

REBAPTISM

A LOST ORDINANCE

A non-cultural LDS perspective on the doctrine of rebaptism

I dropped into the seat next to my mom, a little red in the face, my hair slightly tussled. I was eight. My dad baptized me the day before, and that Sunday was confirmation day. A circle of men, priesthood brethren, laid their hands on my head and entreated me to receive the Holy Ghost. Then they confirmed me as the newest member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The church meeting carried on afterward with little fanfare.

My mom leaned over, squeezing my shoulder. “Do you feel any different,” she asked.

“No,” I responded with little thought. “Why would I?” Her question surprised me as much as my answer surprised her.

As a young child, I understood the teachings of the church on baptism. I knew it was a “saving” ordinance. Yet in my eight-year-old brain, it was just another requirement, another rule. All good members followed the path of membership, and along that path lay the font.

Reflecting on that experience years later makes me blanch. I received the token ordinance by physical emersion in water. Yet I did not receive it in my heart at that time. How could I? The church and the ordinances were a cultural aspect of life. I did what all good Mormons do. It never sank into my young brain or heart that there was something infinitely more important to baptism than satisfying a church requirement and receiving my certificate.

My experience as a child is not unique to church members. Many children baptized into the church have little understanding of the intimate covenant they make with the Lord when they sink in the water. Most members view this ordinance as a rite of initiation into the church, and by extension, initiation into the kingdom of God.

The church does teach the eternal and saving characteristics of baptism. Yet it prefaces that teaching with the inauguration of new membership. According to current church doctrine, once baptized by proper authority, no other baptism is needed. This may come from Paul’s declaration, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). In fact, to consider any other baptism is to deviate from church policy, with potential disciplinary consequences.

Many Christian churches throughout the world hold this same belief. Baptism is a rite of passage into an organization. You are “baptized” Methodist, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Mormon, etc. Once you’ve been baptized, why be baptized again?

You may imagine why my heart and stomach swirled in a whirlwind of excitement and fear when the Lord invited me to be baptized a second time. I felt excitement for the idea of making a new covenant with God, and to do it whole-heartedly. I recalled my experience as a child, and remembered how often I wished I could have redone that covenant promise. What a beautiful opportunity to show God my renewed commitment to follow him.

Yet my gut also wrenched with fear. I had already been baptized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints almost 30 years prior. Rebaptism would be viewed as rebellion against the church and betrayal on my part. What would be the consequences of acting on that invitation? I not only feared the response of the church leaders, should they find out, but I also worried how my wife would take this news.

The invitation of rebaptism resonated in my heart and mind, yet it seemed an odd request. Why would I need baptism a second time? What was the purpose of his request?

As I investigated the Lord's request, I found something quite surprising. To our pioneer predecessors, baptism was not a one-and-done ordinance, but a recurrent covenant process. Discovering our ancestors' passion toward baptism and rebaptism instilled more courage within me.

A unique aspect of the doctrine of baptism unknown to most church members today was the prolific practice of rebaptism among the early Latter-day saints. Rebaptism for these devout saints embodied expressions of faith, a renewed commitment to serve God, a pursuit of remission of sins, a form of healing, and sanctification when entering the temple or preparing for a marriage or sealing covenant.

CHRIST REQUIRES REBAPTISM

Baptism by the right authority is essential for salvation. Peter taught that just like Noah was saved by water with eight souls in the ark, so likewise does baptism “also now save us” (see 1 Peter 3:21). Jesus Christ taught Nicodemus that unless we “be born of water and of the spirit, [we] cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus subsequently taught the correct modality of baptism to the ancient Native Americans in a visit after his resurrection (see 3 Nephi 11:18-41). The Lord's injunction to those Nephites in that visit was an invitation for each of them to be baptized...*again*.

