Eternal Marriage

In LDS theology, eternal marriage is the union of a couple in a temple ceremony for time and all eternity. The covenant of eternal marriage appears to be a modern doctrinal development that isn’t specifically mentioned in any of the standard works prior to 1843 (see D&C 132).

Old Testament

Marriage is depicted in the Old Testament as a culturally important practice, but there is no mention of its continuation beyond the grave. Doctrine and Covenants 132:30 refers to Abraham being married for eternity citing as evidence the Lord’s promise to him that “his seed” would be “as innumerable as the stars; or . . . the sand upon the seashore.” The rationale seems to be that the promise to Abraham of innumerable seed can make sense only if it is fulfilled in the hereafter, thereby confirming an eternal marriage relationship. First, it should be recognized that in the Old Testament account, it wasn’t Abraham’s immediate seed that would be innumerable, but his extended posterity. (Modern translations use the word “descendants.”) Second, the expression “sand of the sea” or “stars of heaven” didn’t mean countless in number, but was simply Near Eastern hyperbole meaning “a whole lot”\(^1\) (see Josh. 11:4; Judg. 7:12; 1 Sam. 13:5; 2 Sam. 17:11; 1 Kgs. 4:20; Nah. 3:16). In fact, one wonders if the biblical writer might have seen God’s promise as having been fulfilled when Israel entered the Promised Land and Moses proclaimed, “The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and, behold, ye are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude” (Deut. 1:10; see also 10:22; 28:62; Neh. 9:23; 1 Kgs. 4:20).

New Testament

In the New Testament, marriage is not only excluded as a practice having any saving merit, but at times it is even denigrated. Though he opposed divorce, Jesus never went on record as proclaiming the sanctity of marriage and family and, in fact, stated that he had come to set family members against one another (Matt. 10:35-37).\(^2\) He urged his followers to put the kingdom of God above family saying, “Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house . . . or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, who shall not receive manifold more” (Luke 18:29-30). Jesus commended those who, choosing not to marry, “have made themselves eunuchs [i.e., celibates] for the kingdom of heaven's sake” (Matt. 19:9-12). The only
The spiritual marriage of the believer to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2).

According to non-LDS biblical scholars, Jesus didn’t see marriage as something that would extend into the next life. They cite as evidence Mark 12:18-25 where the Sadducees, seeking to discredit belief in the resurrection, pose to Jesus the hypothetical situation of a woman marrying and becoming a widow seven times in succession and then ask of him which of all the seven men the woman will be married to in the resurrection. Jesus reprimands them for their lack of understanding and explains that “when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven” (Mark 12:25). The non-LDS explanation of this passage is that Christ is pointing out the absurdity of their own inquisition, stating that such a hypothetical situation as this doesn’t disprove the resurrection because life in the hereafter is not going to be like earth life; there is no marriage, but rather all become as the angels. According to Rabbinical teachings dating back to the time of Christ, “In the world to come there is neither eating, nor drinking, nor procreation, nor strife; but the righteous sit encrowned and enjoy the splendor of the Shekinah [i.e., ‘of God’].”

