

# An Ambivalent Rejection: Baptism for the Dead and the Reorganized Church Experience

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THE REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS has often been characterized in recent historical scholarship as a "moderate Mormon" movement seeking to develop an identity somewhere between the more radical Mormonism of the Great Basin and the mainstream of American Protestantism (Blair 1973; see also Launius 1988b). While midwestern and mountain Mormonism sprang from the same historical roots, their theological development took such different courses that today they probably diverge to a greater degree than do the doctrines of the Reorganization and many other contemporary American Christian churches. While some have suggested this is a recent development, it is more likely a consequence of a course charted in the earliest years of the Reorganized Church's history.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the works of Richard Price, *Decision Time*, (1975); *The Saints at the Crossroads* (1975); *Action Time* (1985). Price is a Reorganization conservative who interprets redirec-

Tracking the development of the doctrine of baptism for the dead within the Reorganization demonstrates this fundamental point. Although baptism for the dead had been adopted by the early Latter Day Saint movement, it did not relate well to the peculiar mindset and theological bent of the Reorganization and seemed to do so even less over time. Gradually, without overt action or explicit discussion, it moved from general, albeit cautious, acceptance to essential, albeit unofficial, rejection. Why did this evolution take place? What theological and historical considerations within the Reorganization made this possible, or even probable? As the Reorganized Church enters a new age with the building of a temple in Independence, how will it deal with this critical doctrine?

#### BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD AND THE EARLY SAINTS

Baptism for the dead first appeared in the early Mormon church in Nauvoo. Predicated on the double assumption that God loves all people and grants each an opportunity for salvation and that salvation cannot be granted without baptism, the doctrine provided for the baptism of dead people by proxy. Those who had died without accepting the gospel would be taught after death, and others could be baptized on earth in their stead. It was an extremely attractive concept for many Latter Day Saints, because it allowed for the salvation of all and signified the justice and mercy of God. It answered the fundamental question of what would happen to those who did not embrace the gospel as the early Saints understood it, particularly ancestors who had already died. This concern was registered by members of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, family for the soul of his oldest brother, Alvin, who had died suddenly in 1823 without baptism.

Years of persecution and the loss of loved ones also made the issue attractive to the church membership. The Saints' desire to understand the nature of the hereafter, particularly as revealed in obscure passages of scripture, also prompted the doctrine's ready acceptance. As Richard P. Howard observed:

All these developments—the Smith family's grief over Alvin, the intense persecution of the Saints, the speculative theological propensities of church leadership—produced a milieu in which baptism for the dead came into focus as a means of sealing the deceased

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tions in the church's policy and doctrine as evidence of apostasy from the truths of the Restoration. He has become the chief spokesman for Reorganization fundamentalists, and a rival church organization is now developing around him. For a similar discussion without the criticisms of the institutional church see Howard J. Booth, *Recent Shifts in Restoration Thought* (1980).

ancestors and relatives of the living Saints into the promises of the Mormon kingdom (celestial glory). (1983, 20)

Joseph Smith apparently first considered the propriety of baptism for the dead after reading the only biblical reference to it: "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?" (I Cor. 15:29). His consideration led to the full-fledged development of the doctrine. He made the first public disclosure of it on 15 August 1840 in Nauvoo at the funeral sermon of Seymour Brunson. Simon Baker later remembered that Joseph Smith told the congregation that although baptism was necessary for salvation, "people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and . . . the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God" (in Ehat and Cook 1980, 49). At the October 1840 conference the Prophet instructed the Saints of Nauvoo about baptism for the dead and called for the construction of a temple, in part to accommodate the ritual which was then being conducted in the Mississippi River (see Ehat and Cook 1980, 38, 71, 76-79, 209-14, 333, 363-65, 372; Cook 1981, 242-51, 284-85; Smith 1843, 82-85; Lyon 1975, 435-46; Hill 1976, 170-80; Howard 1969, 224-27).

The Nauvoo Saints began enthusiastically incorporating the doctrine into their belief system. A 19 January 1841 revelation formalized the practice and was included in the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, along with two 1842 letters on the same subject. With this undisputed revelatory instruction, the practice was codified as a temple ritual and recognized as such by the Nauvoo Saints. There can be no doubt about the doctrine's importance in church theology to Joseph Smith and the early church members. The Reorganized Church could never claim, as it did with some other religious conceptions of the period, particularly plural marriage, that Joseph Smith, Jr., was not its originator (LDS D&C 124, 127, 128; RLDS D&C 107, 109, 110).

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OFFICIAL POSITION

Very early in the movement's history, the Reorganized Church adopted an official position about baptism for the dead. This official pronouncement denied neither the possibility nor the viability of baptism for the dead. Instead, it took a cautious position acceptable to all in the early Reorganization: the doctrine was a permissive one, which God had allowed to be practiced for a time in Nauvoo during the 1840s; but without additional divine guidance, the Reorganized Church was not prepared either to teach or practice the temple ritual. It was, in offi-

cial church parlance, a doctrine of "local character," directed by God to be practiced at a specific time and specific place under strict control of the church leadership. The fundamentals of this position were suggested in an 1884 General Conference Resolution which stated "that the commandments of a local character, given in the first organization of the church are binding on the Reorganization, only so far as they are either reiterated or referred to as binding by commandment of the church" (*Rules* 1980, Resolution 282). In other words, unless the Reorganization specifically reaffirmed a particular questioned doctrine, it had no force in the church's official theology. Two years later the April 1886 General Conference passed a resolution especially singling out baptism for the dead as one of those "commandments of a local character" that would not be practiced until reinstated by divine revelation (*Rules* 1980, Resolution 308).