JESUS VISITS THE NEPHITES

It is very curious that the Lord would ask those who have received baptism to do it a second time. After inviting the Nephite congregation to touch his hands, feet, and side, validating his divinity, he immediately taught the doctrine of baptism. He first called twelve men forward and gave them authority to baptize. Jesus called upon a man named Nephi, a prophet of those ancient Americans. Yet Nephi had previously received the sealing powers—the ability to bind on earth and in heaven—from God (see Helaman 10:3-10). He already held the Lord's authority to baptize. Thirty years earlier he “went forth among the people, and also many others, baptizing unto repentance” (3 Nephi 1:23). Why did the Lord give that authority again to the same person? Was his authority not sufficient before?

The doctrine of baptism was not a new concept to the Nephite people. After Samuel, a Lamanite prophet, stood upon the wall of Zarahemla, people sought out Nephi to receive baptism (see Helaman 15:3). (That was the father of the Nephi mentioned above.) Then after those Native Americans witnessed the sign of Jesus' birth, many desired baptism (see 3 Nephi 1:23). Yet when the Lord came again, he deemed it necessary to reauthorize Nephi and others. In doing so, the Lord emphasizes the significance of divine authority. The Resurrected Lord confirming the right to baptize upon those twelve men removed any question of the authenticity of their authority.

Jesus next described the sequence of baptism. Perhaps those ancient believers disputed the process of baptism, or perhaps he wanted to emphasize the details of the ordinance. And though some in attendance may have not yet covenanted with the Lord, the majority of those gathered already received baptism. They were believers, members of the Church of Christ (Helaman 16:1).

From this account of the Lord's visit in the Americas, and the account of John's ministry before the Lord's first coming in ancient Israel, a pattern appears of inviting people to renew commitment through rebaptized. I would not be surprised if he will require another renewed commitment through baptism when he comes a second time, even of those already baptized.

And who knows, maybe he will ask us to be baptized again even before that time. He may move upon you like he did me through the Spirit to re-covenant through baptism. Are we willing to put aside our cultural beliefs to hear his invitation?

REBAPTISM FOUND IN SCRIPTURE

We find other instances of rebaptism in scripture. Paul rebaptized disciples in Ephesus.

John the Baptist baptized these men years before. We know John was a legal administrator of the baptismal ordinance, receiving his authority from an angel (D&C 84:27-28). Yet as Paul conversed with them, he realized that they had been baptized with water, but not with the Holy Ghost.

Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus, and finding certain disciples, he said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 19:1-5

These men, learning of Jesus Christ, eagerly rededicated themselves to the Lord through baptism. Why did they need to be baptized a second time? Was John's baptism insufficient? Was this new baptism essential for their salvation? John had authority from God to perform that ordinance, but obtaining greater understanding of the Lord, they proceeded into the water again, this time to renew their commitment and to receive the Holy Ghost.

Speaking of John, the Baptizer, the New Testament story begins with his call to baptism. Baptism was not a new ordinance to the Jewish people. The language in the New Testament and the behaviors of the people suggest this principle was known among them. Other historical accounts also point to the practice of baptism prior John's ministry.¹ It is likely that some who sought John's baptism had already been baptized.

Another instance of rebaptism appears in the Book of Mormon. A young priest named Alma who realigned himself with God took his followers to the waters of Mormon and baptized them as well as receiving baptism himself (see Mosiah 18:8-17). Where did he learn about this doctrine? He and his people lived in the Americas prior to John's ministry. Their progenitor, Nephi, recorded a long discourse on the essential aspect of following Jesus Christ into the waters of baptism about 500 years prior (see 2 Nephi 31).

They also were decedents of the Jews and carried with them the records of ancient Israel. It is likely those writings taught the principle of baptism. Nephi lived in Jerusalem about 600 BC. His record bears witness of the Jewish culture of baptism in his day. He also quotes Isaiah, who references baptism around 200 years before Nephi. Isaiah talks about those who "come forth out of the waters of Judah" (Isaiah 48:1), to which Nephi adds, "or out of the waters of baptism" (1 Nephi 20:1).

When Alma approached his followers with an invitation to baptism, they were familiar with it, and had likely already received it. Why would they be baptized a second time? Alma describes that reason as he encourages the people to receive that ordinance once again.

And it came to pass that [Alma] said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?

¹ Frank S. B. Gavin. *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1928.)

And now when the people had heard these words, they clapped their hands for joy, and exclaimed: This is the desire of our hearts.

