

Baptism for the Dead: Comparing RLDS and LDS Perspectives

Grant Underwood

THE PRECEDING ARTICLES by Roger Launius and Guy Bishop give us a clearer view of how and why two churches sharing a common beginning and espousing belief in virtually the same extra-biblical scripture can end up far apart 150 years later. Tracing these different trajectories of thought across time takes us from a beginning point of mutual belief in baptism for the dead to the Reorganization's complete rejection of it as nonessential and even non-Christian or to the Latter-day Saints' enshrining of it as the third leg of their tripartite mission statement to proclaim the gospel, perfect the Saints, and redeem the dead. While both churches have retained allegiance to the early period, what each considers normative from that period is significantly different. In a very real way, though many who would later join the Reorganization lived in Nauvoo, they never held truck with the theological and liturgical developments of the 1840s. For them what was worth preserving in Mormonism was pre-Nauvoo. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, look back to those years as the precise period when Mormonism really came into its own.

GRANT UNDERWOOD resides in Claremont, California. A version of this response was given at the Mormon History Association meeting in Quincy, Illinois, in May 1989.

Roger Launius's essay whisks us along a fascinating tour of how for well over a hundred years the RLDS have attempted to come to grips with baptism for the dead. Launius provides more than just the history of a doctrine; he explores a larger struggle for identity, baptism for the dead merely being the case study. In the years following World War II, as the Reorganization moved increasingly toward ecumenical Christianity, it became obvious that something had to be done with Joseph Smith's theology, which was altogether too exclusivistic and, by mainstream Protestant standards, too speculative. Yet, RLDS leaders had no desire to throw the baby out with the bath water. Consequently, a certain amount of intellectual tension prevailed. The inevitable resolution was perhaps most creatively expressed by George Njeim with his "prophet-theologian" dichotomy: doctrine that strayed too far from the new theological path being pursued could be designated "mistaken speculation" without damaging respect for and faith in Joseph Smith's truly "prophetic" insights.

In the earliest years, though, Launius "could find no evidence . . . that anyone questioned [the] truthfulness" of baptism for the dead. Instead, Reorganized Church members simply acknowledged it as a rite requiring divine revelation to be reinstituted and debated when and under what circumstances such an event would take place. By the 1950s, however, the winds of thought were blowing in a different direction. No longer was it just a question of "when" but "whether" it would be restored. RLDS apostle Russell F. Ralston challenged the very foundation upon which baptism for the dead was based—the essentiality of baptism itself. Like many Protestant theologians, he argued that to require the rite of all humans who have ever lived regardless of circumstance would be "unjust." Besides, had not Christ promised salvation to the unbaptized thief on the cross? Moreover, Ralston was bothered by baptism for the dead's seeming dependence on human saviors rather than on a divine one. He even attempted to exorcise the doctrine from New Testament Christianity by arguing that the one explicit mention of the practice (1 Cor. 15:29), was actually describing pagan rather than Christian behavior.¹

¹ From any perspective, this is highly irregular exegesis. I have been unable to find a widely used commentary on Corinthians which denies that baptism for the dead, however understood, was a practice among at least some Christians in Corinth. In the new *Harper's Bible Commentary*, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza notes that "more than thirty interpretations have been proposed to explain this practice, but none is satisfactory." At the very least, it seems to be saying that Corinthian believers would "undergo baptism vicariously for their dead in the hope of saving them." Moreover, Paul "does not question the merits of it but refers to it to elucidate his point" (1988, 1187).

If to Mormons, such thinking seems a betrayal of some of Joseph Smith's most precious teachings, to the RLDS it represented a deliverance from ideas that had grown uncomfortable. As leading thinkers in the Reorganization increasingly fell under the influence of twentieth-century liberal Protestant ideals, a more fundamental reworking of the early period, something beyond simply denying polygamy and promoting lineal succession, was needed. Ecumenism and "incarnational theology" began to replace sectarianism and speculative theology. If there were no longer a "one and only true" church, if "the Apostasy" and "the Restoration" were not specific events that happened at a particular time in history but rather processes continually at work among God's children, then the crucial need for baptism for the living or dead was no longer apparent.

