Joseph Smith and the Restoration

A History of the Church to 1846

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President Young defined the endowment as follows: “Your endowment,” he said, “is to receive all those ordinances in the House of the Lord, 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 in spite of earth and hell.”

A TEST OF FAITH

Under divine inspiration Joseph Smith taught that the priesthood bearer presides over his family. The priesthood conferred upon him is for the blessing of the entire family. Husband and wife share equally in all the blessings of the priesthood. Paul, the apostle, understood this sharing in eternal blessings: “Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:11.) When the endowment was given, men and women shared the covenants and blessings pertaining to it. In a man-made fraternal order, only men are admitted to membership; women are formed into auxiliary organizations. In God’s plan revealed through his Prophet, Joseph Smith, man and woman are one in the journey through life, and the family, under the priesthood head, is an eternal unit, begun in mortality but perpetuated throughout the eternities. Therefore the marriage contract is more than a mundane agreement; it is an ordained sacrament of God. The word of the Lord, early in the Church, was:

... Whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man.

Wherefore, it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation;

And that it might be filled with the measure of man, according to his creation before the world was made.

(D&C 49:15-17.)

At the time this revelation was given (1831), Joseph, engaged in translating or revising the Bible, asked the Lord how he “justified” the “many wives and concubines” of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. (D&C 132:1.) The doctrine of celestial marriage or the everlasting covenant of marriage, including plural marriage, was revealed to him. When the communication was first made, the Lord informed Joseph that the time for practicing that principle had not arrived but would come thereafter; neither should he make a public announcement of it or teach it as a doctrine of the gospel. At that time he confided the principle to a few intimate associates. Some of these close friends betrayed the confidence of the Prophet and told others. Because of this, charges of practicing plural marriage were made against the Church early in the Kirtland period, and the Prophet denied that such a practice was sanctioned by the Church, as indeed it had not been as yet.

Among the Prophet’s confidants were Oliver Cowdery and Lyman E. Johnson; the latter entrusted the newly revealed principle to Orson Pratt—who was his missionary companion in 1832—informing him that Joseph had made known the previous year (1831) that plural marriage was a correct principle and in time would be practiced in the Church.

During the summer of 1840 an angel of the Lord confronted the Prophet and commanded him, in the name of the Lord, to establish the principle of plural marriage “so long concealed from the knowledge of the Saints and of the world.” Joseph Smith well knew that the introduction of this practice would cost him his life. Fearing God rather than man, he put everything on the altar of duty and devotion and began to do as commanded.

To a few trusted friends he taught the principle and led the way himself by taking other women in the bond of eternal marriage. One Sabbath morning he talked on the restoration of all things and hinted that the patriarchal or plural order of marriage, as practiced by the ancients, would one day again be established. This lone hint created such excitement that he felt it unwise to pursue it further. He knew the frailty of men, the weaknesses and wickedness couched in the human heart:

Many men will say, I will never forswear you, but will stand by you at all times. But the moment you teach them some of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God that are retained in the heavens, and are to be revealed to the children of men when they are prepared for them, they will be the first to stone you and put you to death. It was this principle that crucified the Lord Jesus Christ, and will cause the people to kill the prophets in this generation.
Many times he had said to the Saints: “Would to God, brethren, I could tell you who I am! Would to God I could tell you what I know. But you would call it blasphemy, and there are men upon this stand who would want to take my life. If the Church knew all of the commandments, one half they would reject through prejudice and ignorance.” No wonder, then, that he should choose his confidants carefully, for their sakes no less than his own. For Joseph said later: “When God offers a blessing, or knowledge to a man, and he refuses to receive it, he will be damned.”

In the fall of 1840 the Prophet taught Joseph Bates Noble the principle of the plurality of wives and requested him to step forward and assist him in carrying out this God-ordained principle. “In revealing this to you,” he told Noble in effect, “I have placed my life in your hands; therefore do not, in an evil hour, betray me to my enemies.” Joseph B. Noble was bishop of the Nauvoo Fifth Ward. He sealed the Prophet to one of his first plural wives (some say his first), Louisa Beeman, sister of his own wife, on April 5, 1841. Louisa Beeman was a woman of irreproachable morality and entered into the plural marriage relationship with the deep-seated conviction that the doctrine was from God. Brother Noble also obeyed this order of marriage and took as a wife Sarah B. Alley. They were sealed together as husband and wife by the Prophet. The first child born in a plural marriage in this last dispensation came from this union—a son named George Ommer Noble, born in Nauvoo, February 2, 1844.