Alma 18:8-11

They received the baptism as a covenant to God. They wanted to “witness before him” that they had made a new promise. They wanted to renew their pledge, as Alma outlined.

REBAPTISM IN THE LATTER-DAY CHURCH

Rebaptism first appeared in the restored church on the day of its organization. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery originally baptized each other on May 15, 1829, after receiving authority from the resurrected baptizer, John. Upon the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1830, Joseph and Oliver returned to the water for another baptism. Other members previously baptized also received baptism again on that day.²

Why would they need to be baptized again if they were already baptized? We know with certainty that their first baptisms were divinely authorized by God. An angel authorized Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to baptize giving them divine authority. Yet despite having baptized each other in 1829, they renewed their covenant a second time.

This second baptism was not for their own salvation. They had that baptism already. The purpose for the rebaptism in this instance may have been an initiation into the church organization, or they could have seen it as a renewed commitment to follow Christ. They likely did not make a distinction between the two concepts.

Rebaptism among the Latter-day Saints flourished during the Nauvoo period and extended into the early 20th century. With discord among the saints in the early years at Nauvoo, a general fervor began in 1841 for renewed commitment and a remission of sins. This incited several saints to be rebaptized as part of that reformation.

One historian noted, “William Clayton’s journal indicated that rebaptism for remission of sins was practiced at Nauvoo after Joseph Smith had remarked on the subject at April 1841 conference. However, the beginning of a general Nauvoo Reformation can be dated from the remarks of Hyrum Smith to the Nauvoo High Council on 18 January 1842, that ‘there was a general want of action in the Church that he wanted every one to start anew.’”³

During that conference, Sidney Rigdon spoke on baptism for the remission of sins. Joseph later dismissed the conference so those that desired to do so could go down to the Mississippi river for baptisms.⁴ There, Joseph and Sidney rebaptized each other for a remission of sins and a renewal of covenants.⁵

Two years later, a letter from Jacob Scott, a resident at Nauvoo, dated February 28, 1843, recorded some of the fervor that continued among the saints and his personal enthusiasm for his renewed commitment.

² Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973) 1:76. (Hereafter *History of the Church*).

³ D. Michael Quinn. “The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 2.

⁴ “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” p. 1194, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/366>.

⁵ On This Day in Mormon History (blog). Accessed 8 September 2020 from <http://onthistdayinmormonhistory.blogspot.com/2008/10/april-11th.html>.

Nearly All the Church have been Baptized again, for the Remission of their Sins, since they joined the Church, I have also, by the hands of Br. Joseph (as he himself has been,) & I would advise Jan and you Mary, to attend to it as soon as you can have the opportunity of an Elder or Priest of the Church to administer it.⁶

It is clear by his report that even Joseph Smith was rebaptized at this time, which would have been his third, or possibly fourth, known baptism since 1829. Even after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, members continued to perform rebaptism for the renewal of their covenants. The first pioneers and church leaders to arrive at the Salt Lake valley “dammed City Creek and used the resulting pond for rebaptisms and baptisms for health.”⁷

In another church reformation in 1856-57, members were rebaptized again as they entered the Salt Lake valley. It was common in some areas beginning in 1874 to be rebaptized when joining the united order.⁸ In 1888, a letter from George Reynolds on behalf of the first presidency of the church reiterated a universal rule for all emigrants entering the Great Basin area to be rebaptized.⁹ The history of the early Utah saints demonstrated how rebaptism was a vital part of their faith and renewed convictions.

Rebaptism waned at the turn of the 20th century, though did not discontinue until the 1920s. It is uncertain how many of these rebaptisms were performed. Many were done within the St. George, Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake temples. From 1877-1893, there were 7,788 recorded baptisms for renewal of covenants within those four temples.¹⁰ Who knows how many thousands of rebaptisms were performed in the rivers and lakes.

REBAPTISM FOR HEALING WITHIN THE CHURCH

There is a history comprising nearly 100 years of baptism-evoke healings within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That may surprise most members. Though there is a rich history and symbolism of healing waters dating back more than two millennia, the early saints likely developed their faith in baptismal healings from first-hand experiences.