Christ’s response to the Sadducees was left unmodified in the JST, although Doctrine and Covenants 132:15-16 adds the proviso that it is only those who are not married for all eternity by the proper priesthood authority that will become as angels and remain single. All others become gods and their marriage continues. In light of the LDS doctrine of eternal marriage, several explanations of Christ’s response to the Sadducees have subsequently been proffered. James E. Talmage commented in 1899, “The Lord’s meaning was clear . . . since all except the first had married her for the duration of mortal life only,” she naturally belonged to the first. Joseph F. Smith explained Christ’s response in 1912: “Christ understood the principle [of eternal marriage], but he did not cast his pearls before the swine that tempted him.” Thus, Christ refused to give the Sadducees a real answer. A few decades later, Joseph Fielding Smith turned the Sadducees’ question around to make it an inquiry expressly related to eternal marriage rather than a hypothetical question to disprove the resurrection. He contended that the Sadducees were fully aware that Christ preached eternal marriage, “otherwise they never would have presented the question to the Savior.” These various interpretations all achieve reconciliation between Christ’s response to the Sadducees and the LDS doctrine of eternal marriage, but does any one of them express the true intent of the passage?
A New Testament passage Latter-day Saints cite as teaching eternal marriage is 1 Corinthians 11. Here Paul gives a lengthy sermon on why women should have their heads covered when they prophesy and pray, basically explaining that it symbolizes woman’s subordination to man (1 Cor. 11:1-10). To ensure that the Corinthian saints don’t take this to mean that men are superior to women, Paul immediately follows with: “Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (v. 11). Latter-day Saints have traditionally interpreted this last verse to mean that man and woman must be eternally joined in marriage to stand approved before the Lord. There is no express mention, however, of marriage in Paul’s exposition as the context of his remarks is male and female relationships and customs in the church (1 Cor. 11:3-10). Thomas Schreiner, professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explains, “First Corinthians 11:3-10 is a sustained argument in favor of male headship and female submission, yet with full participation in worship for women. . . . Verses 11-12 function as a qualification so that the Corinthians will not misunderstand Paul’s argument. Woman and man stand in interdependence in the Lord (11:11).” That is, men and women who are “in the Lord” (i.e., Christ’s disciples) are equally dependent on each other for spiritual growth—whether in or out of marriage—and men should not assume superiority just because they are the designated leaders. There is no indication that Paul was looking to the hereafter or proclaiming marriage to be a requirement for obtaining eternal life.

Though Paul himself may at one time have been married, in his writings he expressed a determination to remain single (1 Cor. 7:7) and openly dissuaded fellow disciples from marrying (1 Cor. 7:1-9). At the same time, however, he condemned those who absolutely forbade marriage (1 Tim. 4:1-4). His writings simply suggest a belief that marriage was less important than the work of the ministry. He wrote, “He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife” (1 Cor. 7:32-33). With his apocalyptic perspective of an imminent return of Christ, Paul considered it imprudent to marry. To the Saints in Corinth he wrote, “In view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are [i.e., either married or single]” (NRSV 1 Cor. 7:26). To the single brethren he expressly instructed, “Do not seek a wife” (v. 27). Paul even seems to indicate that, at the Lord’s coming, marriage would pass away with all other earthly relationships saying, “The appointed time [of Christ’s second
coming] has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none….For the present form of this world is passing away” (NRSV 1 Cor. 7:29).  

Nauvoo Period

As previously noted, the concept of eternal marriage isn’t found anywhere in the Book of Mormon or other Latter-day scripture prior to 1843. It was in Nauvoo, in the summer of 1843, that Joseph Smith formally introduced the “new and everlasting covenant of marriage” (D&C 132), which initially entailed plural marriage. As to its connection to plural marriage, the revelation itself came in direct answer to Joseph’s question as to why many of the Old Testament leaders had more than one wife (D&C 132:1). According to BYU religion professor Robert J. Matthews, a specialist on the Joseph Smith Translation, “It is likely that the question regarding the plurality of wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [in Doctrine and Covenants 132] could have arisen during the translation of the book of Genesis, which took place in 1830 and 1831.”

Joseph taught that this practice was essential for exaltation (D&C 131:1-4) and that whoever rejects this covenant is “damned, for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory” (D&C 132:4).

Joseph took the first of his thirty-three documented plural wives (Fanny Alger) as early as 1836. Notably, nine out of the first eleven wives Joseph married were already married and cohabiting with their husbands, most of whom were faithful Mormons. This means polygamy initially allowed for polyandry, or the marriage of a woman to multiple husbands (though only one for eternity).

Post-Nauvoo to Twentieth Century

Many Saints in Nauvoo resisted plural marriage, but the conviction that it was a command from God and essential to one’s exaltation persuaded the more faithful to comply. As to the perceived necessity of entering into plural marriage in order to gain exaltation, early LDS leader William Clayton testified, “From him [i.e., Joseph Smith], I learned that the doctrine of plural and celestial marriage is the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on the earth, and that without obedience to that principle no man can ever attain to the fulness of exaltation in Celestial glory.”

