

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 128

Another letter from Smith, following up on the statement in D&C 127:10, commenting at length on the doctrine of baptism for the dead with a thorough explanation of the theology backing the practice. Unlike the preceding letter, this letter contains no quotations of the Lord, but is instead a lengthy commentary on a specific subject.

1 AS I stated to you in my letter before I left my place, that I would write to you from time to time and give you information in relation to many subjects, I now resume the subject of the baptism for the dead, as that subject seems to occupy my mind, and press itself upon my feelings the strongest, since I have been pursued by my enemies.

v1 Introduction.

2 I wrote a few words of revelation to you concerning a recorder. I have had a few additional views in relation to this matter, which I now certify. That is, it was declared in my former letter that there should be a recorder, who should be eye-witness, and also to hear with his ears, that he might make a record of a truth before the Lord. 3 Now, in relation to this matter it would be very difficult for one recorder to be present at all times, and to do all the business. To obviate this difficulty, there can be a recorder appointed in each ward of the city, who is well qualified for taking accurate minutes; and let him be very particular and precise in taking the whole proceedings, certifying in his record that he saw with his eyes, and heard with his ears, giving the date, and names, and so forth, and the history of the whole transaction; naming also some three individuals that are present, if there be any present, who can at any time when called upon certify to the same, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 4 Then, let there be a general recorder, to whom these other records can be handed, being attended with certificates over their own signatures, certifying that the record they have made is true. Then the general church recorder can enter the record on the general church book, with the certificates and all the attending witnesses, with his own statement that he verily believes the above statement and records to be true, from his knowledge of the general character and appointment of those men by the church. And when this is done on the general church book, the record shall be just as holy, and shall answer the ordinance just the same as if he had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears, and made a record of the same on the general church book.

v2-4 They are to institute local and general recorders. The local recorder is to document all he witnesses as well as the names of three witnesses. These local recorders are to report to the general recorder who will collate all records into a single record.

5 You may think this order of things to be very particular; but let me tell you that it is only to answer the will of God, by conforming to the ordinance and preparation that the Lord ordained and prepared before the foundation of the world, for the salvation of the dead who should die without a knowledge of the gospel. 6 And further, I want you to remember that John the Revelator was contemplating this very subject in relation to the dead, when he declared, as you will find recorded in Revelation 20:12--*And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.* 7 You will discover in this quotation that the books were opened; and another book was opened, which was the book of life; but the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works; consequently, the books spoken of must be the books which contained the record of their works, and refer to the records which are kept on the earth. And the book which was the book of life is the record which is kept in heaven; the principle agreeing precisely with the doctrine which is commanded you in the revelation contained in the letter which I wrote to you previous to my leaving my place--that in all your recordings it may be recorded in heaven.

v5-7 The importance of record keeping is explained. The statements here flesh out what is alluded to in D&C 127:7, namely that there are parallel heavenly and earthly records kept, out of which we are judged.

8 Now, the nature of this ordinance consists in the power of the priesthood, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, wherein it is granted that whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Or, in other words, taking a different view of the translation, whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and whatsoever you do not record on earth shall not be recorded in heaven; for out of the books shall your dead be judged, according to their own works, whether they themselves have attended to the ordinances in their own propria persona, or by the means of their own agents, according to the ordinance which God has prepared for their salvation from before the foundation of the world, according to the records which they

have kept concerning their dead. 9 It may seem to some to be a very bold doctrine that we talk of--a power which records or binds on earth and binds in heaven. Nevertheless, in all ages of the world, whenever the Lord has given a dispensation of the priesthood to any man by actual revelation, or any set of men, this power has always been given. Hence, whatsoever those men did in authority, in the name of the Lord, and did it truly and faithfully, and kept a proper and faithful record of the same, it became a law on earth and in heaven, and could not be annulled, according to the decrees of the great Jehovah. This is a faithful saying. Who can hear it? 10 And again, for the precedent, Matthew 16:18, 19: *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* 11 Now the great and grand secret of the whole matter, and the summum bonum of the whole subject that is lying before us, consists in obtaining the powers of the Holy Priesthood. For him to whom these keys are given there is no difficulty in obtaining a knowledge of facts in relation to the salvation of the children of men, both as well for the dead as for the living.

v8-11 These verses comment on the Priesthood and the binding of earthly ordinances by it such that Heaven takes heed.