This stand has never been officially rescinded. But the institution's official position tells less than half the story, for the movement has walked a torturous path during the past one hundred years as it sought to deal with the legacy of baptism for the dead. From a general acceptance of the policy—a position that recognized it as a permissive but legitimate rite, to be executed at the specific redirection of God—in time the Reorganization gradually drifted away from the doctrine. At the present, I suspect that while the doctrine still has some support, the overwhelming majority of Reorganized Church members no longer accept, even theoretically, baptism for the dead. Until recently, although the church has continually suggested that baptisms for the dead be carried out only by divine direction in a temple built for the purpose, with no prospect for the building of such an edifice in the immediate future, the doctrine was shunted into a limbo between belief and practice. To ignore, as Alma R. Blair has appropriately remarked, was ultimately to reject (1973, 222).

#### THE EARLY REORGANIZATION'S CONCEPTION

The Saints making up the early Reorganization never questioned the propriety of baptism for the dead. It had been introduced by Joseph Smith, it was contained in their Doctrine and Covenants, it was a part of the early Latter Day Saint belief system, and it had been promulgated rapidly and with enthusiasm during the Prophet's lifetime. Whether to accept it into the Reorganization was never of the slightest concern to the earliest members of that dissenting church. The new organization, Richard Howard commented, "had no basis, either in sentiment or in public deliberations, to make a departure from such a firmly established doctrine as baptism for the dead had been since 1840" (1969, 228).

This doctrine was such a distinctive part of the Reorganized Church that it contributed to the conversion of Alexander H. Smith, a son of the founding prophet and the brother of Reorganized Church president Joseph Smith III, who had affiliated with the Reorganization in 1860. Emma Smith had joined at the same time, and the youngest brother, David H., united with the church shortly after. Alexander, however, hung back, unwilling to make a commitment to the Reorganization even though he was interested in its message and generally agreed with its position.

In April 1862 the second-oldest son, Frederick G. W. Smith, took ill and died without baptism. This greatly troubled Alexander, who was concerned that Frederick would be consigned to hell. Vida E. Smith, Alexander's daughter, remembered a turning point in this perplexity:

That his beloved brother was lost was a horror such as has filled many hearts; but to him there came a balm, the testimony of the Spirit, the first communication direct from that Comforter, saying, "Grieve not; Frederick's condition is pleasant; and the time shall come when baptism can be secured to him," admonishing him to do his duty and all would be well. Satisfied of the necessity of baptism for the living, and comforted by the evidence of its possibility for the dead, on May the 25th of the same year [1862], his brother Joseph baptized him in the grand old Mississippi. (1911, 13-14)

Alexander Smith, of course, went on to serve as an apostle and later Presiding Patriarch in the Reorganized Church.

If baptism for the dead was a true principle, then it was incumbent on the Reorganization either to practice it or to explain why it could not do so. The reasons varied depending upon the era; but throughout most of the nineteenth century, Reorganized Church leaders argued that the doctrine had to be executed under a rigid set of conditions at the specific direction of God. They tied this closely to the rejection of the church when Brigham Young accepted leadership and moved its administration to Utah. "Baptism for the Dead was also rejected," stated an unsigned article in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* in March 1860, "and yet this doctrine was believed in and practically observed by the church in the days of Paul." The author went on to make the case that it had been explained to Joseph Smith "before the Book of Mormon was revealed." Even so, the author wrote that Smith did not institute the practice until commanded to do so by God, and then only within a well-defined set of parameters. When the Saints withdrew from Nauvoo, the author continued, the opportunity to practice it had passed, and Young's followers should have stopped. Because they did not do so, the writer concluded, their church was "rejected" ("The Early Revelations" 1860, 67).

An endorsement of baptism for the dead also emerged from the Reorganization's Joint Council of ruling quorums in May 1865. During the meeting, William Marks, the one man in the Reorganization to have been "in the know" about doctrinal ideas of the Nauvoo period, stated at this meeting that the doctrine had originally been considered a permissive rite, to be practiced only under the most restricted conditions in a temple built especially for the purpose. Marks asserted that Joseph Smith "stopped the baptism for the dead" in Nauvoo, at least for a time, and Marks "did not believe it would be practiced any more until there was a fountain built in Zion or Jerusalem" (Council of Twelve Minutes 1865, 12). At the conclusion of this meeting, the Joint Council affirmed a cautious policy, resolving "that it is proper to teach the doctrine of baptism for the dead when it is necessary to do so in order to show the completeness of the plan of salvation, but wisdom dictates that the way should be prepared by the preaching of the first principles" (Council of Twelve Resolutions 1865, 3).

The ensuing years saw considerable discussion of the reinstitution of baptism for the dead. In virtually every instance Reorganization leaders endorsed the idea but withheld practice awaiting a divine mandate. They usually coupled this stance with a condemnation of Utah Mormonism for continuing the ritual without God's sanction (see "The Rejection" 1861, 17-18; J. Smith III 1883; "Building" 1894; "Baptism" 1864).