Brigham Young declared in 1866, “The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.” Then apostle Joseph F. Smith
was adamant on this point and stated in 1878, “Some people have supposed that the doctrine of plural marriage was a sort of superfluit[y], or non-essential, to the salvation or exaltation of mankind…. I want here to enter my solemn protest against this idea, for I know it is false…. [W]hoever has imagined that he could obtain the fullness of the blessings pertaining to this celestial law, by complying with only a portion of its conditions, has deceived himself. He cannot do it.”

Thus, it was firmly held and fervently taught through much of the latter-half of the nineteenth century that plural marriage was essential to exaltation. Marriage to only one wife would never qualify a man for the highest kingdom in the celestial world.

On November 24, 1889, in the wake of mounting pressure by the U.S. government to discontinue polygamy, President Woodruff assured the Saints that “the Lord will never give a revelation to abandon plural marriage.” The following year, however, with federal pressure intensifying, he issued his famous Manifesto discontinuing the practice of polygamy and thereby opening the way for Utah statehood. Specifically, the Manifesto withdrew permission for new plural marriages and advised members of the Church not to contract illegal marriages.

*Modern LDS Teachings*

Today the doctrine of plural marriage is seldom discussed in Church publications, and its significance and practice in early LDS history are sometimes marginalized. Church authorities no longer maintain that plural marriage is required for exaltation, but instead assert that a husband can be exalted with only a single wife. Although Bruce R. McConkie wrote in *Mormon Doctrine* that polygamy would “obviously….commence again after the Second Coming of the Son of Man and the ushering in of the millennium,” LDS commentators today generally refrain from speculating on the future practice of polygamy. Interestingly, polygamy is still practiced in the Church for the afterlife. A man who remarries after being widowed, for example, is permitted to be sealed to his new wife in the temple and is therefore married for all eternity to both wives.

*Calling and Election Made Sure*

The ultimate attainment to which Latter-day Saints aspire is to have their calling and election made sure, which is the unconditional promise of eternal life. Joseph Smith taught that a
man may receive this promise in mortality “when the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds
that the man is determined to serve him at all hazards.”24

During much of the LDS Church’s first century, this promise was commonly
administered through an ordinance performed in the temple called the “second anointing.” This
second anointing was considered an essential ordinance for exaltation until Heber J. Grant
initiated an official Church policy stating that it was no longer a requirement. It is the current
teaching of the Church that only the routine temple ordinances are needed for exaltation.25

Biblical Teachings

The Old Testament mentions no guarantees of one’s salvation, since the whole notion of
salvation in a hereafter is not at all a developed concept. In New Testament times, although no
guarantees were expressed, Saints were admonished to make their “calling and election sure” (2
Pet. 1:10). All Saints were considered called “unto his [God’s] eternal glory” and “elected” in
Christ (1 Pet. 5:10, 13). Peter seems to have been was concerned, however, that those who didn’t
continue in the Christian life would forget that they had been forgiven and lose their calling and
election (2 Pet. 1:1-9). It is in this context that he admonished them to strive to make their calling
and election sure. There is no indication that he was referring to the performance of some rite,
such as a second anointing, that would provide an unconditional guarantee of salvation that
believers could receive while in mortality. Peter simply tells them that, by persisting in following
righteousness, they will “never fall” (2 Pet. 1:10) but ultimately gain “entrance . . . into the
everlasting kingdom of our Lord” (2 Pet. 1:11). Nowhere in the New Testament is an
unconditional guarantee of salvation promised to believers while in mortality. Rather they were
always commanded to remain faithful and steadfast unto the end (Matt. 10:22, 24:13; 1 Cor. 1:8;
Heb. 3:6, 14, 6:11; Rev. 2:26).

