

Can Temple Ceremonies Change?

Because of the sacred nature of this topic, I will not deal with the details of the temple changes, but rather address the issue: “Are changes possible if we subscribe to the belief that the temple ceremony is revealed from God.”

Critics seem to think that any changes in the LDS Church (whether these changes involve scripture, practices, beliefs, or procedures) somehow demonstrate that the LDS Church is false. They often ask, “Does God change?” The answer, of course, is “No,” God does not change. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). God’s directives, and how He deals with His people often vary, however, according to His people’s understanding and needs. God doesn’t tell everyone to build an ark and wait for a flood. Changes most often occur as a result of God dealing with his children according to their changing circumstances.

We know that major changes in practices took place during Christ’s ministry. Christ fulfilled the Law of Moses and practices associated with that law were no longer necessary. Lest our critics claim that all gospel changes were overseen by Christ during his mortal ministry, we must remember that Christ originally taught the gospel only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Matt. 15:24) and forbade his apostles from going to the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5-6). After Christ’s death, however, Peter was commanded by an angel to take the gospel to all people (Acts 10, 11; Matt 28:19). Following Christ’s mortal ministry the practice of circumcision also became unnecessary (Acts 15, Gal. 6:15). Changes in the Church are not only common, but often necessary. Such changes, however, must be done by inspiration or revelation from the head of the Church, which is Christ.

Many people fail to understand that there are *absolute truths* and *relative truths*.¹ *Absolute truths* (such as: God lives, Jesus is the Christ, and the reality of the Atonement) do not change. *Relative truths* (such as: circumcision, plural marriage, age of priesthood ordination) do change. Many *relative truths* deal with procedural issues, and how *absolute truths* are presented, rather than the *absolute truths* themselves. As new truths are revealed, previous revelations are modified to accommodate additional light. “But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, [and] there a little....” (Isaiah 28:13; D&C 98:12.) “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.” (D&C 50:23–24.)

That the temple ceremony has undergone changes, improvements, and refinements, should come as no surprise to Latter-day Saints. The temple presentation has gone from live performances, to movie; from large temples to smaller temples; from ankle-length garments to shorter garments. Modifications in various aspects of the temple have evolved with the *living* Church. Temple ordinances have evolved as well. Joseph Fielding Smith has noted that the “work of

salvation for the dead came to the Prophet like every other doctrine—piecemeal. It was not revealed all at once.”²

What has changed in the temple ceremony? It’s probably more important to understand what has *not* changed. The need for the endowment is an *absolute truth*. But what is the *endowment*? Brigham Young said:

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, 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.³

Joseph Smith said that the endowment is designed to give “a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God”⁴ by way of instruction and covenants. As noted by Brigham Young, important elements of the endowment include the key words, signs, and tokens. These elements are used to convey *absolute truths* although they may do so by way of *relative truths* that are subject to change. Thus, the vehicle by which these important elements are expressed, as well as other components of the endowment—such as penalties, and the dramatic presentation of the endowment—are less essential (*relative truths*). The significance and purpose of the endowment (an *absolute truth*) remains unchanged. How God chooses to reveal the message and meaning of the endowment can change according to His direction. Thanks to continuing revelation, the endowment can be modified as our understanding changes.

Although Joseph Smith received the principles of the endowment by revelation, he recognized that the presentation of the endowment could, and would, change. In May 1842, after the first endowment was given, the prophet Joseph told Brigham that the endowment was “not arranged perfectly” and he wanted Brigham to “organize and systematize” the ceremonies. In the process of so doing, Brigham said that he gained more insight into the endowment.⁵

In succeeding years, Brigham Young suggested that the presentation of the endowment could further evolve. On April 6, 1845, in a Nauvoo Conference Brigham Young said that Joseph “did not receive every thing connected with the doctrine of redemption” in his lifetime, but instead “left the key” with the Brethren. “We have got to learn how to be faithful in a few things; you know the promise is, if we are faithful in a few things, we shall be made ruler over many things. If we improve upon small things, greater will be given unto us.”⁶

