

Ordinances and Covenants
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What a wonderful sight to see so many of you here on this Friday evening. When our boys entered BYU, I gave them a bit of advice which I will share with you. I counseled them to study every Friday evening in the library. When they asked why, I simply told them that the kind of girl they would find in the library Friday evening is the kind of girl they should marry. This is not the library, but I assume it will still be open for a few hours after the fireside.

We are all aware that the mission of the Church is "to help bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man by inviting all people to come unto Christ and be perfected in Him."¹ One of the most significant teachings given by the Savior to the Apostles just prior to His arrest is this one, as recorded in John: "Jesus saith unto him [Thomas], I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."² This same doctrine was taught by King Benjamin in these words:

"There shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent."³

These and many other scriptures, both ancient and modern, attest to the fundamental doctrine that Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice stand at the very center of the plan of salvation. For a Latter-day Saint this fundamental doctrine of salvation only in and through the name of Jesus Christ and the Church's mission to invite all to come to Him pertain to all who have lived, or will ever live, on this earth. It is inclusive by its very nature and excludes or exempts no one. In answer to the question of how the Church accomplishes this mission to "invite all to come unto Christ," we all quickly respond "by proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the Saints, and redeeming the dead." We would not be wrong, of course. But in such a quick answer we miss some very critical pieces of information. The exact response to the question as set forth includes these statements:

Proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people and preparing them to receive the ordinances and covenants of the gospel.

Perfecting the Saints by preparing them to receive the ordinances and covenants of the gospel and by instruction and discipline to gain exaltation.

Redeeming the dead by performing vicarious ordinances of the gospel for those who have lived on the earth.

Participation in sacred ordinances, both live and vicarious, and fidelity or obedience to the covenants associated with those ordinances are fundamental to the gospel of Jesus

Christ and to the process of coming to Him and being perfected in Him. It is about this fundamental role of ordinances and covenants that I would like to say a few words this evening.

In a very broad sense, everything ordained and established by God's authority with the intent that it be applied in the lives of His children may be referred to as His ordinances. Consequently, the commandments, statutes, decrees, and requirements of God are properly defined as the ordinances of God. Understood in a somewhat narrower sense, ordinances are also solemn acts or ceremonies that have very specific sacred and holy purposes, significance, and meaning. My reference to ordinances this evening will be in this more narrow application.

As I begin, I would like to make a few general observations concerning the role of ordinances in the modern Christian world. In Protestant denominations grace and faith have gained ascendancy as the primary, or sole, requirements of salvation. The more singular the role of grace in the process of salvation, the less important is the role of ordinances in that process. That is, if I believe that God arbitrarily decides whether I will or will not be saved, then my participation in ordinances will have little overall effect. Likewise, if faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the primary or only requirement of salvation, there is again little need for personal participation in ordinances. Additionally, if faith alone is the determining factor in salvation, one must somehow deal with the billions of people who have never heard of Christ or had the opportunity to confess His name.

As personal participation in ordinances loses significance, the importance of divine authority also becomes less significant. If this is true, then one baptism is as good as another. Indeed, many churches accept the baptisms performed by other churches as valid. Consequently, the concept of divine authority and the importance of properly administered ordinances as requirements of salvation are completely lost.

There is a corollary observation. The more claim a church has on antiquity and apostolic authority, the more prominent the emphasis on sacred ordinances and upon divine authority to perform them. The Catholic Church in the western development of Christianity and the Orthodox Church in the East both assume this position. Each claims divine authority and teaches the importance of sacred ordinances referred to as sacraments in the western tradition and mysteries in the eastern. Of these there are basically seven: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, repentance (including confession), holy orders, marriage, and anointing either of the sick or prior to death.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also claims an ancient origin and thereby places exceptional importance on the role of both ordinances and covenants and on the necessity of divine authority to administer them. The third article of faith teaches that, "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel."⁴

The restoration of the gospel and the founding of the Church in 1830 were neither the beginning of sacred ordinances nor of the divine authority to administer them. The

requirements of salvation and exaltation, including the sacred ordinances of the gospel, for all men, "were instituted from before the foundation of the world."⁵ Sacred ordinances have always been an immutable part of the gospel. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that, "Ordinances instituted in the heavens before the foundation of the world, in the priesthood, for the salvation of men, are not to be altered or changed. All must be saved on the same principles."⁶

