

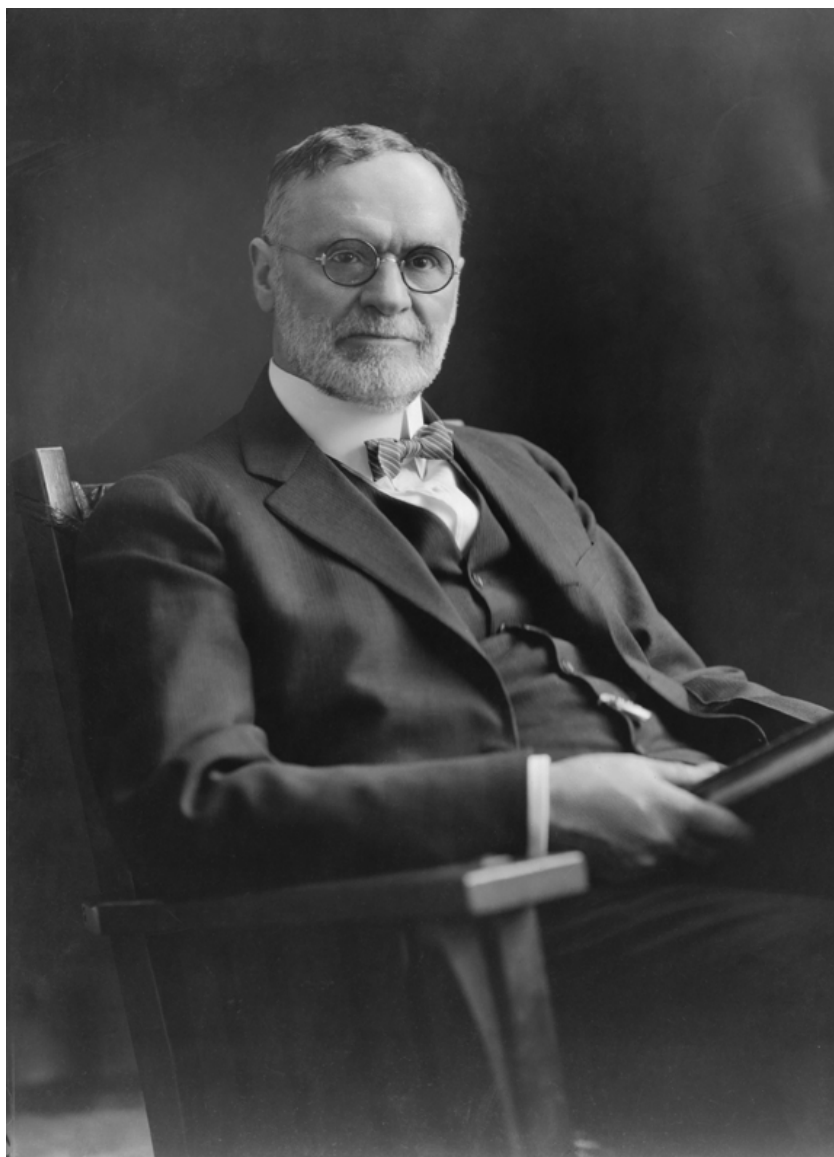


FIGURE 1. Undated photograph of Elder Orson F. Whitney, who served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1906 until his death in 1931. Courtesy Church History Library.

“The Youth of Zion,” “A Word for the Wayward,” and “A Precious Promise”

**Elder Orson F. Whitney’s April 1929
General Conference Sermon on Righteous Parents,
Wayward Children, and Priesthood Sealings**

Reid L. Neilson

Elder Orson F. Whitney (fig. 1), a senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave a memorable sermon at the April 1929 general conference.¹ Elder Whitney, now seventy-three years old, was a beloved Church leader, having served as an Apostle for over two decades. He was widely regarded as one of the finest writers and speakers in the Church. Elder Whitney was “a master teacher, solidly grounded in faith and true doctrine, and he preached by the power of the Holy Ghost,” according to one of his biographers.² His sermon was published in the Church’s official conference report as follows:

THE YOUTH OF ZION

I have faith in the young people of this Church—not because I believe them without fault, nor because I think all are walking in the ways of wisdom and shunning the downward road. I have faith in them because of the character of their parents, because of the ancestry from which they have sprung, and because of the promise made by the God of Heaven, that “this Kingdom shall never be thrown down nor given to another people.”

A WORD FOR THE WAYWARD

You parents of the wilful and the wayward! Don’t give them up. Don’t cast them off. They are not utterly lost. The Shepherd will find his sheep.

1. Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 109–15.

2. Dennis B. Horne, *The Life of Orson F. Whitney: Historian, Poet, Apostle* (Cedar Fort, 2014), 6.

They were his before they were yours—long before he entrusted them to your care; and you cannot begin to love them as he loves them. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend.

A PRECIOUS PROMISE

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.

Who are these straying sheep—these wayward sons and daughters? They are children of the Covenant, heirs to the promises, and have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which makes manifest the things of God. Could all that go for naught?³

Of his participation in that April 1929 general conference, Elder Whitney noted simply in his diary: “Spoke Sunday afternoon first speaker [and at an evening meeting]. . . . Many compliments for both performances came my way.”⁴ This marked one of his final general conference sermons before his passing in May 1931.⁵

3. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110–11.

4. Orson F. Whitney, Diary, April 2–7, 1929, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Originals in the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. “President Grant Makes Plea for Law Obedience,” *Deseret News*, April 8, 1929, 1–2; “Crowded Meeting Ends Session of 99th Annual L. D. S. Conference; President Grant Blesses World,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, April 8, 1929, 3; and “Ninety-Ninth L. D. S. Conference Comes to Close,” *Logan Journal*, April 8, 1929, 1.

In recent decades, Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon has become a beloved text in Latter-day Saint thought. It is perhaps his best-known doctrinal contribution today, although it seemed forgotten for nearly six decades during the middle of the twentieth century. Elder Whitney's themes of righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings have resonated with contemporary Church members, especially those who are struggling to keep their spiritually wandering posterity within the safety of the gospel sheepfold. Beginning in the late 1980s, General Authorities, religious educators, and other Latter-day Saints have referenced and repeated his "Youth of Zion," "Word for the Wayward," and "Precious Promise" statements to give hope to the covenantal parents of disobedient children. Elder Whitney's optimism and encouragement have buoyed up generations of discouraged parents striving to help gather their posterities in the hereafter.

At the same time, Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon (and—as will be shown—its apparent reliance on Joseph Smith's 1843 teachings) has been the subject of some doctrinal puzzlement and questions. In recent years, some Latter-day Saint observers have pointed out the seeming inconsistency of wayward children being pulled back to their righteous parents by priesthood sealings. Aren't individuals agents? If they choose or act unrighteously, how can "the tentacles of Divine Providence" draw them back against their own will? Can mercy rob justice for rebellious offspring? Can unrepentant children be saved *in* their sins through the righteous choices and priesthood sealings of their parents? Moreover, where is the locus of agency? Is it with the individual or with the family? Did the Prophet Joseph and Elder Whitney really teach that agency can be overruled by the Good Shepherd? Church leaders have perceived that some Latter-day Saints might be misinterpreting or putting too much emphasis on the merciful aspects of Elder Whitney's sermon and not on the justice components he also shared in general conference, as will be shown. They worried that this unbalanced usage of the Apostle's words could lead to doctrinal misunderstanding.

The answers to these questions require us to review the way Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon has been interpreted over time as well as the Joseph Smith source(s) for his teaching. The doctrinal foundation of Elder Whitney's teaching is complicated, involving both published and unpublished sources. An examination of these historical texts helps us better appreciate both Joseph Smith's teachings and Elder Whitney's understanding of those doctrines. In this article, I explore the generally accepted relationship between the Prophet's August 1843 discourse

given at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee in Nauvoo on familial priesthood sealings, as published in the *History of the Church*, and Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon content. Moreover, I propose that the Prophet's earlier blessing to his plural wife Sarah Ann Whitney in March 1843 contributed to Elder Whitney's understanding of priesthood sealings and the role of repentance.

I will also offer a close reading of Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon, as well as his 1930 autobiography. Both heretofore unassociated Whitney documents reveal a great deal about his doctrinal views as an Apostle in the immediate years before his passing in 1931. Taken together, these sources imply that Joseph Smith and Elder Whitney consistently taught the doctrinal pairings of agency and accountability, as well as mercy and justice. Or, as Amulek taught Zeezrom in Ammonihah, "that the Lord surely should come to redeem his people, but that he should not come to redeem them *in* their sins, but to redeem them *from* their sins" (Hel. 5:10, emphasis added; see also Alma 11:37; 2 Ne. 30:2).

Moreover, I survey how Elder Whitney's published teachings on this subject echoed Church President Joseph F. Smith's relatively recent vision on the redemption of the dead, which would later be canonized by the Church's membership.⁶ In October 1918, just weeks before his passing, Joseph F. Smith revealed, "The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God."⁷ In addition, "after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation" (D&C 138:58–59). In historian Steven C. Harper's summary of Doctrine and Covenants 138, he wrote that both early and Latter-day Christians believe "that the dead could repent and be redeemed through exactly the same gospel of Jesus Christ that saves the repentant living. The determinant is not death but agency. Individuals are saved or damned based not on when they live or die but on what they decide to do with Christ's offer of salvation when they learn about it."⁸

6. See Mary Jane Woodger, "From Obscurity to Scripture: Joseph F. Smith's Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2012), 234–54.

7. See Joseph F. Smith, "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," *Improvement Era*, December 1918, 170.

8. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Deseret Book, 2008), 511–12.

