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Painting by Robert E. Barrett, *The Grand Council*

# “The Two Covenants”

*Chauncey C. Riddle*

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The most important things for any human being to know are that there does exist a God of righteousness, that He is our Father, and that He is trying to help all of us inherit all that He is and has. He is righteous and acts only to maximize the happiness of every being He oversees. He is our Father because He begat us as His spirit children in our premortal existence. And He is trying to share with us His character of perfect righteousness, His omniscience, His omnipotence, and His dominion. His program to share with us is the joyous news, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To share with us, Heavenly Father provided two covenants whereby His children could demonstrate the ability to bear the weight of blessings He would like to share. Both covenants were planned from the beginning to suit the needs of His children. Each covenant allows the child of God to demonstrate an ability to perform in his or her own sphere, as evidence that the full weight of the Father's blessings would bring happiness, not sorrow, to the individual. The full weight of the Father's blessings is called “exaltation” and is a calling to join with God in His eternal work of righteousness to bring to pass the maximal happiness for each being in the universe.

## **Obedience**

The first covenant, as announced in the premortal existence, is the covenant of perfect obedience. His children would be brought into mortality and would be proved to see if they would do all things whatsoever

the Lord their God would command them to do (see Abraham 3:22–25). This covenant is fulfilled only by our living a perfect mortal life, by not deviating from the path of perfect obedience one iota, no matter what the opposition or the consequences. This demonstration of perfect obedience is no idle or pointless exercise. It is a demonstration of the ability to do what exalted beings all do: to lead an absolutely disciplined existence of action in accordance with the principles of righteousness and order in the priesthood chain of command in the process of blessing others. This is the eternal path: blessing others here and now as preparation for an eternity of blessing them there and then, in a way that is selfless and holy. One deviation from the path, however minor, would show that that person cannot be trusted. And because he or she cannot be trusted, he or she cannot be given the blessings of exaltation. To be trusted is more important than to be loved. All of God's children are loved by Him, but only a few can He trust completely.

Adam and Eve were participants in the first covenant in the Garden of Eden. Adam was determined to keep all the Father's commandments. But before long, Adam and Eve broke the covenant of obedience and were thrust out of the garden and out of God's presence. This fall was part of the Father's plan so that they and their children would have an opportunity to generate the internal strength they did not already have and thus to become trustworthy. In this way, God could save and bless more than just those who were already of perfect character and therefore already trustworthy.

### Repentance

The second covenant, companion to the covenant of perfect obedience, is the covenant of perfect repentance (see Moses 6:56–57). The word *perfect* means "complete." Perfect obedience can be demonstrated only by persons of already perfect character. But all of God's children, of any character, can choose to comply with the second covenant of perfect repentance by repenting until they have perfect character. Then, when they have perfect character, they can comply with the first covenant and demonstrate perfect obedience. This second covenant of perfect repentance is usually referred to as the new and everlasting covenant. It is "new" because it comes after the first covenant. It is "everlasting" because it is made possible only through the life, mission, and Atonement of Jesus Christ, one of His names being "Everlasting."

When most people think of the work of Jesus Christ and His covenant, they think of forgiveness of sins. And forgiveness is important. But it is not the most important thing the second covenant does. The most important thing the new and everlasting covenant does is to bring about a change of character so the person can perform with perfect obedience under the first covenant. When we have attained perfect repentance through Jesus Christ, we then can prove that we can be perfectly obedient, and our Savior is pleased to be able to forgive us of our sins. And He is very forgiving. All who go to a kingdom of glory—celestial, terrestrial, or telestial—are forgiven of their sins either through Jesus Christ or through their own personal suffering. But only a few of those forgiven of their sins can be trusted completely. Only a few who can be given all knowledge, power, dominion, and freedom will then not exercise unrighteous dominion. Those few are precious. They become joint heirs with Christ in receiving all that He has, and He has received all His Father has. Those who cannot be trusted may receive glory but not a fulness. Therefore, their state in eternity is, in a sense, damnation. They receive all the blessings they have demonstrated they will use in righteousness. But where their character has not been changed so that they can be perfectly obedient, in that area they cannot receive a fulness of the blessings; this is damnation to some degree. Even the angels in the celestial kingdom are damned to a degree because they would not fully partake of the new and everlasting covenant (see D&C 131:1–4).