2 Peter 1:19 speaks of having “the more sure word of prophecy,” which, according to
Joseph Smith’s later teachings, “means a man’s knowing that he is sealed up unto eternal life, by
revelation and the spirit of prophecy through the power of the Holy Priesthood” (D&C 131:5).
The full verse of 2 Peter 1:19 reads, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye
do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the
day star arise in your hearts.” Notice that, unlike the exhortation earlier to “give diligence to
make your calling and election sure” (v. 10), obtaining this “more sure word of prophecy” is not
presented as a mandate, as though it were a requirement or even a goal. When read in context (esp. 2 Pet. 1:16, 20-21; 3:1-4, 12-14), the “more sure word of prophecy” refers to Old Testament prophecy, which is to be taken as reliable and to which the Saints were commanded to “take heed” (v. 19). This is clear from the next verse (v. 20) which speaks specifically of “prophecy of the scripture.”

According to most New Testament scholars, Peter was referring to what he perceived to be prophecies of Christ’s second coming. It is “more sure” or reliable because “prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (v. 21). After giving a detailed analysis of the Greek text of 2 Peter 2:19, Daniel Wallace, professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, paraphrases Peter as saying, “We have a very reliable authority, the Old Testament, as a witness to Christ’s return.”

Interestingly, the JST version of this passage in Peter, completed sometime between 1832 and 1833, reads: “We have a more sure knowledge of the prophecy,” which corroborates the general non-LDS understanding that Peter was referring to prophecy contained in the scriptures and not a personal promise of eternal life. It is only later (May 1843), to support the developing concept of making one’s calling and election sure, that Joseph reinterpreted this passage.

Joseph also saw Ephesians 1:13 as a reference to making one’s calling and election sure. Here the apostle Paul refers to Saints being “sealed with that holy Spirit of promise” (cf. Eph. 4:30). Instructing the Saints in June 1839, the Prophet explained that this was a promise of eternal life and was to be received “by this sealing power [of the priesthood], and the other Comforter spoken of [i.e., the personal presence of Jesus Christ], which will be manifest by revelation.” When read at face value, Paul seems to be simply indicating that the Lord’s Spirit is a reassurance to the Saints of the promises of eternal life. This assurance is given to all Saints by virtue of their discipleship, since Ephesians 1:13 states, “After that ye believed, ye were sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise” (emphasis mine). Belief, therefore, is the only stated prerequisite for being sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, a sealing which was not depicted as a priesthood ordinance, neither did it entail the presence of any comforter other than the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Spirit of promise is described in Ephesians 1:14 as “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Eph. 1:14). Thus, the Holy Ghost is God’s “earnest” (i.e., down payment or pledge of commitment) that the believer will ultimately receive what God has promised (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5). This sealing, however, is never
presented in the New Testament as a priesthood ordinance, nor as a witness one receives, as the Prophet taught, “after the Lord has thoroughly proved him.” It is spoken of merely as an assurance, foretaste or witness of God’s promises given to all the Saints provided they continue faithful.

The Prophet also turned to John’s teachings regarding “another comforter” (John 14:16) as a proof-text for making one’s calling and election sure. In a revelation received December 1832, an assembly of elders was given “another Comforter . . . even the Holy Spirit of Promise which is the same that I [God] promised unto my disciples, as is recorded in the testimony of John. This Comforter is the promise of eternal life” (D&C 88:3-4). Evidently, at this point in his understanding, the Prophet perceived the other Comforter of which John spoke to be the promise of eternal life, not the presence of the Father or the Son as is currently taught. It wasn’t until June 1839 that Joseph referred to the other Comforter in John 14 as “the Lord Jesus Christ himself.” According to this later teaching, “When any man obtains this last Comforter, he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him, or appear unto him from time to time, and even He will manifest the Father unto him, and they will take up their abode with him.”

Regarding this later understanding of John 14, it seems odd that the “other” Comforter Jesus promised his disciples, that would replace him, would be himself. Why would he refer to his own physical presence as “another” Comforter? Most New Testament exegetes interpret the other Comforter spoken of in John 14:26 as the Holy Ghost, which seems like the most straightforward interpretation. Consider the text: “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” The identity of this Comforter as someone other than Jesus is also implied in John 15:7-8: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (John 15:7-8).

