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## Religious Freedom Allows Both Mormons and Jews to Honor Their Ancestors



By Elder D. Todd Christofferson

The practice of temple baptism that Mormons perform on behalf of deceased people is a sacred rite deeply rooted in New Testament history and practice, although it is no longer followed by other modern Christian faiths.

Some Jewish critics have objected that the millions of names that individual Mormons send or take to their temples for these baptisms include some who died in the Holocaust. Critics have objected to this on various grounds, but the fact is that our two sides are largely in agreement on the importance of preventing unauthorized temple baptisms of Jewish Holocaust victims.

Unfortunately, much of the current criticism is due to a misunderstanding of what temple baptisms are as well as the steps that the Church has taken to preclude names of known Holocaust victims from being submitted improperly — and to remove those names that made it through our processes in error.

Temple baptisms are unique to the Mormon faith. While other religious groups honor the dead through prayer or rites of memorial, there is nothing quite like a Mormon temple baptism, which is considered one of

the highest sacraments of Latter-day Saint belief.

To understand temple baptisms, one must first know that families and free will are essential core doctrines of the Latter-day Saints. According to our theology, cherished family relationships can be rejoined in heaven. Temple baptisms in which Church members are baptized for their ancestors are seen as a gateway to those reunions and continued progression. Essentially, they are a gift from the living to those who have left this life and are done as an act of love for their departed family members.

Temple rites are not considered binding on the departed soul. A temple baptism is an offering to deceased ancestors who were not members of the Church when they were alive. Mormons believe that even those who have died still think, act, learn, and make decisions in the hereafter. Temple baptisms are therefore free offerings that our departed ancestors can choose to accept or reject as a blessing offered them. Because the result of a proxy baptism is not binding on the recipient, no name is added to the membership rolls of the Church. There is no change in the religion or heritage of the recipient or of the recipient's descendants. There is no possible way of knowing whether that offering has been accepted or rejected.

Members of the Church visit their sacred temples to stand in as living proxies for those who have gone before them. Ideally, individuals represent their own ancestors, which is why many Mormons have such a passion for genealogical work. If they do not have the names of their own ancestors, they may be baptized for other deceased individuals.

A few Jews have complained that the practice harkens back to the era of the Crusades when Jews were sometimes baptized by force, and when the choice was acceptance or death. This is an extreme and invalid comparison to our practice. We are committed to the overarching principle that the departed but conscious and living soul retains the moral freedom to accept or reject the baptism performed in his or her behalf.

We share every sentiment of horror about the Holocaust that any non-Jew can. That's why in 1994, when the issue of temple baptisms of Holocaust victims was first raised, the Church and a group representing some concerned Jews reached an understanding that addressed the special status of Holocaust victims.

As part of this accord, the Church took the extraordinary step of removing 260,000 names of Jewish Holocaust victims from its publicly available International Genealogical Index. In addition, the Church said it would cease all temple baptisms of known Jewish Holocaust victims except for those who are ancestors of living members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And, because names are submitted for temple baptism by hundreds of thousands of members across the world, the Church established procedures to remove names we find to have been submitted contrary to this policy.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has lived up to the commitments it made, seeking to have names of Holocaust victims submitted only by any living descendants and removing names when we learn they have been submitted in violation of our procedures.

As a worldwide Church with members in over 160 countries, we emphatically attest that Mormons do not practice temple baptisms to separate people from their heritage. Instead, we seek to unite generations of a shared heritage in eternal family units.

Whether a religion has existed for more than 5,000 years or less than 200 years, its survival and identity are built around sacred beliefs. It is critical that we respect one another's religious beliefs and freedoms, and the Church believes that our 1995 accord with the Jewish group respects the rights of Holocaust victims while preserving the rights of Mormons today to honor their ancestors in one of their most sacred expressions of faith.

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