On the return of the Twelve Apostles from their missions in England, the Prophet began to teach the doctrine of plural marriage to them and urged the importance of putting it into practice. This doctrine was not readily received by them. John Taylor later declared they put off as long as they could “what might be termed the evil day.” Had Brigham Young any choice in the matter, he would have said, “Let me have but one wife.” He wanted to do his duty, but the thoughts of having to enter into a plural marriage vexed his soul so intensely that he desired the grave rather than meet the obligation imposed upon him by the Lord through his prophet.

The introduction of plural marriage was the greatest trial of faith encountered by the Twelve and other bearers of the priesthood commanded to practice it. Heber C. Kimball had to be commanded three times by the Prophet to take a certain woman as his wife, and not until that command came in the name of the Lord did he comply. He was also told not to divulge the secret—at that time not even to his wife—for Joseph’s life was in constant jeopardy, not alone from outside influences and enemies but from false brethren “who . . . crept like snakes into his bosom and then betrayed him.” The Prophet of God told members of the Twelve that if they did not embrace the practice of plural marriage, they would lose their apostleship and be damned.

Orson Pratt, returning to Nauvoo after most of his Quorum had arrived, was informed by John C. Bennett that Joseph Smith had tried to seduce his wife while he was in England, and that promiscuous sexual relations were not only secretly taught to the quorums by the Prophet and the Patriarch but were indulged in by the Prophet and other Church leaders in Nauvoo. Orson’s wife backed up Bennett’s story, having been deceived on the matter herself. Pratt became so wrought up that instead of going to the Prophet and learning the truth for himself, he smoldered indignantly, becoming extremely agitated. After Bennett was excommunicated from the Church, Elder Pratt was still alarmingly perplexed. “Was Bennett telling the truth about the Prophet or was Bennett the libertine and deserved being excommunicated?” In this mental and emotional struggle, his
mind collapsed and he wandered away from Nauvoo in a daze, completely bewildered. The Prophet, learning of the seriousness of Elder Pratt's quandary and fearing he might commit suicide, called out the temple workers and the principal men of the city to search for him. Toward evening, Orson returned to his home.67 Ebenezer Robinson claims that Orson Pratt was found five miles below Nauvoo, in a frenzy, sitting on the bank of the Mississippi River.68 Brigham Young, with Heber C. Kimball and George H. Smith, endeavored to reclaim Orson and to correct his misunderstandings, but he refused to believe them or obey their counsel. His mind was so darkened that he preferred to believe Bennett and his wife rather than the Prophet. Joseph Smith told him that "if he did believe his wife and followed her suggestions, he would go to hell."69 Even the threat of hell did not convince Elder Pratt, and on August 20, 1842, he and his wife were dropped from the Church records.70 After making a thorough investigation he became convinced of the falseness of Bennett's claims and believed that his wife had been deceived also. He then exonerated the Prophet from blame and convinced his wife that Bennett was the guilty one. Then the Prophet rebaptized them both on January 20, 1843, and restored Elder Pratt to his former office in the Quorum of the Twelve.71

The Prophet called the Nauvoo stake presidency and high council together, and Hyrum Smith read them the revelation on celestial marriage with the injunction: "Now, you that believe this revelation, and go forth and obey the same shall be saved, and you that reject it shall apostatize and be damned." 72 Within a week this prediction began to be verified. Of the stake presidency, William Marks and Austin A. Cowles rejected the revelation, and of the high council, Leonard Soby refused to accept it as from the Lord. From then on there was dissension and discord in the council. These three men diminished in spirit day by day, which was perceivable to everyone who kept the faith.73

The lone member of the stake presidency to accept the revelation was Charles C. Rich. When he was asked by the Prophet and Patriarch to modify his conception of morality by accepting this practice of plurality of wives, it was a crucial point in his life. Echoing through his brain hauntingly and depressingly was the warning given that unless he himself embraced the principle, he would come under divine displeasure. He had read, as had all his brethren who were requested to enter the plural marriage relationship, about men four thousand years earlier who had married wives and concubines and had been considered men of God despite this fact. But it was quite another thing for him, in the nineteenth century, to add another woman of spirit and substance to his household and to ask his wife to share her husband with her. Only his utter confidence in the seership of Joseph Smith could convert him to such a principle. How could he, Brigham Young, John Taylor, or Joseph Noble discriminate and say this is true but that is false, when both statements were introduced by a man who solemnly and reverentially said, "Thus saith the Lord"? Thus the new order of marriage was introduced.

