

The Kirtland Temple

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The Kirtland Temple stands to this day as a physical link with the Church's beginnings—the first of first temples. It became a place of Revelation, communion, inspired learning—a place of awe and joy. Today millions revere it as a place of sacred awakening, and above all, a House of God.

Prelude to Endowment

Less than a year after the Church was organized, the Prophet Joseph Smith received this commandment:

Wherefore, for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on High.

And from thence, whosoever I will shall go forth among all nations, and it shall be told them what they shall do; for I have a great work laid up in store, for Israel shall be saved, and I will lead them whithersoever I will, and no power shall stay my hand.¹

This is the earliest modern mention of the word “endowment” in the literature of the Restored Church, and it has come to be understood as an endowment of power in a temple.

A month later, on 1 February 1831, the Prophet Joseph Smith with his wife, Emma, arrived in Kirtland, Ohio. Almost immediately there arose a controversy which showed the need for mature spiritual discernment in the Church. A certain Mrs. Hubble had been claiming that she had received revelations from the Lord for the Church. The Prophet prayed concerning this matter and received what is now known as Section 43 of the Doctrine and Covenants.² Verse 16 of this section contains a second reference to an “endowment”:

And ye are to be taught from on high. Sanctify yourselves and ye shall be *endowed* with power, that ye may give even as I have spoken [italics added].

And the *Far West Record* of 25 October 1831 states:

Joseph Smith Jr. said that the order of the High Priesthood is that they have power given to them to seal up the Saints unto eternal life. And said, it was the privilege of every Elder present to be ordained to the High Priesthood.

Thus, the Prophet Joseph Smith at this early date was already acquainted with the sealing power, a sealing power associated with apostleship. He was named an apostle on 6 April 1830 when the Church was organized

(D&C 20). It is not unlikely that “sealing,” as the crowning ordinance of the Temple, was already foreshadowed in his mind.

Two days after Christmas in 1832 a revelation rich in doctrine and wisdom was given called, perhaps because of its compassionate tone, the “Olive Leaf” (D&C 88). Here was the explicit commandment to erect a temple:

Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God (D&C 88:119).

This house of God is not the same as “the house prepared for the presidency of the school of the prophets” mentioned in verse 127. The context outlines a temple complex, with a central core of administrative buildings. Verses 130 and 131 state that when the president comes into this house of God, “he should be first in the house—behold, this is beautiful, that he may be an example—Let him offer himself in prayer upon his knees before God, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant.”

Again one is led to wonder whether the Prophet knew much more concerning the endowment than he had yet revealed to the body of the Church. John Whitmer writes in his history dated 1 June 1834:

[Joseph] Received a Revelation that it was not wisdom to go to Jackson County at this time and that the armies of Israel should become very great and terrible first, and the servants of the Lord ben [*sic*] endowed with power from on high previous to the redemption of Zion. . . .

The first Elders were to receive their endowment at Kirtland, Ohio in the house of the Lord built in that stake.³

Thus, the “endowment” spoken of was to be given “in the house of the Lord built in that stake.” Kirtland was to be called a stake, and the stake was to have a temple.

A plan now begins to appear in outline. A city of Kirtland is to be built, and is to have a central complex of several different houses, or temples. The city is to be a stake, and a special building called the House of God is to stand in its center. Special ordinances are to be performed within this one building. This is suggestive of the later plan of the City of Zion mentioned in the prophet Joseph’s history of the Church,⁴ also of the plan of the city and stake of Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman. Each of these was to be a stake with a special House of God and other administrative buildings.

For 4 January 1836, John Whitmer recorded:

Now the time drew near when the Lord would endow his servants and before he could do this we must perform all the ordinances that are instituted in his house. There was one ordinance Viz, the washing of feet that we had not yet observed, but did perform it according to revelation, which ordinance belongs only to ordained members and not the whole church.

For particulars read the private history of Joseph the Seer.

After the washing of feet came the anointing with holy oil, which was performed by Joseph Smith, Senior, among the presidents then the presidents of each Quorum proced [*sic*] to anoint the members thereof in their proper time and place.⁵

The “proper time and place” was in part determined by age. It is puzzling that the Prophet Joseph had recorded that on 23 January 1833 “we proceeded to the washing of feet (according to the practice recorded in the 13th chapter of John’s Gospel), as commanded of the Lord.”⁶ He then tells the procedure that was followed. Yet here, nearly three years later, John Whitmer records that this ordinance had not yet been observed, perhaps meaning not yet in the House of God. Earlier, one infers, the Prophet had received inspired knowledge of the writings of John and had undertaken to introduce the practice. Now further light and understanding were given and they “did perform it according to revelation.”⁷ Apparently a form of sealing was attached to this ordinance given in 1833 and again in 1836.

