

**Doctrinal Development
of the Church during the
Nauvoo Sojourn,
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T. Edgar Lyon

Those familiar with the history of the rise and expansion of the latter-day restoration movement are aware that Joseph Smith's life from the early 1820s until the settlement at Nauvoo was characterized by frequent movings, economic disasters, mob violence, and in 1838–1839, the expulsion of most of the members of the Church from Missouri. The five year period during which Joseph Smith resided at Nauvoo was different. It is true that on three different occasions attempts were made either to kidnap and transport him to Missouri, or to have him legally extradited to stand trial on one or more charges of violating Missouri laws. However, these attempts were disposed of through legal channels, proving more troublesome than dangerous. In addition, at Nauvoo threats of vexatious lawsuits or conspiracies had forced him to remain aloof from the Saints and curtail his public appearances for short periods of time until the threats had passed, but for the most part of a year or two at Nauvoo Joseph Smith experienced a greater freedom than he had known for the previous ten years. He was nearly always able to walk the streets of the city, night or day, to drive into the country, or to visit distant cities or branches of the Church, confident that his safety was assured. One reason for this was his awareness that Nauvoo, the largest city in Illinois, was filled with thousands of loyal Latter-day Saints who would have risked their lives if need be to protect him. Among these were hundreds of courageous men who would leave their work at a moment's notice to defend him or to travel with him as body guards.

Another reason for his assurance of safety was the fact that the Nauvoo Charter had set up an independent body of militia, with compulsory enrollment provided for all able-bodied men within the commonly accepted ages of military service. This body, with detachments located in outlying communities and across the river in Iowa, numbered approximately 2,000, and Joseph Smith was the commanding lieutenant general. There was no other body of militia of this size in the state, and it outnumbered all the other militia groups in Hancock County combined. Knowing the Legion and the loyalty of the individual members to him were deterrents against anyone or any group of men entering Nauvoo to harass him or the Saints gave Joseph the confidence of being among friends who could provide more than enough support to guarantee his protection in any situation.

It must be remembered that although Nauvoo had been divided into wards, and the number increased as the city grew, there were no plans to construct what we presently know as ward meetinghouses or chapels. The "regular" meetings were outdoor, city-wide affairs. The Nauvoo wards were essentially ecclesiastical units of the city for organizing Church economics, settling local disputes, and caring for the needy. During inclement weather some of the bishops arranged to hold sacrament and testimony meetings in school rooms, public buildings, or large houses where the ward members could meet, but these were substitutes for the large city-wide public services which convened out of doors much of the year. Though these large meetings were usually designated as having been held in "The Grove," a number of open-air gathering places were used in Nauvoo, and the site shifted as the city grew, or the vicissitudes of the weather demanded.

By 1840 these meetings had become quite regular occurrences and were continued until the fall of 1845 when the lower floor of the temple had been sufficiently finished to allow meetings indoors, although on temporary seating. The Saints in the city, those on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, and those residing a few miles outside of Nauvoo, knew that unless the weather was very threatening, or it was extremely cold, a preaching meeting would convene about 10:00 A.M. each Sunday morning somewhere in Nauvoo, usually in the vicinity of the Nauvoo Temple. And from what soon became an established custom, the probability was high that Joseph Smith would be one of the speakers, if not the only one. What more capable or better preacher could they find in the Church than the Prophet who had been responsible for the restoration of the gospel? This situation of a large body of people, eager to be fed spiritual teachings, must have stimulated Joseph Smith to satisfy their longings.

A survey of the sermons preached by Joseph Smith at Nauvoo and some neighboring communities, as well as articles and epistles he sent to the Saints, indicates he made great use of the body of new scriptures he had made available to the Church. If we review his sermons and writings, we might figuratively say that he took a huge canvas and on it, as would a master artist, painted a panorama of the pre-mortal life of man and his progress to a mortal existence, in which his preexisting spirit was clothed in a mortal body. Then he presented glimpses of the disembodied state following death, the re-embodiment of the spirit and body through the resurrection, and the various estates attained in the degrees of exaltation or damnation. Up to the Nauvoo period, these gradations or phases of life in the totality of eternal existence had never been clearly defined. As the Prophet undertook to delineate relationships between these on-going phases of life into a coherent pattern, he refined LDS theology in several key areas: (1) Concepts of God and Man, (2) Man in the World, (3) Salvation for the Dead,

(4) Eternal Nature of Priesthood Covenants, (5) Temple Ordinances for the Living, (6) Celestial and Plural Marriage, and (7) Eternal Progression. He also prepared the Wentworth Letter from which we have the Articles of Faith. All these doctrines were not presented at once, but came as the Saints proved they could accept and try to live them.