Elder Orson F. Whitney and Wayward Children

Orson Ferguson Whitney was born on July 1, 1855, in Salt Lake City, Utah, eleven years after a mob murdered the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in Carthage, Illinois. As such, he never personally knew the Church's founding leader. Nevertheless, Whitney came from a privileged Latter-day Saint lineage: his grandfathers were Bishop Newel K. Whitney and Apostle Heber C. Kimball, who both served in the presiding councils of the Church under the leadership of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. A third-generation Latter-day Saint, Whitney was the son of Horace Kimball Whitney and Helen Mar Kimball, who was previously sealed as one of Smith's plural wives in Nauvoo. Sarah Ann Whitney, his paternal aunt, was another of the Prophet's plural wives. In 1906, Elder Whitney himself was called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a position he held for a quarter of a century.⁹

In addition to being one of the Church's leading expounders of the truth, Elder Whitney was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He had nine children with his first wife, Zina Beal Smoot. With his plural wife, Mary Minerva Wells, Elder Whitney had two more children.¹⁰ Although Elder Whitney's grown children and grandchildren were prospering temporally, the aging Apostle was increasingly concerned about their spiritual wellbeing. A number of his posterity—all who had been raised in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—had ceased full activity in the Church. Several of his children had chosen to marry outside of the house of the Lord, and he believed many of his grandchildren were suffering spiritually as a result.¹¹

Notably, Elder Whitney's eldest and firstborn son, Horace (known as "Race"), was a source of deep parental pain for the Apostle. As an adult, Race wrestled with drinking, eventually becoming an alcoholic. He married and divorced twice. Race died unmarried, destitute, and without his Church membership or priesthood blessings in 1908, at the age of twenty-eight. One year later, a still-mourning Elder Whitney oversaw the posthumous rebaptism and reordination of his wayward son and was vicariously endowed for him in the Salt Lake Temple.¹²

9. Dennis D. Flake, "Orson F. Whitney," in *Latter-day Saint History Encyclopedia*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Deseret Book, 2000), 1341.

10. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 415.

11. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 257–69.

12. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 267–68.

Twelve years after Race's tragic death, Presiding Patriarch to the Church Hyrum G. Smith reassured Elder Whitney, by then an Apostle, of his own spiritual standing in a final patriarchal blessing in 1920. "Be of good cheer, for the Lord loves thee, and is pleased with thy ministry, and thy devotion, and will continue to strengthen thee both in body and in mind." The patriarch also assured Elder Whitney that his descendants would be blessed by his continued righteous ministry as their father: "And because of thy teachings and thy firmness and thy humility, the answers to thy prayers will reach into the lives of thy children, touching their hearts, and bringing them to acknowledge their Creator."¹³

Given Elder Whitney's ongoing spiritual challenges with his growing posterity, it is not surprising that the Apostle addressed a good portion of his April 1929 general conference sermon on the wayward children of righteous, temple-covenant-keeping mothers and fathers. Elder Whitney was not, of course, speaking only to himself. Many second- and third-generation Latter-day Saints had raised their children in the Church at great sacrifice only to see them grow up and leave the faith. These departures had caused heartache and disappointment. What would become of these children in the afterlife? Were they cast off forever? The Church's teachings on eternal families made these questions even more acute. In Latter-day Saint thought, the ideal afterlife involved parents and children living together in righteousness. But waywardness disrupted the ideal by cutting family members out of the eternal family circle. The family would be incomplete. Knowing that parents needed comfort and reassurance, Elder Whitney spoke directly to the problem of family disunion.

Teachings of Early Church Leaders on Wayward Children

While Elder Whitney would specifically reference some Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith as the source of his doctrine in general conference, Elder Whitney contributed to a familiar doctrinal arc by the Prophet's apostolic successors. To begin with, Brigham Young, while serving as the second president of the Church, spoke in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on April 29, 1866, and taught the following to the gathered Saints: "I could say something encouraging to parents, if they would heed. Let the father and mother, who are members of this church and kingdom, take

13. Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney As Told by Himself* (Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1930), 414.

a righteous course, and strive with all their might never to do a wrong, but to do good all their lives; if they have one child or one hundred children." The prophet continued with a conditional promise: "If they conduct themselves towards them as they should, binding them to the Lord by their faith and prayers, I care not where those children go, they are bound up to their parents by an everlasting tie, and no power of earth or hell can separate them from their parents in eternity; they will return again to the fountain from whence they sprang."¹⁴

Likewise, Lorenzo Snow, then serving as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught the following in the October 1893 general conference: "God has fulfilled His promises to us, and our prospects are grand and glorious. Yes, in the next life we will have our wives, and our sons and daughters. If we do not get them all at once, we will have them some time, for every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is the Christ." The senior Apostle sought to further comfort righteous parents with wayward offspring. "You that are mourning about your children straying away will have your sons and your daughters. If you succeed in passing through these trials and afflictions and receive a resurrection, you will, by the power of the Priesthood, work and labor, as the Son of God has, until you get all your sons and daughters in the path of exaltation and glory." Snow expressed his deep faith that wayward children could be redirected back onto the covenant path. "This is just as sure as that the sun rose this morning over yonder mountains. Therefore, mourn not because all your sons and daughters do not follow in the path that you have marked out to them, or give heed to your counsels. Inasmuch as we succeed in securing eternal glory, and stand as saviors, and as kings and priests to our God, we will save our posterity."¹⁵

Similarly, during the October 1919 general conference, Alonzo A. Hinckley, then president of the Deseret Stake (Millard County, Utah), spoke in a second overflow meeting held at the Assembly Hall on Temple

14. G[eorge]. D. Watt, "Remarks by President Brigham Young," *Deseret News*, May 10, 1866, 2. See also *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 163–64, 173, and 341; and "Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," *Ensign*, September 2002, 11. See also "Brigham Young, 29 April 1866," transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, typescript, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand Transcriptions, 2013–2024, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/effec3fd-45d5-45ef-9df4-592acff5e4cc/0/0>.

15. Arthur Winter, "Discourse Delivered by President Lorenzo Snow," *Deseret Weekly*, November 4, 1893, 610. See also "Hope for Parents of Wayward Children," 11.

Square.¹⁶ He based his sermon on the Savior's parable of the prodigal son featured in Luke. The previous week, Elder James E. Talmage, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had visited Hinckley's stake in west central Utah and shared his feelings on the wayward children of the stalwart Saints.¹⁷ "Do not count any boy or girl lost. They are not," Hinckley disclosed to his audience. "Brother Talmage stated at our [stake] conference, a week ago today, as a servant of the Lord, and I wrote it down, and read it to him after the meeting was over and he said I had it recorded correctly."

According to Hinckley's stake conference notes, Elder Talmage made the following declaration: "I promise the Saints in the Deseret stake of Zion that if their lives are such that they can look their sons and daughters in the face, and if any of them have gone astray, that the parents are able to say, 'It is contrary to my instruction and my life's example; it is against every effort of love, long suffering, faith, prayer and devotion that that boy or that girl has gone,'—I promise you, fathers and mothers, that not one of them shall be lost unless they have sinned away the power to repent."¹⁸ As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve also in attendance, Elder Whitney would have also heard Elder Talmage's talk. It seems likely that these remarks influenced Whitney's 1929 talk a decade later.

Reconstructing Joseph Smith's History and Teachings

Elder Orson F. Whitney's April 1929 general conference sermon invoked teachings from Joseph Smith that did not appear in any canonized revelations. By the close of the nineteenth century, the Prophet had been deceased for over five decades. In 1898, the Prophet's nephew President Joseph F. Smith, then a counselor in the First Presidency, and Elder B. H. Roberts, then a member of the Council of the Seventy, encouraged aging Church members to carefully record their memories of Joseph Smith and his teachings.¹⁹ They urged the Saints to ensure "that the circumstances

16. For a description of the now defunct practice of holding overflow meetings during general conference, see Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, eds., *A Voice in the Wilderness: The 1888–1930 General Conference Sermons of Mormon Historian Andrew Jensen* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 16–18.

17. See James E. Talmage, Journal, September 27–28, 1919, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

18. Alonzo A. Hinckley, in *Ninetieth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1919), 161.

19. Editors [Joseph F. Smith and B. H. Roberts], "Shall We Record Testimony?," *Improvement Era*, March 1898, 372.

are well authenticated and carefully and accurately stated. We fear that many things that are reported as coming from the Prophet Joseph, and other early elders in the church, by not being carefully recorded or told with strict regard for accuracy, have lost something of their value as historical data, and unwarranted additions have sometimes been made to the original facts.”²⁰

Such concerns would encourage Church leaders to document, as best as possible, the history and teachings of Joseph Smith and the early generations of Latter-day Saints who lived in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. This desire to record the history and teachings of Joseph Smith would lead to several major compilations of the Prophet's words beginning in the early twentieth century.²¹

B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (1902–1912)

As the nineteenth century closed, Joseph Smith's history was not available in book format for Latter-day Saints, so the First Presidency assigned President George Q. Cannon to prepare a multivolume history of the Church covering the Prophet's lifetime. However, President Cannon passed away in 1901. At this point, the senior Brethren turned the historical undertaking over to General Authority B. H. Roberts, a prolific author himself, and a committee composed of Church leaders and members who served in the Church Historian's Office.²² Over the next decade, Elder Roberts and his coworkers in the historian's office compiled and published the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, by*

20. Editors, “Shall We Record Testimony?,” 372.

21. See *Joseph Smith's Teachings: A Classified Arrangement of the Doctrinal Sermons and Writings of the Great Latter-day Prophet*, comp. Edwin F. Parry, from the authorized “History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Deseret News, 1912); and Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings as They Are Found in the Documentary History and Other Publications of the Church and Written or Published in the Days of the Prophet's Ministry* (Deseret News Press, 1938).

22. Ronald W. Walker, David J. Whittaker, and James B. Allen, *Mormon History* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 8. In 1902, President Anthon H. Lund, a counselor in the First Presidency, was serving as Church Historian with Roberts, Orson F. Whitney, Andrew Jenson, and Amos Milton Musser working as his assistant Church historians. Whitney, as both an assistant Church historian and then as an Apostle beginning in 1906, was involved in the editorial selection and review process for this multivolume history and other Church publications. See Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 293.