The Reorganization condemned the Mormon method of conducting baptisms for ancestors without direct and individual revelation. "It is not commonly known that President Young taught and administered baptism for the dead in a very different way than Joseph did," stated a July 1880 article in the *Saints' Advocate*, published by the Reorganization at Plano, Illinois. "Joseph taught that baptism for the dead could be done, properly, only by revelation, . . . Have President Young and his followers observed this essential restriction?" Of course, the article answered with a resounding no, and the author concluded that the Utah faction had "departed away from the teachings of the 'Choice Seer,' however much they may have claimed to follow him" ("Baptism" 1880).

Perhaps the clearest expression of the Reorganized Church's concept of baptism for the dead can be found in an 1874 *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* editorial:

For the Doctrine of Baptism for the Dead, we have only this to write; it was by permission, as we learn from the history, performed in the river until the font should be prepared. The font and the temple which covered it are gone, not a stone remains unturned,

the stranger cultivates the soil over the places where the corner stones were laid; and when memory paints in respondent hues the rising light of the glorious doctrine, the mind should also remember how sadly sombre and dark are the clouds lying heavily over the horizon where this light was quenched; "You shall be rejected with your dead, saith the lord your God."

The practice of "Baptizing for the Dead" was made a part of the practice of the Church only after years of suffering and toil; and not taught nor practiced until a place of rest was supposed to have been found; does not add to, nor diminish the promises made to the believer in the gospel proclamation; and while it was permitted, was of so particular form in its observance, that a settled place, and only one, was essential to the keeping of the records of baptism. . . .

Baptism for the dead is not commanded in the gospel; it is at best only permitted, was so by special permission, and we presume that should we ultimately prove worthy, it may be again permitted. . . .

In conclusion on this subject, let those who are most anxious for the reinstating of the doctrine and practice of baptism for the dead remember, that there is but little of direct scriptural proof that can be adduced in support of the doctrine; and that left mainly to the direct institution of it among the Saints, we must be fully prepared to meet all the consequences attendant upon its introduction, or we shall rue the mooting of the subject. ("Editorial" 1874, 434)

The anonymous author went on to say that the Saints should live justly and not concern themselves with such practices as baptism for the dead until such time as God should direct.

#### JOSEPH SMITH III AND THE DOCTRINE

Joseph Smith III, who became Reorganized Church president in April 1860, played a critical role in developing the church's policy concerning baptism for the dead. Smith never questioned the doctrine publicly and only hesitantly considered its propriety in private late in his long career. Too much religious background from Nauvoo eliminated any serious reconsideration of the issue the early Reorganization, and I doubt that he had either the will or the inclination to deal with the issue. Smith's mother, Emma, had been a proxy in the baptism for the dead rituals in Nauvoo. His lone counselor in the First Presidency in the 1860s, William Marks, had been stake president in Nauvoo and had participated in the proxy baptisms (Bishop 1990, 7). And, as already mentioned, the doctrine was particularly comforting to his brother Alexander.

Even if Smith had been willing to challenge the ritual on theological grounds, he probably still would not have done so early in his presidency because he was generally unwilling to take strong and forceful action publicly that might needlessly upset the harmony of the church (see Launius 1988, 361-74). Throughout his life, Smith recognized the doctrine as legitimate, at least in principle, and allowed the door to remain

open to its eventual practice or possible rejection in the Reorganization.

Smith wrote to Alfred Ward on 9 May 1880 about this issue. "Baptism for the dead, temple building, and gathering are not rejected," he wrote, "and what you may deem laying on the shelf, remains to be seen." He added, however, that baptism for the dead was at best a permissive doctrine that might or might not be practiced again. In a similar manner, he wrote to Job Brown on 5 January 1886 that he believed in the principle of universal salvation and that baptism for the dead was one means of achieving it, "but [I] do not teach it; having as I understand it no command to do so."

Apparently, Joseph Smith III began to modify some of his ideas concerning baptism for the dead at least by the early 1890s.<sup>2</sup> He still positively regarded it, but his comments on the subject show inconsistency. His 3 May 1894 letter to Mrs. N. S. Patterson shows that he still stressed its permissive nature:

We do not feel at liberty to baptize for the dead yet, though we believe it. It is a permissive rite, and the church was forbid the practice in about 1844, until the Temple was finished. The temple was not finished in the time allotted sic, and the privilege ceased. It will be renewed soon we believe, when we can practice that ordinance.

On 5 May 1894 he even defended the doctrine against charges that it was unscriptural by pointedly asking a correspondent: "Will you please state wherein the doctrine of baptism for the dead is contrary to the Book of Mormon?"

At the same time, he began asking more questions about the doctrine. Perhaps it was challenges from others, or the completion of the Salt Lake Temple, or his own personal feelings that by the 1890s resulted in a subtle shift in his willingness to reexamine the issue. In an intriguing 26 May 1893 letter to L. L. Barth of Rexburg, Idaho, Joseph Smith III described his basic position about baptism for the dead and the Mormon concept of the eternity in general. "Personally, I would not value going through the temple a dollar's worth," he wrote, "and then only as a matter of curiosity, I cannot see anything sacred or divine in it." Smith also suggested that baptism for the dead might be rejected

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<sup>2</sup> In my biography of Joseph Smith III I argued that by the 1890s the prophet was more comfortable with his position in the church, that the peculiar circumstances of his presidential position, his time in office, the successes of his policies—particularly against polygamy—prompted greater shifts in his administration than at any previous time. This may help explain what appears to be a subtle and tentative, but nonetheless important, reexamination of the doctrine of baptism for the dead by the Reorganization prophet (see Launius 1988, 296-311).



at some date in the future, arguing that God could either “enjoin” or “permit” it to suit his purposes, and it was not humanity’s concern (“Baptism” 1893, 115).