Early Mormons viewed healing, along with glossolalia and prophecy, as important evidence of the Restoration’s validity; and miraculous healings were a common hallmark of early Mormon conversions. Often, converts were healed upon their baptism or confirmation.¹¹

BAPTISM FOR HEALING IN THE NAUVOO ERA

Baptism and rebaptism for healing expanded during the Nauvoo period. It was likely stimulated by the healing of Samuel Rolfe as he washed his infected hand in the newly dedicated baptismal font in the temple. William Clayton recorded in his journal that account.

⁶ Jacob Scott to Mary Scott Warnock, 28 February 1843, *Research Library and Archives of The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, the Auditorium, Independence, Missouri as quoted in D. Michael Quinn. “The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 3.

⁷ Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 86.

⁸ Russell Rich, “Why did some Utah Pioneers undergo rebaptism?” *Ensign* (February 1975).

⁹ Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 96.

¹⁰ On This Day in Mormon History (blog) Accessed 8 September 2020 from <http://onthisdayinmormonhistory.blogspot.com/2008/10/april-11th.html>

¹¹ Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 72.

At 5 o'clock in the evening, the 8th day of November, 1841, the font was dedicated by Joseph Smith the Prophet. After the dedication Brother Reuben McBride was the first person baptized, under the direction of the President.

Brother Samuel Rolfe, who was seriously afflicted with a felon upon one of his hands, was present. President Joseph instructed him to wash in the font and told him that the hand would be healed. The doctors had told him that he could not recover before Spring, and had advised him to have his hand cut. He dipped his hand in the font, and within a week he was perfectly healed.

After this time baptisms were continued in the font, and many saints realized great blessings—both spiritually and bodily.¹²

Prior to this event, eight of the apostles wrote a stirring piece in the *Times and Seasons* invoking the angel of God to touch the waters for the people in a symbolic gesture pointing to the ancient practice of waiting near the waters of Bethesda. “The time has come,” they wrote, “when the great Jehovah would have a resting place on earth, a habitation for his chosen..., where the saints may enter the Baptismal Font for their dead relations...; a place, over which the heavenly messengers may watch and trouble the waters as in days of old, so that when the sick are put therein they shall be made whole...¹³

Later, when the Endowment House font was dedicated, Heber Kimball dedicated it with the same imagery. “Let thine Angel O Lord touch this water & this Font with his Finger that it may be holy unto Thee Lord..., that the sick may be healed of evry infirmety that we may be renewed in body & spirit in all things.”¹⁴

Rebaptism for health became commonplace among the saints in Nauvoo and grew even more prevalent as the saints migrated to Utah. The practice of rebaptism was so popular among the saints at Nauvoo, particularly in the temple font, that Joseph clarified guidance for the practices. He stated that “baptisms for the dead, and for the healing of the body must be in the [temple] font, those coming into the church and those rebaptized may be done in the river.”¹⁵

Despite this declaration, many still carried their loved ones to the rivers and streams to be baptized for healing. Joseph took his wife Emma to a river for a baptism of healing in October 1842 instead of the temple font. Joseph worried about Emma’s health condition, who was critically ill at the time. He baptized her twice in the river, “which evidently did her much good,” he later recorded in his journal.¹⁶ John Gillert, a businessman who was not a member of the church recorded how Joseph had interrupted a business interview as “Mrs Smith lay Dangerously ill at the time and they ware about to administer the Rights of Baptism for her.”¹⁷

BAPTISM FOR HEALING AFTER NAUVOO

Though some sought healing through a single rebaptism, it was not uncommon that people would seek rebaptism multiple times, whether for themselves or their loved ones. In several accounts, people were rebaptized up to seven times either all at once or over several days or weeks. This practice may have originated

¹² Journal of William Clayton, 1840–1845, p. 21, 8 November 1841, *Church Archives*, as quoted in D. Michael Quinn. “The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 3-4.

¹³ “An Epistle of the Twelve.” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (12 October 1841): 567-570.

¹⁴ Wilford Woodruff, Journal, 4:459 as quoted in Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “‘They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 89.

