



Hastening Family History and Temple Work

“Surely the Lord will support us if we use our best efforts in carrying out the commandment to do family history research and temple work.”

From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

Family history was always close to President Howard W. Hunter’s heart. From the time he was a boy, he listened to stories about his ancestors with great interest. As he grew older, he devoted substantial time to researching his family history.¹ In 1972, while he was in Europe on a Church assignment, he and his wife, Claire, visited places in Denmark where his ancestors had lived. In one of the villages, they found the church where President Hunter’s great-grandfather Rasmussen had been christened and where the family had worshipped. This experience deepened President Hunter’s appreciation for his maternal ancestors. He made similar visits to areas of Norway and Scotland where other ancestors had lived.²

President Hunter’s son Richard recalled his father’s love for family history:

“He was an avid researcher all of his life. He would often take time from his law practice to go to the Los Angeles public library to do research in its extensive genealogy section. He kept his research, family group sheets, pedigree charts, and the narrative histories he personally wrote in ledger books.

“Occasionally I would travel with him to various conference assignments. He would put a few of the ledgers in the car trunk, and after the stake conference he would say, ‘Let’s go to [this] cousin’s home for a few minutes. There are some dates I want to verify.’ We would go to [the] cousin’s home. He would get the ledgers from



*Howard W. Hunter's parents, John William (Will) Hunter
and Nellie Marie Rasmussen Hunter*

the trunk, and soon the dining room table would be covered with family group sheets.

“If one of the family members wanted to make sure they had the right information for their own research, they would call or write Dad to verify the facts because they knew he would have it right. The work he did was prodigious.”³

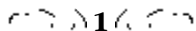
One time while President Hunter was serving in the Quorum of the Twelve, his home teachers visited and said, “We wanted to show you our family group sheets that we have prepared. . . . We don’t have time to see yours tonight, but next time we come we’d like to take a look at them.”

“Now this was quite interesting to me,” President Hunter said. “I worked a month getting prepared for the next home teachers’ visit.”⁴

From 1964 to 1972, Howard W. Hunter presided over the Genealogical Society of Utah (see page 19). In 1994, at a meeting honoring President Hunter and commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Genealogical Society, he said:

“On the eve of my eighty-seventh birthday, I look back in wonder at the tapestry woven by the Lord in the furthering of temple and family history work. When I was president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, we had visions of how it would move forward mightily. Now we are observing something glorious occurring throughout the world. The gospel is moving forward to encompass every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Temples are located throughout the earth, and the spirit of Elijah is touching the hearts of many members, who are doing family history and temple ordinance work at an unprecedented pace.”⁵

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter



Temples are built for performing ordinances that are essential for the salvation and exaltation of God’s children.

Temples are sacred for the closest communion between the Lord and those receiving the highest and most sacred ordinances of the

holy priesthood. It is in the temple that things of the earth are joined with the things of heaven. . . . The great family of God will be united through the saving ordinances of the gospel. Vicarious work for the dead and ordinances for the living are the purposes of temples.⁶

The gospel proclaimed to the world by the Latter-day Saints is the gospel of Jesus Christ as restored to the earth in this dispensation and is for the redemption of all mankind. The Lord himself has revealed what is essential for the salvation and exaltation of his children. One of these essentials is that temples are to be erected for the performance of ordinances that cannot be performed in any other place.

When this is explained to people from all over the world who come and look at our temples, the question these people most frequently ask is, what are the ordinances that are performed in temples?

Baptism for the dead

In response, we often first explain the ordinance known as baptism for the dead. We note that many Christians believe that at the time of death, our status before the Lord is determined for all eternity, for did not Christ say to Nicodemus, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5)? Yet we know that many people have died without the ordinance of baptism, and thus, according to Christ’s statement to Nicodemus, they would be eliminated from entering into the kingdom of God. This raises the question, is God just?

