



Why Do We Baptize for the Dead?

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It matters tremendously what we do in relation to those who have gone before, because they live today as spirits and shall live again as immortal souls, and that because of Jesus Christ.

Christian theologians have long wrestled with the question, What is the destiny of the billions who have lived and died with no knowledge of Jesus? With the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ has come the understanding of how the unbaptized dead are redeemed and how God can be “a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15).

While yet in life, Jesus prophesied that He would also preach to the dead. Peter tells us this happened in the interval between the Savior’s Crucifixion and Resurrection (see 1 Peter 3:18–19). President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) witnessed in vision that the Savior visited the spirit world and “from among the righteous [spirits], he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness. . . .

“These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, [and] the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands” (D&C 138:30, 33).

The doctrine that the living can provide baptism and other essential ordinances to the dead vicariously was revealed anew to

the Prophet Joseph Smith (see D&C 124; 128; 132). He learned that the spirits awaiting resurrection are offered not only individual salvation but they can be bound in heaven as husband and wife and be sealed to their fathers and mothers of all generations past and have sealed to them their children of all generations future. The Lord instructed the Prophet that these sacred rites are appropriately performed only in a house built to His name, a temple (see D&C 124:29–36).

The principle of vicarious service should not seem strange to any Christian. In the baptism of a living person, the officiator acts, by proxy, in place of the Savior. And is it not the central tenet of our faith that Christ’s sacrifice atones for our sins by vicariously satisfying the demands of justice for us? As President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) expressed: “I think that vicarious work for the dead more nearly approaches the vicarious sacrifice of the Savior Himself than any other work of which I know. It is given with love, without hope of compensation, or repayment or anything of the kind. What a glorious principle.”¹

Some have misunderstood and suppose that deceased souls “are being baptized into the Mormon faith without their knowledge.”² They assume that we somehow have



power to force a soul in matters of faith. Of course, we do not. God gave man his agency from the beginning. The Church does not list them on its rolls or count them in its membership.

Our anxiety to redeem the dead and the time and resources we put behind that commitment are, above all, an expression of our witness concerning Jesus Christ. It constitutes as powerful a statement as we can make concerning His divine character and mission. It testifies, first, of Christ's Resurrection; second, of the infinite reach of His Atonement; third, that He is the sole source of salvation; fourth, that He has established the conditions for salvation; and, fifth, that He will come again.

The Power of Christ's Resurrection

As regards the Resurrection, Paul asked, "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15:29). We are baptized for the dead because we know that they will rise. "The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame" (Alma 40:23). "For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living" (Romans 14:9).

It matters tremendously what we do in relation to those who have gone before, because they live today as spirits and shall live again as immortal souls, and that because of Jesus Christ. We believe His words when He said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). By the baptisms we perform in behalf of the dead, we testify that "as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. . . .

"For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:22, 25–26).

Jesus Christ, the Sole Source of Salvation

Our anxiety to ensure that our kindred dead are offered baptism in Jesus's name is testament to the fact that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" and that "no man cometh unto the Father, but by [Him]" (John 14:6). Some contemporary Christians, concerned for the many who have died without a knowledge of Jesus Christ, have begun to wonder if there truly is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). To believe that Jesus is the only Savior, they say, is arrogant, narrow-minded, and intolerant. We say, however, that this is a false dilemma. There is no injustice in there being but One through whom salvation may come, when that One and His salvation are offered to every soul, without exception.

Conditions of Salvation Set by Christ

Because we believe that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, we also accept His authority to establish the conditions by which we may receive His grace. Otherwise we would not concern ourselves with being baptized for the dead.

Jesus confirmed that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life" (Matthew 7:14). Specifically, He said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). This means we must "repent, and be baptized every one . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and . . . receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38).

Notwithstanding He was sinless, Jesus Christ Himself was baptized and received the Holy Ghost. He said, "He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do" (2 Nephi 31:12).

There are no exceptions granted; none are needed. As many as will believe and be baptized—including by



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proxy—and endure in faith, shall be saved, “not only those who believed after [Christ] came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came” (D&C 20:26). It is for this reason that the gospel is preached “also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Peter 4:6).

Freeing the Dead from Prison

The vicarious ordinances we perform in temples, beginning with baptism, make possible an eternal welding link between generations that fulfills the purpose of the earth’s creation. Indeed, without these ordinances, “the whole earth would be utterly wasted at [Christ’s] coming” (D&C 2:3).

In the scriptures, the spirits of the dead are sometimes referred to as being in darkness or in prison (see Isaiah 24:22; 1 Peter 3:19; Alma 40:12–13; D&C 38:5). Contemplating God’s glorious plan for the redemption of these, His children, the Prophet Joseph Smith penned this psalm: “Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free” (D&C 128:22).

Our charge extends as far and as deep as the love of God to encompass His children of every time and place. Our efforts on behalf of the dead bear eloquent witness that Jesus Christ is the divine Redeemer of all mankind. His grace and promises reach even those who in life do not find Him. Because of Him, the prisoners shall indeed go free. ■

From an October 2000 general conference address.

NOTES

1. “Words of the Living Prophet,” *Liahona*, Aug. 1998, 16–17; “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1998, 73.
2. Ben Fenton, “Mormons Use Secret British War Files ‘to Save Souls,’” *The Telegraph* (London), Feb. 15, 1999.