The Covenant Path

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When President Nelson became Prophet, he challenged the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to "keep on the Covenant Path". This phrase was repeated several times in the recent conference, and has become President Nelson's theme.

In contemplating what this term means, I feel that the theme of the Covenant Path is both prophetic and deeply relevant to our lives. And like every other prophetic charge, we can get it right, or we can use it as a tool to silence and control others.

There is no question in my mind that the restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Joseph Smith was prophetic. And yet, as I have studied the history of our Church from the beginning, Joseph Smith and all others that have followed him to this day, as well as our collective culture, have frequently messed up the implementation of prophetic counsel. The greatest lesson I have learned in my faith journey is that a person can both be a Prophet as well as deeply flawed. So also is our Church and culture.

The key is what we do with our inspired humanity -- and that, to me, is what the Covenant Path is all about.

Properly followed, the Covenant Path leads to eternal life, both here and now, as well as for the eternities. Improperly understood and implemented, the Covenant Path leads to pride, secrecy, and oppression. The silencing of the less powerful -- Women, LGBTQIA and those who struggle with God -- is the symptom of walking the wrong Covenant Path.  
  
The use of the term “Covenant Path” is relatively recent, occurring in any frequency over the past decade. And in my mind, there is some confusion as to what this might mean.

Typically, a “covenant” is a promise to do, or not do, something, in exchange for some value. It’s transactional: I covenant to pay rent and abide by my community association rules, and in response the landowner covenants to give me a place to live.

But in scripture, the idea of “covenant” is much broader: it is a relational thing: it is an overall connecting promise between god and humans, where God’s part is typically unconditional, and our part is based upon our acceptance of god’s relationship as manifest in symbol, ordinance, and/or behavior.   
  
When we think in terms of Abrahamic Covenant, Mosaic Covenant, or New Covenant (the Atonement), we are not dealing in transactional terms, but rather, in relational: God comes into relationship with us.  
  
And this broader covenant is worth exploring. Looking at the examples, we see a pattern of two parts:

1. A broad, unconditional promise by God to his people.
2. A symbolic token of our receipt of that promise – an ordinance or action on our part that signifies our acceptance.

Examples: The Abrahamic covenant was that God would bless the descendants of Abraham with land and posterity, and that through them all the nations of the world would be blessed. This covenant is unconditional: there is no act by humans that would make or remove this covenant. However, as a symbol of this covenant, males would be circumcised as an ordinance.

The old and new testaments are also called “covenants”: the old covenant being the Mosaic covenant that Israel would be God’s people, and God would give them his Law. Because they love god, they would follow this law. Jews, today, demonstrate their acceptance of the Mosaic covenant through their practice of the law, the 613 Mitzvah. Again, the love of god was unconditional; there is no act that would make an Israelite no longer an Israelite.

The New Covenant was the Atonement of Jesus Christ. God loves his people, and in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, God reconciles us to God through grace by faith alone. The New Covenant is God’s promise of unconditional grace and love. We accept this covenant through faith and the actions of baptism, reception of the holy ghost, and our ongoing ordinance of communion – what we LDS call “sacrament”.

So, in scripture and throughout history, the term “covenant” has meant the broad agreement between God and us. It’s one big thing, not a specific set of “covenants” on a path.

In our LDS tradition, however, we do not use the term “covenant” to refer to the overall relationship we have with God as a restored church and community. Instead, we think more in terms of the transactional meaning. We make a progressive set of covenants/promises, signified by ordinances, and god then blesses us. Thus, in simplest terms, the Covenant Path is the set of milestone covenants and ordinances taught and practiced by the restored Church of Jesus Christ throughout our lives. These include:

1. Baptism

2. The Laying on of Hands for the Gift of the Holy Ghost

3. The Sacrament

4. Priesthood Ordination, both Aaronic and Melchizedek

5. The Endowment

6. The Sealing

7. Exaltation

Where do we get these?

The "First Principles and Ordinances of the Gospel", as we have in our fourth Article of Faith, is consistently taught throughout scripture as the "Doctrine of Jesus Christ". In fact, Jesus commanded repeatedly, in D&C 10, in 3 Nephi 11, and in 3 Nephi 27, that this core doctrine, of faith, repentance, baptism, the Gift of the Holy Ghost, as well as enduring to the end, are the fullness of the Gospel -- the Doctrine of Jesus Christ, and any more or less than this, if taught as Jesus' doctrine, is NOT his gospel, and comes of evil.