Himself (popularly known as the *Documentary History of the Church* by many Latter-day Saints).²³ This was a major accomplishment for these historians, but their impressive scholarship was not without its shortcomings.²⁴

It would be from Elder Roberts's multivolume work that Elder Whitney would apparently gain some of his understanding of Joseph Smith's teachings on righteous parents and wayward children that he featured in his 1929 sermon. Specifically, when Elder Roberts and his committee of fellow Church leaders and historians drafted the historical description of Joseph Smith's Sabbath discourse at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee in Nauvoo on August 13, 1843, they simply published the earliest account, which first appeared in the *Deseret News* on January 28, 1857.²⁵ The preface to their entry in the *History of the Church*²⁶ reads as follows: "I went to the stand on Sunday morning, August 13, 1843, and preached on the death of Judge Higbee, a synopsis of which was reported by my clerk, Dr. Willard Richards." The relevant portion of the Prophet's 1843 discourse to our discussion of Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon continues as follows: "When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother."²⁷ This transcript would become the standard account of the Prophet's teaching on the matter until 1980, when additional records would become available for Church members to study.

Two decades after Elder Roberts published Richards's account of Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse in the *History of the Church*, Elder Whitney spoke in general conference on righteous parents and wayward children in 1929. He clearly references the teachings of the Church's founder but, as was common practice for the first 150 years of the Church, does not provide a source citation in his published conference

23. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Bookcraft, 1980), 289–91. See also Gary James Bergera, ed., *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts* (Signature Books, 1990), 221–23.

24. See Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, *Mormon History*, 8–9.

25. "History of Joseph Smith," *Deseret News*, January 28, 1857, 370, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-of-joseph-smith/513>. See also History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844], 1690, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/62>.

26. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Deseret News, 1909), 5:529–31.

27. Roberts, *History of the Church*, 5:530.

report text.²⁸ In time, Latter-day Saint leaders and laity would associate the doctrinal teachings found in Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse—as featured in Elder Roberts's *History of the Church*—with Elder Whitney's April 1929 sermon.

Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938)

Published historical accounts have a way of perpetuating themselves because readily available transcriptions are often repeated in subsequent publications. In 1938, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith,²⁹ then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Church Historian, published a volume of what he considered to be the most important teachings of his great-uncle Joseph Smith, known as *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.³⁰ It is unclear how involved Elder Smith was in the selection and editorial process, but the volume's structure and purpose bore the perspective of the Church Historian, who felt the Latter-day Saints were drifting from the foundational teachings of the founding Prophet of the Restoration.

Following Elder B. H. Roberts's earlier approach of copying Willard Richards's transcription into his multivolume history, Elder Smith directly copied and cited the *History of the Church* text. Again, the relevant passage reads exactly as it had in Elder Roberts's (and Richards's) earlier transcript: "When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother."³¹ Given that Elder Smith's *Teachings* was published in 1938, it had no influence on the late Elder Orson F. Whitney's thinking or understanding given his passing seven years earlier. But it did have an impact on Latter-day Saints who looked to this volume as an authoritative source of the Prophet's teachings. Accordingly, Richards's transcript in the nineteenth century had become the standard text for Church members in the twentieth century.

28. See Scott L. Howell, Jesse Vincent, and Lauryn Wilde, "'How Beautiful Are the Feet': The Use of Footnotes in General Conference Reports," *Religious Educator* 24, no. 2 (2023): 14–32.

29. The following section is adapted from Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, "Joseph Fielding Smith as Mormon Historian and Theologian," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2018): 43–45.

30. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

31. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 321.

Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (1980)

Amidst the Church's sesquicentennial anniversary celebrations, historians Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook published *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* in 1980.³² Previous to the release of this documentary edition, Latter-day Saints had relied on Elder B. H. Roberts's *History of the Church* or Elder Joseph Fielding Smith's *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* as the official transcripts of the Prophet's Nauvoo sermons. However, Ehat and Cook painstakingly reproduced not just one transcript but six contemporaneous accounts of Joseph Smith's funeral discourse on August 13, 1843, which many readers point to as the likely source of Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 sermon.³³ "The original source of these reports is the Joseph Smith Diary, by Willard Richards," Ehat and Cook clarify in footnote. "The accounts of this discourse by Howard [and Martha] Coray, Franklin D. Richards, William Clayton, Levi Richards, and Willard Richards (personal diary) are here published for the first time."³⁴ Suddenly, Latter-day Saints had additional accounts of the Prophet's teachings to compare and contrast in their studies.

With unprecedented access to several additional transcripts of Joseph Smith's 1843 funeral discourse, Ehat and Cook explored the doctrinal consistency of the Prophet's teaching. They believed that the previously unpublished Coray account helped clarify the Prophet's teachings on

32. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series 6 (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980).

33. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 238–42.

34. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 297n1. According to the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*: "Church members Willard Richards, William Clayton, and Franklin D. Richards, as well as Howard or Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, were likely in the audience that day [August 13, 1843], and each of them produced handwritten manuscripts that captured elements of Joseph Smith's discourse. Richards likely recorded rough notes of the discourse on loose paper or in a notebook before inscribing a more polished account in Joseph Smith's journal. The polished nature of Clayton's and Franklin D. Richards's versions suggest that they also reconstructed them from notes or memory. Martha and Howard Coray recorded several of Joseph Smith's discourses in the early 1840s, and one of them likely took nonexant notes of Joseph Smith's discourse. Martha Coray later copied them into a notebook sometime after 1853." "Discourse, 13 August 1843–A," in *Documents, Volume 13: August–December 1843*, ed. Christian K. Heimburger, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred, J. Chase Kirkham, and Matthew S. McBride, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2022), 33, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-willard-richards/7#historical-intro>.

the blessings of priesthood sealings: were they unconditional, as many assumed, or were they actually conditional, based on repentance? Ehat and Cook explained, "When the Church historians [Elder Roberts and his committee] amalgamated the entries from the Joseph Smith Diary [kept by Willard Richards] and the William Clayton Diary to create the version of this discourse that was published, the passage that the blessings conferred by the ordinance of sealing parents and children was unconditional. The wording of the published version suggests that the children of parents who receive the fulness of the priesthood can never fall."³⁵ Given the Nauvoo texts available to them, all of which seemed to highlight the unconditional nature of priesthood sealings, it is not surprising that most Latter-day Saints considered the doctrinal matter settled.³⁶

Nevertheless, Ehat and Cook felt that the expanded Coray transcript shed new light on Joseph Smith's 1843 teachings. They reasoned that all of Heavenly Father's children, including rebellious sons and daughters, could only be saved *from* their sins by exercising faith and engaging in repentance through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The relevant portion of the expanded Coray account—with conditions emphasized—reads as follows: "when a Father & mother of a family have entered into [the sealing,] their children *who have not transgressed* are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed" (figs. 2–3).³⁷

Ehat and Cook explain their theological rationale for privileging the Coray's version of the Prophet's sermon over the other available transcriptions: "This previously unpublished, more complete account of the Prophet's idea *does* contain a conditional. Clearly this is a more reasonable and consistent doctrine: if it were not for such a conditional, the concept would contradict significant doctrines taught by Joseph Smith, not the least of which would be a contradiction of his [second] article of faith that 'men will be punished for their own sins.'"³⁸ According to the Coray transcript (and Ehat and Cook's analysis), the Prophet did

35. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 300n19. See also Elizabeth Ann Anderson, "Howard and Martha Coray: Chroniclers of Joseph Smith's Words and Life," *Journal of Mormon History* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 96–103.

36. For a thoughtful articulation of this viewpoint, see Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–53; and Jonathan Stapley, "Providential Tentacles, Sacerdotal Perseverance, and Punishment for Sin," *By Common Consent* (blog), February 13, 2014, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2014/02/13/providential-tentacles-sacerdotal-perseverance-and-punishment-for-sin/>.

37. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 241, emphasis added.

38. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 300n19, emphasis in original.

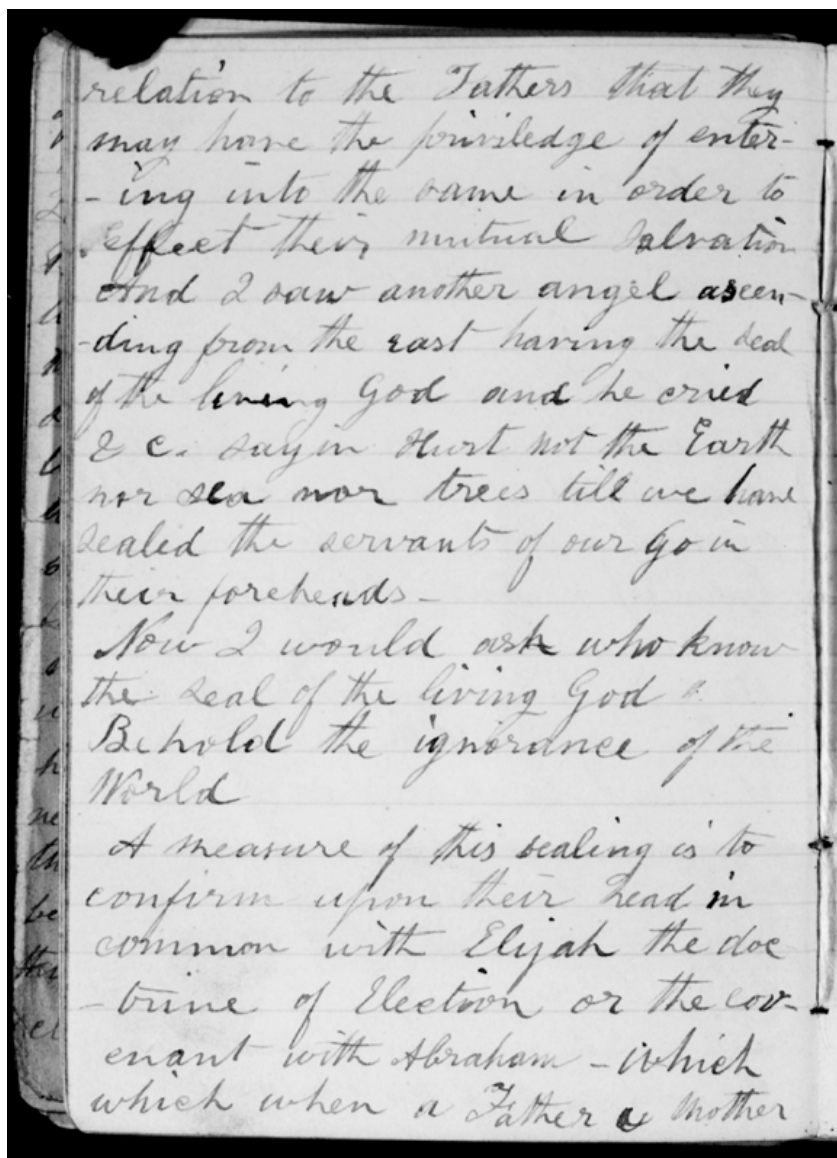


FIGURE 2. Photograph of Howard Coray and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray's transcript of Joseph Smith's "Discourse, 13 August 1843-A, as Reported by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray," page [34], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-martha-jane-knowlton-coray/5>. Courtesy Church History Library.