There can be no doubt, however, that Joseph Smith III held at least a tangential belief in baptism for the dead until his death in 1914. Usually in the latter years of his presidency, he alluded to it in connection with the temple in Independence at some distant future time. He wrote to J. W. Jenkins in 1902, “We believe that when the temple is built baptism for the dead will be practiced, and we are in hopes that perhaps permission may be given before that.” But Smith never implored God for revelations and guidance about the practice of the ritual. The abstract principle, without any tangible expression and with fewer and fewer people concerned with it, began a path toward rejection.

#### EARLY CHALLENGES

There were opponents of the doctrine of baptism for the dead from the earliest period of the Reorganization, and they vocally disagreed with the Reorganized Church’s cautious official position about its legitimacy as a permissive rite to be practiced at the express command of God. A few—notably Reorganization founding father Jason W. Briggs, who was admittedly such a liberal element in the movement that he withdrew from it in 1886 because of irreconcilable doctrinal differences—even advocated that the church reject the premise outright as unscriptural and adopt a more “Christian attitude.”<sup>3</sup>

Russell Huntley, in most instances an orthodox church member (he demonstrated as much by donating significant funds to the church to provide for the publication of the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon when it came forward), also thought the doctrine ridiculous (Launius 1985).<sup>4</sup> In a February 1875 article in the *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* Huntley challenged the concept: “Then we find the believer and the doer saved; the unbeliever that has the law and will not keep it, lost; and the little children and those without the law redeemed by the atonement, the blood of Christ. Now where does the baptism for the dead come in, as all are saved that can be saved? I see no place or need for that ordinance.” Huntley’s position, as might be expected, relied

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Briggs, Apostle Zenos H. Gurley, Jr., also questioned the necessity of the doctrine. Both withdrew from the church in 1886 over theological issues (see Smith and Smith 1967, 4:524-28; Vlahos 1971; Blair 1980; Russell 1987).

<sup>4</sup> In the 1880s Huntley asked for and received back the money he had donated for a trust fund to publish the remainder of the Book of Mormon.

heavily on Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon's 1832 vision of the three glories, which indicated that salvation would come to a much broader category of human beings than most Christian churches accepted but did not mention baptism as a necessary prerequisite to this redemption (D&C 76).

For several years thereafter, baptism for the dead was discussed in church meetings and periodicals, but mostly in noncommittal ways (Stebbins and Walker [1888], 166, 216-18; Griffiths n.d., 139-40; Parsons 1902, 114-20). For instance, the author of a 5 January 1889 statement in the *Saints' Herald* debated the wisdom of baptism for the dead, declaring that even though the doctrine could be rectified with the existing body of scripture and then practiced, there was little reason to believe it would be reinstituted any time soon and perhaps never. Joseph Smith III was in Utah when this appeared, and it seems unlikely that he had approved its publication. At the preconference meeting of the Quorum of Twelve in 1892 the apostles voted "that as a Quorum we put ourselves upon record as being ready to promulgate the doctrine as soon as the Lord shall so direct us as to time, place, and conditions for observance" (in Edwards 1969, 5:145). There was, however, little enthusiasm for the pronouncement from most of the quorum members, and nothing came of the exercise, not even a request to Joseph Smith III that he prayerfully consider the matter, a common action in other cases of doctrinal interpretation.

#### A TIME OF WITHDRAWAL

During the early years of the twentieth century, Reorganization leaders withdrew further from considering baptism for the dead as a legitimate doctrine. The official position remained constant throughout this period; the doctrine was "permissive," to be practiced at some future, unspecified time. Questions about the doctrine were much less common during the first half of the century than before 1900. Discussion in the *Saints' Herald* dropped drastically.<sup>5</sup> Most discussion, both in church periodicals and elsewhere, involved debate with the Utah Saints about the issue (see Phillips 1904; H. Smith 1907; J. F. Smith nd; E. Smith 1943; Ralston 1950; Carpenter 1958; Hield and Ralston 1960). This debate became not so much about when to implement the doctrine—the old

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<sup>5</sup> There are only nine articles on the subject listed in the card file index for the *Saints' Herald* at the Reorganized Church Library-Archives for the period between 1900 and 1960. In addition, such influential tracts as A. B. Phillips, *Latter Day Saints and What They Believe* (n.d., 203-6) has a lengthy discussion of baptism and resurrection, but no commentary on baptism for the dead.

"permissive" position—as about whether it was necessary at all.

Russell F. Ralston, a member of the seventy assigned to full-time missionary service in Utah in 1948, was one of the most important students of the issue (Ralston 1989a; 1989b). In his work in Utah, Ralston needed answers to doctrinal questions about the Restoration churches but found very little quality information. To rectify this deficiency, he enlisted the aid of Charles R. Hield, the apostle in charge of the region, and prepared a series of study papers on the various doctrinal dissimilarities of the Latter-day Saint and Reorganization churches. They found that most of the Reorganization's doctrinal materials placed too much emphasis on the subject of plural marriage to the exclusion of other critical issues. Accordingly, they began by studying each church's concept of God. That led naturally into a consideration of temple rituals, one of which was baptism for the dead.