The Concepts of God and Man

The *Lectures on Faith*, published in the forepart of the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, stated that there were two members of the Godhead, the Father and the Son.¹ The Father was defined as a personage of Spirit, and the Son as a personage of Tabernacle. The *Lectures* also stated the Father and Son possessed the same mind, and this mind was the Holy Ghost.

During the years between its publication in 1835 and the settlement of the Saints at Nauvoo, there had been some speculation concerning this statement among the Saints, especially after the publication of Joseph Smith's dictated account of the First Vision. At a conference held at Ramus, Illinois, on 2 April 1842, Joseph Smith vitiated the erroneous doctrine in the *Lectures* by declaring:

The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us. (D&C 130:22)

After Joseph Smith's death, this later teaching was incorporated in the Doctrine and Covenants and became a foundation of Mormon theology. It marks a permanent theological landmark in the development of the doctrine of the Godhead among Latter-day Saints and in time contributed to the deletion of the *Lectures on Faith* from the Doctrine and Covenants. This doctrine has done much to clarify the understanding of the Saints and their relationships to their Eternal Father.

This relationship needed to be clearly understood because the great majority of the converts to the Church during the lifetime of Joseph Smith had been reared as Episcopalians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Congregationalists, Baptists, members of the Reformed churches, "Campbellites" (reformed Baptists or Disciples of Christ), members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), as Unitarians, or Universalists. With the exception of the latter three, and the Methodists, all of them predicated their doctrines of salvation on one or more variations of predestination by God. The Episcopalians and Roman Catholics taught a less stringent version of predestination which upheld God's power to save or damn, but conceded that it was not an unchanging absolute. They believed God could change his earlier decision if something in the way a person lived had shown the first decree would have been unjust. The Calvinistic bodies of the day (Presbyterians,

Congregationalists, Baptists, and the Reformed churches) accepted a doctrine of absolute predestination. Regardless of which of these absolute predestinarian doctrines one believed there was little a mortal could do to change the decree which God had already made for the elect. The Methodists alone maintained that man enjoyed a freedom of the will which would base salvation on personal righteousness.

In revelations to Joseph Smith, the Lord had stressed the importance of man's free will in accepting the salvation offered by the Savior. However, it was inevitable that converts would bring with them into the Church some of their former doctrines and that these would survive in their minds and color their thinking about salvation. At Nauvoo Joseph Smith preached sermons in which he gave a new dimension to the concept of man which apostate Christianity had lost². These sermons had their roots in the doctrine of preexistence. Very little had been written or printed on this subject in the first decade of the existence of the Church.³ While the Bible and Book of Mormon have accounts which are now used to support the doctrine of a pre-earthly existence, little use was made of these verses by the Saints prior to the Nauvoo period.

The Book of Moses, which was further augmented by the teachings of the Book of Abraham, provided Joseph Smith with material by which he interpreted the relationship of mortals to God as one of true kinship. He taught that God the Father had created an eternal spirit which inhabited the body of every mortal on earth. Thus, we are actually children of God in a literal sense, being offspring of Deity. Hence, we have inherited from our creator-parent some of his capacities, just as we inherited certain characteristics from our earthly parents. Joseph Smith would not believe that a loving, just, and fair God would place his children on earth in a mortal body that was depraved and often damned before birth. Nor would he believe that God would have created spirit children and then damned them for eternity. No mortal parent would be so unjust. He rejected completely the timeworn errors of Christianity concerning mortal beings and their destiny.

Instead of teaching that man's nature was inclined toward anti-godly behavior, Joseph Smith taught that mortals could identify themselves as spirit children of a God who loved them and that they had the potential to become like their eternal parent. If they failed in this, it would be because of their own evil choices, whether by their willful disobedience of God's law, ignorance, or rebelliousness toward law and order.