The answer is, of course God is just. It is evident that the Savior’s statement to Nicodemus presupposes that baptisms may be done for those who have died who have not been baptized. Latter-day prophets have told us that baptism is an earthly ordinance that can be performed only by the living. How then can those who are dead be baptized if only the living can perform the ordinance? That was the theme of the Apostle Paul’s writing to the Corinthians when he asked this question:

“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 Cor. 15:29.)⁷

Does it seem reasonable that persons who have lived upon the earth and died without the opportunity of baptism should be deprived throughout eternity? Is there anything unreasonable about the living performing the baptisms for the dead? Perhaps the greatest example of vicarious work for the dead is the Master himself. He gave his life as a vicarious atonement, that all who die shall live again and have life everlasting. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In a similar way we can perform ordinances for those who did not have the opportunity to do them in [their] lifetime.⁸

The endowment

The endowment is another ordinance performed in our temples. It consists of two parts: first, a series of instructions, and second, promises or covenants that the person receiving the endowment makes—promises to live righteously and comply with the requirements of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The endowment is an ordinance for the great blessing of the Saints—both living and dead. Thus it is also an ordinance performed by the living in behalf of deceased individuals; it is performed for those for whom baptismal work has already been performed.

Celestial marriage

Another temple ordinance is that of celestial marriage, where wife is sealed to husband and husband sealed to wife for eternity. We know, of course, that civil marriages end at death; but eternal marriages performed in the temple may exist forever. Children born to a husband and wife after an eternal marriage are automatically sealed to their parents for eternity. If children are born before the wife is sealed to her husband, there is a temple sealing ordinance that can seal these children to their parents for eternity, and so it is that children can be sealed vicariously to parents who have passed away. . . .

All of these priesthood ordinances are essential for the salvation and exaltation of our Father in Heaven’s children.⁹



“Truly there is no work equal to that done in the temple.”



The objective of family history work is to make the blessings of the temple available to all people.

Surely we on this side of the veil have a great work to do. . . . The building of temples has deep significance for ourselves and mankind, and our responsibilities become clear. We must accomplish the priesthood temple ordinance work necessary for our own exaltation; then we must do the necessary work for those who did not have the opportunity to accept the gospel in life. Doing work for others is accomplished in two steps: first, by family history research to ascertain our progenitors; and second, by performing the temple ordinances to give them the same opportunities afforded to the living.

Yet there are many members of the Church who have only limited access to the temples. They do the best they can. They pursue family history research and have the temple ordinance work done by others. Conversely, there are some members who engage in temple work but fail to do family history research on their own family lines. Although they perform a divine service in assisting

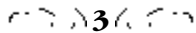
others, they lose a blessing by not seeking their own kindred dead as divinely directed by latter-day prophets.

I recall an experience of a few years ago that is analogous to this condition. At the close of a fast and testimony meeting, the bishop remarked, “We have had a spiritual experience today listening to the testimonies borne by each other. This is because we have come fasting according to the law of the Lord. But let us never forget that the law consists of two parts: that we fast by abstaining from food and drink and that we contribute what we have thereby saved to the bishop’s storehouse for the benefit of those who are less fortunate.” Then he added: “I hope no one of us will leave today with only half a blessing.”

I have learned that those who engage in family history research and then perform the temple ordinance work for those whose names they have found will know the additional joy of receiving both halves of the blessing.

Furthermore, the dead are anxiously waiting for the Latter-day Saints to search out their names and then go into the temples to officiate in their behalf, that they may be liberated from their prison house in the spirit world. All of us should find joy in this magnificent labor of love.¹⁰

The objective of family history work is to make the blessings of the temple available to all people, both living and dead. As we attend the temple and perform work for the dead, we accomplish a deep sense of alliance with God and a better understanding of his plan for the salvation of the human race. We learn to love our neighbors as ourselves. Truly there is no work equal to that done in the temple.¹¹



**May we be valiant in hastening our
family history and temple work.**

As we do the work in [the] temple for those who have gone beyond, we are reminded of the inspired counsel of President Joseph F. Smith who declared: “Through our efforts in their behalf, their chains of bondage will fall from them, and the darkness surrounding them

will clear away, that light may shine upon them; and they shall hear in the spirit world of the work that has been done for them by their children here, and will rejoice” [in Conference Report, Oct. 1916, 6].¹²

This sacred work [family history and temple work] has a prominent place in the hearts and minds of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. I speak for all of the Brethren when I thank those who have given valuable contributions in providing the saving ordinances for those beyond the veil. . . . We are grateful to the army of volunteers who move this mighty work forward throughout the world. Thank you all for what you are doing so well.