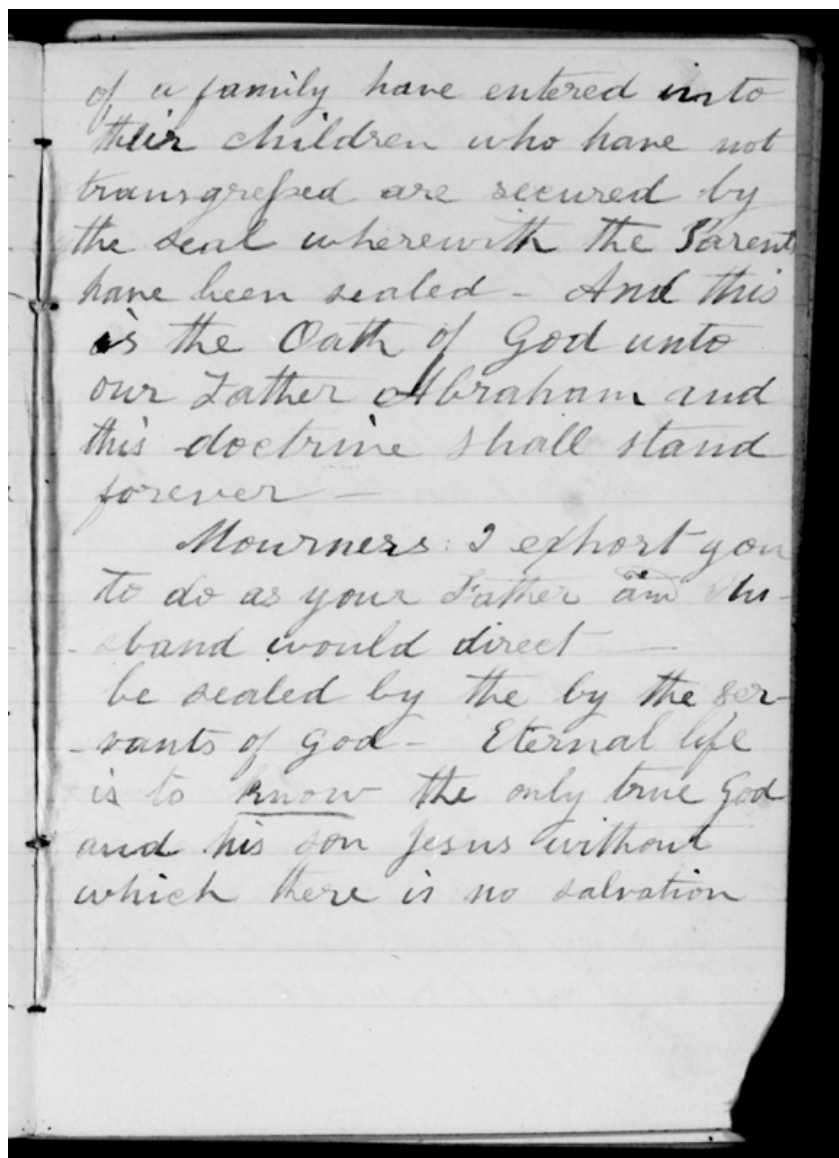


FIGURE 3. Photograph of Howard Coray and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray's transcript of Joseph Smith's "Discourse, 13 August 1843-A, as Reported by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray," page [35], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-13-august-1843-a-as-reported-by-martha-jane-knowlton-coray/6>. Courtesy Church History Library.

not teach that unrepentant souls could be saved *in* their sins or that the agency of wayward children could be overruled by virtue of their parents' priesthood sealings. But was this concept of conditional priesthood sealings reinforced in any other Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith? If so, did Elder Orson F. Whitney have access to such a document before he spoke in April 1929 general conference? I believe that the answer to both questions is yes.

Additional Sources for Joseph Smith's Teachings and Elder Orson F. Whitney's Understanding

As historiographically documented above, Elder Orson F. Whitney's April 1929 general conference sermon has been traditionally linked to Joseph Smith's August 1843 discourse at the funeral of Judge Elias Higbee. A textual comparison suggests that the Prophet's Nauvoo teachings on righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings—as recorded by Willard Richards—was an underlying source for Elder Whitney's declaration nearly nine decades later. But I believe there are two heretofore unassociated texts that informed the Apostle's 1929 sermon and clarified his final thinking before his passing in 1931.

To contextualize these additional historical sources, one needs to further appreciate the cherished relationship between the Newel K. Whitney and Joseph Smith families in early Church history, especially during the Nauvoo years. This loving bond was very important to the identity of Orson F. Whitney, a grandson of Newel. Between October 1884 and September 1885, Orson Whitney published a twelve-part series of monthly articles on "The Aaronic Priesthood" for the Church's *Contributor* periodical. In part 4, he wrote extensively about his paternal grandfather, Newel K. Whitney, an early bishop of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, who was later called as the Presiding Bishop of the entire Church. Orson wrote, "We have before spoken of the friendship and intimacy existing between the Prophet and Bishop Whitney. This bond of affection was strengthened and intensified by the giving in marriage to the former of the Bishop's eldest daughter, Sarah, in obedience to a revelation from God," Whitney wrote of his paternal aunt Sarah Ann Whitney. "This girl was but seventeen years of age, but she had implicit faith that the doctrine of plural marriage, as revealed to and practised by the Prophet, was of celestial origin. She was the first woman, in this dispensation, who was given in plural marriage by and with the consent of both parents."³⁹

39. Orson F. Whitney, "The Aaronic Priesthood. [Part] IV," *Contributor*, January 1885, 131.

As an unmarried young woman still living in her parents' household, Sarah Ann Whitney was sealed to Joseph Smith on July 27, 1842, in Nauvoo by her father, Newel K. Whitney, with her mother, Elizabeth Ann Whitney, acting as a witness.⁴⁰ In addition to providing specific instructions on how to officiate over the priesthood sealing, the Prophet's associated revelation "promised immortality and eternal life to Sarah Ann, and by extension her entire family, through her sealing to [Joseph Smith]. By uniting the Whitney family with [Joseph Smith], the marriage created kinship ties that promised to seal the two families together eternally," write the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*.⁴¹

Joseph Smith's Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney

Eight months after being sealed to Sarah Ann Whitney, Joseph Smith handwrote a priesthood blessing (fig. 4) for his young plural wife, which assured "blessings for her and her family" conditioned upon her faithfulness.⁴² "Of the several documents promising blessings to Whitney family members," the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers* note, "the blessing featured here is the only document directed solely to Sarah Ann."⁴³ The Prophet's holograph document, dated March 23, 1843, reads as follows:

Oh Lord my God thou that dwellest on high bless I beseech of thee the one into whose hands this may fall and crown her with a diadem of glory in the Eternal worlds Oh let it be Sealed this day on high that She Shall come forth in the first reserrection to recieve the Same and verily it Shall be so Saith the Lord *if She remain in the Everlasting covenant to the end* as also all her Fathers house Shall be Saved in the Same Eternal glory and *if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived in and by repentance* be crowned with all the fullness of the glory of the Everlasting gospele these promises I Seal upon all of their heads in the name of Jesus Christ by the Law of the holy preisthood Even so Amen.⁴⁴

40. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," in *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, ed. Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Jordan T. Watkins, Matthew C. Godfrey and Mason K. Allred, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 308–14.

41. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," 311.

42. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," in *Documents, Volume 12: March–July, 1843*, ed. David W. Grua, Brent M. Rogers, Matthew C. Godfrey, Robin Scott Jensen, Jessica M. Nelson, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2021), 100–4.

43. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 101.

44. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 103–4, emphasis added.

Nauvoo City March 23^d 1843
Oh Lord my God Thou that
dwellest on high bless I beseech of thee
the one into whose hands this may
fall and crown her with a Diadem
of glory in the Eternal worlds
Oh let it be sealed this day on high
that she shall come forth in the
first resurrection to receive the
same and verily it shall be so
saith the Lord if she remain in
the Everlasting covenant to thee
as also all her Father's house shall
be saved in the same Eternal glory
and if any of them shall wander
from the fold of the Lord they
shall not perish but shall re-
turn saith the Lord and be
saved in and by repentance
be crowned with all the fullness
of the glory of the Everlasting gosp^l
=el these promises I seal upon
all of their heads in the name of
Jesus Christ by the Law of the
holy Priesthood Even so Amen
Sarah Ann } Joseph Smith
Whitney

FIGURE 4. Photograph of Joseph Smith's handwritten "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-sarah-ann-whitney-23-march-1843/1>. Courtesy Church History Library.