Man in the World

Joseph Smith also clarified man's relationship to "worldly" activities during this period. Orthodox Protestantism in the 1830s and 40s condemned and forbade what were described as "worldly entertainments":

dancing, operas, the theatre, girls playing with dolls, playing certain musical instruments, celebrating Christmas, and participating in similar recreational activities. The Prophet succeeded in changing the views of many of his followers who had been reared on such teachings. At Nauvoo we read of the Saints attending dinner-dances, participating in stage plays, singing Christmas carols, and playing in bands and orchestras. The Prophet taught that such things were not inherently evil. They were evil when an evil use was made of them. This released the Saints from old mores and gave them a new sense of freedom. It opened new avenues for finding refreshing diversion in activities many had been taught were the works of Satan. This made them identify themselves as children of God in reality, and feel a close kinship with their Eternal Father.

Salvation for the Dead

In the fall of 1840, Joseph Smith taught the doctrine of salvation for the dead. Section 124 of the Doctrine and Covenants, dated 19 January 1841, introduced the first scripture concerning this outreach of mortals to assist in making exaltation a possibility for their departed ancestors (see verses 27–33). The first step in this process consisted of a proxy baptism for their departed forebears. Such baptisms for the dead were at first performed in the Mississippi River at Nauvoo. As soon as the basement walls of the temple were laid, that portion was roofed over with a temporary covering and a wooden font, resting on twelve wooden oxen, was installed. River baptisms for the dead were then discontinued, according to instructions in D&C 124. At this early period there were few guidelines to follow. As a result people were baptized for both sexes of their ancestors. Toward the close of the Nauvoo period this was changed, and ordinance work for the dead could only be done for those of the same sex as the proxy worker.

Later a second step in the salvation for the dead consisted of the endowment ceremony being done through a living proxy. Due to the short period of time the Saints remained at Nauvoo after the endowment ceremonies were available in the temple, few if any complete ordinances for the dead were performed at that time, there being too many living people who desired these blessings. Some marriages of the dead for eternity were performed and other sealings accomplished, but this phase of temple work was little more than introduced to the Saints at Nauvoo.

The Eternity of Priesthood Covenants

The enduring power of the Melchizedek Priesthood ordinances was not realized by many in the early days of the Church. Joseph Smith interpreted this power to be much stronger and more enduring than a setting apart to office or an assignment in the Church. In D&C 84:38–40 it is stated

that there is an oath and a covenant of the priesthood which God the Father cannot break. This was interpreted to mean that apostasy and even excommunication could not destroy the validity of such covenants. The blessings thereof can be lost and the priesthood authority made inoperative through Church discipline, but the priesthood itself is never obliterated. As a result, one who has received the Melchizedek Priesthood and is excommunicated, upon returning to the Church is not reordained to that priesthood, nor are endowments redone, neither is the marriage sealing repeated. These, then, by authority of the President of the Church, or through a member of the Council of the Twelve, are restored to the repentant member⁴.

Temple Ordinances for the Living

During the early period of use of the Kirtland Temple for sacred ordinances, many of the Saints received what were often referred to as their "endowments." These consisted of preparatory ordinances commonly referred to as "washings and anointings."⁵ Doctrine and Covenants 124, received in Nauvoo in 1841, contained a commandment to the Church to erect a temple and provide facilities for ordinances for both living and dead, designed to save and exalt the recipients. It contained a promise of great blessings, but also a threat that if the Saints failed to complete the structure, ". . . ye shall be rejected as a church, with your dead" (D&C 124:32). Verses 40–42 contained the promise of great blessings if the Saints completed the temple:

And verily I say unto you, Let this house be built unto my name, that I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people;

For I deign to reveal unto my church, things which have been kept hid from before the foundations of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fullness of times;

And I will show unto my servant Joseph all things pertaining to this house, and the Priesthood thereof, and the place where it shall be built.

According to these verses the Lord would give the Saints priesthood ordinances and blessings which had not been given in any prior dispensations because they ". . . pertain to the dispensation of the fullness of times." This promise must have served as the motivating force which encouraged the Saints to sacrifice their scanty means to further the construction of the Nauvoo Temple in the midst of adversity. The zeal with which the men worked, months after many of the Church leaders had commenced their westward journey, to complete and dedicate the Nauvoo Temple is evidence of their determination to be worthy of the blessings they had received therein, and to assure all the Saints that they and their Church had not been rejected by the Lord.