¹⁵ “Conference Minutes.” *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 April 1842):763.

¹⁶ Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of The Church*. 5:167–168.

¹⁷ John D. Gillett to Smith Tuttle, 5 November 1842, *Gillett and Whittle Papers*, Manuscript Section, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois, as quoted in D. Michael Quinn *The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo*, *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 4.

from the story of Namaan’s miraculous healing in the Jordan river after Elisha told him to immerse himself seven times.

Additionally, an anointing or sealing by laying hands on the recipient’s head commonly followed rebaptisms, whether for healing, renewed commitment, or any other purpose.

Once the temples were dedicated, many redirected their baptisms for health to the temple fountains. The fountains of the Logan and Salt Lake temples were first used for baptisms of health. The practice of seeking healing rituals within the temples became a standard for many members. Members could seek healing through baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, and blessings dedicated for the healing of the sick within the temple. Some of these were done in prayer circles. Temple healers were called to provide those services to the temple patrons. These ordinances for healing constituted just over half the ordinance performed at the temples up to the year 1900.¹⁸

THE END OF REBAPTISM

DISCONTINUING REBAPTISM FOR RENEWED COVENANTS

Rebaptism for the purpose of renewing commitments and for the remissions of sins waned in the late 19th century. The first known discussions regarding the mainstreaming of baptisms—aside from rebaptism for health—were entertained by Wilford Woodruff and his counselors. They desired a consistent baptismal prayer aligned with the revelations given to Joseph, and in consequence, limiting rebaptism to only those seeking reentry into the church. Despite this changing belief, others of the Quorum of the Twelve felt there was still pertinent value in the practice of rebaptism.

In 1894, the leaders of the church sent a letter to temple presidents providing guidance for these practices.

In cases where people are baptized for their health, we see no impropriety in using the words “for the restoration of your health” in the ceremony. There is a difference between baptism for such a purpose and baptism for admission into the Church. One is an ordinance of salvation—the door provided by the Lord through which his children must enter into his Church, and become entitled to the blessings of the new and everlasting covenant; the other, while it may be termed in some respects an ordinance, is not imperative upon the members of the Church. If they have faith and believe, when they have some ailment, that the administration of baptism in that form will be beneficial to them, the privilege is granted to them. But there is a clear distinction between that form of baptism and the form of baptism which the Lord requires His children to obey to become a member of His Church.¹⁹

At the turn of the century, most leaders of the church no longer considered rebaptisms part of a routine practice, except in the case of rebaptism for health. George Cannon, author of the letter above, implied there were two distinct baptisms viewed by the church leadership, those required for salvation and entry into the church—which they considered one and the same—and those allowed for healing.

It is unclear when the practice of rebaptism ceased for the renewal of commitment and remissions of sin, as well as for sanctification prior to entering the temple or marriage. The accounts dwindle at the turn of the 20th century and were discouraged as early as the 1890s. Stake presidents were instructed that attendees to the Salt

¹⁸ Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “‘They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 94.

¹⁹ “First Presidency, Letter to Temple Presidents, *Journal History*, May 8, 1896, 2-4,” in Selected Collections, 2:19, as quoted in Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, “‘They shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 99-100.

Lake Temple dedication no longer needed to be rebaptized. It was likely required for those attending the dedication of the previous three temples of St. George, Logan, and Manti to be rebaptized.²⁰

George Cannon delivered the discourse that led to the discontinuation of the practice of rebaptism, particularly for purposes of renewed commitment or remissions of sins.

At the April 1895 general conference priesthood meeting, Charles O. Card of Alberta recorded notes on George Q. Cannon's sermon: "There has grown up among many who baptized for every little thing. It is improper. Confess our sins. There has been a rule that those going to Temple or coming home from our native lands but this is not required. It is not necessary except he or she has sinned especially." Apostle Mariner W. Merrill also preached against such baptisms in Cache Stake conference in July 1897. In the October general conference three months later, George Q. Cannon delivered what several historians have viewed as the official end of baptism for the renewal of covenants in the Church.²¹

DISCONTINUING REBAPTISM FOR HEALING

Baptisms for healing continued strong through the first two decades of the twentieth century. It was generally viewed that baptism for renewal of covenants was different from baptism for health. Baptisms for health were commonly performed in the temples.