Couples were also instructed concerning the practice of plural marriage, and the revelation was read to them. In July, 1843, the Patriarch, Hyrum Smith, called on Howard Coray and his wife at their home in Nauvoo, read to them the revelation on the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, and sealed them as husband and wife for all eternity. That summer the Prophet taught John Benbow and his wife Jane the doctrine of plurality of wives.74

The family of Bishop Edward Partridge was in the depths of poverty following his untimely death in May, 1840, so the Prophet and his wife provided a home for the two eldest daughters, Eliza and Emily. The doctrine of plural marriage was a severe trial to the Prophet's wife Emma. At times she fought it with passionate denunciation. "Then again she would break down in her feelings," commented Orson Pratt, "and would humble herself, and would lead forth ladies and place their hands in the hands of her husband, and they were married to him according to the law of God."75 On a day when her feelings were mellowed, she consented to give her husband two wives providing she could choose them. She accordingly chose the Partridge sisters, Eliza and Emily. They were sealed to Joseph Smith by James Adams in Emma's presence on May 11, 1843.76 George A. Smith wrote to Emma's son, Joseph, who tried to maintain that his father neither introduced nor practiced plural marriage. George A. said to him: "The inauguration of these principles was a severe trial to your mother. At times, she received and resolved to act upon her own hands; this intelligence I had from your father's mouth."77 A number of young women living in Nauvoo at the time plural marriage was inaugurated testified that Emma Smith taught them the principle of plural marriage and later gave them to her husband in marriage. Maria and Sarah Lawrence were among that number.78
Until July 12, 1843, the principle of celestial marriage remained an "unwritten law" to the faithful Saints. On the morning of the above date, Hyrum Smith came to his brother Joseph's office in the upper story of the brick store. They conversed on the subject of plural marriage and Hyrum said to Joseph, "If you will write the revelation on Celestial marriage, I will take it and read it to Emma, and I believe I can convince her of the truth, and you will hereafter have peace." The Prophet smiled, "You do not know Emma as well as I do." But Hyrum insisted and further remarked, "The doctrine is so plain, I can convince any reasonable man or woman of its truth, purity and heavenly origin." Joseph agreed to dictate the revelation to his scribe William Clayton, who wrote it down sentence by sentence. After it was written, Clayton read it through slowly and carefully, and the Prophet pronounced it correct. He observed that there was much more on the subject, but what had been dictated would suffice. Hyrum took the revelation and read it to Emma. When he returned, Joseph asked if he had accomplished his object. Hyrum replied regretfully that he had never taken such a severe lecture in all his life and that Emma remained resentful and angry. Joseph quietly commented, "I told you you did not know Emma as well as I did."

This remarkable revelation on celestial marriage contains "the celestial law," which says in essence that all covenants, agreements, and promises entered into for eternity, here in mortality, are in force after death. The Lord revealed that marriage is destined for eternity as well as for time, providing the man and woman are joined by the authority of God vested in his servants and sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise by the one appointed unto this power, who is the President and Prophet of the Church. (D&C 132:19.) If the couple so sealed honor the obligations devolving upon them they are promised an inheritance in eternity of kingdoms, principalities, and powers, with an exaltation and glory in all things. This means the continuation of their family unit forever, making them gods, "because they have no end." (D&C 132:20.) "Over whom then will they reign [in these kingdoms]?” asked Orson Pratt and answered his own rhetorical question: "Their own children, their own posterity will be the citizens of their kingdoms;...the patriarchal order will prevail there to the endless ages of eternity, and the children of each patriarch will be his while eternal ages roll on." Plural marriage was part of the celestial law here revealed:

Footnotes

1. HC, 4:491-92.
2. HC, 4:492-93.
4. HC, 4:519.
5. Manuscript History of the Church, 19 February 1842.
6. HC, 4:548.
9. HC, 5:11.
12. JH, 10 October 1880.
15. JH, 21 November 1841.
60. Whitney, p. 322.
62. Jenson, 6:239.
64. *JD*, 3:266.
65. Whitney, p. 325.
69. Brigham Young's Journal, 2 August 1842 (Salt Lake City: Church Historical Department).
70. Brigham Young's Journal, 2 August 1842.
71. *HC*, 5:256.
73. Jenson, 6:226-27.
74. John Benbow's Affidavit, 8 August 1869, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City; Jenson, 5:222.
76. Jenson, 5:223.