An Endowment generally is a gift, but in a specialized sense it is a course of instruction, ordinances, and covenants given only in dedicated temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The words "to endow" (from the Greek enduein), as used in the New Testament, mean to dress, clothe, put on garments, put on attributes, or receive virtue. Christ instructed his apostles to tarry at Jerusalem "until ye be endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49), a promise fulfilled, at least in part, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). In modern times, a similar revelation was given: "I gave unto you a commandment that you should build a house, in the which house I design to endow those whom I have chosen with power on high; for this is the promise of the Father unto you; therefore I command you to tarry, even as mine apostles at Jerusalem" (D&C 95:8-9).

Though there had been preliminary and preparatory spiritual outpourings upon Latter-day Saints in Ohio and Missouri, the Endowment in its full sense was not received until the Nauvoo Temple era. As he introduced temple ordinances in 1842 at Nauvoo, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that these were "of things spiritual, and to be received only by the spiritual minded" (TPJS, p. 237). The Endowment was necessary, he said, to organize the Church fully, that the Saints might be organized according to the laws of God, and, as the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple petitioned, that they would "be prepared to obtain every needful thing" (D&C 109:15). The Endowment was designed to give "a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God" (TPJS, p. 324), "to prepare the disciples for their missions in the world" (p. 274), to prevent being "overcome by evils" (p. 259), to enable them to "secure the fulness of those blessings which have been prepared for the Church of the Firstborn" (p. 237).

The Endowment of "power from on high" in modern temples has four main aspects. First is the preparatory ordinance, a ceremonial washing and anointing, after which the temple patron dons the sacred clothing of the temple.

Second is a course of instruction by lectures and representations. These include a recital of the most prominent events of the Creation, a figurative depiction of the advent of Adam and Eve and of every man and every woman, the entry of Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden, the consequent expulsion from the garden, their condition in the world, and their receiving of the Plan of Salvation leading to the return to the presence of God (Talmage, pp. 83-84). The Endowment instructions utilize every human faculty so that the meaning of the gospel may be clarified through art, drama, and symbols. All participants wear white temple robes symbolizing purity and the equality of all persons before God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. The temple becomes a house of revelation whereby one is instructed more perfectly "in theory, in principle, and in doctrine" (D&C 97:14). "This completeness of survey and expounding of the gospel plan makes temple worship one of the most effective methods of refreshing the memory concerning the entire structure of the gospel" (Widtsoe, 1986, p. 5).

Third is making covenants. The temple Endowment is seen as the unfolding or culmination of the covenants made at baptism. Temple covenants give "tests by which one's willingness and fitness for righteousness may be known" (Widtsoe, p. 335). They include the "covenant and promise to observe the law of strict virtue and chastity, to be charitable, benevolent, tolerant and pure; to devote both talent and material means to the spread of truth and the uplifting of the [human] race; to maintain devotion to the cause of truth; and to seek in every way to contribute to the great preparation that the earth may be made ready to receive...Jesus Christ" (Talmage, p. 84). One also promises to keep these covenants sacred and to "trifle not with sacred things" (D&C 6:12).

Fourth is a sense of divine presence. In the dedicatory prayer of the temple at Kirtland, Ohio, the Prophet Joseph Smith pleaded "that all people who shall enter upon the threshold of the Lord's house may feel thy power, and feel constrained to acknowledge that thou hast sanctified it, and that it is thy house, a place of thy holiness" (D&C 109:13). Of temples built by sacrifice to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, dedicated by his authority, and reverenced in his Spirit, the promise is given, "My name shall be here; and I will manifest myself to my people in mercy in this holy house" (D&C 110:8). In the temples there is an "aura of deity" manifest to the worthy (Kimball, pp. 534-35). Through the temple Endowment, one may seek "a fulness of the Holy Ghost" (D&C 109:15). Temple ordinances are seen as a means for receiving inspiration and instruction through the Holy Spirit, and for preparing to return to the presence of God.

In Nauvoo, the Prophet Joseph taught for the first time that it is the privilege of Latter-day Saints to act as agents in behalf of their kindred dead. After receiving their own temple Endowment, Latter-day Saints return to the temple frequently to participate in the Endowment ceremony as proxies for, and in behalf of, deceased persons. Consistent with the law of agency, it is believed that those so served have complete freedom in the spirit world to accept or reject the spiritual blessing thus proffered them (HC 5:350).