

Painting of Nauvoo, Illinois, with boats on the Mississippi River and the walls of the Nauvoo Temple. (Painting by Johan Schroder, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

“FOR THEIR SALVATION IS NECESSARY AND ESSENTIAL TO OUR SALVATION”

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM AND
CONFIRMATION FOR THE DEAD



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In 1979, while serving as the LDSSA president at the Logan Institute of Religion, I invited Richard O. Cowan to be the speaker at the institute's weekly "Religion in Life" devotional. He consented to speak provided that following the devotional I would take him and his wife, Dawn, to the Cache Valley Cheese factory in Amalga to tour the facility and sample the cheese, and then accompany them in an endowment session in the recently renovated Logan Temple. I was more than happy to agree to his two propositions, and we spent a delightful afternoon together. I could not have projected it at the time, but fifteen years later I sat in Richard's office when he, as department chair, extended an invitation for me to be a full-time faculty member in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at BYU. I will be forever grateful for his kindness, generosity, and friendship, and I consider it a great honor to have been one of his colleagues.

The *Elders' Journal* of July 1838, published in Far West, Missouri, included a series of twenty questions related to Mormonism, the answers to which bear the editorial pen of Joseph Smith. Question number sixteen posed the following query: "If the Mormon doctrine is true, what has become of all those who have died since

the days of the apostles?" The Prophet answered, "All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the gospel, *and being administered to by an inspired man in the flesh*, must have it hereafter before they can be finally judged."¹ Significantly, the answer given by the Prophet marks his first known statement concerning the doctrine of vicarious work for the dead. However, it was not until more than two years later that the principle was put into practice.

On August 10, 1840, Seymour Brunson, a devoted friend of Joseph Smith and a member of the Nauvoo high council, died.² Five days later, on August 15, Joseph Smith preached the funeral sermon for Brunson, during which time he elucidated the ordinance of baptism for the dead.³ Unfortunately, no contemporary account of the Prophet's discourse exists. However, Simon Baker was present at the funeral services and later stated that during the meeting the Prophet read extensively from 1 Corinthians 15, then noted a particular widow in the congregation whose son had died without baptism. After referring to the statement Jesus made to Nicodemus that a man must be born of the water and of the spirit, Baker recalled the Prophet saying that the Saints "could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God."⁴

Baker's account of what Joseph Smith preached on the occasion of Brunson's funeral is consistent with a statement by Joseph Smith in a letter dated October 19, 1840, addressed to the members of the Twelve, most of whom were serving in Great Britain. In the letter he cites 1 Corinthians 15:29, while noting that he spoke about the verse in his remarks at Brunson's funeral, then briefly expounds on the subject:

I presume the doctrine of "baptism for the dead," has ere this reached your ears, and may have raised some inquiries in your minds, respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject, but aside from knowledge independent of the Bible, I would say that it was certainly practiced by the Ancient Churches, and St. Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same, and says "else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" I first mentioned the



View of the Mississippi River, where many of the first baptisms for the dead were performed.
(Courtesy of George Edward Anderson.)

doctrine in public, when preaching the funeral sermon of brother Seymour Brunson, and have since then given general instructions to the Church on the subject. The Saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, who they believe would have embraced the gospel, if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the gospel in the Spirit, through the instrumentality of those who have been commissioned to preach to them while in prison. Without enlarging on the subject, you will undoubtedly see its consistency and reasonableness and it presents the Gospel of Christ in probably a more enlarged scale than some have imagined it. But as the performance of this rite is more particularly confined to this place, it will not be necessary to enter into particulars, at the same time I always feel glad to give all the information in my power, but my space will not allow me to do it.⁵

While it is not known precisely when the first proxy baptism or baptisms were performed, the first known documented baptism for the dead took place on Sunday, September 13, 1840. On that occasion Jane Neyman requested that Harvey Olmstead baptize her in behalf of her deceased son, Cyrus Livingston Neyman. Jane Neyman may have

been the widow who had lost her son that Joseph Smith referred to in his August 15 sermon as given by Simon Baker in his statement. If this is the case, it helps explain why Jane Neyman was privileged to be the first person to be baptized for the dead. Vienna Jacques witnessed the proxy baptism by riding into the Mississippi River on horseback to hear and observe the ordinance. A short while later, upon learning the words Olmstead used in performing the baptism, Joseph Smith gave his approval.⁶

In the early 1840s, Nauvoo had four landing sites on the Mississippi River—the Upper Stone House Landing, the Kimball Wharf, the Lower Stone House Landing, and the Main Street Dock near Joseph Smith's Homestead and later the Nauvoo House. Each of these locations likely would have provided a suitable place for baptisms to be performed, although the ordinance was conducted at any number of locations near the riverbank. Traditionally, the Main Street Landing has been the site generally believed to be where baptisms, both for the living and the dead, were performed most frequently.⁷

Alvin Smith, Joseph Smith's older brother who died in November 1823, may have been one of the first deceased persons to have his proxy baptismal work performed. Lucy Mack Smith recalled that just before her husband's death, Joseph told his father "that it was . . . the privilege of the Saints to be baptized for the dead," whereupon Joseph Sr. requested that "Joseph be baptized for Alvin immediately."⁸ Significantly, Joseph Sr. died on September 14, 1840, less than a month after the Prophet first taught the doctrine of baptism for the dead, and only one day after the reported date that Jane Neyman was baptized in behalf of her deceased son. If Joseph and the Smith family were true to their father's request that Alvin's baptism be done "immediately," the likelihood exists that it was performed sometime around mid-September. The record containing the early proxy ordinance information indicates that Hyrum acted as proxy (not Joseph, as Father Smith requested), but does not give any date other than the year 1840.⁹ The ordinance was performed for Alvin a second time, again by Hyrum, in 1841, and was probably done after the font was completed, installed, and dedicated in the basement of the temple.¹⁰ A friend and