The fervor saints showed for this form of baptism had a long and rich history among Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith taught the principle, and even sought the healing powers of baptism for his wife. Many practiced this rite for nearly a century before it became banned in the church. Scriptural accounts show our ancient Israelite ancestors believed in the healing benefits of water and baptism.

The practice of rebaptizing for health continued more than 20 years after the official cessation of rebaptism for other purposes. Yet like other rebaptism practices, leaders of the church gradually discouraged even baptisms for health. Eventually, church leaders concluded to end baptisms for health. Anthony Ivins sent a letter on behalf of President Heber Grant and the first presidency dated December 15th, 1922, to the presidents of the temples that portrayed the perspectives of the church leaders concerning baptisms for health.

We feel constrained to call your attention to the custom prevailing to some extent in our temples of baptizing for health, and to remind you that baptism for health is no part of our temple work, and therefore to permit it to become a practice would be an innovation detrimental to temple work, and a departure as well from the provision instituted of the Lord for the care and healing of the sick of His Church. And in this connection we desire to say that the practice of Church members going to temples to be administered to is a departure from the way instituted of the Lord, and we are desirous that these things should be corrected and receive attention of the proper authorities in the branches, Wards and Stakes of the Church where they belong, and it will be for you to so inform your temple workers and those who may come to you from time to time for baptism for health and to be administered to.²²

Despite the deep contradictions in this statement to previously held beliefs and teachings, rebaptisms came to a halt. The statement that baptisms for healing in the temple are an “innovation detrimental to temple work” and a departure from the “provisions instituted of the Lord” for the healing of the sick opposes the previous

²⁰ James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992): 431 as quoted in Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, ““They shall Be Made Whole”: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 100.

²¹ Jonathan A Stapley & Kristine Wright, ““They shall Be Made Whole”: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 102.

²² “Rebaptism, Jan 18, 1923.” *LDS Church History* (blog), <http://lds-church-history.blogspot.com/2012/06/rebaptism-jan-18-1923.html>.

century of rebaptism principles, including Joseph Smith’s statement that baptisms for healing were to be specifically performed in the temple font.

REBAPTISM IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Since the discontinuation of the practice of rebaptism, the only baptisms currently recognized by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are listed below. Each of these forms of baptism (and rebaptism) center on initiation into the church and constitute for the church the saving ordinance described in scripture.

1. Baptism of new members, whether converts or “children of record,” meaning children of members who have reached the age of accountability (over 8 years old),
2. Rebaptism of excommunicated members, and
3. Baptism for the dead.

The church today limits the scope of baptism significantly compared to the practice of their pioneer progenitors. Rebaptism for the early saints was used as expressions of faith, a renewed commitment to serve God, a remission of sins, a form of healing, and a process of sanctification when entering the temple or preparing for a marriage or sealing covenant. The rich history of multiple baptisms among early church has dimmed until members of the church today have no knowledge of these expressions of faith.

The current teachings on baptism in the church highlight the purposes of baptism as the following:

1. A remission of sins
2. Admittance into the church
3. A prerequisite for receiving the Holy Ghost
4. A demonstration of obedience, and
5. Access into the Celestial Kingdom.

Where the early members of the church would seek rebaptism to renew those covenants and receive anew a remission of sins, the church now teaches that the sacrament renews the baptismal covenants. According to a previous church priesthood manual, “the ordinance of the sacrament reminds us of the promises we made when we were baptized. We renew our baptismal covenant by partaking of the sacrament.”²³ This principle was reiterated by Dallin Oaks, a church apostle, in the October 1998 general conference.²⁴

AN INVITATION FROM THE LORD

CHURCH POLICY ON REBAPTISM

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not recognize the baptism of any other denomination, nor does it recognize any baptisms performed by a person that was not properly authorized or approved by church administrators. This comes from a belief that only members of the church in good standing can hold authority from God to perform ordinances. Joseph Smith received authority to baptize directly from the John the Baptist. The church therefore concludes that only those who have received priesthood authority through that line of authority have legitimate claim to baptize.