The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead” [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 475]. He also stated: . . . “Those Saints who neglect it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation” [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 471–72].

Catching the same vision of this important revelation, President Brigham Young said: “We have a work to do just as important in its sphere as the Savior’s work was in its sphere. Our fathers cannot be made perfect without us; we cannot be made perfect without them. They have done their work and now sleep. We are now called upon to do ours; which is to be the greatest work man ever performed on the earth” (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1941, p. 406).

Every prophet who has led this church from the days of Joseph Smith until the present has repeated this same sublime truth. Guided by these truths, the Church has been from the beginning of this dispensation engaged in the work of salvation and exaltation for all the sons and daughters of God, regardless of when they lived on the earth.

We who live in this day are those whom God appointed before birth to be his representatives on earth in this dispensation. We are of the house of Israel. In our hands lie the sacred powers of being saviors on Mount Zion in the latter days [see Obadiah 1:21].

With regard to temple and family history work, I have one overriding message: This work must hasten. The work waiting to be

done is staggering and escapes human comprehension. Last year [1993] we performed proxy temple endowments for about five and a half million persons, but during that year about fifty million persons died. This might suggest futility in the work that lies before us, but we cannot think of futility. Surely the Lord will support us if we use our best efforts in carrying out the commandment to do family history research and temple work. The great work of the temples and all that supports it must expand. It is imperative! . . .

My beloved brothers and sisters, may we be valiant in hastening our family history and temple work. The Lord said, “Let the work of my temple, and all the works which I have appointed unto you, be continued on and not cease; and let your diligence, and your perseverance, and patience, and your works be redoubled, and you shall in nowise lose your reward, saith the Lord of Hosts” (D&C 127:4).

I encourage you in your efforts with these words of the Prophet Joseph Smith: “Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory! 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).

I love this work. I know the Lord will provide all that will be required to accomplish it as we devotedly do our part. May the Lord bless each of us as we make our contribution to this great work, which we must accomplish in our day.¹³

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- Ponder the opening sentence in section 1. How has performing ordinances in the temple helped you draw closer to God? What information in this section could help you explain the purposes of temples to someone who does not understand them?
- How have you experienced “both halves of the blessing” of family history research and temple work? (See section 2.) How can

we include children and other family members in this important work?

- As you review President Hunter's teachings in section 3, consider the importance the Lord places on family history and temple work. How are family history and temple work hastening today? How can we increase our participation in this work?

Related Scriptures

Isaiah 42:6–7; Malachi 4:5–6; 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6; D&C 2; 110:12–15; 124:28–30; 128:15–18; 138:57–59

Study Help

To liken the words of a prophet to yourself, think about how his teachings relate to you (see *Teaching, No Greater Call* [1999], 170). During your study, consider asking yourself how those teachings can help you with concerns, questions, and challenges in your life.

Notes

1. See Eleanor Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter* (1994), 186.
2. See Francis M. Gibbons, *Howard W. Hunter: Man of Thought and Independence, Prophet of God* (2011), 16–18.
3. Unpublished manuscript by Richard A. Hunter.
4. In Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter*, 192.
5. "We Have a Work to Do," *Ensign*, Mar. 1995, 64.
6. "The Great Symbol of Our Membership," *Ensign*, Oct. 1994, 2.
7. "A Temple-Motivated People," *Ensign*, Feb. 1995, 2.
8. "Elijah the Prophet," *Ensign*, Dec. 1971, 71.
9. "A Temple-Motivated People," 2, 4.
10. "A Temple-Motivated People," 4–5.
11. "We Have a Work to Do," 65.
12. Text of the Bountiful Utah Temple dedicatory prayer, in "'Magnificent Edifice' Consecrated to [the] Lord," *Church News*, Jan. 14, 1995, 4.
13. "We Have a Work to Do," 64–65.