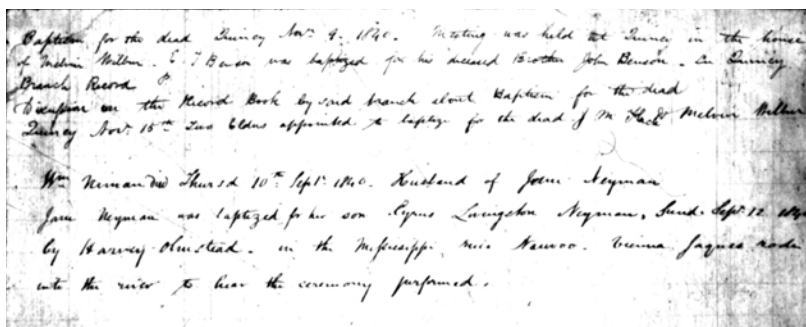
contemporary of the Prophet, Aroet Hale, stated that Joseph Smith instructed the Saints “to have the work done over as quick as the temple was finished, when it could be done more perfect.”¹¹

Developmental Procedures, Practices, and Provisions

The early procedure and practice of baptism for the dead during the Nauvoo years were developmental, not as clearly defined as they are today. In the case of Jane Neyman and her deceased son, for example, a female was baptized in behalf of a male. Second, although a witness was present (Vienna Jacques), the individual was not a priesthood holder. Third, no mention is made of a proxy confirmation following the baptism. Fourth, no “official” baptismal record is known to exist. And finally, the ordinance was performed in the Mississippi River, not in a temple font. In consideration of these irregularities, in 1873 Brigham Young gave the following explanation:

When Joseph received the revelation that we have in our possession concerning the dead, the subject was opened to him, not in full but in part, and he kept on receiving. When he had first received the knowledge by the spirit of revelation how the dead could be officiated for, there are brethren and sisters here, I can see quite a number here who were in Nauvoo, and you recollect that when this doctrine was first revealed, and in hurrying in the administration of baptism for the dead, that sisters were baptized for their male friends, were baptized for their fathers, their grandfathers, their mothers and their grandmothers, &c. I just mention this so that you will come to understanding, that as we knew nothing about this matter at first, the old Saints recollect, there was little by little given, and the subject was made plain, but little was given at once. Consequently, in the first place people were baptized for their friends and no record was kept. Joseph afterwards kept a record, &c. Then women were baptized for men and men for women.¹²

What Brigham Young is saying is that a full understanding of the correct procedures for properly performing the ordinance was not given at first; additional instruction was given as the principle and practice came to be more understood. Yet it appears that the practice of men being baptized for women and women for men



This note was attached to the Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, book A, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. An entry, third line from the bottom reads "Jane Neyman was baptized for her son Cyrus Livingston Neyman, Sund[ay], Sept 12, 1840 by Harvey Olmstead in the Mississippi river Nauvoo. Vienna Jaques rode into the river to hear the ceremony performed." Although the note states that the baptism was performed on September 12, that day was a Saturday, not a Sunday, indicating an incorrect date. Sunday, September 13, 1840, was the correct date. (Courtesy of Family History Library.)

continued until April 1845, at which time Brigham Young, in his capacity as the head of the Church by virtue of his being the senior member of the Twelve, prescribed that the proxies be of the same gender as the persons for whom they were being baptized.¹³ Another example was the need for proper record keeping. Between September 1840, when the first known proxy baptisms were performed, and September 1842, a general proxy baptism record had not been kept. Recognizing this deficiency, Joseph Smith directed that a recorder be present to properly record the ordinance and that an archival record of all the ordinances be maintained in the temple (see D&C 127:5–9; D&C 128:2–9).¹⁴

As indicated, the first proxy baptisms were performed at Nauvoo in the Mississippi River. In the first revelatory instruction concerning baptism for the dead, given on January 19, 1841, five months after the first baptisms for the dead were performed, the Saints were instructed that this practice would be temporary: "For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for the dead—for this ordinance belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me" (D&C 124:29–30; see also vv. 31–34). In essence, the revelation allowed a provision for the performance of

the ordinance outside the temple until a font could be completed and placed in the temple, or until the temple itself was completed.

The Saints enthusiastically embraced the doctrine and practice. Examining the records of baptisms for the dead performed in 1841, M. Guy Bishop calculated that 6,818 baptisms for the dead were performed.¹⁵ Bishop also notes that in 1841 the most active Latter-day Saint proxy was Nehemiah Brush, who was baptized for more than one hundred deceased relatives and friends. The most baptized woman was Sarah M. Cleveland, who performed the saving ordinance for forty deceased persons.¹⁶

Several individuals recorded their experiences and first impressions of participating in the new practice. “I saw the Elders baptizing for the dead in the Mississippi River,” Robert Horne wrote. “This was something new to me and the beauty of this great principle dawned upon me. I had never heard of such a doctrine then. Orson Pratt was baptizing. Brother Joseph stood on the banks.”¹⁷ Aroet Hale remembered Joseph Smith performing more than two hundred baptisms in the Mississippi River. “Then the apostles and other elders went into the river and continued the same ordinance. Hundreds were baptized there.”¹⁸ Wilford Woodruff wrote that Joseph Smith “went into the Mississippi River, and so did I, as well as others, and we each baptized a hundred for the dead.”¹⁹ Interestingly, while the Prophet was known to have officiated in performing the ordinance, there is no record that he ever participated as a proxy.²⁰

Baptism for the Dead Practiced Outside Nauvoo

An often overlooked part of Doctrine & Covenants section 124 is a provision in the revelation that temporarily allowed the Saints living outside Nauvoo to perform the ordinance. The revelation reads “And after this time [after the Saints had a sufficient time to complete a place in the temple to perform baptisms], your baptisms for the dead, *by those who are scattered abroad*, are not acceptable unto me, saith the Lord. For it is ordained that in Zion, and in her stakes, and in Jerusalem, those places which I have appointed for refuge, shall be the places for your baptisms for the dead” (D&C 124:35–36; emphasis added).