The matter came to a head at the 1970 RLDS World Conference. There, the body of the church rejected as revelations the three sections of the Doctrine and Covenants dealing with baptism for the dead (RLDS 107, 109, 110; LDS 124, 127, 128) and placed them in the back of the volume as part of a historical appendix. So important, actually and symbolically, was this conference that one wonders to what degree it should be considered the Vatican II of the Reorganization. Despite dissent from within some priesthood quorums and church jurisdictions, the trajectory toward ecumenical Christianity continued unabated. Today, on the eve of the construction of the RLDS temple in Independence, Launius points out that there are no plans for a baptismal font in the temple basement and that support for the vicarious ordinance has virtually disappeared. In short, he says, it has been relegated to "the nether world of church theological consideration."

A fascinating story indeed! And whether it be labeled the "Protestantization" or the "liberation" of the Reorganization, it certainly indicates a sea change of attitude during the twentieth century. But has it been universal? Launius acknowledges a few dissenting voices along the way, though he minimizes their number and influence. However, I would like to know more about the Vivien Sorensens of the Reorganization who still hold, with Joseph Smith III, that baptism for the dead will be restored. Are these dissenters basically traditionalists who represent a primitivist reaction to ecumenical trends? If so, in what other areas do they seek to retain the early heritage? Beyond that lies the broader question about the nature of heterodoxy in the Reorganization generally. Do various factions exist? What theological or ideological orientations do they espouse? How much opposition emanates from those uncomfortable with picking and choosing which portion of Joseph Smith III's (or his father's) teachings will be consid-

ered doctrine and which will be labeled speculation? What is the relative size and strength of opposition groups, and how does the RLDS Church handle dissent? Whatever further research may reveal, Launius has demonstrated skill both in relating his particular subject to broader developments within the Reorganization and in whetting our appetite for more of the same.

What strikes me as the major contribution of Guy Bishop's paper is his careful analysis of the Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead Book A. From it we learn that in the early years nearly half of the baptisms for the dead were cross-gender, that more aunts and uncles were baptized than either parents or grandparents, and that the ceremony was widely participated in by ordinary residents of Nauvoo. Bishop introduces us, for example, to the otherwise unknown Nehemiah Brush, who was vicariously baptized 111 times in 1841. Particularly revealing is the fact that in addition to relatives, enthusiastic Saints were also baptized for a number of "friends," among them certain of the Founding Fathers. It no doubt interests Latter-day Saints to learn that George Washington had already received several vicarious baptisms in Nauvoo before Wilford Woodruff was baptized for him again as part of the full ordinance work for the dead performed in the St. George Temple.

Bishop's survey of the early history of baptisms for the dead piques interest and invites further research at a number of points. For instance, he lists leading figures in Nauvoo who participated in the ordinance, including members of the Prophet's own family, and notes thereby that baptism for the dead was "an ordinance of the hierarchy as well." But what of Joseph Smith himself? Why is there no record of him being baptized for the dead, not even for Alvin? Was it because he preferred to let others have the experience? Or, why does there appear to have been such a dramatic drop-off in baptisms for the dead after 1841? No records exist for 1842, and baptisms for 1843 were down by two-thirds. Does this reflect simply a lapse in record-keeping, or was it because once the Nauvoo Temple font was finished in November 1841 performance of the ordinance was restricted to that site? And what is the connection with the epistles of September 1842 (LDS D&C 127, 128; RLDS Appendices B, C)? How should their timing and content be accounted for?

Questions also surface with regard to the relationship between tithing and baptisms for the dead. Bishop states that "access to the font" required "approved compliance with church dictates." This is intriguing in light of the current LDS practice requiring individuals to have a worthiness-certifying "recommend" in order to enter the House of the Lord. Then, as now, did one have to be a tithepayer, as Bishop

suggests, in order to participate in the temple ordinances? Bishop cites as evidence a copy of a "temple receipt" signed by William Clayton and a statement by John Taylor that "a man who has not paid his tithing is unfit to be baptized for his dead." Since both date from the post-martyrdom period, we will need more evidence from the earlier years to establish this as a practice during the Prophet's lifetime. Moreover, the Taylor statement needs to be placed in perspective. An LDS Church leader today might remark that a man who does not do his home teaching is unfit to enter the temple. But that is quite different from having home teaching performance written into the official temple recommend questions.

