremony online. Although this is a violation of temple covenants, the question may arise whether they have actually revealed any sacred truths that the Lord intended only for worthy temple-goers. In other words, does disclosure of the symbolic, ritual performances of the temple reveal anything about the underlying spiritual reality?

Although it is unfortunate that the sacred symbolism of the temple ordinances would ever be disclosed outside the temple, that disclosure does not expose the truths symbolized by the ordinances. They can only be known and understood through the Holy Spirit by those who have been faithful to their covenants. John A. Widtsoe notes that "many apostates have tried to reveal the ordinances of the House of the Lord." Publishing the ceremony, he observes, reveals nothing meaningful:

Some of their accounts form a fairly complete and correct story of the *outward form* of the temple service; but they are pitiful failures in making clear the eternal meaning of temple worship and the exaltation of spirit that is awakened by the understanding of that meaning. Such attempts *are only words; symbols without meaning*. Is anything more lifeless than a symbol of an unknown meaning?¹²⁵

Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry note that "Symbolic language conceals certain doctrinal truths from the wicked and thereby protects sacred things from possible ridicule. At the same

125. Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," 62, emphasis added.

time, symbols reveal truth to the spiritually alert.”¹²⁶ The temple ordinances both *reveal* and *conceal*. In this regard, Hugh Nibley writes, “the ordinances are not secret, and yet they are, so to speak, automatically scrambled for those not authorized to have them.”¹²⁷ Those who participate in an endowment unworthily may not see beyond the symbolic performances. Moreover, it is not only those who attend unworthily who may not discern the underlying spiritual reality, but also those who fail to realize there are greater depths to the ritual and who fail to seek understanding. Although they hear the words and participate in the ordinances, the true meaning remains hidden to them since it is “scrambled,” so to speak.

Referring to those who reveal sacred temple ordinances to the outside world, Nibley notes, “anyone who would reveal these things has not understood them, and therefore that person has not given them away. You cannot reveal what you do not know!”¹²⁸ Nibley asks, “Why are these temple ordinances guarded with such secrecy when anyone who really wants to can find out what goes on?” He answers:

Even though everyone may discover what goes on in the temple, and many have already revealed it, the important thing is that I do not reveal these things; they must remain sacred to *me*. I must preserve a zone of sanctity which cannot be violated whether or not anyone else in the room has the remotest idea what the situation really is. For my covenants are all between me and my Heavenly Father, all others being present only as witnesses. . . . No matter what happens, it will, then, always remain secret: only I know exactly the weight and force of the covenants I have made—I and the Lord with whom I have made them—*unless* I chose to reveal them. If I do not, then they are secret and sacred no matter what others may say or do.¹²⁹

In this sense, the endowment is like a parable—it communicates truth to some but not to others. As in Jesus’s parables, symbols may or may not have meaning to a participant. The Bible Dictionary includes the following as part of the definition of *parables*:

126. Quoted in “Why Symbols?,” *Ensign*, February 2007, 14, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/02/why-symbols.

127. Hugh Nibley, “Return to the Temple,” in Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 63, archive.org/details/templecosmosbeyo0000nibl/page/62/mode/2up.

128. Nibley, “Return to the Temple,” 64–65.

129. Nibley, “Return to the Temple,” 64.

From our Lord's words (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) we learn the reason for this method [teaching in parables]. *It was to veil the meaning.* The parable conveys to the hearer religious truth exactly in proportion to his faith and intelligence; to the dull and uninspired it is a mere story, "seeing they see not," *while to the instructed and spiritual it reveals the mysteries or secrets of the kingdom of heaven.* Thus it is that the parable exhibits the condition of all true knowledge. Only he who seeks finds.¹³⁰

When his Apostles asked why he taught in parables, Jesus answered that it was because "it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matthew 13:10–11). Why was it not given? Because those in the multitude were not prepared or were not yet worthy. The scriptural record notes that Jesus spoke in parables "because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matthew 13:12–13). The Savior states that, if he taught the truths to the multitude in plainness, "they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them" (Matthew 13:15).¹³¹ Before his death, Jesus told his disciples that he had spoken unto them in "figures of speech" but that the time would come "when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father" (ESV John 16:25).