It is important to note that both Joseph Smith's April 1843 blessing and his August 1843 funeral discourse were given during the same period that he was expounding the doctrine of priesthood sealings. That July, the Prophet also dictated a revelation on "eternal and plural marriage," which was later canonized as section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know Sarah Ann's reaction to Joseph Smith's blessing or her thoughts about its promises to her and her family. "Few of Sarah Ann Whitney's own writings survive, and none is known to illuminate this blessing from her perspective. However, the Whitney family preserved a significant number of family and church records," the *Joseph Smith Papers* editors continue. "This document, along with a select few other records likely important to the family, was isolated from that larger collection, suggesting that Sarah Ann, her mother, and other family members assigned those select documents a special status."⁴⁶

I believe that this blessing by Joseph Smith to Sarah Ann Whitney was an additional historical source for her nephew Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 sermon.⁴⁷ There are a number of contextual and textual similarities between the two documents. To begin with, both Joseph Smith's March 1843 blessing and August 1843 discourse promise salvation to both the recipient and their entire family, based upon their faithfulness and repentance. While the assured blessings are similar, the trajectory of the priesthood sealing is opposite. Whereas the Prophet's August 1843 discourse suggests that the priesthood sealing of righteous parents will have salvific effects *forward in time on their posterity*, his earlier March 1843 blessing declares that the priesthood sealing of a single youth to a righteous priesthood holder, in this case Sarah Ann Whitney to himself, will have salvific blessings *backward in time on her ancestors*, or "all of her Fathers house." Regardless of these differences and directional sealings, the conditional promised blessings are the same for related family members.

Furthermore, both Joseph Smith's 1843 blessing and Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon feature imagery of the Good Shepherd found in John 10:1–21 (see also Ps. 23 and Ezek. 34:11–16). To Sarah Ann Whitney, the Prophet promised her family that, like sheep in the Holy Land, "if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish

45. "Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132]," in David W. Grua and others, *Documents*, Volume 12, 457–78.

46. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 103.

47. An earlier historian suggested this textual connection in a footnote in his encyclopedic history of Joseph Smith and plural marriage. See Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, Volume 1: *History* (Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 509n33.

but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived.” Similarly, Elder Whitney taught in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1929: “Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold.” In both cases, the Good Shepherd gathers his straying flock back to the safety of the sheep fold, a fenced enclosure to safeguard one’s livestock from predators, upon conditions of repentance (see Num. 32:24; 1 Chr. 17:7; and Ps. 50:9; 78:70). There the Savior would preserve and protect his sheep eternally, by virtue of priesthood sealings honored by his atoning sacrifice.

Table 1. Comparison of Joseph Smith’s 1843 Teachings and Elder Orson F. Whitney’s 1929 Sermon

Joseph Smith’s March and August 1843 Teachings	Elder Orson F. Whitney’s April 1929 Sermon
	A PRECIOUS PROMISE
[August:] When a Father & Mother of a family have entered into their children <i>who have not transgressed</i> are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed. ⁴⁸	¶The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.
[March:] If She remain in the Everlasting covenant to the end as also all her Fathers house Shall be Saved in the Same Eternal glory and if any of them Shall wander from the foald of the Lord they Shall not perish but Shall return Saith the Lord and be Saived and <i>by repentance</i> be crowned with all the fullness of the glory of the Everlasting gospele! ⁴⁹	Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. ⁵⁰

Due to his familial ties, Elder Orson F. Whitney became the physical custodian of both Whitney family plural-marriage-related documents from the Nauvoo era: (1) Joseph Smith’s July 24, 1842, revelation for Newel K. Whitney (his grandfather), which instructed him how to perform the priesthood sealing of his daughter, Sarah Ann Whitney (his

48. “Discourse, 13 August 1843–A,” 33, emphasis added.
49. “Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843,” 103–4, emphasis added.
50. Whitney, in *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110.

aunt) to the Prophet; and (2) Joseph Smith's March 23, 1843, blessing for Sarah. It appears that the original copy of the 1842 revelation to Newel no longer exists. But Orson made a typescript in 1912 from a copy that belonged to his father, Horace Whitney, and believed that Horace had received a copy from Newel.⁵¹ By contrast, Joseph Smith's subsequent handwritten blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney is extant. Sarah Ann Whitney's mother, Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, obtained the document at an unknown time. Another daughter of Elizabeth, Mary Jane Whitney Groo, inherited the document and gave it to Orson, her nephew.⁵² In a very real sense, the extended Newel K. Whitney family, including Orson in the third generation, became the keepers of these documents containing the Prophet Joseph's Nauvoo teachings, which other Latter-day Saints did not have access to.

In the spring of 1912, Elder Whitney determined to donate a number of family treasures in his possession to the Church on behalf of his extended Whitney relatives, including these two featured Nauvoo documents.⁵³ The Apostle documented this extraordinary family bequest in his diary as follows: "Wrote to President Joseph F. Smith, presenting to him or to the Church a number of Nauvoo relics, for many years heirlooms in the Whitney family."⁵⁴

When the Whitney family documents are paired with the Prophet's 1843 sermon at Judge Elias Higbee's funeral, we get a fuller sense of his teachings on righteous parents, wayward children, priesthood sealings, and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Read together, Joseph Smith's Nauvoo blessing and his discourse (as reported by Coray) both impart that priesthood sealings and their associated blessings for individuals and families are conditioned on Christian repentance.

51. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," 312; "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

52. "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

53. Orson F. Whitney to Joseph F. Smith, April 1, 1912, Whitney Family Documents Collection, MS 23156, Church History Library. He presented four items to Church President Joseph F. Smith: his prepared typescript copy of Joseph Smith's 1842 revelation to Newel K. Whitney; the original handwritten blessing of Joseph Smith to Sarah Ann Whitney in 1843; a wood chip spotted with what the family believed to be Joseph Smith's blood taken from the Carthage Jail grounds; and a lock of Joseph Smith's hair clipped from his body after his martyrdom.

54. Orson F. Whitney, Diary, April 1, 1912, Newel K. Whitney Papers, 1817–1910, Church History Library. See also Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 283; and "Blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, 23 March 1843," 100.

Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney* (1930)

In addition to Joseph Smith's handwritten blessing to Sarah Ann Whitney, there is an additional historical source that we need to consider when trying to excavate Elder Orson F. Whitney's doctrinal understanding of families and priesthood sealings. During the final years of his life, Elder Whitney began writing his autobiography for distribution to his posterity and interested Latter-day Saints.⁵⁵ By the summer of 1930—a year after he spoke in April 1929 general conference—Elder Whitney had completed his memoir for publication, following four years of diligent drafting and editing. *Through Memory's Halls: The Life Story of Orson F. Whitney* was published in November 1930. "I am very pleased with the appearance of the book and hope it will prove, as designed, a blessing to my children and kindred and friends," the senior Church leader noted with satisfaction.⁵⁶ The book was well received by his loved ones and within Latter-day Saint circles in Utah.

In his autobiography's seventh chapter, "A Soul's Awakening," Elder Whitney focused on the year 1876, a hinge point in his own adolescent life in Utah. "I had made up my mind to embrace the dramatic profession, and as the Salt Lake Theatre was not running regularly, I decided to go to New York, that Mecca of theatrical aspirants, and there begin my career." He confessed that his concerned parents "were much opposed to it, but I was determined to do something, to be somebody, and the drama seemed the only opening for me at that time." But during that October general conference, twenty-one-year-old Whitney was unexpectedly called on a mission. His proselyting assignment "fell like a bolt from the blue," he admitted years later. "This was the turning point in my life, the virtual beginning of my career."⁵⁷

During his adolescent years, Whitney drifted from his spiritual moorings and the religious life his Latter-day Saint parents expected him to follow. "For several years I had paid little or no attention to religion, and though naturally of a spiritual turn and possessed of deep veneration, had become careless and indifferent, like many others, and had contracted a distaste for sacred things. This was due largely to the company I kept, but most of all to ignorance of the true meaning and import

55. Whitney, Diary, April 4–6, 1926.

56. Whitney, Diary, November 28, 1930.

57. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 66–68.

of religion," he described in a manuscript autobiographical sketch. Yet Elder Whitney clarified that while some observers in Utah thought him "an infidel," he was "only reckless and disobedient" like some of his fellow young Latter-day Saints as they matured unevenly into adulthood and Christian discipleship.⁵⁸

As Elder Whitney reviewed his own youthful conversion, accelerated by his unanticipated missionary service as a young elder, he wove into his recollections his tender feelings for his own posterity. Reflecting back more than five decades on his own spiritual struggles, he shared his belief that so many wandering youths are but a meaningful spiritual experience away from receiving a testimony and aligning their lives with gospel teachings. The Apostle implored the readers of his autobiography, Latter-day Saint parents with potentially wayward children themselves, to hold out hope for their youth, just as his parents had done for him in the mid-1870s. Remembering his younger, troubled self, Elder Whitney wrote, "I know now that I had a testimony, a deep conviction of the Truth; but it was latent, undeveloped, like a gold mine in the depths of the earth. Something had to occur to bring it out. That something was my mission. It bored the tunnel, sunk the shaft, and brought the precious ore to the surface."⁵⁹

Briefly pausing the narration of his personal spiritual development, Elder Whitney then weaved into his memoir the relevant text from his April 1929 sermon, given the previous year. He held up his own spiritual immaturity and his parents' longsuffering in 1876 as a cautionary tale: that righteous parents must not abandon their spiritually indifferent or wayward offspring, who nevertheless remained "children of the Covenant."

I cannot but believe that in the heart of every "Mormon" boy and every "Mormon" girl there is a spiritual gold mine, awaiting development. To some, the development comes early; to others, late. But come it will, sometime, somewhere. They are children of the Covenant; in their veins is the blood of Israel; and they have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which manifests the things of God. How could all that go for naught?

The sons and daughters of faithful fathers and mothers in Israel are heirs to sacred and divine promises, made for valiant service here or

58. Orson F. Whitney, "Autobiography of Orson Ferguson Whitney, Written in 1885–6," 36–37, unpublished manuscript, quoted in Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 24.

59. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls*, 68.

elsewhere, and inherited by both parent and child for some good reason, rooted, perhaps, in the spiritual soil of a life that went before. Therefore are they entitled to great consideration at the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is “not slack concerning his promises.”⁶⁰

A careful reading of Elder Whitney’s 1930 memoir clarifies his final doctrinal understanding of the interplay between righteous parents, wayward children, and priesthood sealings just months before his death. A side-by-side comparison of the texts of Elder Whitney’s 1929 sermon and his 1930 autobiography is instructive for both his *inclusions* of—and *exclusions* from—his earlier teachings (see table 2).