The Prophet may have surmised that John was referring to a personal appearance of the Father and the Son from a couple of suggestive verses in John 14. After promising to send the Spirit to his disciples, Jesus tells them, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18; emphasis mine). He further states that both he and his Father would make their abode with the faithful (vv. 22-23). The question is whether this was to be a personal and visible visitation, or a manifestation of the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. According to
James Dunn, “the clear implication of John 14:15-26 is that the coming of the Spirit fulfills the promise of Jesus to come again and dwell with his disciples (cf. 7:38f., 15:26; 19:30; 20:22).”

Jesus taught that when the Holy Ghost comes “he shall not speak of himself,” but rather “he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you” (John 16:13-14). It appears that Jesus would dwell with his disciples through the Holy Spirit, though a personal appearance is certainly not precluded.

As previously noted, the Prophet’s later teachings evidence a more literal interpretation of the scriptures, and his interpretation of the Father and the Son making their abode with the Saints is another case in point. In correcting an address delivered by Elder Orson Hyde in April 1843, Joseph Smith declared that “the appearing of the Father and the Son” in John 14:23 (John actually uses the term abide with; not appear to) “is a personal appearance; and the idea that the Father and the Son dwell in a man’s heart is an old sectarian notion, and is false” (D&C 130:3). Joseph’s rejection of the idea of the Father and the Son dwelling in the human heart seems to disregard New Testament teachings referring to Christ and God abiding in the hearts of the righteous (Rom. 8:9-10; Eph. 2:22). The Book of Mormon likewise declares, “In the hearts of the righteous doth he [the Lord] dwell” (Alma 34:36).

Early Mormonism

Turning to modern scriptural teachings on being sealed to eternal life, little evidence of such can be found in the Book of Mormon, which presents a very simplistic concept of salvation. The promise is essentially: if you do what is right, in the end the Lord will “seal you his” (Mosiah 5:15); otherwise, the devil “doth seal you his” (Alma 34:35). In the Book of Mormon, sealing seems to be a direct act of the party--God or Satan--doing the sealing. It is not portrayed anywhere as a priesthood ordinance. The single example in the Book of Mormon of someone receiving a promise (not necessarily unconditional) of eternal life occurred when God blessed Alma saying, “I covenant with thee that thou shalt have eternal life” (Mosiah 26:20).

Beginning in 1831, individuals as well as entire congregations were sealed up to eternal life through the power of the priesthood. Though no group sealings are documented after 1833, individual priesthood sealings continued to be common. Elders who were admitted to the school of the prophets, which ran from 1833 to 1837, had their feet washed and were “sealed up to eternal life.”

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It is currently taught that the real sealing power wasn’t restored until Elijah’s appearance in 1836, some five years after the first sealings occurred. Regarding the relationship between the sealing power restored by Elijah and the sealing power exercised prior to the coming of Elijah, LDS scholar Greg Prince observes:

The power to seal was bestowed upon the elders in 1831, five years before the vision of Elijah, and while forms embodied by the concept of sealing evolved throughout the rest of Smith’s ministry, all later forms were in continuity with the earliest form, and there is no point along the continuum where one can detect the influence of angelic ministration. Furthermore, no contemporary account of the 1836 vision of Elijah used the term “seal” with reference to his mission. Indeed, Smith himself made no explicit connection between Elijah and sealing until 1843—seven years after the vision—and the connotation of sealing most commonly used today by LDS did not develop until 1844.32

Thus, priesthood sealings weren’t initially considered to be dependent on Elijah’s coming, since they were performed prior to his coming. In fact, even for a seven-year period after he came, there was no discernible connection made between his coming and the restoration of sealing power. (See Chapter 4.)