President Nelson teaches that, as we seek to bring the blessings of the temple to God's faithful children, "the Lord reveals more insights. The ongoing Restoration needs ongoing revelation."¹³² The form of the presentation of the endowment is determined solely by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The Church provides little explanation of the meaning of many of the symbols used in that presentation. Still, as Nelson teaches, those who participate are entitled to personal revelation regarding the meaning of those symbols. He explains that "the endowment is so richly symbolic that only a fool would attempt to describe it; it is so packed full of revelations to those who *exercise their strength to seek and see*, that no human words can explain or make clear the possibilities that reside in temple service." He adds that "the endowment, which was given by revelation, can

130. Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Parables," churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/parables, emphasis added.

131. Quoting Isaiah 6:10.

132. Nelson, "The Temple," 94.

best be understood by revelation.”¹³³ That revelation must be “prayerfully sought with a sincere heart.”¹³⁴ Nelson teaches further that, “to the man or woman who goes through the temple, with open eyes, *heeding the symbols* and the covenants, and making a *steady, continuous effort to understand the full meaning*, God speaks his word, and revelations come.”¹³⁵

Although the symbols themselves may not disclose the full truth of spiritual reality that the Lord has obscured through the symbology, the symbols are nonetheless sacred. For this reason, the instruction given in the temple prohibits discussing much of what transpires during the ceremony. Even more specifically, Elder Bednar has cautioned that “we should not disclose or describe the special symbols associated with the covenants we receive in sacred temple ceremonies.”¹³⁶

Summary and Conclusions

President Nelson emphasized the importance of serving and worshipping in the temple by quoting Brigham Young’s powerful statement:

What do you suppose the fathers would say if they could speak from the dead? Would they not say, “We have lain here thousands of years, here in this prison house, waiting for this dispensation to come”? . . . Why, if they had the power the very thunders of heaven would be in our ears, if we could but realize the importance of the work we are engaged in. All the angels in heaven are looking at this little handful of people and stimulating them to the salvation of the human family. . . . When I think upon this subject, I want the tongues of seven thunders to wake up the people.”¹³⁷

Presidents Nelson and Oaks have encouraged participants to see beyond the symbolic ordinances of the temple to the realities that are represented by the endowment ceremony. This encouragement to seek revelation promises an understanding of the reality underlying the symbolic ordinances of the temple. It also entails a welcoming acceptance, by temple-goers, of the inspired adjustments that are made from time to time as circumstances require.

133. Nelson, “The Temple,” 96n18, emphasis added.

134. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” 33.

135. Nelson, “The Temple,” 96n18, emphasis added.

136. Bednar, “Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing,” 103.

137. Nelson, “The Temple,” 96n13.

The theological foundation of the temple has been undisturbed by adjustments to the temple ceremony. We can be confident that any future modifications will similarly leave the covenants and doctrine unchanged while making the temple available to members world-wide. Temple ordinances, while essential, are insufficient to ensure salvation any more than baptism without repentance is effective to bring the remission of sins. The ordinances only point the way toward higher spiritual levels ultimately ending — as it does symbolically in the endowment — in a passage through the veil into the presence of God.



[Author’s Note: *I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editorial staff of Interpreter for their assistance in editing this article. I would like to specifically thank Godfrey Ellis and Allen Wyatt for their invaluable editorial help in structuring and improving this article. Thanks also to Keenan Reesor for his helpful comments and to my wife, Jan, for her patience and support.]*

R. Stephen Marshall received an Honors BA degree in History in 1977 and a JD in 1980, both from the University of Utah. He practiced law in Salt Lake City for over forty years before retiring to serve a mission with his wife, Jan, teaching Institute together. He has served in various Church callings, including bishop, scoutmaster, high councilor, and on the Church curriculum committees that produced the priesthood and relief society manuals on the teachings of Joseph Smith and of Lorenzo Snow. He resides in Millcreek, Utah, and is the father of ten children and nearly twenty-one grandchildren. He loves studying the scriptures and Church history.

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.