Ralston approached baptism for the dead from a fresh perspective. By the late 1940s no one in the church remembered Nauvoo and the practice of baptism for the dead. Since the doctrine had no practical application in the Reorganization, there was no body of knowledge surrounding it from continued practice, as in the case of the Latter-day Saints. Ralston was free, therefore, to consider the issue without defending or condemning it. While Ralston denied that he was consciously departing from previous approaches to the subject, he articulated well the shifting position of many Reorganized Church members during the immediate postwar era as the church began to struggle with broader questions. Having moved beyond the borders of western culture, the Church was also forced to consider anew its role within the broader context of Christianity. Baptism for the dead was apparently one of the issues reviewed (see Booth 1980; Potter 1980; Cole 1979).

He quickly found that baptism for the dead had a very strong pedigree in the early Mormon church, although he thought its scriptural support was suspect. In spite of this, he began by asking, "Was baptism for the dead as now understood and practiced a false doctrine?" That was, of course, a remarkably different premise from one that recognized the doctrine's viability but argued its restrictive nature. Ralston reasoned that baptism for the dead was only legitimate if baptism was essential for salvation. His studies all indicated that baptism was not essential to salvation and therefore that baptism for the dead was a false doctrine deserving of rejection. Israel A. Smith, the Reorganization's president from 1946 to 1958, supported Ralston's conclusions and asked Ralston to prepare his studies on Restoration doctrines for publication (Ralston 1989a).

The 30 October 1950 *Saints' Herald* contained the first of several

pathbreaking articles by Ralston on baptism for the dead. This article accepted the basic church position that the practice of baptism for the dead in the early church had been formally directed, circumscribed, and governed by revelation. Ralston suggested that the practice was strictly limited for a time to the Mississippi River and to the Nauvoo Temple when it was completed. He also concluded that "the ordinance of baptism for the dead was only to be *permissible* in Zion, her *stakes*, and *Jerusalem*." Without a temple specifically for the purpose, "there is *no place on earth* where this ordinance can be *legally* practiced" (1950, 1047). Ralston was here taking at face value an argument he had heard from Elbert A. Smith, a longtime church official currently serving as presiding patriarch, who believed that in spite of the doctrine's strangeness, it might have to do with a special relationship between some of the living and their dead, even though it had nothing to do with their salvation (Ralston 1989a).

After reaffirming the standard church position, Ralston next considered whether baptism for the dead was essential "to the salvation of either the living or the dead." He suggested, "I believe that if baptism for the dead is essential to their salvation, then God is unjust." He argued that those who had died without a knowledge of the gospel should not be penalized and that Joseph Smith, Jr., had learned as much in a 1836 revelation when he saw his brother Alvin in the celestial kingdom, even though he had not been baptized. Ralston used several scriptural citations to show that baptism was not essential, including Christ's promise of paradise to the thief on the cross. "Considering the above fact," Ralston commented, "we can but conclude that baptism for the dead is *not* essential to the salvation of the dead" (Ralston 1950, 1048).

Ralston also used the Book of Mormon, asserting that while it contained the fullness of the gospel, it made no mention of baptism for the dead. He also invoked the Doctrine and Covenants 34:3, dated December 1830, to demonstrate that God had "*sent forth the fullness of my gospel by the hand of my servant Joseph Smith*" by that early date, apparently without any consideration for the historical evolution of the church after that period.

Ralston also used the only biblical reference to baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29 to demonstrate the doctrine's error. In the first instance I have found of this particular argument, Ralston asserted that in this scriptural passage "Paul was not talking about Christians." He wrote:

In this fifteenth chapter, Paul is expounding the truth of the Resurrection. Talking to the saints (members of Christ's church) at Corinth, he says, "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?" You will note carefully that Paul does not say, "why are *you* (members of Christ's church) baptized for the dead," but specifically talks about *they*. Who are *they*? There is no indication that *they* are Christians. (1950, 1048)

This last argument has become a standard in Reorganized Church efforts to discredit the practice of baptism for the dead. Based on this assessment of scripture—and the discrediting of the biblical reference to baptism for the dead had to take place before the Reorganization could reject the doctrine—Ralston concluded that "we feel the only logical conclusion is that baptism for the dead is not a basic principle of the doctrine of Christ" (1950, 1048).

Having cast doubts on the biblical sanction of baptism for the dead, it was now easier for Ralston to challenge the latter-day revelations of Joseph Smith on the subject. Ralston suggested that the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants concerning baptism for the dead were deficient as scripture: one was a cautious revelation that limited the practice, and the other two were 1842 letters that Ralston cast aside as nonrevelatory writings. He also offered an entirely different interpretation of the scripture in Malachi 4:6 about turning the hearts of the children to their fathers, using a statement from the first vision that reads: "And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to the fathers" (Ralston 1950, 1049; Smith and Smith 1973, 1:13).