Before the temple was completed, Joseph Smith introduced the endowment ceremony to a select group on the second floor of his brick store in Nauvoo in May 1842. From then until near the close of his life, small groups of men and women were given their endowments at various places in Nauvoo. By late November 1845, the upper floor of the temple was nearing completion. Church records indicate as soon as the plasterers and painters had completed the attic story, the leading brethren and their wives provided drapes for the windows and installed canvas curtains which divided the main hall of the top floor into four rooms. The front part of the floor provided space for the dressing and washing and anointing rooms. The floors were covered with borrowed carpets which townspeople gladly supplied. The walls were decorated with borrowed painted portraits, landscapes, and mirrors. Potted plants and shrubs were hauled in the freezing weather from homes of the Saints to beautify the House of the Lord, thus creating a setting of tranquillity and beauty for the rites of the temple. The Saints had been raising them in their houses after the cold weather set in.

On 11 December 1845, the first group of Saints participated in the endowment ceremonies in the temple. As soon as a sufficient number had been trained to conduct this work, sessions were held around the clock. The smallness of the quarters and the arrangement of the exits and entrances made it impossible for a second group to use the facilities until those of the first group had completed their rites. The endowment ceremonies taught the participants the meaning of the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial glories, as well as the blessings and obligations required of those who aspire to the highest degree of glory.

Following the endowment ceremonies many husbands and wives were sealed for eternity. Some whose spouses had died were sealed to their deceased companions. Many plural wives were sealed to their husbands. The plural wives of Joseph Smith were given a temple sealing which had been impossible at the time he had married them.⁶ But a great number of sealings were not done at that time because of space limitations and the demand for the officiators to give endowments to the living. Likewise most of the sealing of children to parents was postponed to a later date, much of it being done in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City, commencing in 1855. The Nauvoo endowment and sealing books indicate that upwards of 5,000 Saints received the blessings the revelation had promised if they were obedient to the commandment of the Lord to complete his temple.

Celestial and Plural Marriage

As far back as 1832, according to Orson Pratt, Joseph Smith had told some of the brethren at Kirtland that in time plural marriage would become part of the doctrine and practice of the Church, because it was part

of the restoration of the fullness of the gospel which had been promised, embracing the covenants God had made with Abraham.⁷ Official Church records indicate the first plural marriage by the Latter-day Saints was performed at Nauvoo in 1841 when Joseph Bates Noble sealed Louisa Beaman to the Prophet Joseph.⁸ As the members of the Council of the Twelve returned from their missions to Great Britain in 1841, Joseph Smith took them one by one and taught them the doctrine. Some had more difficulty than others in accepting it. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball mentioned the struggles they had.⁹ At this time Orson Pratt became disillusioned with Joseph Smith and his rejection of the doctrine apparently was one of the reasons he and his wife were excommunicated from the Church at Nauvoo.¹⁰ Through further study Elder Pratt became converted to the doctrine, and he and his wife were rebaptized and at the April Conference of 1843 Elder Pratt was reinstated in the Council of Twelve. In time he came to be the foremost expounder of the doctrine, delivering the first public address on the subject and publishing most of the early literature to explain why it was instituted as a practice of the Church. Although the doctrine was publically disavowed at Nauvoo and for six years after the Saints went West,¹¹ many of the prominent men and women in the Church had entered into plural marriage in Nauvoo and started the long trek to the west with their families.

Eternal Progression

A corollary of the doctrines of free will and preexistence is found in the teachings of Joseph Smith which extended these doctrines into the realm of mortals having a potential to become gods. The Book of Abraham—the small new volume of scripture published by Joseph Smith at Nauvoo—showed how Abraham in the pre-mortal state had used his free will and intelligence to make him a great figure in the eyes of God. He had been chosen to become a great figure in mortality. This choosing was not a predestination, but a foreordination based on the right choices he made before coming to earth, and his wisely making the same choice of good during mortality.