The dramatic *presentation* of the endowment has undergone changes. Up until the dedication of the St. George Temple in 1877 the endowment teachings had passed on in oral form

only. Brigham (as the sole survivor of the original group who received the endowment from Joseph Smith in 1842), was concerned that this ordinance be preserved as perfectly as possible. He enlisted the help of Brigham, Jr., and Wilford Woodruff, giving them the assignment to record the ceremonies so they could be taught to the temple workers.⁷ Wilford Woodruff recalled that President Young labored “all winter to get up a perfect form of Endowments *as far as possible*.”⁸ This indicates that the endowment may have varied slightly from the endowment of Joseph Smith.

Woodruff wrote that prior to this time they had “acted up to all the light and knowledge” they had, but they “felt that there was more to be revealed upon this subject than we had received.” After receiving revelation in the St. George Temple, “changes were made” to the endowment and Woodruff wrote that “we still have more changes to make, in order to satisfy our Heavenly Father, satisfy our dead and ourselves.”⁹ One of the changes was the addition of vicarious endowments for the dead. Although the doctrine concerning baptisms for the dead was revealed and performed under the direction of Joseph Smith, it wasn’t until January 11, 1877, in the St. George temple that the first endowments given in behalf of the dead were preformed. “Not long before,” notes Cowan, “President Young had told some temple workers that he had just learned by revelation “that it takes as full and complete a set of ordinances for the dead as for the living.”¹⁰

Sixteen years later, Wilford Woodruff met with the Quorum of the Twelve and four temple presidents to harmonize the various and “different” modes of endowment ceremonies.¹¹ As the prophets have recognized, a *living* Church with *continuing revelation*, will expect the Lord to add further light, correction, and modification, as the needs of His people, and their understanding changes.

To answer the critics’ charge that the endowment ceremony has changed, we reply: So what? Christ oversaw changes while in His mortal ministry. The Apostles, by revelation, oversaw changes after Christ’s death. And modern day prophets have made changes under the direction of He who stands at the head of this same Church—Jesus Christ. Many anti-Mormons belong to evangelical churches that have also experienced changes. And, as we have already noted, change itself is not wrong. But since evangelicals deny modern-day revelation through prophets, we must ask: Who has directed such unwarranted changes? We might ask the same question they ask of us: “Does God Change?” To quote Stephen Gibson:

Why did God have apostles, prophets, and teachers in His Church (Eph. 4:11) during the New Testament times and now they are no longer needed according to many of the professors of other faiths.

Why did the Lord love the church so much (Eph. 5:25) that He gave Himself (died) for it, now God

doesn’t care what church you attend just so long as you accept Christ?

Why does the Bible mention baptism more than 75 times and being “born again” only twice, yet now according to most evangelical ministers one need only to profess Jesus (being born again) to go to heaven while baptism is optional?¹²



For more details on this topic see <http://www.mormonfortress.com/changet1.html>

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¹ See Spencer W. Kimball, “Absolute Truth,” *Ensign* (September 1978), 3–8.

² Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:168.

³ *JD* 2:31.

⁴ Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 324.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Millennial Star* No. 8 (October 1, 1845), 6:119-123.

⁷ Richard O. Cowan, “Brigham Young: Builder of Temples,” *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, eds., Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1995), 240; see also David John Buerger, “The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony,” *Dialogue* 20:4 (Winter 1987), 50.

⁸ Buerger, 50; italics added.

⁹ Wilford Woodruff, *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 154.

¹⁰ Cowan, “Brigham Young,” 240; see also Richard O. Cowan, “The Doctrine and Covenants on Temples and Their Functions,” *Doctrines For Exaltation: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 27.

¹¹ Wilford Woodruff (1985), *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 9 vols., ed., Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1985), 9:267.

¹² Stephen R. Gibson, “Does God Change?” *One Minute Answers: The Mormon Trail*, Nov. 1, 1985, p. 4; reprinted in *Scrapbook of Mormon Polemics V1:2* (Sandy, Utah: Mormon Miscellaneous, 1986), 31.