At the end of this article, Ralston offered six basic conclusions about baptism for the dead: (1) baptism for the dead at best is very strictly limited; (2) there is no temple on the earth where baptism for the dead can be practiced according to the limitations of God; (3) baptism for the dead is in no way essential to the salvation of either the living or the dead; (4) baptism for the dead is not a basic principle of Christ's gospel, for the Book of Mormon, which contains the fullness, does not teach it; (5) the doctrine is at best permissible, and this only under very specific conditions; and (6) "members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints cannot feel justified [either] in accepting or rejecting it, nor can we rightfully do so unless God in his wisdom shall reveal it in such a way and with such a purpose that it will be completely consistent with him, his Son, and his gospel" (Ralston 1950, 10-49).

In the next few years, Ralston followed this article with several essays on baptism for the dead in church periodicals, each laying waste to the practice. In a 1952 article in the *Saints' Herald*, he commented:

The whole matter of baptism for the dead is so very indefinite that it would be difficult to

come to any conclusion as to just what did occur. There are no records of any revelation of God coming through the prophet telling any one individual to be baptized for any specific dead person. Since there are no records of such, I feel it is safe to assume that there was no such revelation.

When questioned about the possibility of proxy baptism for someone on the verge of converting to the church at the time of death, Ralston asserted that "God has a way by which he offers celestial salvation to those whose hearts' desire is worthy and who through no fault of their own had no opportunity to be baptized in this world." He did not allow, however, for any requirement for baptism at any time, considering it an unnecessary act (*Question* 1955, 224-26; Ralston 1955, 525).

In 1960 Russell Ralston and Charles R. Hield published an expanded tract on the subject, which laid out in detail the official Reorganized Church position but firmly defended the nonpractice of the rite by the movement. They asserted that "while the Reorganized Church does not completely reject the principle of baptism for the dead, *it does very strongly deny any concept which makes baptism for the dead essential to the salvation of either the living or the dead.*"<sup>6</sup> Interpreting scripture and restoration history, the authors' case against the practice was similar to, though more detailed than that offered in Ralston's earlier writings.

One of Ralston and Hield's most interesting and original arguments for the rejection of baptism for the dead is that the doctrine makes humans the saviors of those for whom they are baptized, rather than Jesus Christ. "If salvation for the unbaptized people on the other side must depend upon frail mankind today, then judgment depends upon the works of the living and not upon one's own life," they wrote. "Any doctrinal concept that makes man a savior is obviously false" (1960, 11).

This has become an especially important rationale for members of the Reorganization and has been used repeatedly in recent years to discredit baptism for the dead (see Elefson 1984, 12-14). James D. Wardle, a Reorganized Church member living in Salt Lake City who operates the only combination barber shop/theological seminar that I know of, echoed this position in an unpublished study in the early 1960s: "To

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<sup>6</sup> Hield and Ralston, *Baptism for the Dead*, p. 9. This tract was incorporated into a larger publication by Ralston, *Fundamental Differences* (1963, 209-65). An earlier edition of *Fundamental Differences* had been published in 1960, but its discussion was much circumscribed from that of the 1963 edition because of a fear that it would preempt the sales of the Hield and Ralston booklet on *Baptism for the Dead*, published in 1960 (Ralston 1989a).

trust in baptism for the dead is to prefer the interference of men over the redemptive power which is already assured through Jesus Christ."

During the 1960s the Church moved even further from the doctrine. Instead of explaining that baptism for the dead was a permissive doctrine that would be practiced upon further revelation from God, several church leaders publicly challenged and then overturned, at least to their satisfaction, the doctrine's theological underpinnings. Charles Fry, long a leading figure in the church's hierarchy, concluded in a 1963 study:

1. The doctrine of Baptism for the Dead was never revealed of God; never commanded of Him; and never endorsed of Him.
2. Its entrance into the church was irregular and illegitimate, and in disregard of the law.
3. It came out in due season and was no part of the "Restoration" of latter days. . . .
4. It is based upon false promises including an erroneous interpretation of scriptural baptism.

Another argument at this time commented that the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants mandating baptism for the dead had not been officially adopted by conference action of the church before the death of Joseph Smith and therefore should not be binding on the church. As a result, some church officials advocated removing these sections from the Doctrine and Covenants (*Question* 1967, 195-96; Draper 1989).

#### GEORGE NJEIM AND THE PROPHET/THEOLOGIAN DICHOTOMY

Also at center stage in this reevaluation of the legitimacy of baptism for the dead was George Njeim, a president of seventy and full-time missionary. Njeim published what was, after Russell Ralston's writings, the most comprehensive analysis of the subject. His work, like Ralston's, dealt not only with baptism for the dead, but with the personality and doctrinal thinking of Joseph Smith as well. In a serialized article appearing in the *Saints' Herald* during the first three months of 1970, Njeim analyzed what he called the two sides of Smith's religious personality: the prophet and the theologian. Using a complex argument—and ultimately one that may satisfy only those looking at the issue through the lens of the Reorganization—Njeim argued that during the latter 1830s Smith began to rely less on revelatory power and more on his own instincts and doctrinal ideas. He emphasized the Prophet's early visions as central to the divinity of the movement and offered the decrease of visions in the latter 1830s and of revelations published in the Doctrine and Covenants after 1838 as evidence of Smith's spiritual deadening. The theological innovations especially of the

Nauvoo period—the temple endowment, the progressive nature of God, the Book of Abraham, plural marriage, and others highly prized by some Mormon factions—Njeim credited to Joseph Smith's theological speculation, prompted by Smith's attempts to rationalize the various scriptural passages he studied. Njeim explicitly included baptism for the dead in his list of speculative doctrines introduced in Nauvoo and urged its outright rejection by the Reorganized Church.