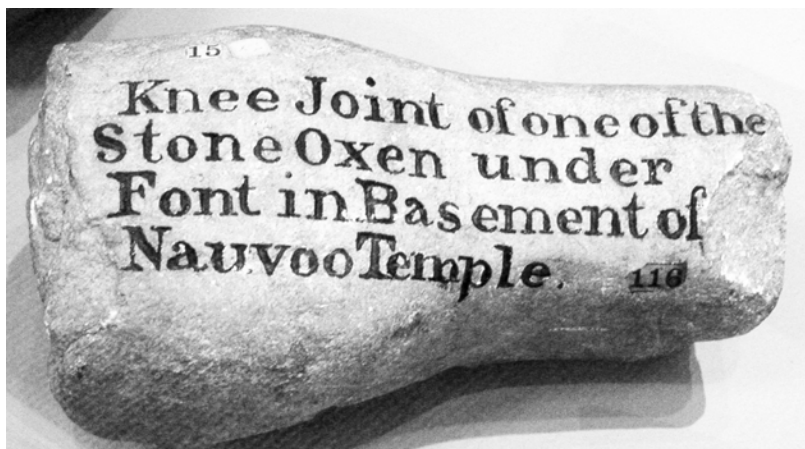
Historical sources reveal that baptisms for the dead were indeed performed by Latter-day Saints living in areas other than Nauvoo. On November 9, 1840, a meeting was held at the home of Melvin Wilbur in Quincy in Adams County, Illinois. Somewhere near the Wilbur property, perhaps in the Mississippi River, Ezra T. Benson was baptized for his deceased brother, John Benson.²¹ At this same time, members of the Lima/Yelrome Branch, situated just a few miles north of Quincy, were also performing the ordinance. On November 7, 1840, John Murdock, Gardner Snow, Edmund Durfee, Albert Miner, Levi Osgood, Joseph Allen, Lane Durfee, Lydia B. English, and Sarah Weston “performed baptisms for their dead friends.” One week later, on November 14, the ordinance was attended to again by six branch members.²² The fact that there is evidence showing Latter-day Saints performing baptisms for the dead in these outlying areas suggests that Mormons in other settlement communities, such as Montrose, Nashville, Ramus, LaHarpe, and Plymouth, may have also engaged in the practice.

Significantly, baptism for the dead was also briefly practiced in Kirtland, Ohio. In fact, it was probably due to problems associated with the leadership of the Church in Kirtland that the practice of baptism for the dead outside the temple was cut short. During the Church’s October 1840 general conference held in Nauvoo, Almon W. Babbitt was appointed to preside as stake president over approximately three to four hundred Latter-day Saints still residing in Kirtland.²³ At the time of the conference, it had only been six weeks since Joseph Smith first publically revealed the doctrine of baptism for the dead, and during one of the sessions the Prophet delivered another major discourse on the subject.²⁴ Clearly, Babbitt knew of the doctrine before leaving Nauvoo and then taught the principle to the Ohio Saints after his arrival. On May 23, 1841, during a conference in Kirtland at which he presided, Babbitt entertained the subject. The minutes of the conference include the following report: “Elder Babbitt delivered a discourse on baptism for the dead, from 1 Peter 4:6, to a very large audience, setting forth that doctrine as compatible with the mercy of God, and grand council of heaven.” W. W. Phelps, the

conference clerk, followed Babbitt and “continued the same subject from 1 Corinthians 15:22, bringing scripture upon scripture to prove the consistency of this doctrine.”²⁵ The conference minutes end with the following entry: “About 25 baptisms took place, the most of which were for the dead.”²⁶ During the years the Church was in Ohio, a small dam was situated across a portion of the east branch of the Chagrin River in the Kirtland Flats area; the baptisms likely took place there.

Evidence that Latter-day Saints indeed practiced baptism for the dead in Kirtland in the early 1840s is also supported by Alfred Holbrook, a nonmember who lived in the Kirtland area. In constructing his memoirs, Holbrook remembered the Saints instituting the practice in Kirtland but observed that the doctrine was rather strange to him, noting that “it seemed to me and others that this was running baptism into the ground.”²⁷

It is not known to what extent baptisms for the dead were performed in Kirtland, but the practice was relatively short-lived. Contrary to the First Presidency’s counsel, Babbitt began preaching and promoting Kirtland, rather than Nauvoo, as the main gathering place. News of Babbitt’s countermanding reached Church leaders in Nauvoo and was likely a primary reason why on October 2, 1841, during a general conference of the Church in Nauvoo, Babbitt was disfellowshipped.²⁸ Then the following day, October 3, the Prophet announced, “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s House. . . . *For thus saith the Lord!*”²⁹ Four weeks later, on October 31, Hyrum Smith, representing the First Presidency, addressed a letter to the Kirtland Saints encouraging them to leave Ohio and move to Nauvoo so that “the House of the Lord and the baptismal font shall be finished,” then added with possible reference to proxy work that “any proceedings of the Saints otherwise than to put forth their hands with their might to do this work, is not according to the will of God.”³⁰ In short, Babbitt’s conduct and the lack of confidence exhibited by Church leaders in his leadership contributed to the cessation of the practice of baptism for the dead outside the temple both in and around Nauvoo as well as Kirtland.³¹



Knee joint of one of the original stone oxen from the Nauvoo Temple, 2002. This artifact is in the collection of the Church History Museum, Salt Lake City, Utah. (Photo by Alexander L. Baugh, courtesy of Church History Museum.)