The church also believes that no legitimate priesthood authority can exist outside the church, and therefore, any unauthorized baptism is done without real authority. It is inconceivable in the minds of most members of

²³ “The Purposes of Priesthood Ordinances,” in *Duties and Blessing of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders*, Part B (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Revised 2000): 31-32.

²⁴ Dallin H. Oaks, “The Aaronic Priesthood and the Sacrament.” *Ensign* (November 1998): 38-39.

the church that priesthood authority could be granted by God to someone outside of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Once a person has been baptized into the church, no other baptisms are permitted for any reason other than re-admittance of an excommunicated member. James Talmage wrote in his book *The Articles of Faith* that “repeated baptisms of the same person are not sanctioned in the Church.”

He continued:

It is easy to fall into the error of believing that baptism offers a ready means of gaining forgiveness of sins however oft repeated. Such a belief tends rather to excuse than to prevent sin, inasmuch as the hurtful effects seem to be so easily averted. Neither the written law of God, nor the instructions of His living Priesthood, designate baptism as a means of securing forgiveness by those who are already within the fold of Christ. Unto such, forgiveness of all sin, if not unto death, has been promised on confession, and repentance with full purpose of heart; of them a repetition of the baptismal rite has not been required and, were subjects of this class repeatedly baptized, unto them remission of sins would in no wise come, except they repent most sincerely. The frailties of mortality and our proneness to sin lead us continually into error; but if we covenant with the Lord at the waters of baptism, and thereafter seek to observe His law, He is merciful to pardon our little transgressions, through repentance sincere and true; and without such repentance, baptism, however oft repeated, would avail us nothing.²⁵

Aptly stated, rebaptism is not currently “sanctioned” in the church. The church philosophy has evolved since this statement in 1899 to be stricter. In more direct terms, rebaptism is prohibited. In the present church culture, the idea of rebaptism for any reason seems laughable. Why would anyone need it? If a person were baptized by proper authority, he or she has received the required saving ordinance and does not need rebaptism.

Although that logic may hold some truth, for those who were baptized as youth under parental or cultural pressure, this perspective leaves that person desiring a means to recommit when they truly convert to Christ. The same could be said for adults.

These church policies and beliefs leave several questions unanswered. If there is no allowed authority to baptize outside the guidelines of church leaders, and the church denounces any additional baptisms, why would the Lord invite people to be rebaptized? How could a rogue rebaptism be effectual if not authorized by the current administration? Do the doctrines of the Lord change because rebaptism is not appealing to current leadership?

INVITATION FOR REBAPTISM

As I mentioned earlier, when the Lord asked me to renew my covenants through a second baptism, I experienced a whirlwind of emotion from elation to fear. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for an opportunity to express my renewed commitment to the Savior. To be invited by the Lord to renew that commitment fill me with absolute joy. It was an opportunity I never thought I would experience.

Yet almost immediately fear gripped my heart. It is commonly understood in church culture that rebaptism is heresy. A rebaptism—outside church protocol—is viewed as an affiliation with another group, religion, or sect, and considered a form of apostasy. It is in direct opposition to current church policy, and ergo, defiance of church leadership. I knew being baptized again could cause a rippling effect on my membership status.

If someone discovered a member was baptized a second time, privileges of partaking the sacrament may be withheld. It sounds silly but it is true. How ironic that the church views the sacrament as a renewal of the baptismal covenant yet would potentially forbid partaking of those emblems of Christ’s death for the heretical act of rebaptism.

Discovery of a rebaptism could also lead to the suspension or revoking of a member’s temple recommend. This would preclude the member from performing or participating in any of the ordinances within the temple.

²⁵ James Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1899): 148.

How ironic that a church that once required members to be rebaptized prior to attending a temple dedication or encouraged rebaptism prior to receiving temple covenants and ordinances would potentially restrict access to the temple for the sacrilegious act of rebaptism.

