

Section 128

Wilford Woodruff wrote that

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. ... 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.¹

Baptism for the dead “seems to occupy my mind,” Joseph wrote. Less than a week after dictating section 127, Joseph dictated a much longer, more detailed explanation of the order of sacred ordinances: section 128. It adds practical instructions to 127’s revelation that for baptisms for the dead to be valid, they must be recorded by an eyewitness. Joseph proposes a recorder for each of Nauvoo’s four wards, each of whom will account to a general Church recorder who will be responsible to collect, certify, and keep the records.

Verse 5 uses three related words: *order*, *ordinance*, and *ordained*. Boyd K. Packer cited the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of *order* as “arrangement in sequence or proper relative position” and noted how often the scriptures emphasize the importance

¹ Wilford Woodruff, Journal, September 19, 1842, Church History Library.

of order. *Ordinance*, wrote President Packer, derives from *order*. He defined an ordinance as “the ceremony by which things are put in proper order.” *Ordain*, “a close relative of the other two words,” is the process of putting in order, including appropriately appointing someone to the ministry. “From all this dictionary work,” Elder Packer said, “there comes the impression that an ordinance, to be valid, must be done in proper order.”² That is precisely Joseph’s point in section 128. To be valid, an ordinance must be ordained of God, or, in other words, done according to the order or procedure he dictates.

Beginning in verse 6, Joseph traces the doctrine of recording earthly ordinances full circle through the Bible to make his point and substantiate what he had previously taught. He begins with the Biblical book of Revelation, in which John saw that the dead would be judged by what is recorded on earth, which is mirrored in the book of life kept in heaven (D&C 128:6–8). “It may seem to some to be a very bold doctrine that we talk of,” Joseph says, speaking of the priesthood’s power to seal earthly ordinances in heaven. But in defense he evokes Matthew 16’s description of Jesus’s promise to give Peter sealing keys to bind on earth and in heaven (vv. 9–10). Joseph then turns to the symbolic significance of baptism and cites Paul’s teaching at 1 Corinthians 15 and Hebrews 11:40. Joseph adds Malachi’s prophecy of the mission of Elijah to unite generations before the Savior’s second coming and elaborates on its meaning.

With the teaching of temple ordinances, Joseph remarks that the dispensation of fulness “is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together” of generations, dispensations, and, indeed, of the human family can be accomplished (D&C 128:11–18). Joseph turns exultant at this prospect. Beginning at verse 19, he launches into a celebration of the Restoration. Recounting the sources of his knowledge and priesthood power, Joseph lists a Who’s Who of heavenly messengers he has seen—Moroni, Michael, Peter, James, John, Gabriel, Raphael, “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” (vv. 19–22). At least one of the events to which Joseph refers—Michael teaching him how to detect false messengers (v. 20)—must have taken place before Joseph moved from the Susquehanna River to Ohio in

² Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 144–45.

1831, yet this is his first known mention of it. These verses are at least a partial answer to the questions of when and by whom was Joseph endowed with priesthood power, becoming able to give the temple ordinances to the Saints.

Sec. 128 Journeying Sept. 6th 1842

To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
 Andeeth Meeting - 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. I wrote a few words of Revelation to
 you concerning a Recorder. I have ~~added~~ ^{had} a few addition-
 al ~~feelings~~ ^{views} in relation to this matter which I now
 certify. i.e. 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. 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 making his Record, and taking the whole proceeding
 certifying in his Record that he saw with his eyes, and heard with
 his ears, giving the date and names &c. 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. Then let
 there be a general Recorder to whom these other records can
 be handed being attended with certificates over their own ^{signatures}

Manuscript of Doctrine and Covenants 128. Image via Joseph Smith Papers.

In sum, Joseph had revelatory experiences and learned glorious truths that he did not readily share except in the right places at the right times to prepared people. That is exciting, and in a final burst of rhapsody, Joseph celebrated the profundity of the revealed solution to the terrible theological problem that has perplexed every thoughtful Christian: “What about those who never heard?”³ The answer? “The King Immanuel ... *ordained*, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free” (D&C 128:22).

Joseph had spent the winter of 1838–39 in a cold, tiny cell in Liberty, Missouri, and when he dictated section 128, he was hiding from unlawful extradition efforts to get him back to Missouri. He had some sense of how it felt to be liberated from prison. Joseph closed section 128 excited about these “glad tidings of great joy” (D&C 128:19) and tells the Saints what to *do* with them. It’s the same thing the Lord’s current prophets and apostles are urging us to do: “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,” or, more recently, electronic files or cards “containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation” (v. 23). In other words, let us organize families in the order God ordained. Let’s take disordered families and put them in order via the performance of holy ordinances in the House of the Lord.

Having shown that baptism for the dead was practiced by the earliest Christians but not since, Professor Hugh Nibley asked,

Where did Joseph Smith get his knowledge? Few if any of the sources cited in this discussion were available to him; the best of these have been discovered only in recent years, while the citations from the others are only to be found scattered at wide intervals through works so voluminous that even had they been available to the Prophet, he would, lacking modern aids, have had to spend a lifetime running them down. And even had he found such passages, how could they have meant more to him than they did to the most celebrated divines of a thousand years, who could make nothing of them? This is a region in which great theologians are lost and bemused; to have

³ John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

established a rational and satisfying doctrine and practice on grounds so dubious is indeed a tremendous achievement.⁴

It is impossible to estimate the results of these revelations, these glad tidings. Because of them, innumerable spirit prisoners have gone free. “Shall we not go on in so great a cause?” (D&C 128:22).

⁴ Hugh Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 148–49.