Thus, the main point of the new and everlasting covenant is that it allows a person to change character until he or she is a new creature. The individual may become new to any degree desired. The power of Christ in the new and everlasting covenant is sufficient to help any person attain any degree of perfection desired. Total perfection, to come into the measure of the stature of Christ, is attained only by those persons who fully keep the new and everlasting covenant. As they work through to complete repentance, they are added upon, bit by bit, until they are as noble, as selfless, and as trustworthy as is Christ Himself. Through perfect repentance, they have come to be a perfect person, renewed unto the full measure of the stature of Christ Himself.

### **The Merits of Christ**

How is this perfection achieved? The story of this process of repenting is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perfection comes only in and through the merits of Christ. What are His merits? First, He has a perfect character.

Second, He is exalted and has all the Father's knowledge, power, and ability. Third, He performed the Atonement and thus is able to resurrect all men and women and to plead before the Father for the forgiveness of their sins. Fourth, He is the creator of heaven and earth and all things that in them are, the governor and manager of our universe.

Because He was already perfect in character, our Savior came into mortality and kept fully the first covenant of perfect obedience. Subject to all the problems of mortality that every other human being suffers, He came into this world as a human being, denied each temptation of Satan, and fulfilled the Father's will in every single instruction.

He was and is exalted, having all power in time and in eternity to do whatever work of godliness is required for the blessing of mankind. We do not yet comprehend the great blessings He has in store for the faithful. But the faithful are not primarily faithful so that they will get the blessings; they are faithful because faithfulness is the right thing to do, the thing that will enable them to bless others.

The life and mission of Jesus Christ as a whole could be called His Atonement, or His at-one-ment, whereby He attempts to reconcile each of us with the Father. Father cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance, and our Savior tries to help each person to stop sinning and to be forgiven of the sins committed so that he or she can again stand in Father's presence. He sends His gospel into the earth that all might be fully instructed as to how to enter into and complete the second covenant and be fully empowered through its ordinances to grow in character. Only those who complete the second covenant—who achieve perfect repentance—can be fully trustworthy and thus acceptable to our Father, to become one with Him, even as He and our Savior are one. The arms of mercy and repentance are extended to all mankind that everyone who wishes to partake may, without money and without price. But repent they must.

Being the creator and governor of the universe, our Savior manages all things for the instruction and blessing of each human being. Every human experience is an opportunity to repent, to change our actions and through changing our actions to change our character. Through the gifts of the Spirit, which Christ bestows, the efforts of men and women are matched with the divine power each needs to repent until repentance is complete and each has endured to the end, which is to become as Christ.

There is no more intelligent thing to do in the universe than to rely on the merits of Jesus Christ. That is the only path to happiness.

The degree to which any human being relies on the merits of Christ will be the measure of his or her happiness.

### **The Measure of Our Faith and Repentance**

It is important now to say how the first principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ are to be applied in this quest for complete repentance. The first principles are faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repentance.

To have faith in Jesus Christ means to accept His gospel message as attested to by the Holy Ghost and then to rely fully upon the merits of Christ. It means to rely on His name, to keep His commandments, and to strive for perfection of character in all things. If there is anything mean, cowardly, lascivious, untruthful, snobbish, lazy, careless, or lacking in character, our business as servants of Christ is to root out these things with all haste and effort. This is done not only that our own souls can be saved but because we cannot love anyone else purely or deeply until all of these ungodly things are rooted out of our souls through faith and repentance. To have faith in Christ means to trust in Him completely to the giving up of all our sins, bad habits, untrue ideas, evil thoughts, or untoward desires.