To begin with, Whitney adds a paragraph that did not appear in his 1929 sermon that explains the necessity of individual agency and accountability: “True, the offspring of the righteous must show themselves worthy of such consideration. Men and women are not blessed and honored of God merely because their ancestors were deserving. Something for nothing is not a principle of eternal justice. We pay for what we get, even from the Divine Giver—pay to the limit of our ability to pay; and He does the rest, the part that we cannot do.” Next, after inserting this clarification, Elder Whitney then repeats his “Word for the Wayward” statement with only slight changes in wording.

Finally, what is even more interesting is the language Elder Whitney *excludes* in his last retelling. The aging Apostle does not include the original opening sentence from his “Precious Promise” testimony, cutting out completely the following sentence: “The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.” Instead, Elder Whitney simply includes the rest of his original statement. He makes no reference to Joseph Smith’s teachings on the matter.⁶¹

60. Whitney, *Through Memory’s Halls*, 68.

61. Whitney, *Through Memory’s Halls*, 68–69.

Table 2. Comparison of Elder Orson F. Whitney's 1929 General Conference Sermon and his 1930 Autobiography (with significant additions and subtractions to his 1929 statements in bold)

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1929 General Conference Sermon**

THE YOUTH OF ZION

¶ I have faith in the young people of this Church—not because I believe them without fault, nor because I think all are walking in the ways of wisdom and shunning the downward road. I have faith in them because of the character of their parents, because of the ancestry from which they have sprung, and because of the promise made by the God of Heaven, that “this Kingdom shall never be thrown down nor given to another people.”

A WORD FOR THE WAYWARD

¶ You parents of the wilful and the wayward! Don't give them up. Don't cast them off. They are not utterly lost. The Shepherd will find his sheep. They were his before they were yours—long before he entrusted them to your care; and you cannot begin to love them as he loves them. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend.

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1930 Autobiography**

¶ The sons and daughters of faithful fathers and mothers in Israel are heirs to sacred and divine promises, made for valiant service here or elsewhere, and inherited by both parent and child for some good reason, rooted, perhaps, in the spiritual soil of a life that went before. Therefore are they entitled to great consideration at the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is “not slack concerning his promises.”

¶ **True, the offspring of the righteous must show themselves worthy of such consideration. Men and women are not blessed and honored of God merely because their ancestors were deserving. Something for nothing is not a principle of eternal justice. We pay for what we get, even from the Divine Giver—pay to the limit of our ability to pay; and He does the rest, the part that we cannot do.**

¶ Parents of the wilful and the wayward! Do not give them up. Do not cast them off. They are not utterly lost. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is very merciful to ignorance. Only the fulness of knowledge brings the fulness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow, finite minds can comprehend.

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1929 General Conference Sermon**

A PRECIOUS PROMISE

¶ **The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity.** Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.

¶ Who are these straying sheep—these wayward sons and daughters? They are children of the Covenant, heirs to the promises, and have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which makes manifest the things of God. Could all that go for naught?

**Elder Orson F. Whitney's
1930 Autobiography**

¶ The wandering sheep will be found. The eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the Fold. Either in this world or the world to come, they will return. They must pay their debt to justice, must suffer for their sins, and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving Father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain.

¶ I cannot but believe that in the heart of every "Mormon" boy and every "Mormon" girl there is a spiritual gold mine, awaiting development. To some, the development comes early; to others, late. But come it will, sometime, somewhere. They are children of the Covenant; in their veins is the blood of Israel; and they have received, if baptized, the gift of the Holy Ghost, which manifests the things of God. How could all that go for naught?



FIGURE 5. Undated photograph of Elder Orson F. Whitney, who loved studying the scriptures, history, poetry, and literature. Courtesy Church History Library.

Someone or something had apparently influenced Elder Whitney (fig. 5) to clarify his position on this important doctrinal matter in the last years of his life. Perhaps he was speaking extemporaneously during general conference, as was often the case, and he recognized that some Latter-day Saints might misinterpret his remarks on the impact of mercy over justice for the salvation of wayward children. Maybe he received a letter from a Church member seeking for clarification following his general conference sermon. In the weeks and months following his remarks, did he reflect on what he had said and seek for an opportunity to nuance his statement? Did a member of the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles share their concerns with him about the Prophet Joseph Smith's 1843 discourse? As a former assistant Church historian and well-regarded writer himself, did he take the occasion to go into the Church Historian's office and search for fuller accounts of what Joseph Smith likely said? He may have found the Coray notebooks there, which had been donated to President Joseph F. Smith and the Church sometime before 1918. It is unclear what prompted Elder Whitney's doctrinal

clarification of his earlier statement in general conference. Regardless of the impetus, Elder Whitney publicly clarified his thinking in his 1930 autobiography. Unfortunately, Latter-day Saints have continued to reference his 1929 sermon as his authoritative teachings on the subject instead of his subsequent memoir published a year later.

Elder Whitney would speak in general conference one last time in April 1931. What began that spring as a severe cold developed into pneumonia, which required his hospitalization. He passed away on May 16, 1931, at the age of seventy-five, having served for about a quarter of a century as an Apostle.⁶² Elder Whitney was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery near his extended family, a modest headstone marking the grave of a covenant-keeping father who clung to hope for the Church's wayward children, including his own.

Quoting Elder Orson F. Whitney in General Conference, 1987–2009

Beginning in the late 1980s, more than fifty years after Elder Orson F. Whitney's death, a new generation of Latter-day Saints was introduced to his April 1929 general conference sermon, especially his "The Youth of Zion," "Word for the Wayward," and "Precious Promise" statements. The late Apostle's fellow General Authorities had not quoted his memorable teachings in general conference until nearly six decades after they were first spoken over the Tabernacle pulpit. However, between 1987 and 2009, Church leaders repeated some combination of Elder Whitney's statements eight times in general conference.⁶³ But none of the discussions cited the expanded Howard and Martha Coray notebook transcript of the sermon first published in 1980 as noted above.

Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone, then a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, was the first to recite Elder Whitney's "Word for the Wayward" assertion in his October 1987 general conference address.⁶⁴

62. Horne, *Life of Orson F. Whitney*, 403–4.

63. During these same decades, a number of religious educators from Brigham Young University likewise quoted Whitney's 1929 sermon in their publications, including Robert L. Millet, *When a Child Wanders* (Deseret Book, 1996), 114–16; Douglas E. Brinley and Daniel K. Judd, eds., *Eternal Families* (Bookcraft, 1996), 265; Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Joseph Smith: The Choice Seer* (Bookcraft, 1996), 198–99; Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Deseret Book, 1998): 74; and Andrew C. Skinner, *Temple Worship: 20 Truths That Will Bless Your Life* (Deseret Book, 2007), 202–3.

64. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "A Champion of Youth," *Ensign*, November 1987, 27.

Three years later, Elder James E. Faust, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, paraphrased Elder Whitney's "Word for the Wayward" and "Precious Promise" statements in his October 1990 general conference address. He taught, "There are some great spiritual promises which may help faithful parents in this church. Children of eternal sealings may have visited upon them the divine promises made to their valiant forebears who nobly kept their covenants. Covenants remembered by parents will be remembered by God. The children may thus become the beneficiaries and inheritors of these great covenants and promises. This is because they are the children of the covenant."⁶⁵

In April 1992 general conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke on righteous parenting. He taught, "It is a great challenge to raise a family in the darkening mists of our moral environment. . . . It is not uncommon for responsible parents to lose one of their children, for a time, to influences over which they have no control. They agonize over rebellious sons or daughters. They are puzzled over why they are so helpless when they have tried so hard to do what they should." Next, he shared his "conviction that those wicked influences one day will be overruled." Elder Packer then quoted Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement and emphasized the importance of parents keeping their covenants made in the house of the Lord. Packer testified, "We cannot overemphasize the value of temple marriage, the binding ties of the sealing ordinance, and the standards of worthiness required of them. When parents keep the covenants they have made at the altar of the temple, their children will be forever bound to them."⁶⁶

Elder Robert D. Hales, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was the next to quote Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement when he spoke on strengthening families at the April 1999 general conference. He noted, "Every family can be strengthened in one way or another if the Spirit of the Lord is brought into our homes and we teach by His example." He then shared a series of uplifting ideas, including the following: "While we may despair when, after all we can do, some of our children stray from the path of righteousness, the words of Orson F. Whitney can comfort us," and next shared Elder Whitney's "Precious Promise" statement. Elder Hales then added, "Knowing that we are in

65. James E. Faust, "The Greatest Challenge in the World—Good Parenting," *Ensign*, November 1990, 35.

66. Boyd K. Packer, "Our Moral Environment," *Ensign*, May 1992, 68.

mortality to learn and to develop our faith, we should understand that there must be opposition in all things. During a family council in my own home, my wife said, ‘When you may think that someone has a perfect family, you just do not know them well enough.’”⁶⁷

In his April 2004 general conference talk, Elder Hales again referenced Elder Whitney in his sermon. Testifying of Jesus Christ’s power to redeem mankind, he declared, “If we are seeking the salvation of special ‘ones’ in our own families, I bear testimony that they are within His reach. We assist Him in reaching them by faithfully living the gospel, being sealed in the temple, and living true to the covenants we make there.” The Apostle continued, “Parents can take great comfort in the words of Elder Orson F. Whitney relating the teachings of Joseph Smith” and then recited the “Precious Promise” statement.⁶⁸

Two years later, at the October 2006 general conference, Elder Richard H. Winkel, then a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, stated, “Like you, I don’t want to lose any of my children. I want to be together forever with all of my family. The temple gives all of us extra hope of continuing and improving these relationships, even after this life. Sealings bestowed in the temple promise additional blessings.” He then read Elder Whitney’s “Precious Promise” testimony and asked the Conference Center attendees, “Isn’t this statement encouraging news for parents whose children are sealed to them?”⁶⁹

Finally, President Henry B. Eyring, then First Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke on the perfect example of Jesus Christ at the October 2009 general conference. He said, “The story of the prodigal son gives us all hope. The prodigal remembered home, as will your children. They will feel your love drawing them back to you. Elder Orson F. Whitney, in a general conference of 1929, gave a remarkable promise, which I know is true, to the faithful parents who honor the temple sealing to their children.” President Eyring then shared portions of the late Apostle’s “Precious Promise” statement.⁷⁰

By the early twenty-first century, however, President James E. Faust, then Second Counselor in the First Presidency, sought to moderate how some Church leaders and members (including himself previously in general conference) were quoting too selectively from Elder Whitney’s

67. Robert D. Hales, “Strengthening Families: Our Sacred Duty,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 34.

68. Robert D. Hales, “With All the Feeling of a Tender Parent: A Message of Hope to Families,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 91.