Something of a pattern is apparent here; clearly, ordinances had been performed outside the temple. Later baptism for the dead was performed outside the temple as a preface to the completion of the Nauvoo Temple. The complete temple endowment was given in 1842 in the upstairs room of Joseph Smith’s store prior to the dedication. So all the ordinances performed in the temples today were performed outside the temple, the sealing of children to parents being the only exception, so far as we know.⁸

Wilford Woodruff, who was not present at the dedication services in Kirtland, nor at the earlier ceremonies, received his endowment the following year. He observes in his journal that whatever had been given before was confirmed and renewed in the finished Kirtland Temple.⁹ With what little we have mentioned it is clearly evident that the manner of giving the endowment or at least part of it was understood as early as 1834. A close study of the contents of the revelation received after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple shows that the Prophet Joseph Smith received many more keys of authority and instructions pertaining to temple endowments during the period of dedication than he transmitted to the Twelve or the Saints. Sometime before 4 May 1842 the Prophet gave the complete temple endowment to several of the Twelve in the upper rooms of his store in Nauvoo.¹⁰

The eventual influence of temples built or anticipated in stakes such as Kirtland, Independence, Far West, and Adam-ondi-Ahman clarifies D&C 36:124, which is an explanation of the sacred import and the central influence of temple worship on all the functions of the Church. The Kirtland Temple served as a place to receive those keys necessary for these unfolding powers which the Prophet taught were essential to a fullness of the glory of God. The Saints caught the vision. A grasp of the scope of the divine plan

emerged. In the stress of persecution, they derived strength from the recognition that certain basic principles are eternal. A unique doctrine of the necessity and universality and eternity of ordinances and covenants grew out of Kirtland.

The Structure of the Temple

Section 94 of the Doctrine and Covenants tells us of the revealed plan of the pattern of the city of the Stake of Zion in Kirtland. Brigham Young said several times that the pattern of the Temple was also revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

In a sermon given 6 April 1855 Brigham Young said:

Soon after, the Church, through our beloved Prophet Joseph, was commanded to build a Temple to the most High, in Kirtland, Ohio, and this was the next House of the Lord we hear of on the earth, since the days of Solomon's Temple. Joseph not only received a Revelation and commandment to build a Temple, but he received a pattern also, as did Moses for the Tabernacle, and Solomon for his Temple; for without a pattern, he could not know what was wanting, having never seen one, and not having experienced its use.¹¹

Orson Pratt echoed that idea when he said:

He revealed the pattern according to which that house should be built, pointing out the various courts and apartments, telling the size of the house, the order of the pulpits, and in fact everything pertaining to it was clearly pointed out by revelation. God gave a vision of these things, not only to Joseph, but to several others, and they were strictly commanded to build according to the pattern revealed from the heavens.¹²

and later when he said:

When the Lord commanded this people to build a house in the land of Kirtland, he gave them the pattern by vision from heaven, and commanded them to build that house according to that pattern and order; to have the architecture, not in accordance with architecture devised by men, but to have everything constructed in that house according to the heavenly pattern that he by his voice had inspired to his servants.¹³

In 1881 Erastus Snow speaking in the St. George Stake said:

The general features of the St. George Temple are in conformity to those of the Kirtland Temple which was dedicated in April 1836.

That temple may be said to have been built to show forth the order of the Priesthood, Aaronic and Melchizedek—the priesthood there received the ordinance of the washing of feet and the anointing of the head with oil. This was confirmed to those holding the Priesthood. There was no baptismal font in the temple at Kirtland for that ordinance had not yet been revealed to the people.

By the time the Nauvoo Temple was being built the doctrine of the baptism for the dead was revealed and one of the first things attended to there

was the preparation of the font for the Baptisms of the Dead. It was revealed here in St. George to the Prophet Brigham Young that there should be variations made in the temples to be built. This was given unto the Prophet Brigham in answer to his question, "Oh Lord show unto thy servants if we shall build all temples after the same pattern?" The answer came. "Do you all build your houses after the same pattern used when your family is small? So shall the growth of the knowledge of the principles of the Gospel among my people cause diversity in the pattern of temples."¹⁴

In the Zion city of Independence a twenty-four-building complex is projected, each building being called a temple. Only the pattern of the House of the Lord for the Presidency is provided. The design of the other buildings remains to be given.¹⁵

On 21 April 1834, "Elder Rigdon gave an account of the endowment of the ancient apostles, and laid before the conference the dimensions of the House to be built in Kirtland, and rehearsed the promise to the Elders in the last days, which they were to realize after the House of the Lord was built."¹⁶ No specific detail is added. On 6 June 1833 a conference of high priests assembled in Kirtland and instructed the building committee to obtain stone, brick, lumber and other materials for the building. On 23 July of the same year the cornerstones of the Lord's House, or the Kirtland Temple, were laid after the order of the Holy Priesthood.