12 Herein is glory and honor, and immortality and eternal life--The ordinance of baptism by water, to be immersed therein in order to answer to the likeness of the dead, that one principle might accord with the other; to be immersed in the water and come forth out of the water is in the likeness of the resurrection of the dead in coming forth out of their graves; hence, this ordinance was instituted to form a relationship with the ordinance of baptism for the dead, being in likeness of the dead. 13 Consequently, the baptismal font was instituted as a similitude of the grave, and was commanded to be in a place underneath where the living are wont to assemble, to show forth the living and the dead, and that all things may have their likeness, and that they may accord one with another--that which is earthly conforming to that which is heavenly, as Paul hath declared, 1 Corinthians 15:46, 47, and 48: 14 *Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy; and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly.* And as are the records on the earth in relation to your dead, which are truly made out, so also are the records in heaven. This, therefore, is the sealing and binding power, and, in one sense of the word,

the keys of the kingdom, which consist in the key of knowledge.

v12-14 Smith draws parallels between things earthly and things heavenly. In v. 12-13 he uses the symbolism of baptism to represent resurrection from the grave, to state that the subject of vicarious baptism for the dead was an implicit part of the symbolism the whole time. Smith then presents a proof text from 1 Cor. to substantiate symbolism that we take for granted today, but remember that at the time of the writing the doctrine was novel. Smith then goes on to say that this parallel of earthly and heavenly things is also present in the record keeping.

15 And now my dearly beloved brethren and sisters, let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining to our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers--that they without us cannot be made perfect--neither can we without our dead be made perfect.

16 And now, in relation to the baptism for the dead, I will give you another quotation of Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:29: *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?* 17 And again, in connection with this quotation I will give you a quotation from one of the prophets, who had his eye fixed on the restoration of the priesthood, the glories to be revealed in the last days, and in an especial manner this most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel, namely, the baptism for the dead; for Malachi says, last chapter, verses 5th and 6th: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.* 18 I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other--and behold what is that subject?

It is the baptism for the dead. For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. Neither can they nor we be made perfect without those who have died in the gospel also; for it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time. And not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the

foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times.

v15-18 Here, the importance of this principle is emphasized and discussed in an eschatological setting using additional proof texts from Paul and the famous Malachi quotation (following the reading forwarded in D&C 2), which he expounds upon in considerable detail in v. 18.

19 Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that bring glad tidings of good things, and that say unto Zion: Behold, thy God reigneth! As the dews of Carmel, so shall the knowledge of God descend upon them!

20 And again, what do we hear? Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets--the book to be revealed. A voice of the Lord in the wilderness of Fayette, Seneca county, declaring the three witnesses to bear record of the book! The voice of Michael on the banks of the Susquehanna, detecting the devil when he appeared as an angel of light! The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times! 21 And again, the voice of God in the chamber of old Father Whitmer, in Fayette, Seneca county, and at sundry times, and in divers places through all the travels and tribulations of this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints! And the voice of Michael, the archangel; the voice of Gabriel, and of Raphael, and of divers angels, from Michael or Adam down to the present time, all declaring their dispensation, their rights, their keys, their honors, their majesty and glory, and the power of their priesthood; giving line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little; giving us consolation by holding forth that which is to come, confirming our hope!

22 Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory! Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free. 23 Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your

Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy! And let the sun, moon, and the morning stars sing together, and let all the sons of God shout for joy! And let the eternal creations declare his name forever and ever! And again I say, how glorious is the voice we hear from heaven, proclaiming in our ears, glory, and salvation, and honor, and immortality, and eternal life; kingdoms, principalities, and powers!

v19-23 Smith exults at the revelation of this great doctrine given its implications. The section is composed of various eschatological events couched in the language of the Psalmist.

24 Behold, the great day of the Lord is at hand; and who can abide the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap; and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation.

v24 Smith admonishes them to continue in their efforts to build the Temple, cp. D&C 127:4.

25 Brethren, I have many things to say to you on the subject; but shall now close for the present, and continue the subject another time. I am, as ever, your humble servant and never deviating friend,

Joseph Smith

v25 Closing statement.

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 128

If there were any specific revelatory events addressing the practice or doctrine of vicarious ordinance work on behalf of the dead, there is nothing to suggest that is the case. Rather, it appears Smith came to understand it by implication of various other events (e.g., D&C 110), and likely through his translation of the Bible.

This sections was first published in Times and Seasons, volume 3, number 23, pages 934-936, dated October 1, 1842. It was published in the Deseret News, volume 5, number 43, page 337, dated January 2, 1856. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 20, number 1, pages 5-8, dated January 2, 1858. It was first published in the Doctrine and Covenants in the 1844 edition, pages 420-430.