69. Richard H. Winkel, “The Temple Is About Families,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 10.

70. Henry B. Eyring, “Our Perfect Example,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 72.

1929 sermon. Some Latter-day Saints were evidently believing that unrepentant children could somehow be saved *in* their sins (not *from* their sins), by virtue of their parents' righteousness and priesthood sealings. These parents hung their hope on the portions of Elder Whitney's earlier message that emphasized the Savior's mercy, but they overlooked the Apostle's call for repentance and the demands of justice. In other words, Elder Whitney's message was seemingly being taken out of doctrinal balance.

Previously, Church leaders had emphasized the importance of keeping gospel truths in equilibrium. For example, Neal A. Maxwell, then Commissioner of Church Education, had taught in an address to the Church's religious educators that orthodox "gospel principles are weaved together in a fabric which keeps them in check and balance with each other. You see, the doctrines of Jesus Christ by themselves are dangerous. Any principle of the gospel, isolated, spun off and practiced in solitude goes wild and goes mad." Maxwell further explained, "It is only the orthodoxy of the gospel that keeps it together, because these are powerful principles that need each other. Just as the people of the Church need each other, the doctrines of the Church need each other."⁷¹ Church teachings that should be understood together as doctrinal pairings include agency and accountability, mercy and justice, repentance and forgiveness, divine love and divine laws, and love for God and love for others.⁷²

Recall that back in the October 1990 general conference, then Elder Faust became the second General Authority to reference Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon when he paraphrased it in his general conference address, but with no nuancing of his own. However, in President Faust's April 2003 general conference address, "Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered," he prefaces his remarks as follows: "I believe and accept the comforting statement of Elder Orson F. Whitney," and then quotes his "Precious Promise" teaching. He then clarifies the associated truths by bringing them back into doctrinal equilibrium.

71. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Gospel Gives Answers to Life's Problems," address to Church Education System religious educators, July 1, 1970, <https://educationforeternity.byu.edu/general-religious-education-quotes#richtext-maxwell-neal-a>. See also Neal A. Maxwell, "The Simplicity of the Gospel," address given at a Brigham Young University eight-stake fireside, May 4, 1969, transcript, 8, Perry Special Collections.

72. See David A. Bednar, *Act in Doctrine: Spiritual Patterns for Turning from Self to the Savior* (Deseret Book, 2012), xvii; and Neil L. Andersen, "The Power of Jesus Christ and Pure Doctrine," CES Religious Educators Conference address, June 11, 2023.

A principle in this statement that is often overlooked is that they must fully repent and “suffer for their sins” and “pay their debt to justice.” I recognize that now is the time “to prepare to meet God.” . . . Mercy will not rob justice, and the sealing power of faithful parents will only claim wayward children upon the condition of their repentance and Christ’s Atonement. Repentant wayward children will enjoy salvation and all the blessings that go with it, but exaltation is much more. It must be fully earned. The question as to who will be exalted must be left to the Lord in His mercy.⁷³

The demands of mercy and justice, agency and accountability, repentance and forgiveness need to be properly balanced, President Faust cautioned Church members. Since October 2009, Elder Whitney’s relevant statements have not been quoted by any General Authorities in general conference. Moreover, when the Church published the *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* in 2007, this popular principle was not included.⁷⁴

Elder David A. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children” (2014)

In August 2011, Elder David A. Bednar, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke during the annual training broadcast of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. During the extemporaneous question and answer portion of his remarks, he addressed the most common question asked of him during his tenure as a Church leader and past university president at BYU-Idaho (formerly Rick’s College): how a child can help reunite their fractured family (shifting the possible responsibility from parent to child). Paraphrasing President Gordon B. Hinckley’s admonition during a 1999 Rick’s College devotional to not be a “weak link” in one’s family chain of priesthood blessings,⁷⁵ Elder Bednar taught: “Well, if there’s a break in the chain, then the new chain starts with you. And, as you forge your link in that chain, it will bless not only you, but it will reach in both directions to strengthen other links; so, it begins with you.”⁷⁶

73. James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 62.

74. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007).

75. See Gordon B. Hinckley, *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley*, vol. 1, 1995–1999 (Deseret Book, 2005), 474–75, 477.

76. David A. Bednar, “A Discussion with Elder David A. Bednar,” Seminaries and Institutes of Religion annual training broadcast, August 2, 2011, The Church of Jesus

Elder Bednar continued his explanation to the gathered Seminaries and Institute personnel as follows: “We read the statement by the Prophet Joseph, and Orson F. Whitney, and the elaborations by President Packer, about the tentacles that will reach out to wayward children. Some parents, I believe, overinterpret that to mean that if I’m faithful to my temple covenants then my children will be okay,” he explained. “Well, that can’t be right; we believe that men will be punished for their own sins, not for Adam’s transgressions. And therefore you can’t be saved through the faithfulness of your parents.” Nevertheless, the Apostle offered hope to righteous children of wayward parents. “But the tentacles that reach out because of the faithfulness of parents in honoring temple covenants exert a spiritual pull and a tug on those wayward children. Well, couldn’t that work the same way from children who are faithful to temple covenants and the tentacles reach out to a mom and a dad who are not as faithful as they need to be? So it will extend both ways and they can help forge that chain of the generations, and help repair some of the broken links, regardless of the direction.”⁷⁷

Three years later, in the March 2014 issue of the *Ensign*, Elder Bednar published a more developed doctrinal article titled “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children: Sustaining Hope While Overcoming Misunderstanding.”⁷⁸ It was the most comprehensive review of the gospel teachings associated with Elder Whitney’s April 1929 general conference sermon to date.

Elder Bednar divides his article into three parts. In his introductory section, he begins by compassionately acknowledging the pain and suffering that righteous parents with wayward children experience while striving to live the gospel with their posterity. But like President James E. Faust before him, he cautions grieving parents to keep the associated teachings in doctrinal balance.

One of the greatest heartaches a valiant parent in Zion can suffer is a child who strays from the gospel path. . . . Statements by General Authorities of the Church describing the influence of faithful parents on wayward children have been and continue to be a source of great familial comfort. The consolation arises from the hope these messages seem to proffer that parents who honor gospel covenants, obey the Lord’s commandments,

Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/archive/satellite-training-broadcast/2011/08>, 39 min, 18 sec.

77. Bednar, “Discussion with Elder David A. Bednar,” 39:38.

78. David A. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” *Ensign*, March 2014, 28–33.

and serve faithfully can influence the salvation of their sons and daughters who go astray. However, the interpretation of these statements by some members of the Church has contributed to a measure of doctrinal misunderstanding. The confusion derives from the apparent inconsistency of these interpretations with the doctrine of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the principles of moral agency and individual accountability for sins and transgressions.⁷⁹

In the second section of his article, “Prophetic Promises about Posterity,” Elder Bednar begins by referencing a specific teaching of Joseph Smith in 1843. “The following quotation appears in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith during his service as Church historian and recorder: ‘When a seal is put upon the father and mother, it secures their posterity, so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother.’” The Apostle then references the now popularized “Precious Promise” statement. “A similar teaching, apparently based on the statement by the Prophet Joseph, was made by Elder Orson F. Whitney,” which he then quotes. Elder Bednar then analyzes how these two interrelated teachings have been misunderstood by some Church members:

The statements by Joseph Smith and Orson F. Whitney are construed by some members of the Church to mean that wayward children unconditionally receive the blessings of salvation because of and through the faithfulness of parents. However, this interpretation is moderated by the fact that the most complete account of the Prophet’s sermon was not available to Church historians at the time they compiled an amalgamated version of his teachings from the notes of Willard Richards and William Clayton. In the more complete set of notes recorded by Howard and Martha Coray, Joseph Smith is shown to have qualified his statement to make the promised blessings conditional upon the obedience of the children:

“When a father and mother of a family have [been sealed], their children *who have not transgressed* are secured by the seal wherewith the Parents have been sealed. And this is the Oath of God unto our Father Abraham and this doctrine shall stand forever.”⁸⁰

Elder Bednar thus becomes the first General Authority to reference the Howard and Martha Coray notebook transcript featured in the *Words of Joseph Smith* in relation to Elder Whitney’s 1929 general conference sermon.

79. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 28.

80. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 30.

Paraphrasing and citing the historical scholarship of Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, Elder Bednar states: "This clarification is more consistent doctrinally. Except for the additional information contained in the Coray records, the concept of unconditional salvation for disobedient children would contradict many foundational teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, including the second article of faith that 'men will be punished for their own sins' (A of F 1:2)."

The Apostle further advocates that the Coray's expanded transcription "is in accordance with numerous examples in the standard works," including several examples in the Book of Mormon. Elder Bednar relates the teachings of Alma to his wayward son, Corianton (Alma 39:8–9), as well as Samuel the Lamanite's declaration to the Nephites of the necessity for repentance (Hel. 14:29–31). "A number of additional scriptures likewise substantiate the principle that men and women are agents blessed with moral agency and are accountable for their own thoughts, words, and deeds," he explained in his *Ensign* article.⁸¹ Like President Faust before him, Elder Bednar emphasized the need for equilibrium between agency and accountability when it came to sin. It was this perceived lack of doctrinal balance that seems to make some of the General Authorities uneasy about the ways some members of the Church have understood Elder Whitney's 1929 sermon.