In the Archives of the Historical Department of the LDS Church are some hand-drawn sketches in both pencil and ink of the temple pulpits or stands. The pencil drawings give an outline of the stands together with the initials that were to appear on them. These drawings show that the first thing a person facing east would see is a communion table. Slightly higher than the floor, this table is called the "4th stand" and bears the initials "P.E.Q." (Presidency of Elders Quorum). This reflects a stake level of priesthood organization. In the day of the Kirtland Temple all priesthood was organized on a stake basis and not yet on a ward level as we know it today.¹⁷

The next higher stand, or "3rd stand," bears the initials "P.H.P.Q." (Presidency of High Priests Quorum). Still higher, the "2nd stand" carries the initials "P.S.Z." (Presidents of Seventy). The reason for the "Z" is unclear. Perhaps it should have been a "Q" for "Quorum." The upper stand bears the initials "P.M.P.H." (This may have stood for Presidency of Melchizedek High Priests. If so, the last two initials should have been reversed.) Facing west one would see another communion stand bearing the initials "P.D.Q." (Presidency of Deacons Quorum). This was called the "4th stand" also.

The drawings of the Temple of the Presidency do not show a specific altar for the elders or for the deacons but do show a table. Further study is needed of the changes made for the lettering on the stands, since, when the Prophet presided at tile altar, the initials were different. Neither the pencil

drawing nor the pen and ink drawing shows a stand or altar for the elders or deacons, but each does show a table. This table was 10 feet 7 [inches?] long. It was 2 feet wide except at the extreme end, where it was 2 feet and 3 inches wide. It was a simple, straight, flat table and not in the shape of tile higher stands.

Determining more about these stands and their initials will require further study of records which are not presently on file in the Historical Department Archives.

The next higher stand, or “3rd stand,” on the west bears the initials “P.T.Q.” (Presidency of Teachers Quorum). Still higher, the “2nd stand” has the initials “P.P.Q.” (Presidency of Priests Quorum). The upper stand has the initials “P.A.P.” (Presidency of Aaronic Priesthood).

Having one stand for the presidency of the priests quorum and another for the presidency of the Aaronic Priesthood, which is the bishopric, seems out of order today. But these were likely drawn before D&C 107 was given. It is in this section that the Prophet is informed that the bishop is the president of the priests quorum.¹⁸

Another document, carefully executed in black ink, shows the initials to be upon the pulpits. This document is not dated but was apparently made after the temple was completed. The direction of file stands for the Melchizedek Priesthood and the Aaronic Priesthood are reversed and the initials are different from those on the pencil drawings. In this description there is no mention of a stand for the Seventy or the Elders. The writer of the document names a definite stand at which the Prophet presided. These initials must have been there at the time of Joseph Smith’s presidency.

Note that there is no mention of a place for the deacons. The place for the elders and the deacons must have been at the communion tables.¹⁹

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1. *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968), 38:32–33. (Hereafter cited in text as D&C.)

2. See John Whitmer, “History of the Church,” chapter 3, photo copy of an unpublished manuscript in the Historical Department of the Church.

3. It is interesting to note here also that the date recorded by John Whitmer for this revelation is different from that which is given in the heading of D&C 105 today. Orson Pratt may have overlooked this bit of information or he may have thought John Whitmer in error on his dating. Another possibility is that there may have been two revelations combined to make Section 105.

4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1949), 1:357–62. (Hereafter designated *H. C.*)

5. Whitmer.

6. *H. C.*, 1:323.

7. This agrees with the sermon of Brigham Young in February 1846 to the First Council of the Seventy.

8. Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855–56), 16:185–89. (Hereafter designated *J.D.*)

9. See 3 April 1837 entry.

10. For some reason one important personality was left out of the revelation (Section 110) as having appeared in the Kirtland Temple—Peter, the ancient apostle. Heber C. Kimball, speaking on the subject of home manufacturing on 9 February 1862 said: “Some of you have got an idea that wool will not do; but let me inform you that when Peter came and sat in the Temple in Kirtland, he had on a neat woollen garment, nicely adjusted round the neck” (*J.D.*, 9:376). It is strange that this information should seem so commonplace that it had not been officially recorded.

11. *J. D.*, 2:31.

12. *J.D.*, 13:357.

13. *J.D.*, 14:273.

14. St. George Stake Historical Record. no. 97707, 20 November 1881.

15. The “Temple of the Presidency” was not constructed in Kirtland, nor was it built in Independence. It is to be built in the future in Jackson County in fulfillment of prophecy. No drawn plans exist in our present archives for the Kirtland Temple. There are, however, some hand-drawn plans for the “Temple of the Presidency.” These plans were used as suggestions for the size of the visitors’ center now completed in Independence, Missouri.

16. *H. C.*, 2:54.

17. The present-day pattern was outlined in July 1877 when Brigham Young began to correlate the Church programs.

18. This places this drawing sometime before 28 March 1835.

19. The problem of these initials is complicated by an analysis of the Reorganized Church in the *Saints Herald* for 9 March 1953. It gives the following designations for the initials: P.D.A., Presiding Deacon Aaronic; P.T.A. Presiding Teacher Aaronic; P.A.P., Presiding Aaronic Priest; B.P.A., Bishop Presiding over Aaronic; P.E.M., Presiding Elder Melchisedec; M.H.P., Presiding Melchisedec High Priesthood (Quorum of Twelve or Stake High Council); M.P.C., Melchisedec Presiding Counsel (Presidency of Church or Presidency of Stake).