The fact that individuals and congregations were sealed up to eternal life through the power of the priesthood prior to Elijah’s coming raises the question of what purpose Elijah’s visitation served. Were these earlier sealings not really valid or in some sense incomplete? Whatever the explanation, since 1843 it has simply been taught that the power to seal individuals to eternal life was restored by Elijah. Perhaps more significant for Latter-day Saints today is the question of why this once-common ordinance of making people’s calling and election sure has all but disappeared from the Church, together with the ordinance of the washing of feet which accompanied it.33

Regarding foot washing, there is no indication in the Bible that it was ever practiced as a gospel ordinance, though it became such in later Catholic and Protestant traditions on through modern times. Ancielly, it was a Near Eastern custom to cleanse travelers’ feet from the dusty roads. Paul speaks of widows being hospitable and washing the saints’ feet (1 Tim. 5:10). As the
washing of feet was a symbol of hospitality in the ancient world, the “shaking off the dust” from one’s feet was an act performed against those who were detestable (Luke 10:10-12). Curiously, in JST John 13:10 Joseph linked the washing of feet to the Law of Moses adding, “Now this was the custom of the Jews under their law; wherefore, Jesus did this that the law might be fulfilled.” This is in spite of the fact that there is no mention of such a Mosaic ritual in either the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon. Assuming that it was part of the law of Moses, one wonders why Joseph would state that it was fulfilled in Christ and then turn around and institute it again as an essential ordinance of salvation in the latter days (see D&C 88:139).

Nauvoo Period

By 1842 the sealing of individuals to eternal life started becoming dissociated with the endowment as it became part of the developing covenant of celestial marriage. In July 1842, Joseph Smith was married for time and eternity to Sarah Ann Whitney, his sixteenth plural wife. The wording of the ceremony, which was given by revelation, concluded with the promise: “Let immortality and eternal life henceforth be sealed upon your heads forever and ever.” It is noteworthy that the word “seal,” when used in the marriage ceremony, didn’t designate the joining of husband and wife, but rather signified that one’s calling and election was made sure. Accordingly, the sealing spoken of in Doctrine and Covenants 132 (dated July 12, 1843) is not the sealing of wives to husbands, but rather the sealing or ratification of the promise of eternal life whereby “their exaltation . . . [is] sealed upon their heads” (D&C 132:19). In Orson Pratt’s 1853 published account of the temple wedding ceremony, the word “seal” is used three times, all in reference to the sealing of the blessings of exaltation upon the couple’s heads.

In Doctrine and Covenants 132, this seal is unconditional and guarantees a couple’s exaltation in spite of any and all subsequently committed sins except for the shedding of innocent blood. The promise is that if they “commit no murder wherein they shed innocent blood, yet they shall come forth in the first resurrection, and enter into their exaltation” (D&C 132:26). Two months prior to this revelation (May 16, 1843) Joseph informed a few of his associates that “those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life, and continue without committing the sin against the Holy Ghost, will continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory.” This is not to say that they will escape punishment for
subsequent sins committed (see D&C 132:26), only that in the end they will inherit the highest glory of the celestial kingdom.

Though the ordinance of sealing individuals to eternal life was subsumed under the marriage covenant, within a few months it reemerged as a distinct ordinance called the second anointing. The second anointing ordinance was instituted September 28, 1843, and over the next five months was received by twenty men and their wives.  

Current LDS Teachings

Shifting the sealing from the marriage covenant to the second anointing has created a bit of confusion, since the sealing language of the marriage covenant has remained unchanged (D&C 132:19, 26-27). Should couples assume that their calling and election has been made sure as a result being righteously joined together in the temple, or should they look forward to a second anointing or some other signal guaranteeing their eternal life? Bruce R. McConkie explained, “As with baptism, so with celestial marriage; after the glorious promise of eternal life that is part of each of these covenants, we must press forward in righteousness until our calling and election is made sure.” Thus, “after” celestial marriage, which itself “seals” every promised blessing on a couple, an additional sealing of some kind is appears necessary. Since the second anointing is no longer a customary practice, Saints are faced with the uncertainty of knowing when and whether their calling and election has been made sure.