A member whose rebaptism had been discovered could find themselves accused of apostasy to the church and its leaders. This could potentially lead to disfellowship or excommunication. How ironic that baptism, which symbolizes an initiating ordinance into the church, could become the impetus for the church to withdraw all the benefits and affiliations of church membership. This rebellious act of rebaptism was once sanctioned and practiced by Joseph Smith, the man who started the church. It was used as a faith-enriching ordinance to draw men and women closer to Christ. Yet it becomes the incriminating evidence that incites disciplinary action.

Many of these concerns flashed through my mind as I considered the Lord's invitation. I know it sounds awful that I would hesitate to follow an invitation of the Lord to avoid persecution and punishment from his church. Yet any member of the church would agree these are legitimate issues in today's culture. Members feel constrained from following what is in their heart because of the fear a reprisal from the church.

To add to the mounting concerns, I wondered what my family would think. I remember very well the night I approached my wife, telling her the exciting news that the Lord spoke to me and invited me to recommit to him through baptism. She is a wonderful faith-filled woman and I wanted to include her in my spiritual journey. As I described this invitation, I felt dismayed and surprised by her angry response. I cannot blame her for that reaction. As a very loyal and faithful member of the church, she legitimately held deep concerns for me and my salvation. She loved me. She could not understand why the Lord would ask this of me and wondered if I listened to the right spiritual promptings. Our conclusions of the invitation came to different ends. I determined to follow the Lord, and she urged me to abandon the heretical mindset. It caused a deep wedge in our relationship that never healed.

It is no wonder that so many of those who seek rebaptism refuse to act upon that invitation. Or they do so under the cloak of secrecy or anonymity. They desire to recommit to the Savior yet fear retaliation from the leaders of a church that profess to be led directly by the Christ. What a grand paradox!

Why should those who desire to express the depth of their faith fear punishment and persecution from the church they so endear? It seems throughout history the Lord puts his disciples in circumstances where they must choose between him and the world or its culture. Perhaps these were the same thoughts and feelings that haunted those who awaited baptism by John at the banks of the river Jordan 2000 years earlier.

A CLASH OF CULTURES

The argument posed by George Cannon in 1895 has validity. The overuse and misuse of the practice of rebaptism can diminish the value and wonder of the ordinance of baptism. Additionally, these rebaptisms, whether for the purpose of renewing commitment, seeking remission of sins, or healing, are not essential ordinances. Yet to ban such practices because of excessive application is disappointing and deprives men and women from benefiting from humble resubmission to Christ in an incredibly symbolic manner.

Though no commandment can be found for or against rebaptism, cultural precedent weighs heavily on the issue. Despite the conviction of Heber Grant and his administration that rebaptism detracts from the Lord's instituted provisions, Joseph Smith preached and behaved otherwise. In Joseph's view, these were not detractors, but contributors to faith and commitment to Christ, and a valid method of faith healing.

Taking a book out of the pages of history and with the invitation of the Lord in hand, I decided to accept the opportunity. It was bright September afternoon. It was uncharacteristically warm for that time of year, and there was slight warm breeze. I waded into the Boise River. The cool water felt refreshing but chilly. That day I made a new commitment with Christ.

I will never forget that experience and the deep peace that engulfed me. I chose to follow Christ despite the potential consequences. I chose to recommit in the simple yet deeply symbolic act of rebaptism. I hold it as

one of my most treasured and sacred experiences. And even eight years later I still feel that deep connection with my Savior. Since then, the very things I worried could happen did happen. I am now labeled an apostate for following Christ. I have been disciplined by the church I loved. Yet despite the persecutions, punishments, and divisions caused by the church and its members, I have deepened faith, obedience, and connection with the Lord.

There is a rich and vibrant history of commitment, healing, and faith through rebaptism within the origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one that has been forsaken and long forgotten. It is truly disheartening to know those practices have not only been discouraged, but the history has been discounted and even tainted.

In seeking to understand the doctrines of Christ, may we not limit our views by cultural constraints and mores of modern society and the church. Instead, may we seek deeper counsel from Jesus Christ and live by his precepts. May we reach into the fundamentals of our religious beliefs, find truth in Christ, and have the courage to act. May we listen for his invitation to follow.