If this were not the case, salvation would indeed be a very arbitrary matter and would be restricted to those few who may have been fortunate enough to have heard of, and believed in, Jesus Christ. It is this principle of consistent and unalterable requirements that gives true meaning to the performance of vicarious ordinances in the temple. The Prophet wrote that baptism for the dead and the recording of such baptisms conform, ". . . to the ordinance and preparation that the Lord ordained and prepared before the foundation of the world, for the salvation of the dead who should die without a knowledge of the gospel."⁷

Through time and apostasy following Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, however, the divine authority of the priesthood and the sacred ordinances which were instituted from before the foundation of the world for the salvation of all men were changed or lost, and the associated covenants were broken. The Lord revealed His displeasure over this situation in these words, "For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god."⁸

This situation required a restoration of knowledge pertaining to the importance, significance, and appointed administration of sacred gospel ordinances, both live and vicarious, as well as the divine authority of the priesthood and priesthood keys to administer them.

May we now turn our attention to a discussion of some of the factors that make personal and worthy participation in sacred gospel ordinances, properly administered, so significant in our determination to come unto Christ and be perfected in Him.

First, through personal participation in sacred gospel ordinances we come to know God. I refer to a couple of verses in the 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants in which we read:

"And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the Kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.

Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh." ⁹

Our participation in sacred ordinances teaches much about the order of God's kingdom and about Him. For example, it seems ludicrous to think that one could enter a temple to perform some of the most sacred ordinances before submitting to baptism, which is one of the initial ordinances of the gospel. There is order in the kingdom of God and there is order in the way we learn about it. To Nephi the Lord said:

"I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have."¹⁰

Elsewhere the Lord has stated that, "That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day."¹¹

We do not receive everything at one time, but receive knowledge of holy things progressively and incrementally as we are worthy of, and obedient to, such knowledge. From the first ordinance of the kingdom, baptism, we progress through other ordinances such as confirmation and ordination to the priesthood, all of which lead to the most holy of ordinances which are performed in the temple. Our participation in the sacred ordinances of the gospel orders our knowledge of the kingdom and thereby reveals the nature of God to us.

Knowledge of God and sacred ordinances are closely related. Therefore, what are some of the things we learn about God by participating in His appointed ordinances? Let us take baptism as an example. Baptism by immersion is for the remission of sins. One who has fully repented of his or her sins and with full purpose of heart receives baptism, knows that God not only has the power to forgive and to take away the burden of guilt associated with sin, but that He does so. This person knows, through personal experience, something about God and His magnificent power and kindness. The only way to truly know these things is by participating worthily in the ordinance of baptism itself. Baptism opens the door to the kingdom of God, through which one now not only passes cleanly, but with a sure knowledge that God forgives. The same can be said of all other sacred ordinances of the gospel. Over time and with obedience, we progress into the ordinances of the temple, where we come to know that our most precious relationships are not affected by death. This knowledge we receive only by participating in the ordinances that are meant to teach us such things. Otherwise, they will not and cannot be known. The Prophet taught the following relating to knowing essential holy truth through our participation in sacred ordinances, "Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose."¹²

As sacred ordinances reveal the order of the kingdom of God in a progressive manner, our participation in them reveals to us the personality and character of God that can be gained in no other way.

Secondly, sacred gospel ordinances are the gateway to solemn covenants with God. Ordinances and covenants can hardly be understood apart from each other. By ordinance we enter into covenant and by covenant we receive the ordinance. Though there may be ordinances—such as blessing and naming of children, anointing the sick or blessings of comfort—that do not have an associated covenant, there is no eternal covenant that is not connected to an ordinance. All important steps toward God are introduced by sacred ordinances and are governed by the conditions of the covenants associated with those ordinances. Perhaps it would be good at this point to make just a comment on the nature of covenants. Eternal covenants are extended or offered to us only by God. He is the originator of all such covenants, as He is the only one who has authority and power to guarantee their validity beyond the grave.

"And everything that is in the world, whether it be ordained of men, by thrones, or principalities, or powers, or things of name, whatsoever they may be, that are not by me or by my word, saith the Lord, shall be thrown down, and shall not remain after men are dead, neither in nor after the resurrection, saith the Lord your God."¹³

We cannot originate such covenants because we do not possess the power to guarantee them. Consequently, we can only enter into covenants that are offered to us by God and we can enter them only in the way He prescribes. Examples of this, of course, are obvious and numerous. The gospel itself is the New and Everlasting Covenant between God and man. We can enter into that covenant in only one way—baptism by immersion for the remission of our sins. Without obeying the ordinance, we can neither enter the covenant nor receive its blessings. God is the only one who can extend forgiveness of sins and bestow the blessings of membership in His kingdom that come through baptism. Such blessings, of course, include the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The ordinances of baptism and the sacrament are bound inseparably together. Through baptism we receive a remission of our sins. Through the sacrament we "retain a remission" of sins.¹⁴ By participating in baptism and the sacrament, we agree, or covenant, that we are willing to take the name of Christ upon us, to keep His commandments and to always remember Him. In both instances based upon our obedience to the ordinances, God extends the promise, or covenant, that we would have His Spirit to be with us. Understanding the nature of covenant and living in accordance with its requirements give life and meaning to the ordinance itself.