However, a second and perhaps an even more important contributing factor which led Joseph Smith to no longer allow for river baptisms being performed in behalf of the dead had to do with the confirmation ordinance. Today, the ordinance of baptism, whether for the living or in behalf of the dead, is always accompanied by a second ordinance—confirmation (i.e., confirming an individual a member of the Church and conferring the gift of the Holy Ghost). The one, baptism, must be followed by the other, confirmation. However, there is evidence that during the period when baptisms for the dead were permitted outside the temple, the ordinance was not accompanied by proxy confirmation. A November 21, 1841, journal entry by Wilford Woodruff indicates that he, along with Willard Richards and George A. Smith officiated in the proxy confirmations for some forty deceased persons in the Nauvoo Temple baptistery. This marked the first known instance that the ordinance of confirmation for the dead was performed.³² Such an explanation helps to understand why many baptisms for the dead performed outside the temple were redone after the temple font was put into use.

The allowance and practice of performing proxy baptisms outside the temple was relatively short-lived, lasting approximately thirteen

and a half months (August 15, 1840, to October 3, 1841). With the announcement that such a practice must cease, the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo moved quickly to comply with Joseph Smith's directive.

Nauvoo Temple Font

At the time of Joseph Smith's October 1841 announcement suspending the practice of proxy baptism outside the temple, Elijah Fordham, a master craftsman, had already been engaged for several months in constructing and carving a large, oval-shaped wooden font to be used as a temporary baptistry until a more permanent stone structure could be made. Within a month after the Prophet's declaration, Fordham completed his work, and the basin-like structure was put into place in the temple's basement. A description of the font is given in the Manuscript History of the Church:

The baptismal Font is situated in the centre of the basement room under the main hall of the temple, it is constructed of pine timber and put together of staves tongued and grooved, oval shaped 16 feet long, east and West and 12 feet wide; 7 feet High from the foundation, the Basin 4 feet deep, the moulding of the cap and base are formed of beautiful carved work in antique style. The sides are finished with pannel work. A flight of Stairs on the North and South sides leading up and down into the bason Guarded by side railing. The font stands upon 12 oxen 4 on each side, and 2 at each end, their heads shoulders and fore legs projecting out from under the font they are carved out of pine plank, glued together and copied after the most beautiful five year old steer that could be found in the country and they are an excellent striking likeness of the original, the Horns, were Geometrically formed after the most perfect horns that could be procured, the oxen and ornamental mouldings of the Font were carved by Elder Elijah Fordham from the city of New York which occupied eight months of time. The font was enclosed by a temporary frame building sided up with split oak clap boards with a roof of the same material, and was so low that the timbers of the first storey were laid above it, the water was supplied from a well 30 feet deep in the east end of the basement.

This font was built for the Baptisms for the dead until the Temple should be finished when a more durable one will supply its place.³³

Although temple construction was still in the beginning stages, the placement of a font within the building proper was enough to satisfy the Prophet Joseph Smith's strict directive that the ordinance must "be attended to in the Lord's house." As evidence of Joseph Smith's approval, on November 8, 1841, he officially dedicated the baptismal font. William Clayton, the Prophet's secretary, wrote, "On the 8th day of November 1841 the font was dedicated by president Joseph Smith at 5 o'clock in the evening." Further, "After [the] dedication brother Reuben McBride was the first person baptized under the direction of the president. He was baptized by President B. Young."³⁴ At the time, Reuben McBride resided in Kirtland, Ohio, but was in Nauvoo on Church business.³⁵ Knowing that McBride would shortly return to Ohio (probably within a matter of a few days) and thereafter no longer be able to have the opportunity to perform proxy ordinances, Joseph Smith granted him the privilege of being the first person to be baptized for the dead in the new baptistry.³⁶

A portion of a significant and interesting letter, written by Reuben McBride from Fillmore, Utah, in 1886, to his sister, Martha McBride (Knight, Kimball),³⁷ sheds additional light concerning the first proxy temple baptisms:



Original well located in the east end of the original Nauvoo Temple, 1979. During the excavations conducted at the temple site in the late 1960s, archaeologists discovered the well, which was used to draw water for the baptismal font. (Photo by Alexander L. Baugh.)

Fillmore Nov 1st [18]86

Dear Sister Martha: I Received your kind and welcome letter Some time ago, but circumstances has been Such that hindered me till now the Subject you wrote uppon is one of the greatest importance the first Work that I done for our Dead Relitives was done in Nauvoo I think in the fall of [18]42 but you know for you was there.³⁸ Bro. Joseph Smith made a bee³⁹ and had the Font in the Temple filled with water from the Wells.⁴⁰ He Said he, wished me to be Baptised in the Font before I went back to Ohio. we met. Joseph, Spoke and the Font Dedicated and he Joseph Said Blessed is the first, man Baptised in this Font. Brigham Young Baptised me. I was Baptised Six times. Joseph took off his mantle and Wrapt it around me took me in his Carrage and, drove to your House He talked all the way goeing to your House and [end of page 1; pages 2 and 3 are missing].⁴¹

Some confusion exists regarding precisely when the first proxy baptisms in the Nauvoo Temple were actually performed. For example, Wilford Woodruff recorded the following entry in his journal under the date of November 21, 1841:

21st Sunday I met in Council with the Twelve at Elder B. Youngs. Then attended the general Assembly near the Temple. Heard a discours by Elder Taylor followed by President Hiram Smith. I then met the Twelve at B. Youngs untill 4 o'clock at which time we repaired to the Baptismal Font in the Temple for the purpose of Baptizing for the dead, for the remision of Sins & for healing. It was truly an interesting seene. It was the first FONT erected for this glorious purpose in this last dispensation. It was dedicated By President Joseph Smith & the Twelve for Baptizing for the Dead &c & *this was the first time the font had been prepared for the reception of candidates.*