An essential part of trusting in Jesus Christ is knowing who His servants are and accepting them as His servants. For instance, no one alive today can fully come unto Christ and receive the fulness of His blessings in this life or in the world to come if that person cannot and does not accept Joseph Smith Jr. as the prophet of this dispensation. It is through him that the keys of the priesthood have come to this time to offer salvation to every soul on earth. Joseph Smith truly did represent Jesus Christ in full authority to bring souls to Christ. Likewise, no one can be saved today and receive all the blessings unless he or she accepts Gordon B. Hinckley as the living prophet. One thing that faithful people quickly learn is that they must also accept the leadership of their stake president and bishop—or their mission president if they are missionaries. No one who has true faith in Christ would think of making a serious life change, such as getting married or divorced, without consulting their bishop and staying close to him in the process. This phenomenon of accepting priesthood authority as part of faith in Jesus Christ is somewhat jokingly in the Church called being "priesthood broke," the western term referring to a horse being broken to be manageable and rideable. Those who have true faith in Christ wear the priesthood harness well; they do their assignments well; they support those in authority over them; they minister to those

under their priesthood authority; and they strive to bring all humans to Christ both by precept and by example.

One very good measure of our faith and trust in Christ is our lack of fear. If we are His faithful servants, He has promised that all things would and will work together for our good, no matter what happens (see D&C 98:3). If we believe this, we can meet each day with joy and gladness, each crisis with equanimity, and each calamity with recognition of an opportunity to do good. If we are afraid of *anything*, that fear is the measure of our lack of trust in Christ. For if all things work together for our good, what is there to fear? If we will only do our part and obey Christ in all things, there is no need to fear anything except not having faith in Jesus Christ.

The second principle of the gospel is repentance. Repentance is changing each act of our life that is not an act of faith in Christ to become an act of faith in Jesus Christ. To help us with this process, our Savior sends the Holy Spirit to be the constant companion of His covenant servants. With the help of the whisperings and promptings of the Holy Spirit, each of us is guided into the narrow path of obedience to Jesus Christ. Humble, willing obedience to Jesus Christ is faith in Him. Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot perfect our faith in Christ. And perfect faith in Christ is the end or goal of repentance. To repeat: repentance is changing our feelings, thinking, decisions, and actions until each thing we do is an act of faith in Jesus Christ. Then we are *faith-full*.

What makes the second covenant so drastically different from the first covenant is that in the first covenant if we make one mistake, break one commandment of God, we are lost. In the second covenant, if we break a commandment and misstep on our way, that can be forgiven if we are truly sorry and get ourselves back onto the strait and narrow way of faith. That getting back is repentance. Should we sin many times, we still can be forgiven if we truly repent and get back onto the track of trust in Christ. Thus, the second covenant is the covenant of complete or perfect repentance.

All the other laws and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ are examples of the application of faith in Jesus Christ and repentance in our lives and can be truly and fully understood only in that light. Faith, repentance, and all of the other laws and principles of the gospel have one end: to produce persons of perfect character whose only actions are those of the pure love of Christ. Pure means selfless. Those who are pure live outside of themselves in service to others. They have a pure love for Christ, looking to Him in every thought (see D&C

6:36). They see the face of Christ in every person they encounter. They minister to every person they encounter as Christ would, discerning their needs and blessing each person with whatever he or she needs to take the next step on the individual path to happiness. Filled with the Holy Ghost and the power of the holy priesthood, the child of Christ knows what to do and has the power to do whatever is necessary to manifest the pure love of Christ.

### **An Ongoing Work**

If enough of the children of Christ who have pure love happen to be in one place, they together constitute a Zion, for they are pure in heart (see Moses 7:18). To establish Zion is to encourage and entice every person to enter the new and everlasting covenant and to endure to the end, which end is to be able to love with pure love, and which end is also eternal life.

The work of establishing Zion is a work of power. It cannot be done by mortal means. Only as the powers of heaven come down and infuse the natural, mortal situation can we be saved, which salvation is to be changed from the natural, mortal condition to the stature of the character of Christ, full of pure love, as He is.

A key power that makes this transformation possible is the holy priesthood. God bestows the holy priesthood upon men, and they use it in the service of Christ to bring about the personal transformations I have been discussing. They use it to teach and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. They use it to administer the ordinances of the new and everlasting covenant. They use it to establish and guide The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They use it to bless each other, to check evil, to control the elements of nature, and to do whatever God instructs them to do.

Special mention needs to be made of the ordinances of the new and everlasting covenant as administered by the holy priesthood. The two basic parts of that second covenant are baptism and the receiving of the holy Melchizedek Priesthood.