In the third section of his article, "The Tentacles of Divine Providence," Elder Bednar seeks to clarify additional points relating to Elder Whitney's 1929 teachings. He quotes the relevant passages from President Faust's 2003 general conference address, which "provided the most comprehensive explanation of this eternally important concept." Elder Bednar then closes his discussion of the matter with a synopsis of what has been revealed on the tender subject.

President Faust's teachings authoritatively summarize the things we do and do not know about righteous parents and wayward children. The influence of parents who honor covenants and obey commandments indeed can have a decisive spiritual impact upon children who stray by activating the tentacles of divine Providence—in ways that have not been revealed fully and are not understood completely. However, righteous parental influence (1) does not replace in the life of an individual the need for the redeeming and strengthening power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, (2) does not overrule the consequences of the unrighteous exercise of moral agency, and (3) does not negate the

81. Bednar, "Faithful Parents and Wayward Children," 30–31.

responsibility of an individual as an agent “to act . . . and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26).⁸²

Elder Bednar concludes his doctrinal overview by pointing Latter-day parents to the models of faithful fathers and mothers in the Book of Mormon who likewise struggled with wayward children millennia earlier. He cited the examples of Father Lehi with his sons Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 2:9–11; 2 Ne. 1:12, 14, 16–17, 19) and Alma the Elder with Alma the Younger (Mosiah 27:14, 24) in the Book of Mormon. “As parents are patient and persistent in loving their children and in becoming living examples of disciples of Jesus Christ, they most effectively teach the Father’s plan of happiness. The steadfastness of such parents bears powerful witness of the redeeming and strengthening powers of the Savior’s Atonement and invites wayward children to see with new eyes and to hear with new ears (see Matthew 13:43),” Elder Bednar concludes. “Acting in accordance with the teachings of the Savior invites spiritual power into our lives—power to hear and heed, power to discern, and power to persevere. Devoted discipleship is the best and only answer to every question and challenge.”⁸³

Conclusion: “Tentacles of Divine Providence”

Latter-day Saint parents striving for righteousness hold their temple blessings, especially their priesthood sealings, dear to their hearts. They are aware of and seek for the fulfillment of the incredible blessings associated with their temple covenants. To begin with, worthy individuals enter into the “new and everlasting covenant” when they are sealed as couples in temples by priesthood authority. They rejoice in taking this essential step towards gaining exaltation, which promises the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom of God to those who are faithful.

These couples are also promised that they can be together forever as an eternal family unit; as they honor their temple covenants, they never need fear separation at death. As they have children in mortality, these sons and daughters are likewise sealed to them for eternity. Families can be together forever as each member honors their own gospel covenants. Moreover, when righteous couples are sealed in the temple they are promised the blessings of Abraham, including assurances of eternal posterity and everlasting increase. They can enjoy confidence that their

82. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 31–32.

83. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 33.

children and their children's children will have access to the blessings of the gospel of salvation as they choose to exercise faith in Jesus Christ, repent, and accept salvific ordinances themselves, whether in this life or the life to come.

Finally, righteous parents gain spiritual strength and protection by participating repeatedly in temple ordinances, including sealings, for their deceased ancestors. Returning to the temple again and again provides patrons with an eternal perspective of the entire plan of salvation and reassures struggling parents of the divine love and mercy of our Father in Heaven and Savior Jesus Christ. The temple can remind them what Elder Patrick Kearon has taught: "God is in relentless pursuit" of both them and their posterity. "Everything about the Father's plan for His beloved children is designed to bring everyone home."⁸⁴

Righteous parents of wayward children in the twenty-first century Church continue to exercise faith in the Good Shepherd, just as Elder Orson F. Whitney had counseled in general conference. They hold out hope that Elder Whitney's so-called "tentacles of Divine Providence,"⁸⁵ the symbolic flexible limbs or appendages of God, will reach out and help guide their straying children back into the spiritual safety of the gospel sheepfold, even if they are unsure how this will be accomplished during mortality or in the hereafter.⁸⁶ Along with Elder Whitney these parents express optimism that "our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than our narrow finite minds can comprehend."⁸⁷ They put their trust in a loving God and Christ while acknowledging the need for doctrinal balance within the plan of salvation. They honor their own temple covenants, regardless of their children's choices.

In a pastoral February 1997 *Ensign* article, for example, Elder John K. Carmack of the Quorum of the Seventy acknowledged that Latter-day Saints "may not understand exactly how" their temple sealings may

84. Patrick Kearon, "God's Intent Is to Bring You Home," *Liahona*, May 2024, 87.

85. A Google Books search reveals that Whitney's memorable phrase, "tentacles of Divine Providence," was unique to him and first appeared in his April 1929 general conference sermon.

86. See Terryl L. Givens, "How Limited Is Postmortal Progress?," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 127–38. "Any postmortal progress at all—within or beyond the spirit world—would in no way suggest shortcuts, cheap grace, or exemption from all salvational requirements," Givens clarifies in his essay. "Progress would in any case require conformity to all the principles and ordinances of the gospel" (135, emphasis in original).

87. Whitney, *Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference*, 110.

influence their wayward posterity. “But we can understand that there is more to the relationship of righteous parents and their children than we fully understand in this life and more help available with the problems that arise in that relationship than we grasp with our worldly logic. We are not alone in our struggle to save and preserve the sealing between us and our children.”⁸⁸

Moreover, President James E. Faust in his April 2003 general conference address recognized the limitations of our mortal comprehension. He shared, “Perhaps in this life we are not given to fully understand how enduring the sealing cords of righteous parents are to their children. It may very well be that there are more helpful sources at work than we know. I believe there is a strong familial pull as the influence of beloved ancestors continues with us from the other side of the veil.” President Faust then concluded, “To those brokenhearted parents who have been righteous, diligent, and prayerful in the teaching of their disobedient children, we say to you, the Good Shepherd is watching over them. God knows and understands your deep sorrow. There is hope.”⁸⁹

Elder David A. Bednar, in his March 2014 *Ensign* article, likewise encouraged Latter-day Saints to honor their temple covenants and seek for the promised blessings. He counseled, “Though many subsequent Church leaders have differed in their emphasis on various aspects of the statements by Joseph Smith, Orson F. Whitney, and others, they agree on the fact that parents who honor temple covenants are in a position to exert great spiritual influence over time on their children. Faithful members of the Church can find comfort in knowing that they can lay claim to the promises of divine guidance and power, through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and the privileges of the priesthood, in their efforts to help family members receive the blessings of salvation and exaltation.” Elder Bednar suggested that the “tentacles of Divine Providence” pronounced by Elder Whitney “may be considered a type of spiritual power, a heavenly pull or tug that entices a wandering child to return to the fold eventually. Such an influence cannot override the moral agency of a child but nonetheless can invite and beckon” them to exercise faith, repent, and accept the doctrine of Christ.⁹⁰

88. See also John K. Carmack, “When Our Children Go Astray,” *Ensign*, February 1997, 13.

89. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” 62.

90. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children,” 31.

During a general conference leadership meeting, Church President Russell M. Nelson spoke on the “Everlasting Covenant,” which seems to echo the hopes of Elder Whitney as a righteous parent. Covenants call for greater accountability but also provide increased privilege. “Once we make a covenant with God, we leave neutral ground forever. God will not abandon His relationship with those who have forged such a bond with Him. In fact, all those who have made a covenant with God have access to a special kind of love and mercy. In the Hebrew language, that covenantal love is called *hesed* (חֶסֶד).”⁹¹ The prophet continued to explain the blessings of these covenants, including to those souls who struggle to stay on the gospel path. “Because God has *hesed* for those who have covenanted with Him, He will love them. He will continue to work with them and offer them opportunities to change. He will forgive them when they repent. And should they stray, He will help them find their way back to Him.”⁹² President Nelson closed his remarks with the following promise, which should give every parent hope within the gospel plan: “The covenant path is all about our relationship with God—our *hesed* relationship with Him. When we enter a covenant with God, we have made a covenant with Him who will always keep His word. He will do everything He can, without infringing on our agency, to help us keep ours.”⁹³

Given Elder Whitney's reliance on the 1843 Nauvoo teachings of Joseph Smith for his 1929 general conference sermon, it seems fitting to conclude with a related teaching of the Prophet on the perfect goodness of God. In a Nauvoo newspaper editorial on baptism for the dead, Joseph Smith cautioned his fellow mortals to leave judgement of this world's children to their loving Heavenly Father:

But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care, and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring; and without any of those contracted feelings

91. Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022, 5.

92. Nelson, “Everlasting Covenant,” 6.

93. Nelson, “Everlasting Covenant,” 11. President Dallin H. Oaks has likewise taught: “We have a loving Heavenly Father who will see that we receive every blessing and every advantage that our own desires and choices allow. We also know that He will force no one into a sealing relationship against his or her will. The blessings of a sealed relationship are assured for all who keep their covenants but never by forcing a sealed relationship on another person who is unworthy or unwilling.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Kingdoms of Glory,” *Liahona*, November 2023, 29. See also Noel B. Reynolds, ‘Biblical *hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture,’ *BYU Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 143–72.

that influence the children of men, causes “*his sun* to rise on the evil and the good; and sends *his rain* on the just and unjust.” He holds the reins of judgment in his hands; he is a wise lawgiver, and will judge all men, {not according to the narrow contracted notions of men, but} “according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil;” or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey[, or] India.⁹⁴

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94. Ed. [Joseph Smith], “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 759. “While [Joseph Smith] likely authored many of the paper’s editorial passages, John Taylor reportedly assisted him in writing content. No matter who wrote individual editorial pieces, [Joseph Smith] assumed editorial responsibility for all installments naming him as editor,” clarify the editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers*. “Selections from *Times and Seasons*, 15 April 1842,” in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimbürger, and Christopher James Blythe, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 372n271.