

Sections 127

In May 1838 in the Church's *Elders' Journal*, Joseph published questions he was frequently asked, including some provocative ones like "Do Mormons baptize in the name of Jo Smith?"¹ In July he published the answers, including some snarky ones like, "No, but if they did, it would be as valid as the baptism administered by the sectarian priests."²

Maybe the most important Q&A was this one:

If the Mormon doctrine is true what has become of all those who had died since the days of the apostles. Answer: 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 finally be judged.

Two years later, on a Nauvoo summer day in 1840, at the funeral of Seymour Brunson, Joseph Smith had more to say about that. He read most of 1 Corinthians 15, in which Paul refers to the early Christian practice of being baptized for the dead in anticipation of the resurrection "and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy." Noticing Jane Neyman in the congregation, whose teenage son Cyrus had died without baptism, Joseph gave her the good news "that people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of

¹ "Questions and Answers, 8 May 1838," 43, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 7, 2020.

² "Elders' Journal, July 1838," 43, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 7, 2020.

salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God.” It was “a very beautiful discourse.”³

Joseph taught baptism for the dead again at October conference in 1840, as the Saints eagerly performed the sacred ordinance in the Mississippi River in lieu of a temple baptismal font.⁴ One witness wrote that “during the conference there were some times from eight to ten elders in the river at a time baptizing.”⁵ But in their understandable zeal they were without knowledge. No one recorded the ordinances. A year later Joseph taught the doctrine in conference again and announced, as section 124 had declared in the meantime, that the Lord would no longer accept baptisms for the dead performed outside the temple (D&C 124:29–35).⁶ The Saints thus pushed the temple toward completion, and just over a year later, in November 1841, they performed the first baptisms for the dead in the unfinished but rising Nauvoo Temple.

In the midst of teaching the temple ordinances to the Saints, Joseph was charged with masterminding an attempted murder of former Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs. There was no evidence for the charge, and Joseph regarded it as another attempt by his enemies to get him to Missouri and lynch him. He hid instead of subjecting himself to that. Joseph was finally arrested in August 1842 but then released, and the charges were finally dismissed a few months later.

Meanwhile, as Joseph moved from house to house in and around Nauvoo, protected by friends, he pondered the newly restored doctrines of the temple. There was something missing. He sought revelation while he was hiding and learned more about the nature of the ordinances. He looked for the first safe opportunity to teach the Saints. In August he taught the Relief Society that “all persons baptiz’d for the dead must have a Recorder present, that he may be an eye-witness to testify of it. It will be necessary in the grand Council, that these things be testified.”⁷ The next day Joseph

³ Simon Baker, in *Journal History of the Church*, August 15, 1840, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁴ John Smith, *Journal*, October 15, 1840, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁵ Vilate Kimball to Heber C. Kimball, October 11, 1840, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁶ Minutes of the General Conference of the Church Held at Nauvoo, Elias Smith and Gustavus Hills, *Rough Draft Notes of History of the Church*, 1841, 17, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; *History of the Church*, 4:423–429.

⁷ Joseph Smith, *Discourse*, August 31, 1842, Nauvoo Illinois, “A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” 80–83, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, in *Words of Joseph Smith*, eds. Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, 129–31.

dictated a letter to the Saints, section 127, in which he shared some of what he had recently learned.

Joseph was nostalgic and melancholy as he hid from extradition officers bent on delivering him to a state in which there was no due process of law for Latter-day Saints. In section 127 he rehearses his eventful life, alternating between frustration at his enemies, the hostility that oppressed him, evidences of God's deliverance, and hope for a final triumph. Mixed in are two revelations, the first in verse 4 and the second in verses 6–9, before Joseph closes with a lament that he is unable to teach the Saints in person and a prayer for their salvation.

In the first revelation the Lord urges the Saints to finish the temple despite persecution. In the second he links recording the ordinances to their being sealed. That is, baptisms for the dead are not valid in heaven unless properly recorded by an eyewitness on earth. It is imperative that the Saints learn the conditions on which ordinances performed on earth are validated in heaven, for, as the Lord declares in verses 8–9, he is about to restore more that pertains to the priesthood ordinances of the temple, and the records of all such ordinances are to be in order and preserved in the temple.