

# Covenants and Responsibilities

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The Church of Jesus Christ is known as a church that emphasizes making covenants with God.

“How does your Church differ from others?” My answer to this important question has varied as I have matured and as the Church has grown. When I was born in Utah in 1932, our Church membership was only about 700,000, clustered mostly in Utah and nearby states. At that time, we had only 7 temples. Today the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints numbers more than 17 million in about 170 nations. As of this April 1, we have 189 dedicated temples in many nations and 146 more in planning and construction. I have felt to speak about the purpose of these temples and the history and role of covenants in our worship. This will supplement the inspired teachings of earlier speakers.

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A covenant is a commitment to fulfill certain responsibilities. Personal commitments are essential to the regulation of our individual lives and to the functioning of society. This idea is currently being challenged. A vocal minority oppose institutional authority and insist that persons should be free from any restrictions that limit their individual freedom. Yet we know from millennia of experience that persons give up some individual freedoms to gain the advantages of living in organized communities. Such relinquishments of individual freedoms are principally based on commitments or covenants, expressed or implied.

Here are some examples of covenant responsibilities in our society: (1) judges, (2) military, (3) medical personnel, and (4) firefighters. All of those involved in these familiar occupations make a commitment—often formalized by oath or covenant—to perform their assigned duties. The same is true of our full-time missionaries. Distinctive clothing or name tags are intended to signify that the wearer is under covenant and therefore has a duty to teach and serve and should be supported in that service. A related purpose is to remind the wearers of their covenant responsibilities. There is no magic in their distinctive clothing or symbols, only a needed reminder of the special responsibilities the wearers have assumed. This is also true of the symbols of the engagement and wedding rings and their role in giving notice to observers or reminding wearers of covenant responsibilities.

II.

What I have said about covenants being a foundation for the regulation of individual lives applies particularly to religious covenants. The foundation and history of many religious affiliations and requirements are based on covenants. For example, the Abrahamic covenant is fundamental to several great religious traditions. It introduces the holy idea of God's covenant promises with His children. The Old Testament frequently refers to God's covenant with Abraham and his seed.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of the Book of Mormon, which was written during the Old Testament period, clearly demonstrates the role of covenants in the Israelite history and worship. Nephi was told that the Israelite writings of that period were “a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel.”<sup>2</sup> The books of Nephi make frequent reference to the Abrahamic covenant<sup>3</sup> and to Israel as “the covenant people of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> The practice of covenanting with God or religious leaders is also recorded in the Book of Mormon writings about Nephi, Joseph in Egypt, King Benjamin, Alma, and Captain Moroni.<sup>5</sup>

III.

When the time came for the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God called a prophet, Joseph Smith. We do not know the full content of the angel Moroni's early instructions to this maturing young prophet. We do know he told Joseph that “God had a work for [him] to do” and that “the fulness of the everlasting Gospel” must be brought forth, including “the promises made to the fathers.”<sup>6</sup> We also know that the scriptures young Joseph read most intensively—even before he was directed to organize a church—were the many teachings about covenants he was translating in the Book of Mormon. That book is the Restoration's major source for the fulness of the gospel, including God's plan for His children, and the Book of Mormon is filled with references to covenants.

Being well read in the Bible, Joseph must have known of the book of Hebrews' reference to the Savior's intent to “make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”<sup>7</sup> Hebrews also refers to Jesus as “the mediator of the new covenant.”<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the biblical account of the Savior's mortal ministry is titled “The New Testament,” a virtual synonym for “The New Covenant.”

Covenants were foundational in the Restoration of the gospel. This is evident in the earliest steps the Lord directed the Prophet to take in organizing His Church. As soon as the Book of Mormon was published, the Lord directed the organization of His restored Church, soon to be named The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>9</sup> Revelation recorded in April 1830 directs that persons “shall be received by baptism into his church” after they “witness” (which means solemnly testify) “that they have truly repented of all their sins, and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end.”<sup>10</sup>

This same revelation directs that the Church “meet together often to partake of bread and wine [water] in the remembrance of the Lord Jesus.” The importance of this ordinance is evident in the words of covenants specified for the elder or priest who officiates. He blesses the emblems of the bread for “the souls of all those who partake of it ... , that they ... witness unto thee, O God,

the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them.”<sup>11</sup>

The central role of covenants in the newly restored Church was reaffirmed in the preface the Lord gave for the first publication of His revelations. There the Lord declares that He has called Joseph Smith because the inhabitants of the earth “have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant.”<sup>12</sup> This revelation further explains that His commandments are being given “that mine everlasting covenant might be established.”<sup>13</sup>