Securing Children through the Sealing of Parents

During the year preceding the fall of 1843, not only was it taught that couples could be sealed up to eternal life through celestial marriage, but also that this sealing would automatically extend to their children. In August 1843, Joseph Smith taught that “when a seal [of eternal life] is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother.” This teaching made an indelible impression on later Apostle Orson F. Whitney (a grandson of Heber C. Kimball) who commented in 1929, “The Prophet Joseph Smith declared--and he never taught a more comforting doctrine--that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their
posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return.”

Brigham Young similarly remarked that the children of righteous parents may stray, but “they are bound up to their parents by an everlasting tie, and no power on earth or hell can separate them from their parents in eternity; they will return again to the fountain from whence they sprang.” In an October 1893 general conference, Lorenzo Snow promised parents whose children had strayed that they would eventually “get all [their] sons and daughters in the path of exaltation and glory. This is just as sure as that the sun rose this morning over yonder mountains.”

Near the middle of the twentieth century Joseph Fielding Smith gave a more tempered explanation of this teaching: “All children born under the covenant belong to their parents in eternity, but that does not mean that they, because of that birthright, will inherit celestial glory. The faith and faithfulness of fathers and mothers will not save disobedient children. Salvation is an individual matter.”

More recently, President James E. Faust put a few cuffs on Orson F. Whitney’s divine “tentacles” saying that, in order for wayward children who have been sealed to their parents to be saved, they “must fully repent” and their salvation “must be fully earned.” The implication of these later teachings is that the salvation of sealed children is now seen as being essentially up to the individual and is not guaranteed by virtue of the covenant of the parents as in earlier teachings.

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2 Christians view this passage as describing a consequence of accepting the gospel message, not Christ’s intent. The wording, however, seems somewhat harsh and causes one to wonder why only a pessimistic outcome is expressed regarding the impact of the gospel on familial relationships.


10 There is uncertainty whether Paul was ever married. Though he likely would have been married had he been a member of the Sanhedrin, it has been argued that it is unlikely that someone as young as Paul would have been a member of this council composed of Jewish elders. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), 283.

11 Based on modifications the Prophet made in the JST, Latter-day Saints contend that Paul was speaking only to those serving as missionaries at the time and that, like modern LDS missionaries, they could better serve singly. Clyde J. Williams, “The JST and the New Testament Epistles,” in *Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1985), 223. This understanding, however, doesn’t change the fact that Paul nowhere extols marriage nor extends it into the hereafter. He expressly states, “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth” (Rom. 7:2).


14 The principal explanation of why David and Solomon’s possession of many wives and concubines was considered “abominable” in the Book of Mormon (see Jacob 2:24) but later “justified” in the D&C 132:1 is that, it was only David and Solomon’s later taking of wives and concubines for selfish reasons that was abominable to the Lord. Initially, the Lord sanctioned their practice of plural marriage. Robert L. Millet, “A New and Everlasting Covenant (D&C 132),” in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 1: The Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 522. This reasoning also seems to be suggested in Doctrine and Covenants 132:38-39.

15 For a thorough treatment of the early practice of polygamy, see Todd Compton, *In Sacred Lonliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). For a


17 Brigham Young, August 19, 1866, Journal of Discourses, 11:269.


21 Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 578.

22 Ibid.

23 See, for example, Danel Bachman and Ronal K. Esplin, “Plural Marriage,” Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 3:1095.

24 Joseph Fielding Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 150.


27 Joseph Fielding Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 149.


Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 442-43, relates several incidents in which Joseph Smith and other Church elders sealed groups of Saints up to eternal life.


Joseph Smith instituted the ordinance of washing feet for the purpose of declaring elders to be “clean from the blood of this generation” and was “to be administered...according to the pattern given in the thirteenth chapter of [John]” (D&C 88:139). It was an integral part of making one’s calling and election sure. See Prince, *Power from On High*, 172. Later it became part of the second anointing and was performed by one’s wife. Ibid., 174. It has been erroneously supposed to have been subsumed into the washing and anointing ordinance of the temple. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 831.


*History of the Church*, 5:391.