Njeim repeated many of Ralston's arguments and concluded that baptism for the dead had been a "theological accident" which arose only because the church's particular circumstances, the prophet, and the place came together to create an environment ripe for doctrinal speculation. His conclusions summarized this basic belief:

I must admit that teachings of Joseph during this period (1839-1844) have concerned me greatly and nearly caused me to leave the church. Once I began to see the theological background, my concern was eased. My faith is in the God who gave Joseph his visions resulting in the Book of Mormon and convincing me of the divinity of Christ, who is my Savior. . . . That Joseph may have made mistakes in trying to find explanations for vexatious verses in the scriptures does not bother me now. He was a man such as I am, and I have found myself wrong many a time in my interpretation of a doctrinal issue. (Njeim 1970b, 26)

By creating the dichotomy of prophet and theologian in Joseph Smith, Njeim was thus able to offer Reorganization leaders a rational vehicle, even if it was a bit rickety, to bury baptism for the dead. Several others seconded his position (Ashenhurst et al. 1970, 22-23, 25).

#### THE PIVOTAL 1970 WORLD CONFERENCE

From whatever perspective we view it, the 1970 World Conference of the Reorganized Church was one of the most difficult in the movement's history. Racked with controversy over issues of peace and war, religious education, liberalism and conservatism, and racism, the pivotal meeting will affect the Reorganized Church indefinitely ("Conference Resume" 1970, 3-6; Russell 1970, 769-71). One action of this conference moved several sections of the Doctrine and Covenants from the main body of the work to a "Historical Appendix" at the back of the book. Among the five documents consigned to this appendix were the three on baptism for the dead, which had been so recently reinterpreted. This decision culminated years of study about the doctrine, which had evidently led the majority of church members to believe that baptism for dead was a non-Christian concept deserving of rejection.

The desire for change, of course, had been fermenting for years. In



1967 when the First Presidency considered revising the prefatory material for each section in the book, a logical question arose about the propriety of deleting certain sections with seemingly no relationship to the current church. At the April 1968 World Conference, delegates from the Utah District proposed including in a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants only those revelations "attested by Joseph Smith, Jr., or by one of his lawful successors," and "presented to and acted upon by the presiding quorums of the church . . . as revelation authoritatively binding upon the whole church." Other sections not considered revelatory and binding on the Reorganization were to be placed in a historical appendix. This resolution, which passed on 6 April 1968, did not designate which sections of the Doctrine and Covenants might be relegated to an appendix, but there was little question that those relating to baptism for the dead were to be among them (*World Conference* 1968, 283; Draper 1989).

On 7 April 1970 the First Presidency offered a lengthy resolution to the World Conference creating the historical appendix. Innocuously named "New Doctrine and Covenants Format," this resolution presented, in addition to the historical appendix, a new introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants, a new order for sections in the book, and a new set of introductions to individual revelations (*World Conference* 1970, 286). The issue caused heated debate. The first controversy involved an amendment to the resolution, offered by Earline Campbell of Los Angeles, California, providing for the deletion from the book of all sections to be placed in the historical appendix.

Melvin Knussman spoke for those still holding to the legitimacy of baptism for the dead:

In view of the long historical tradition of the Doctrine and Covenants as we have it today, I feel it would be tragic if we would at this time seek to make these changes. I feel that we better let well enough alone, for by making changes at this time I feel it will in the long run raise more problems than it would solve ("World" 1970, 84).

Even more eloquent was the argument of Madalyn Taylor, a delegate of Santa Fe Stake near Independence, Missouri. "I would vote an emphatic no to this whole resolution," she said, then continued:

There was a time as recorded in I Nephi when scholars in the vision of then removed many precious things that were plain from the Bible and after these plain and precious things had been removed by theologians this book went forth among the Gentiles and because of the lack of revelations, due to the tampering of men, Nephi was shown that many should stumble until in the latter days, they should be had again.... If ever there

was a time in the history of the restoration when people have itching fingers and desire to tamper with things, it is now. Change the Book of Mormon, change the revelations, change the name of the church, change the ordinance. This is all that the word apostasy in the Greek language means. Apostacize, abandoning of that which is a faith of belief. I beg the delegates to consider well before they vote on this resolution. ("World" 1970, 86)

For Melvin Knussman and Madalyn Taylor as well as for a minority of other church members, removing the sections concerning baptism for the dead represented a serious departure from the church's "tried and true" system of belief.

C. Robert Mesle, then a theology student and now on the faculty at Graceland College, silenced some of this dissent with research he and some associates had conducted concerning the place of baptism for the dead in the theology of selected church appointee ministers. In describing a survey he had sent to these individuals he noted:

We received somewhere in the area of 90 replies. Of these, 56 percent agreed strongly that baptism for the dead was not valid, 42 percent agreed, 11 percent were undecided, and no one felt that it was valid. Two, we asked, how do you view the concept of baptism for the dead? 12 percent felt that it was an ordinance requiring revelation through the present prophet to be considered valid, 32 percent felt that it was invalid on scriptural grounds, and 56 percent felt that it was invalid on all grounds. Third, we asked, what would you like to see done to sections 107, 109, 110? 18 percent said remove all three sections entirely from the D. and C.; 66 percent said place all three sections in an historical area of the D. and C.; 5 percent said place sections 109 and 110 in an historical section of the Doctrine and Covenants and leave 107 remain as it now stands, and 11 percent were undecided. We feel that this might give the Conference some idea how the men involved with the question feel about it. ("World" 1970, 88)

It should be noted that a portion of Mesle's research on baptism for the dead had been strategically published in the *Saints' Herald* in April 1970 to coincide with the convening of conference. This article challenged in no uncertain terms the scriptural foundation of the practice and was one more means of building the case for placing the baptism for the dead sections in a historical appendix (see Ashenhurst et. al 1970).