The Lord asks this question: ". . .will I receive at your hands that which I have not appointed?"¹⁵ The appointed authority in performing a sacred gospel ordinance is as essential to the validity of the ordinance as the ordinance itself is to the covenant that accompanies it. The Savior told Joseph in the initial visitation, "...they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."¹⁶

The "form of godliness" may have reference to ordinances common to most Christian churches, such as baptism, the sacrament, and marriage. These all may share similarity in their performance, but without the priesthood and the accompanying covenant, the power of the ordinance is denied. If we eliminate the covenant portion of an ordinance, we are left only with the "form of godliness".

Thirdly, sacred ordinances provide an endowment of divine power in our lives. In His conversation with Pilate the Savior said "My kingdom is not of this world."¹⁷ Numerous scriptures teach us that there is natural enmity between the world and the kingdom of God. One of the things that sets the kingdom of God apart is the sense of the holy that exists therein. The world can only have a sense of the secular. Worthy participation in sacred gospel ordinances changes our lives and brings blessings and power to us that we would otherwise not enjoy. The power of the Atonement itself is unlocked by sacred gospel ordinances which are performed under the keys of the priesthood. Remission of sins is extended through the ordinance of baptism. Confirmation brings with it the promise of the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. Ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood opens the way for "every man to speak in the name of God"¹⁸ by teaching, blessing and comforting others. Worthy participation in the holy ordinances of the temple reveals our eternal possibilities and places us in a position to realize them. President Brigham Young taught of the temple endowment, "Your endowment 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."¹⁹

One of the most beautiful, yet most common of the gospel ordinances, is that of the sacrament. We participate in it literally thousands of times throughout our lives. Yet, because of its ever present nature in our sacrament meetings, we can easily miss its supernal significance. I would like to refer to a scripture which we normally quote in context of baptism, but it has wonderful application to sacrament meeting as well. Listen:

"And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light;

Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort. . . What have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord."²⁰

Isn't this a perfect description of a sacrament meeting? Should we not all come to that meeting mourning for our sins and willing to mourn with others over this same matter? The Savior's promise in the Sermon on the Mount is that those who mourn will be comforted. This occurs during the administration of the sacrament. I think this is why we come to sacrament meeting. As we partake of the sacrament, we express our willingness to take the name of Christ upon us, to always remember Him, and to keep his commandments. For this God extends His covenant that we will always have His Spirit to be with us. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter. As we come to the sacrament mourning for our sins, so may we also leave comforted and forgiven of our sins. This is a weekly

endowment of divine power in our lives that we can receive only by partaking worthily of the sacrament. Is it any wonder, then, that those who stay away from this sacred ordinance also estrange themselves from the covenant associated with it?

Sacred ordinances are ordained of God. They are essential to our salvation and exaltation. Through the sacred ordinances of the gospel, we learn of His kingdom and learn of Him, we enter into holy and eternal covenants, and we receive an endowment of divine power in our lives. All of these things bring us to Christ that we may be perfected in Him.

Brethren and sisters, I bear my witness that we can come unto Christ and be perfected in Him by our worthy participation in the sacred ordinances appointed by God and instituted from before the foundation of the world. I testify of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and to the saving power of His holy name. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. The Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
2. [John 14:6](#)
3. [Mosiah 3:17](#)
4. [Articles of Faith 1:3](#)
5. [Doctrine and Covenants 124:33](#)
6. Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (1976), 308
7. [Doctrine and Covenants 128:5](#)
8. [Doctrine and Covenants 1:15-16](#)
9. [Doctrine and Covenants 84:19-21](#)
10. [2 Nephi 28:30](#)
11. [Doctrine and Covenants 50:24](#)
12. Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 324
13. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:13](#)
14. [Mosiah 4:11-12](#)
15. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:10](#)
16. [Joseph Smith-History 1:19](#)
17. [John 18:36](#)
- 18.
- 19.
20. [Mosiah 18:8-10](#)