Baptism is the first part of the new and everlasting covenant. It allows individuals formally to renounce their old, natural way of living and to announce a determination to accept the power of God to change their nature into the character of Christ. The person who truly is reborn of water and of the Spirit is as a little child: meek, submissive, patient, humble, and willing to submit to whatever the Lord sees fit to inflict upon him or her (see Mosiah 3:19). Having been given the right to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, the person strives

to treasure that influence and to obey God in all things, putting aside all worldliness and walking in the plain path of goodness, virtue, and service to others in the pure love of Christ.

When men and women are well rooted and established as reborn children of Christ, anxiously engaged each day in selflessly pursuing the services the Master would have them render to others, they are ready to receive and profit from the holy Melchizedek Priesthood. For men, there are three steps in receiving that priesthood power to be able to minister to others as a greatly enhanced being. The first step is to be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood. The second is to receive one's endowment in the holy temple. The third is to be sealed to an eternal companion in the temple.

To be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood is to join the ranks of the empowered servants of God to give special service: missionary work, church work, family work, and temple work. All who receive that priesthood are assigned to a quorum, where they are to learn to serve with others and to learn to wear the priesthood harness well, pulling their load in coordination with others. As they are faithful and continue in repentance, the power of the priesthood wells up within them; they become full of the gifts and powers and knowledge of the Lord and gain the power to bless others with ordinances, miracles, direction, and insight.

In due time, the faithful servant of Christ is invited to go into the holy temple to receive the endowment. The endowment is a gift, as the name suggests. It is a gift of all the eternal powers and blessings the person needs to overcome the world and to accomplish his or her mortal mission. Without the endowment, the person has not the power to defeat Satan and to fulfill all the callings received as a servant in the kingdom of Christ. The blessings of the endowment, like that of the gift of the Holy Ghost at baptism, do not come automatically. The ordinances are the bestowing of a right to receive, and as the gifts are carefully sought for and treasured by explicit prayer and obedience, the gifts come in the sequence and degree the Lord sees is best for the development of the individual into the likeness of the character of Christ.

When endowed persons are ready to marry and establish a new eternal family, those who preside over them send them to the temple to receive a fulness of the blessings of the gospel. In the temple sealing, they receive all the other powers and rights they need to act as husband and wife, father and mother, in their own eternal kingdom. Their own eternal kingdom is not solely their property. They are Christ's, and Christ and all of His are the Father's. The couple joins

the eternal family and kingdom of the gods and through faithfulness enter into the order of the gods for an eternal career of blessing others with all that time and eternity afford.

### A Path to Perfection

Now to sum up this discussion of the two covenants.

The first covenant is the basic covenant. It is never replaced by the second covenant. The purpose of the second, or new and everlasting covenant, is to enable us to grow in stature and character until we can fulfill the first covenant of perfect obedience. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, kept the first covenant in His mortal life and through His Atonement made the second covenant possible for us. The key to remember is that neither covenant excuses sin. The first covenant requires sinlessness, always. The second covenant is a covenant of mercy, which allows a person to learn through experiment, and in experimenting and trying, perhaps to sin, but then to repent unto not sinning. The second covenant is an inclined plane that leads gently up to perfection, whereas the first covenant demands perfection from the beginning. Both demand perfection, and the reward of each is the powers, abilities, and life of a perfect person. One is direct; the other is roundabout.

The first covenant is pure and straight justice. The second covenant is a covenant of justice mixed with temporary mercy for those who do not as yet have the character of Christ to produce and to abide perfect justice. Both come to the same end, the first by direct obedience to the Father, the second by becoming first children of Christ and then, as His children, growing until we can give direct and total obedience to the Father.

The good news is that "the leopard can change its spots." Whatever we are and have been, we can change. By submitting ourselves to Christ through His new and everlasting covenant, we can become new creatures with new habits, new desires, a new mind, a new heart, and a new body. This is salvation indeed.

I rejoice in the goodness of our God in providing two covenants whereby mankind may join the ranks of the gods. The first is the eternal order of the gods. The second is the apprenticeship whereby we learn to abide the perfect and eternal order of the gods. I thank our Father and His Son for giving us these two great gifts to bless our lives. ■