On the sabbath a large Congregation assembled. Elders B Young and H C Kimball & J Taylor went forward & Baptized about 40 persons. Elder W Richards, G. A. Smith & myself assisted in confirming them.⁴²

Significantly, an entry in the Manuscript History of the Church under the date of November 21, 1841, supports President Woodruff's claims: "The Twelve met in Council at President [Brigham] Young's; and at 4 o'clock repaired to the Baptismal font in the basement of the

Temple. Elders Brigham Young Heber C. Kimball, and John Taylor, baptized about 40 persons; for the dead. Elders Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, and Geo. A. Smith confirming[.] These were the first baptisms for the dead in the font.”⁴³

How can Wilford Woodruff’s journal entry and the statement in the Manuscript History of the Church, both of which indicate that the first proxy baptisms performed in the Nauvoo Temple were performed on November 21, 1841, be reconciled with William Clayton’s statement and Reuben McBride’s letter, both cited above, that the first proxy baptisms were actually done nearly two weeks earlier, on November 8, 1841? Quite simply, the November service was a *private*, informal function and attended by only a few people—the Prophet, Brigham Young, William Clayton, Reuben McBride, and perhaps a few others. The font was in place, and since McBride was in Nauvoo and about to return to Kirtland, Joseph Smith used the occasion to dedicate the font and let McBride have the opportunity to be baptized. No record of McBride’s proxy work appears in the Nauvoo Temple baptism registry, suggesting that this occasion was an informal and perhaps even somewhat spontaneous ceremony.⁴⁴ The baptismal service held nearly two weeks later, however, was the first *public* or *general* ceremony involving a number of Latter-day Saint leaders and members. Woodruff did not leave record of the dedication of the font and of McBride’s proxy baptisms because Woodruff was simply unaware of the earlier meeting and service and therefore assumed that the November 21 date was the first baptismal service of its kind. The omission or error in the Prophet’s Manuscript History resulted from Church historians who, years later, failed to properly incorporate into the Prophet’s history Clayton’s record of McBride’s November 8, 1841, proxy baptisms, and instead referred to Woodruff’s November 21 entry as the date the first proxy baptisms occurred.⁴⁵

Baptisms for the dead continued to be performed in the Nauvoo Temple’s wooden font until late 1845 or early 1846, when it was replaced with a stone font.⁴⁶

Exceptions

Although the Saints were instructed not to perform proxy baptisms outside the temple after the October 1841 conference, a few recorded instances have been found which show exceptions to the policy. Charlotte Haven, a nonmember who lived in Nauvoo in 1842 to 1843, wrote a letter to her family in the East in which she described a baptismal service she observed being performed in behalf of the dead. The letter is dated May 2, 1843:

Last Sunday morning . . . was a balmy spring day, so we took a bee-line for the river, down the street north of our house. Arriving there we rested a while on a log, watching the thin sheets of ice as they slowly came down and floated by. Then we followed the bank toward town, and rounding a little point covered with willows and cottonwoods, we spied quite a crowd of people, and soon perceived there was a baptism. Two elders stood knee-deep in the ice cold water, and immersed one another as fast as they could come down the bank. We soon observed that some of them went in and were plunged several times. We were told that they were baptized for the dead who had not had an opportunity of adopting the doctrines of the Latter Day Saints. So these poor mortals in ice-cold water were releasing their ancestors and relatives from purgatory! We drew a little nearer and heard several names repeated by the elders as the victims were douched, and you can imagine our surprise when the name George Washington was called. So after these fifty years he is out of purgatory and on his way to the “celestial” heaven! It was enough and we continued our walk homeward.⁴⁷

Wilford Woodruff recorded an instance when he and others performed baptisms for the dead outside the temple after Joseph Smith’s October 1841 injunction banning the practice. On August 26, 1844, he recorded in his journal that he and his wife Phebe “went to the River in company with Mrs. Woodruff to be baptized for some our dead friends.” He continued, “I was baptized for five of my friends under hands of G. A. Smith & confirmed under the hands of Elder Richards.” He then notes the names for whom he was baptized, each of whom was a relative. Phebe was also baptized for five deceased persons, members of her family.⁴⁸ Even though the temple’s wooden font was in place in November 1841, and the stone font in use in late



Many Saints performed baptisms for the dead in the Salt Lake City Endowment House until the St. George Temple was dedicated in 1877. (Courtesy of Church History Library.)

1845 or early 1846, ongoing temple construction may have prohibited use of the baptistry at times, which necessitated that proxy baptisms be performed elsewhere.

During the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith frequently addressed the Saints regarding the importance of providing the sacred saving ordinances, particularly baptism and confirmation, in behalf of the dead.⁴⁹ Perhaps his most prodigious teachings on the subject appeared in a September 6, 1842, letter to the Saints in which he emphasized the imperative that those who have received the restored gospel in mortality have a sacred responsibility to perform the saving ordinances in behalf of the dead. “Let me assure you,” he wrote, “that these principles in relation to the dead and the living . . . cannot be lightly passed over. . . . For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation . . . [because] they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we [meaning the living] without our dead be made perfect” (D&C 128:15; emphasis added).