The sealings and blessings of the endowment ceremony, coupled with the doctrine of marriage for time and eternity, including plural marriage, augmented by examples of great prophets such as Abraham, who had used their free agency wisely in the preexistence, formed the basis upon which Joseph Smith taught the doctrine of eternal progression. Through their God-given potential which the people on earth inherit from the Divine Father, it can become possible for some resurrected and exalted mortals to achieve the full potential of their divine inheritance and progress toward godhood. This would, of course, be a long and slow process whereby the

married partners acquire the intelligence necessary to undertake and fulfill the responsibilities to become creators as the Eternal Father and the Son. It was in the “King Follett Discourse” given at the April Conference of the Church in 1844, at Nauvoo that the Prophet first described this ultimate potential of human beings.¹²

The Articles of Faith

In the spring of 1842, Joseph Smith presented the first printed Articles of Faith. At the request of John Wentworth, a Chicago editor, the Prophet summarized some of the more salient points of the religion the Saints had embraced. The summary, intended for a non-Mormon audience, was never meant as a creed or a complete delineation of the gospel as believed by the Latter-day Saints. No doubt Joseph Smith sensed that if he listed all the ramifications of the gospel as it was being revealed, the array would become confusing and those who read it would not understand so many unfamiliar doctrines. For example, he did not mention such items as prayer, resurrection, and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It is possible that he thought all Christians would understand that such beliefs were common practices of all professing Christians. Neither did he mention salvation for the dead, endowments for the living and dead, the eternity of the marriage covenant, the three degrees of glory, sealings, eternal progression, or many others. Such new and strange doctrines could not possibly be understood by sectarian Christians in a few words. What he really did was list points of doctrine which were directed to the burning issues of the day, such as Unitarianism, Trinitarianism, Universalism, predestination, election by grace, necessity for Christian baptism, and other doctrines which were dividing Christianity into many small antagonistic factions.

Summary

When the Saints settled at Nauvoo in the spring of 1839, the organization and doctrines of the Church had made little progress beyond what had been taught at Kirtland, Ohio. Seven years later as Brigham Young and the Saints commenced their journey toward the West, the Church had developed the concept of wards and bishoprics, both of which were unknown earlier. The Prophet’s new interpretation of the Godhead made at Nauvoo, the concept of the eternity of the Melchizedek Priesthood and its covenants, the new volume of old scripture (Book of Abraham) were theirs; baptism for the dead and endowments and sealings for the living and the dead were all new foundation stones for their common faith. A new concept of personal identity with their God and Savior through the doctrine of preexistence and the sealing of children to parents in eternal family relationships

were all part of the new teachings and practices of this last dispensation of the gospel. Eternal progression opened new vistas of mortals' greatest challenges.

It was the same Church organization which had been effected on 6 April 1830, but its outlook and visions of eternal worlds had given new and exciting meaning to the understanding of those who believed in their inspired Church leadership. This was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which President Brigham Young was to lead to the West, where the teachings of Joseph Smith could be perpetuated.

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1. *Discourses on the Holy Ghost and Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 5, ed. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), pp. 134–41.

2. See Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," as an example of apostate Christianity's view of man in the eyes of God.

3. Parley P. Pratt's *Voice of Warning*, the earliest and most widely circulated booklet of the early years of the Church's existence, which explains the teachings of the Restored Church, is practically silent on the subject. The index to the six volumes of the *Times and Seasons* has only one citation to the doctrine and that is in 1845.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, s.v. "Restoration of Former Blessings," *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), p. 570.

5. Dean C. Jessee, "The Kirtland Diary of Wilford Woodruff," *BYU Studies* 12 (Summer 1972):365–99.

6. See record in "Nauvoo Temple Sealings, Book A," Church Historical Department.

7. Orson Pratt, "Discourse on Celestial Marriage," in *The Bible and Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Steam Printing Establishment, 1877), p. 81.

8. Affidavits of Joseph Bates Noble, Church Historical Department. See also B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 2:101–02.

9. See an account of Heber C. Kimball's first contacts with polygamy in Stanley B. Kimball, "Heber C. Kimball and Family, The Nauvoo Years," in this issue of *BYU Studies*.

10. T. Edgar Lyon, "Orson Pratt—Early Mormon Leader" (Master's diss., University of Chicago, 1932), pp. 34–42. See also Brigham Young's Journal, 8 and 20 August 1842.

11. See Roberts, *Comprehensive History* 2:103–05 and 6:55–58.

12. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:302–17. This sermon was deleted from the original printing of 1912, after the book had been printed. It was reinserted when these volumes were reproduced in the 1950s by photo-offset printing.