So, the evidence throughout scripture that Baptism, the laying on of hands for the Holy Ghost, and the Sacrament of communion are core ordinances of the Gospel. They are deeply related, and taken together, indeed are consistent with the broader, covenantal meaning of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ’s atonement.

So, in spite of treating these first three ordinances as transactional, they are collectively relational to us, if we seek to enrich our the relationship with God and Christ through their symbolism. These first principles, as daily embodied in the ordinances of our baptism, our ongoing seeking of the Spirit, and the Sacrament, are available to all equally. All members of the Church -- and indeed, through our vicarious ordinances in temples-- all humanity can share in the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel.

But what of the others? Do the additional ordinances of Priesthood ordination, Endowment, and Sealing constitute an extension to the basic principles of the Gospel? Should we be wary that we are extending beyond the first principles, a practice that would be condemned by multiple scriptural admonitions?

In contemplating this question, I hypothesized that these additional ordinances and covenants of Priesthood, Endowment, and Sealing and covenants are not part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As I see them implemented in our Church today, these three ordinances are inherently unequal, the latter two being shrouded in secrecy, and in particular, have had the historical effect of silencing and subordinating women.

Bear with me for a bit. This will be some hard statements about the status of the Covenant Path. I need to walk through what I studied, in order to get to what I have realized through contemplation -- and they are two different things here.

As implemented today

4. Priesthood is only available for men. This cultivates inequality during adolescence, when youth are forming their identities: men are cultivated to lead, and women to submit to their husbands and leaders. Role identities are rigidly defined.

5. The Endowment places men into the position of authority and binds all members to secrecy, obedience, and giving all to the Church. The woman must obey and hearken to her husband, but the husband is under no commitment to hearken to his wife. The access to the Lord is through the husband, creating not only subordination of the woman, but exclusion of those women who have no husband.

6. The Sealing subordinates the woman into a polygamous model of marriage: she gives herself exclusively to the man, but the man does not give himself exclusively to the woman, allowing the man to have multiple wives.

Indeed, the institution of polygamy informs how the LDS church, under Brigham Young, evolved the concept of Priesthood, Endowment, and Sealing to a systematic protection of the the "Principle". In Fundamentalist Mormon culture, "the Priesthood" is code for the institution of polygamy.

And while our current LDS Church does not practice polygamy in the same sense as was done in the nineteenth century or among fundamentalists, the institution of eternal polygamy is practiced: in fact, the Presiding two men leading the LDS church today are in fact eternal polygamists. President Nelson and President Oaks each have two women who have given themselves to their husbands, while neither men have given themselves exclusively to their wife.

Most importantly, in our implementation, today, of Priesthood, the Endowment, and the Sealing, the term "Love" is never mentioned. It's entirely about Control, Dominion, and Compulsion, and unquestioning obedience as the first law of heaven. Yet in Joseph Smith's prophetic words, no power or influence can or should be maintained by virtue of the Priesthood, but rather we must practice unfeigned love, kindness, and pure knowledge. Indeed, the first law of heaven is not obedience, but rather, Love.

As for the final milestone on the Covenant Path, Exaltation, there are also challenges on how that is implemented in the Church today. There is no covenant or ordinance more secret than the Second Anointing, yet this covenant continues to be marked today by a very select few.

And our church leaders are completely silent about what it is and how it is practiced today among them.

So, in my study and research of the Covenant Path, I have realized that there are some significant challenges with the latter four ordinances, milestones, and covenants as implemented today:

- They are unequally implemented between men and women, and the woman is silenced through priesthood exclusion, subordination to the man, and exclusively giving herself to the man in the sealing without reciprocity.

- They are progressively shrouded in secrecy, thus silencing all who dare to speak about them.

- They progressively bind people in to increasing commitments, but are silent, ahead of time, as to to what these covenants involved. This silence prevents any informed consent.

- They are inherently hierarchical, permanently binding the covenant makers to their leaders, and silencing any dissent by covenanting to not speak ill -- however that may be defined -- against the Lord's anointed: specifically meaning, those who have been anointed to be Prophets Seers and Revelators.

As implemented today, Silence has become the power of the Covenant Path. And the silencing of women, along with the silencing and exclusion of LGBTQ and those who doubt from full participation is a symptom of something deeply wrong.

But in my contemplation this morning, I realized that the problem isn't the Covenant Path, or the charge by our Prophet to keep on it. Rather, it is in how we have implemented the Path, both within our correlated narrative, and in our cultural tendency to draw toward authoritarian hierarchy.