Today we understand the role of covenants in the restored Church and the worship of its members. President Gordon B. Hinckley gave this summary of the effect of our baptism and our weekly partaking of the sacrament: “Every member of this church who has entered the waters of baptism has become a party to a sacred covenant. Each time we partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, we renew that covenant.”<sup>14</sup>

We have been reminded by many speakers at this conference that President Russell M. Nelson often refers to the plan of salvation as the “covenant path” that “leads us back to [God]” and “is all about our relationship with God.”<sup>15</sup> He teaches about the significance of covenants in our temple ceremonies and urges us to see the end from the beginning and to “think celestial.”<sup>16</sup>

#### IV.

Now I speak more of temple covenants. In fulfillment of his responsibility to restore the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Joseph Smith spent much of his final years directing the construction of a temple in Nauvoo, Illinois. Through him the Lord revealed sacred teachings, doctrine, and covenants for his successors to administer in temples. There persons who were endowed were to be taught God’s plan of salvation and invited to make sacred covenants. Those who lived faithful to those covenants were promised eternal life, wherein “all things are theirs” and they “shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever.”<sup>17</sup>

The endowment ceremonies in the Nauvoo Temple were administered just before our early pioneers were expelled to begin their historic trek to the mountains in the West. We have the testimonies of many pioneers that the power they received from being bound to Christ in their endowments in the Nauvoo Temple gave them the strength to make their epic journey and establish themselves in the West.<sup>18</sup>

Persons who have been endowed in a temple are responsible to wear a temple garment, an article of clothing not visible because it is worn beneath outer clothing. It reminds endowed members of the sacred covenants they have made and the blessings they have been promised in the holy temple. To achieve those holy purposes, we are instructed to wear temple garments continuously, with the only exceptions being those obviously necessary. Because covenants do not “take a day off,” to remove one’s garments can be understood as a disclaimer of the covenant responsibilities and blessings to which they relate. In contrast, persons who wear their garments faithfully and keep their temple covenants continually affirm their role as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is constructing temples all over the world. Their purpose is to bless the covenant children of God with temple worship and with the sacred

responsibilities and powers and unique blessings of being bound to Christ they receive by covenant.

The Church of Jesus Christ is known as a church that emphasizes making covenants with God. Covenants are inherent in each of the ordinances of salvation and exaltation this restored Church administers. The ordinance of baptism and its associated covenants are requirements for entrance into the celestial kingdom. The ordinances and associated covenants of the temple are requirements for exaltation in the celestial kingdom, which is eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God.”<sup>19</sup> That is the focus of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I testify of Jesus Christ, who is the head of that Church, and invoke His blessings on all who seek to keep their sacred covenants. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. See, for example, Genesis 17:2–9; Exodus 6:2–4; 19:5–6; Leviticus 26:42; see also 2 Nephi 9:1.
2. 1 Nephi 13:23.
3. See 1 Nephi 15:18; 17:40; 22:9; 2 Nephi 29:14.
4. See, for example, 1 Nephi 14:14; 2 Nephi 6:13; 9:1.
5. See 2 Nephi 1:5; 3:4; 31:7, 13, 14; Mosiah 5:5–8; 6:1; Alma 7:15; 46:21–22.
6. Joseph Smith—History 1:33–34, 39.
7. Hebrews 8:8.
8. Hebrews 12:24. This same description appears in Doctrine and Covenants 76:69.
9. See Doctrine and Covenants 115:4.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 20:37; see also Mosiah 18:10–13.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 20:75, 77.
12. Doctrine and Covenants 1:15.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 1:22.
14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “God Is at the Helm,” *Ensign*, May 1994, 53.
15. Russell M. Nelson, “As We Go Forward Together,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Apr. 2018, 7; Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, Oct. 2022, 5, 11. Also see Nephi’s use of the metaphor of walking in the “path”: 2 Nephi 4:32; 33:9.
16. See Russell M. Nelson, “Think Celestial!,” *Liahona*, Nov. 2023, 117–20.
17. Doctrine and Covenants 76:59, 62.
18. See Church History Topics, “Nauvoo Temple,” Gospel Library.
19. Doctrine and Covenants 14:7.