Excerpt from Joseph Smith Letterbook 2

I presume the doctrine "of baptism for the dead" has ere this reached your ears and may have raised some inquiries in your mind, respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject, but aside from knowledge independant of the bible, I would say that it was certainly practiced by the Ancient Churches, and St Paul endeavours to prove the doctrine of the ressurection from the same, and says, "else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead" &c &c. I first mentioned the 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 privelege 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 immagined it. But as the performance of this right rite is more particularly confined to this place, it will not be necessary to enter into particulars, at the same time I allways feel glad to give all the information in my power, but my space will not allow me to do it ([Joseph Smith, Jr., Letterbook 2, page 196](#))

Excerpt from Key to the Science of Theology

In the world of spirits there are Apostles, Prophets, Elders, and members of the Church of the Saints, holding keys of Priesthood, and power to teach, comfort, instruct, and proclaim the Gospel to their fellow spirits, after the pattern of Jesus Christ.

In the same world there are also the spirits of Catholics and Protestants of every sect, who have all need to be taught and to come to the knowledge of the true unchangeable Gospel in its fullness and simplicity, that they may be judged the same as if they had been privileged with the same in the flesh. [1 Peter 4:6.]

There is also the Jew, the Mahomedan, the infidel, who did not believe in Christ while in the flesh. All these must be taught, must come to the knowledge of the crucified and risen Redeemer, and hear the glad tidings of the Gospel.

There are also all the varieties of the heathen spirits; the noble and refined philosopher, poet, patriot or statesmen of Rome or Greece, the enlightened Socrates and Plato, and their like, together with every grade of spirits down to the most uncultivated of the savage world.

All these must be taught, enlightened, and must bow the knee to the eternal King, for the decree hath gone forth that unto Him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. [Sec. 76:110-11; 88:104.]

O, what a field of labor, of benevolence, of missionary enterprise now opens to the Apostles and Elders of the Church of the Saints! As this field opens they will begin to realize more fully the extent of their divine mission, and the meaning of the great command to "preach the gospel to every creature." [Mark 16:15.]

In this vast field of labor the Priesthood are, in a great measure, occupied during their sojourn in the world of spirits, while awaiting the resurrection of the body, and at the same time they themselves are edified, improved and greatly advanced and matured in the science of divine Theology. (Parley P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, pages 127-28)

Excerpt from Journal of Discourses

Taking all these passages of Scripture together [Daniel 7:9-13; Revelation 20], we may look for a general reckoning with

all the inhabitants of this earth, both the righteous and the wicked. How long this day, called the day of judgment, will be, is not revealed. It may be vastly longer than what many suppose. It seems to me that unless there were a great number engaged in judging the dead, it would require a long period of time; for, for one being to personally investigate all the idle thoughts and words of the children of men from the days of Adam down until that time [Mosiah 4:30], it would require a great many millions of years, and therefore I come to another conclusion, namely, that God has his agents, and that through those agents the dead will be judged. (Orson Pratt, Journal of Discourses, volume 17, page 182)

Excerpt from Millennial Star

When I returned from England in 1841 and heard Joseph Smith give this revelation, that we had power to redeem our dead, one of the first things I thought was, "I have a mother in the spirit world." My father was in the flesh. I baptized and ordained him and brought him up to Zion where he is buried. But I never saw my mother to know her. She died when I was an infant. I had power to seal my mother to my father. Was not that a satisfaction? It was to me. I have gone to work with the assistance of my friends and redeemed my father's and my mother's house. When I inquired of the Lord how I could redeem my dead, while I was in St. George, not having any of my family there, the Lord told me to call upon the Saints in St. George and let them officiate for me in that temple, and it should be acceptable unto Him.... This is a revelation to us. We can help one another in these matters, if we have not relatives sufficient to carry this on, and it will be acceptable unto the Lord. (Wilford Woodruff, Millennial Star, volume 56, page 341)

Excerpt from Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith

See Historical Note for section 127. Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal the difficulties that the Prophet was encountering at the time he authored sections 127 and 128. Although the "spirit of persecution" prevailed, said Elder Woodruff, "yet the Lord is with him."

President Joseph Smith has been much persecuted of late by being hunted & sought for by Sheriffs & officers from Missouri & Illinois by the orders of

Governors Reynolds & Carlin under pretense of taking him to Missouri to try him for being accessory to the shooting of ex Gov Bogg but it is no more or less than the spirit of persecution But though Joseph has been deprived of the privilege of appearing openly & deprived of the society of his own family Because Sheriffs are hunting him to destroy him without cause Yet the Lord is with him as he was upon the Isle of Patmos with John. Joseph has presented the Church of late with some glorious principles from the Lord concerning Baptism for the dead & other interesting subjects, he has appeared occasionally in the midst of the Saints which has been a great comfort to the Saints.

(Lyndon W. Cook, Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith)

Copyright © 2021 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.