Let's step back from the implementation. Let's look at this with different eyes, a different heart.

First Principles.

We speak of the First Principles and Ordinances of the Gospel, yet this term "First Principles" has important meaning in many ways. First Principles are those that provide the foundation of all else. First principles answer three essential questions:

1. What does it mean to be?

2. How do we know truth?

3. How do we live?

These are personal questions, things we intuitively must form if we are to be functional humans. Sure, I could use the terms "Ontology", "Epistemology", and "Ethics" to drive this into a philosophical discussion, but suffice it to say that these three concepts are fundamental to life itself.

Jesus Christ answered these first principles by saying "I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life". In this short statement, as followers of Christ, we recognize that the Way -- or the power of god as Joseph Smith put it -- is the essence and source of our Being. Truth is knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come. And our daily life is infused by following god's commandments and not the commandments of men.

The first three covenants are personal in nature. They embody the Way, the Truth and the Life.

1. Baptism represents the Way, by symbolizing the death and resurrection of Jesus. This informs us the very aspect that in the Way, death and rebirth are the very essential aspects of life. The deep paradox that in polar opposites, unified together, we have all that is.

2. The Gift of the Holy Ghost symbolizes our quest for Truth in faith. We realize truth by integrating both our mind and heart, that both the empirical truths of science and the eternal truths of that which hope for but cannot see, are One in the spirit.

3. The Sacrament is symbolic of how we are to live, through daily contemplation and renewal through repentance, and weekly partaking of symbols that renew our souls. Indeed, the Sacrament, practiced as an ongoing practice throughout our lives, is our Way of enduring to the end.

These are the personal Gospel of Jesus Christ. These are the only doctrine that can save us personally. These are the First Principles.

But then, as we mature, we realize we need community. The second three covenants talk about how we build Zion:

4. Priesthood is symbolic of Leadership. When we step back from the implementation today, we realize that any community needs leadership. Indeed, both men and women lead, and developing the structure of leadership is critical to a community. Jesus demonstrated this leadership, empowering men AND women to serve one another. Jesus' form of leadership was inverted hierarchy: s/he who is last shall be first and the first shall be last. He who abaseth himself shall be exalted. We lay our hands on the head of our leaders -- both men and women, not to set them apart as above, but rather to symbolically empower them. And in Jesus, we know that his "setting apart" was done by a woman who anointed him King. There is great power in understanding that the covenant of Priesthood is equally available to men and women in Christ Jesus.

5. the Endowment is symbolic of how we Create Zion. We must recognize in our study of history of the endowment that it has evolved over time, as we have learned things, line upon line, precept upon precept. The individual parts of the Endowment, obedience, sacrifice, the gospel, moral conduct, and consecration have not changed in substance, but certainly have changed in implementation over time. It's powerful that the Endowment begins with a Creation narrative, for in the Seven Covenants we are discussing here, the Seven days of creation are mirrored. Communities are created, however not just "top down", but indeed, Creation itself \*evolves\*, line upon line, precept upon precept, organism upon organism. The power of the Endowment is to realize that beyond the symbols and implementation, we have core principles of obedience, sacrifice, living in gospel harmony, moral integrity, and holiness that create and evolve living communities.

6. The Sealing is symbolic of how we Connect with one another in integrity and love. While the implementation today refers strictly to marital and family covenants, the truth to which the sealing points is that we make commitments with each other and the Lord if they are to endure. We look each other in the eyes, we connect with our hands and embrace, and we create a partnership in trinity, where the Lord is there. Whenever two are gathered in His name, there HE IS in the Center of us.

When we step back from the implementation, when we embrace the Vision of the Covenant Path, we realize that the fist six covenants are the six days of creation, leading to the Sabbath of entering into the presence of God. Our personal covenants of Baptism, the Holy Ghost, and the Sacrament mark the Way, the Truth, and the LIfe. These are our personal salvation. Our community covenants of priesthood, endowment, and sealing point to how we Lead, Create, and Connect in Love.

As implemented today, our community covenants have been literalized in our cultural teachings to favor men in priesthood, silence and subordinate women in endowment, and bind us to uninformed consent in our sealings. Our exaltation of the few Anointed leaders has become an authoritarian hierarchy that silences all women, LGBTQ, and those who doubt.

We can do better.

We must do better.

We can see the true Covenant Path as the very essence of our personal and community, leading all to equally share in glorious eternal life, here, now, and forever.