In the end the delegates passed the First Presidency's resolution. In spite of the minority opinions expressed, the conference did not seem to have been seriously divided on the issue. Votes at these conferences are usually taken by raising hands. If the vote had been close, the house would have been divided and an actual count taken; this was not done (see Troeh and Troeh 1987). After a lengthy debate, the conference deferred to the hierarchy and easily passed the resolution. Indeed, this action was typical of many conference episodes when considerable debate and wrestling among the members over a particular issue ended in approval of the leadership's original position. Robert Slasor, from the

unorganized section of eastern Ontario, voiced the basic trust most members have for the church hierarchy when he remarked: "I think the First Presidency and those that have been involved with them have done such an excellent job of improving this . . . I for one would like to see it [the First Presidency resolution] accepted just as it now is and then look toward the future with the possibilities that if change is needed it then could be made" ("World" 1970, 85).

Although this decision did not silence all discussion of the subject among church members, it represented for most the implicit rejection of baptism for the dead. Church officials offered several explanations for relegating the scripture to the appendix where it no longer had the force of commandment. All were firmly rooted in the historical development of the Reorganization's understanding of the practice. First, the action recognized the long-standing position that the doctrine was only permissive but allowed for its future practice if God directed its implementation. Second, since the original revelations had never been approved for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants by formal church vote during Joseph Smith's lifetime they never should have been placed there in the first place. Thus, placement in a historical appendix simply corrected a past error. Finally, the questionable sections were of historical value and in an appendix they would still be available for study by the church members (*World* 1970, E-4; RLDS D&C 107: Introduction).

These were excuses, not the real reasons. Most of the church hierarchy and many of the members openly questioned the legitimacy of baptism for the dead. Israel A. Smith had been opposed to the doctrine as early as the 1940s and was the first to propose the idea of ousting the Doctrine and Covenants sections dealing with it (Ralston 1989a; 1989b). His younger brother and successor as president of the Reorganized Church, W. Wallace Smith, was even more adamant. He and his counselors in the First Presidency in 1970 opposed the concept and were in favor of ultimately exorcising the sections from the Doctrine and Covenants.

The First Presidency's position concerning baptism for the dead was clearly expressed two years earlier at the 1968 World Conference. On that occasion W. Wallace Smith's revelation about the building of a temple in Independence was returned by the priesthood quorums for clarification about the nature of temple ministries, particularly about provisions for endowment rituals akin to those practiced by the Latter-day Saints. Smith considered this issue and prepared a second inspired statement which concluded that "there is no provision for secret ordinances now or ever" in any temple to be built by the Reorganization

(RLDS D&C 149, 149a; Draper 1989). These "secret ordinances," Smith explained, included baptism for the dead. That the statement was easily accepted by the conference body also indicated a consensus among the membership of the church.

This is not to say, however, that there was complete agreement; and at least to some, the 1970 action to place the baptism for the dead sections in the historical appendix represented a compromise allowing all parties to escape with an acceptable solution. Vivien Sorenson, a member of the Seventy and a full-time appointee minister, for instance, has said that he believed in baptism for the dead and looked forward to the day that it would be practiced again, but he voted for the "appendix" decision so that the issue would be settled. If he had not done so, he was convinced that at a later conference sufficient votes would have been mustered by the First Presidency to remove the sections from the Doctrine and Covenants entirely. To do so, he believed, would have wrongfully closed the door to the potential of baptism for the dead. For Sorenson and others of a similar minority view, that half a loaf could be accepted until God spoke on the subject again (Sorenson 1989).

### CONCLUSION

At present a few church members still cling to the older permissive rite position and await the time when baptism for the dead can again be practiced. This number, however, is declining with almost every passing year. Once again, to ignore (and that has been the Reorganization's policy) is to reject (see Whenham 1970). The decision to relegate baptism for the dead to the back of the book represents, I believe, a decision also to relegate it to a limbo world of church theological consideration (see also Holm 1970, 156-64; "Question" 1970, 1978; Williams 1978; Madison 1988).

At this time, with plans for building a temple well underway in Independence, it would seem the ideal moment to reintroduce the practice, if ever that is to occur. Joseph Smith III certainly believed that baptisms for the dead would be practiced in the Independence temple, yet there are no plans for a baptismal font in the building's basement. Perhaps the ultimate moment of rejection for the practice will be at the dedication of the Independence Temple. When Wallace B. Smith opens the temple to the public sometime in the 1990s and there is still no provision for baptisms for the dead, the Reorganized Church will have officially relegated the concept to theological speculation, something it did tacitly more than twenty years ago. For good or ill, the

Reorganization will have finally abandoned one of the most unique practices arising from early Mormonism.

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