Post-Nauvoo Baptisms and Confirmations for the Dead

Following the Nauvoo exodus, with the exception of a few documented instances, baptism and confirmation for the dead were not practiced again until 1867. The first of these known to have occurred took place on April 4, 1848. While in Iowa, just before his return trip to the Salt Lake Valley, Wilford Woodruff performed nine baptisms for deceased persons in the Missouri River, followed by four confirmations.⁵⁰ On August 21, 1855, Margaret E. Moffatt was baptized and confirmed by Ezra Taft Benson for Lyrena Evans Moffatt in City Creek in Salt Lake City. Two years later, on October 23, 1857, Nancy Kent was baptized for Nabby Howe and Fanny Smith was baptized for Nabby Young, with John and Joseph Young officiating.⁵¹ These two baptisms took place in the baptismal font affixed to the Endowment House in Salt Lake City.⁵²

Beginning in 1867, Church leaders once again allowed members to perform baptisms for the dead in the Endowment House font. This practice continued for a period of nine years (1867–76) until the completion and dedication of the St. George Temple in 1877. One example of this is the case of Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. On August 29, 1870, Harris, who had been living in Kirtland, Ohio, arrived in Utah. During the first week of September he met with several Church leaders, who instructed him concerning some of the doctrines that had been revealed since his disaffection from the Church in late 1837, including the principle of baptism for the dead. Following his own rebaptism by Edward Stevenson and reconfirmation by Orson Pratt, “he returned into the font and was baptized for several of his dead friends—fathers, grandfathers, etc., . . . [and] his sister also was baptized for the female relatives, and they were confirmed for and in behalf of those whom they were baptized for, . . . Jos. F. Smith being mouth.”⁵³

With the completion of the St. George Temple in 1877, all the ordinances performed in behalf of the dead—baptism, confirmation,

washing and anointing, priesthood ordination, endowment, and sealing—could be administered in a temple. Thereafter, the practice of performing temple ordinances, including baptism and confirmation for the dead outside the temple, came to a permanent end.

Conclusion

The doctrines and principles associated with the LDS practice of baptism in behalf of the dead provide a reasonable and logical answer to the age-old question held by Christians regarding what will become of those who die without a sufficient knowledge of Jesus Christ and his gospel. The answer is simple and straightforward: because the saving ordinances can be performed in behalf of the dead, they too can qualify to be heirs of the kingdom of God. It is one of the most profound and significant principles instituted and taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Furthermore, the introduction of proxy baptism for the dead (including confirmation) in Nauvoo also inaugurated the beginning of modern-day temple work by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁵⁴ For those who have embraced the restored gospel, the doctrines and practices associated with the redemption of the dead, taught nowhere else by any other Christian church or society, represent yet another witness of Joseph Smith's divine prophetic calling.

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Notes

1. *Elders' Journal of The Church of the Latter Day Saints* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 43; emphasis added.

2. *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 11 (September 1840): 176; see also Manuscript History of the Church, August 19, 1840, vol. C-1, 1089, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as CHL). See also Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd. ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:179 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*); and Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited as Journal History), August 10, 1840, CHL. Seymour Brunson was baptized in Ohio in January 1831. He played an active role as captain in the Caldwell County militia during the

1838 Mormon conflict in Missouri. At the time of his death, he was a devoted friend of Joseph Smith and a member of the Nauvoo high council. See “A Short Sketch of Seymour Brunson, Sr.,” *Nauvoo Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 3–5.

3. The date of August 15, 1840, is usually given as the date for Seymour Brunson’s funeral. See *Journal History*, August 15, 1840. Significantly, no mention of the funeral service is mentioned in the *Manuscript History of the Church*.

4. Simon Baker, statement, in *Journal History*, August 15, 1840; also cited in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 49n1.

5. Joseph Smith to the Twelve, October 19, 1840, *Manuscript History of the Church*, vol. C–1, 1118; also in *History of the Church*, 4:231.

6. See Jane Neyman and Vienna Jacques, statement, November 29, 1854, in *Journal History*, August 15, 1840. The *Journal History* gives the name spelling N-e-y-m-o-n. A discrepancy exists regarding the actual date when the first baptism for the dead was performed. A note in the *Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead*, Book A, indicates the baptism took place on Sunday, September 12, 1840. See *Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead*, Book A, attached note, microfilm no. 183,376, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, microfilm copy, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. However, this appears to be an error since September 12, 1840, was a Saturday, not a Sunday. Therefore it can be concluded that the correct date was Sunday, September 13, 1840. For a brief discussion of the early practice of baptism for the dead in Nauvoo, see Susan Easton Black, “A Voice of Gladness,” *Ensign*, February 2004, 34–39.

7. See LaMar C. Berrett, Keith W. Perkins, and Donald Q. Cannon, *Sacred Places, Ohio and Illinois: A Comprehensive Guide to Early LDS Historical Sites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 104–5, 115–17, 133–34, 195–96.

8. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 714.

9. *Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead*, book A, 145.

10. *Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead*, book A, 149.

11. Aroet Lucious Hale, “Diary of Aroet Lucious Hale, 1828–1849,” typescript, 8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; spelling and capitalization corrected (hereafter cited as Perry Special Collections). Although the document is titled as a diary, it is actually an autobiography.

12. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1874), 16:165–66.

13. Brigham Young, “Speech,” April 6, 1845, *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 12 (July 1, 1845): 954. Wilford Woodruff later recalled: “When that [baptism for the dead] was first revealed . . . a man would be baptized for both male and female [but] afterward we obtained more light upon the subject and President Young taught the people that

men should attend to those ordinances for the male portion of their dead friends and females for females.” *Journal History*, April 9, 1857.

14. The main reason given by Joseph Smith of the need for a proper record of proxy ordinances centered in his teachings that whatsoever is recorded on earth is recorded in heaven, and whatsoever is not recorded on earth is not recorded in heaven. See D&C 128:8. Another reason for the need of a general Church record of proxy ordinances was to try to ensure that a deceased individual’s proxy work would not be repeated.

15. M. Guy Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’: Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 88–89. Since instructions regarding accurate record keeping were not in place at that time, the 6,818 figure would have been larger.

16. Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’,” 90.

17. “Reminiscences of the Church in Nauvoo,” *Millennial Star* 55, no. 36 (September 4, 1893): 585.

18. Hale, “Diary,” 8.

19. Wilford Woodruff, “The Law of Adoption,” April 8, 1894, general conference address in Brian H. Stuy, ed., *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols. (Burbank, CA; and Woodland Hills, UT: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987–92), 4:71.

20. Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’,” 92.

21. Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, Book A, attached note. See also “A Record of the Branch in Quincy, November 9 and November 15, 1840, CHL; Richard E. Bennett, “‘Quincy—The Home of Our Adoption’: A Study of the Mormons in Quincy, Illinois, 1838–40,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 115; also in Susan Easton Black and Richard E. Bennett, *A City of Refuge: Quincy, Illinois* (Salt Lake City: Millennial Press, 2000), 101; and Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’,” 87–88.

22. “Early Branches (Lima, Adams, Illinois to Mendon Monroe, New York),” *Nauvoo Journal* 3, no. 2 (April 1991): 43; spelling corrected.

23. Manuscript History of the Church, October 3, 1840, vol. C–1, 1103. See also *History of the Church*, 4:204.

24. Manuscript History of the Church, October 4, 1840, vol. C–1, 1104. See also *History of the Church*, 4:206.

25. “Minutes of a Conference, held in Kirtland, Ohio, May 22nd 1841,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 459; also in Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1985), 58.

26. “Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 460; also in Cook and Backman, *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record*, 59.

27. Alfred Holbrook, *Reminiscences of the Happy Life of a Teacher* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing Company, 1885), 223. Holbrook claims that the Mormon

practice of baptism for the dead was introduced and took place in Kirtland while Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were residing there (i.e., before 1838). This is an obvious error, since the practice did not begin until May 1841, more than three years after the Prophet and Rigdon left northeastern Ohio. However, the fact that Holbrook had any knowledge of it whatsoever indicates that he was at least aware that it was practiced by the Saints there.

28. Manuscript History of the Church, October 2, 1841, vol. C-1, 1228. See also *History of the Church*, 4:424.

29. Manuscript History of the Church, October 3, 1841, vol. C-1, 1230. See also *History of the Church*, 4:424. Warren Foote was present on this occasion and reported the following: "A large congregation assembled this forenoon. Joseph Smith preached on the subject of baptism for the dead. Among a great many other things, he said that the Saints could be baptized for any of their dead relatives, or friends, who had not been murderers. Such could not be baptized for. The Lord had other ways of dealing with murderers." Warren Foote, "Autobiography of Warren Foote," 57, typescript, Perry Special Collections.

30. Manuscript History of the Church, October 31, 1841, vol. C-1, 1243. See also *History of the Church*, 4:443-44.

31. For a brief discussion of Kirtland under Babbitt's leadership, see Davis Bitton, "The Waning of Mormon Kirtland," *BYU Studies* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 456-57. Biographical information on Babbitt's life and church involvement is found in Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:284-86; and A. Gary Anderson, "Almon W. Babbitt and the Golden Calf," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1995), 35-54. For a discussion of the baptisms for the dead performed in Kirtland, Ohio, see Alexander L. Baugh, "'For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House': The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 47-58.

32. See Wilford Woodruff's *Journal, 1833-1898*, Typescript, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983-84), 2:138-39.

33. Manuscript History of the Church, November 8, 1841, C-1, addenda 44; original spelling preserved. A slightly different description is given in the *History of the Church*, 4:446-47.

34. William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries and Writings of William Clayton, Private Secretary of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Part 1, The Nauvoo Temple History Journal*, ed. Fred C. Collier (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1990), 11; also cited in James B. Allen, *No Toil or Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 420. It is important to note that the entry in the Manuscript History of the Church under this date has sometimes been interpreted to

suggest that Brigham Young dedicated the font. The entry reads “At five o’clock P.M. I attended the dedication of the Baptismal Font in the Lord’s house. President Brigham Young was Spokesman.” Manuscript History of the Church, November 8, 1841, C-1, addenda, 44; also in *History of the Church*, 4:446. However, Clayton’s entry makes it clear that Joseph Smith dedicated the font; Brigham Young acted as the “spokesman” who baptized Reuben McBride.

35. In May 1841, Reuben McBride was sustained and ordained, along with Hiram Winters, as a counselor in the Kirtland bishopric to Thomas Burdick. See *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458. Four months later, at the October 1841 general conference, a motion was passed giving McBride power of attorney and authorizing him to transact all Church-related business in Kirtland, replacing Oliver Granger, who had died. See *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (October 15, 1841): 579. Upon learning of his new legal responsibilities, McBride apparently traveled from Kirtland to Nauvoo to receive instruction and to be provided with the necessary paperwork. A certificate granting McBride power of attorney was signed on October 28, 1841. See *Millennial Star* 18, no. 47 (November 22, 1856): 741–42.

36. Reuben McBride was baptized on March 4, 1834, in New York, and soon after his conversion he moved to Kirtland, Ohio. When the main body of the Saints left Ohio in 1838, McBride remained in Kirtland, and in 1841, Joseph Smith authorized him to take charge of the temple and other Church properties. He came to Utah in 1850 and eventually settled in Fillmore, Millard County, Utah. He died February 26, 1891. See Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 4:690.

37. Martha McBride Knight Kimball, born March 17, 1805, in Chester, Orange County, New York. She married Vinson Knight, who died in Nauvoo on July 31, 1842. She was married for time to Heber C. Kimball on January 26, 1846, and was sealed to Joseph Smith at the same time. She died on November 20, 1901, in Hooper, Weber County, Utah. See Susan Easton Black, comp., *Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1848*, 50 vols. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 29:925–26.