Following the Prophet's death there was a great push to finish the temple, and tithing was stressed as the crucial way to accumulate the labor and resources necessary to complete the task. In that climate, one might expect some attempt to see that those who received from the temple gave to the temple. While an effort to link tithing to temple participation is certainly understandable, the comprehensiveness of its application remains to be demonstrated.

Another tantalizing tidbit is Bishop's remark that "during the first two years of its practice" there was a "lack of institutional control" over baptisms for the dead. What did this mean? What discussions did it prompt? Did Saints merely accept without question the theology of baptism for the dead and argue only over procedures, or did they wrestle with the concept as well? While the answer would provide a fascinating footnote to Mormon intellectual history, there is an even more fundamental lacuna in this story that needs to be addressed: doctrinal development between Joseph's 1836 vision of his brother Alvin in the celestial kingdom and the 1840 announcement of baptism for the dead. The unexamined assumption is that the 1836 vision was "the genesis" of the practice of baptism for the dead. No doubt it played a role, but what about the Prophet's reflections on scriptural passages such as 1 Peter 3:19 or 4:6 and Isaiah 24:22? Were there "lingering questions in 1836 about how" the worthy dead would "receive" the gospel, as Bishop suggests? Or, did some people, like later RLDS from Russell Ralston on, perceive the vision as an answer in itself, merely proclaiming that all those who "would have received" the gospel had they had the chance in this life will automatically inherit the celestial kingdom?

A thorough exploration of these matters would also include such items as an editorial that appeared in the March 1837 *Messenger and Advocate* arguing that it would be unjust for God to condemn those who had not lived where and when they could hear the gospel. Admitting that God has "no other scheme of saving mankind but the gospel," the

editor asked what was to be done. The answer lay in the text for the editorial—1 Peter 4:6, with its declaration that the gospel was “preached to them that are dead.” Thus, “all who do not have, or have not had, the privilege of embracing or rejecting the gospel here in the flesh, have that privilege in God’s own time before the judgment day.” In this way “will the character of God be vindicated” (Smith and Rigdon 1837, 470-71). How representative was this article of the soteriological thinking that was developing in the later 1830s?

Also relevant would be a history of Mormon beliefs about the post-mortual spirit world. In Wilford Woodruff’s diary entry for 3 January 1837, the day he was ordained a seventy, he remembered Zebedee Coltrin saying “that I should visit COLUB & Preach to the spirits in Prison & that I should bring all of my friends or relatives forth from the Terrestrial Kingdom (who had died) by the Power of the gospel” (in Jessee 1972, 380). By modern Mormon standards, this is an odd conjuncture of concepts, yet, rudimentary notions of salvation for the dead are clearly evident. Where did these ideas come from and how were they sorted out in subsequent years? In short, we stand to benefit from a careful study of the period leading up to 1840.

Such a study should also be sensitive to the intellectual milieu in which these ideas were worked out. Universalists had long reacted against traditional notions of damnation by trumpeting God’s salvific benevolence toward his children, and ideas about the spirit world had been given an elaborate boost in the eighteenth century by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Even more interesting is the fact that “Mother Ann’s Work” began among the Shakers in 1837. Through spiritualist phenomena, Shakers were informed that bands of Indian spirits as well as spirits of people from all over the world who had died long ago were being converted to Shakerism. Artaxerxes was only one famous figure from the past whom they singled out as having embraced the Shaker gospel in the spiritual world (Reese 1987). Future research will no doubt ferret out many fascinating details of doctrinal development, but regardless of who now picks up the baton, Bishop and Launius have done a fine job of introducing us to the topic.

Taken together, these two articles provide an excellent example of how thought-provoking it can be to compare doctrinal developments within the RLDS and LDS churches. At the very least, they remind us that even Mormon scripture is not so perspicuous as to compel uniform interpretation. Let’s hope to see more of this kind of work in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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