38. Although McBride states that the first proxy baptisms performed in the Nauvoo Temple were done in the fall of 1842 (he being the first), as indicated in the main text, the correct date is 1841. His statement that his sister Martha was “there” could be interpreted to mean that she was present at the time McBride was baptized in the Nauvoo Temple font. However, later in the letter, he indicates that following the baptism, Joseph Smith drove him to Martha’s house, which suggests that she was not present. It appears that McBride was merely stating that Martha was living in Nauvoo at the time the first temple proxy baptisms were performed (namely, 1841).

39. The “bee” McBride refers to is probably a bucket brigade or a bucket line. He notes that Joseph Smith made a “bee,” meaning that he organized a group of

individuals to form a line and had them pass buckets or pails of water from the well (or wells) to the font in order to fill it.

40. In the Nauvoo Temple archaeological investigations conducted in the 1960s, two wells were discovered in the temple basement area—one situated underneath the west vestibule (identified as Well A) and another situated approximately twenty feet east of the baptismal font (identified as Well B). The east well was the primary water supply for the font. See Virginia S. Huntington and J. C. Huntington, *Rediscovery of the Nauvoo Temple: Report on Archaeological Excavations* (Salt Lake City: Nauvoo Restoration, 1971), 29–32.

41. The original letter is part of the Marion Adaline Belnap Kerr Family Papers Collection in the Church History Library. McBride's capitalization, spelling, and punctuation have been retained. Only page one of what appears to be a four-page letter is cited. Pages two and three are missing. Page 4, written on the backside of page 1, contains family, genealogical, and sealing information. Included with the letter is a duplicate photocopy of page one containing a side inscription, "Courtesy Flora Belnap 1939." At the bottom of the page is the following: "Write as So[o]n as you get this God Bless you Good Bye your Brother [signed] Reuben McBride." The important elements of the letter are that (1) Joseph Smith told Reuben McBride that Joseph wanted him to have the privilege of being the first person baptized in the Nauvoo Temple—the two men met and subsequently went to the temple so the ordinance could be performed; (2) the Prophet spoke and offered a dedicatory prayer; (3) Brigham Young was present and baptized McBride in behalf of six of McBride's deceased relatives; and (4) following the ceremony, Joseph Smith drove McBride to the home of his sister.

42. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 2:138–39; emphasis added.

43. Manuscript History of the Church, November 21, 1841, vol. C–1, addenda 44–45, emphasis added. See also *History of the Church*, 4:454.

44. Reuben McBride's mother, Abigale Mead McBride, and his two brothers, John and Samuel McBride, performed proxy baptisms in Nauvoo, but there is no record of Reuben's proxy work. See Susan Easton Black and Harvey Bischoff Black, *Annotated Record of Baptisms for the Dead, 1840–1845: Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois*, 7 vols. (Provo, UT: Center for Family History and Genealogy, Brigham Young University, 2002), 4:2354–60, 2362–65.

45. For a discussion on the first baptisms performed in the Nauvoo Temple, see Alexander L. Baugh, "'Blessed Is the First Man Baptised in This Font': Reuben McBride, First Proxy to Be Baptized for the Dead in the Nauvoo Temple," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 253–61.

46. The *Times and Seasons* reported in January 1846 that "The Font, standing upon the twelve stone oxen, is about ready." *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 21 (January 20, 1846): 1096. However, Virginia S. and J. C. Harrington, in their

report of the archaeological investigations of the Nauvoo Temple property, give evidence showing the stone font was probably being used in late 1845. See Harrington and Harrington, *Rediscovery of the Nauvoo Temple*, 33. Author Don F. Colvin wrote that the wooden font was removed in July 1845 and that the stone font was in place by late August or early September. See Don F. Colvin, *Nauvoo Temple: A Story of Faith* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2002), 184–85.

47. Charlotte Haven, “A Girl’s Letters from Nauvoo,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 16, no. 96 (December 1890): 629–30.

48. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:455. On this occasion, both Wilford and Phebe were rebaptized for relatives for whom they had previously been baptized on May 29 and August 25, 1842. See Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:177, 204.

49. Between August 1840 and September 1842, Joseph Smith addressed the Saints on the subject of baptism for the dead on at least seven occasions. See Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 37 (August 15, 1840); 38 (October 4, 1840); 71 (May 9, 1841); 77–79 (October 3, 1841); 109–10 (March 27, 1842); 111 (April 7, 1842); and 131 (August 31, 1842). In 1843–44, Joseph Smith addressed the subject on four occasions. See Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 210–11, 213 (June 11, 1843); 333 (March 10, 1844); 362–64 (April 8, 1844); 368, 370–72 (May 12, 1844).

50. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 3:336.

51. Endowment House Baptisms for the Dead, 1867, 1–2, microfilm no. 183,382, LDS Family History Library, copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. The baptism and confirmation information of Lyrena Evans Moffatt, Nabby Howe, and Nabby Young are the first three that appear in the 1867 register.

52. The Endowment House was dedicated on May 5, 1855. The font was dedicated on October 2, 1856. See Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 69. See also A. William Lund, “The Endowment House,” *Improvement Era* 39, no. 4 (April 1936): 213.

53. *Deseret Evening News*, September 5, 1870; also in Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris,” *Millennial Star* 44, no. 6 (February 6, 1882): 87. Concerning the proxy baptisms done in the Endowment House, Brigham Young said in 1873: “We can, at the present time, go into the Endowment House and be baptized for the dead, receive our washings and anointing, etc., for there we have a font that has been erected, dedicated expressly for baptizing people for the remission of sins, for their health and for their dead friends.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:186.

54. Besides baptism and confirmation, the ordinances of washing and anointing, priesthood ordination (for men), the endowment, and marriage sealing (for both the living and the dead) were also prescribed.