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World Conference Resolutions about Conditions of Membership

WCR 48, “Ordinance of Baptism,” Adopted October 7, 1862

That whoever administers the ordinance of baptism should use the precise words given in the law of the Book of Covenants, and not substitute his own words in the place of the words of God.

WCR 212, “Procedure in Baptism,” Adopted September 11, 1878

That all baptisms, in order to be legal, must be done by both the administrator and candidate going down into the water, according to instructions in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants; and if there are any now numbered with the church who have received ordinances with any less than the above requirements, that they are hereby required to receive the administration of the ordinance in the above form.

WCR 552, “Age for Baptism,” Adopted April 15, 1904

That children under eight years of age are not eligible for baptism in the church.

WCR 705, “Requirement for Baptism,” Adopted April 15, 1913

That all that is required of a candidate requesting baptism is for the candidate to satisfy the church authorities that he is worthy, and that it is not necessary to make a public request.

WCR 981, “Withdrawal and Reinstatement,” Adopted April 5, 1952

That in the event any person desires to withdraw from membership in the church, the First Presidency be authorized to make such investigation as may be necessary or desirable through the proper officers of the church, and, if no sound reasons against such action are found, may authorize the Church Statistician to remove the names of these persons from the records of the church, provided that in the event persons whose names have thus been removed from the records of the church shall desire to resume their membership in the church, and no sound reason for denying this request shall be found, the First Presidency may authorize the reinstatement of the names of such persons on the church records.

WCR 1221, “Issues Regarding Conditions for Membership,” Adopted April 7, 1992.

Resolved, That the First Presidency appoint a World Church task force to make a comprehensive study of the conditions for membership in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, particularly the theological questions regarding the status of those previously baptized in other Christian churches; and be it further

Resolved, That this task force have adequate representation of people to ensure a broad perspective from a World Church point of view, and be it further

Resolved, That a detailed report with recommendations be brought back for consideration to the 1994 World Conference.

**WCR 1293, “Conditions of Membership,”
Adopted March 31, 2007**

Resolved, That the World Conference request the First Presidency to examine the issue of rebaptism in the context of the worldwide mission of the Community of Christ; and be it further

Resolved, That following prayer, reflection, and discernment of God’s will for the Community of Christ, the First Presidency issue instructions relevant for today regarding requirements for church membership.

Report of the Issues Regarding Conditions for Membership Committee

To the First Presidency and the World Conference:

The 1992 World Conference approved WCR 1221 calling for a comprehensive study of the conditions for membership in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. A representative committee of members was appointed by the First Presidency to: a) give particular attention to the theological questions regarding the status of those previously baptized in other Christian churches, and b) provide an authoritative clarification of issues surrounding rebaptism, as well as the larger attendant theological issues underpinning baptism and church membership (including such topics as authority, the sacraments, denominational identity, implications for mission and evangelism, membership and discipleship, doctrine and scripture, and attendant sociological and pastoral care issues).

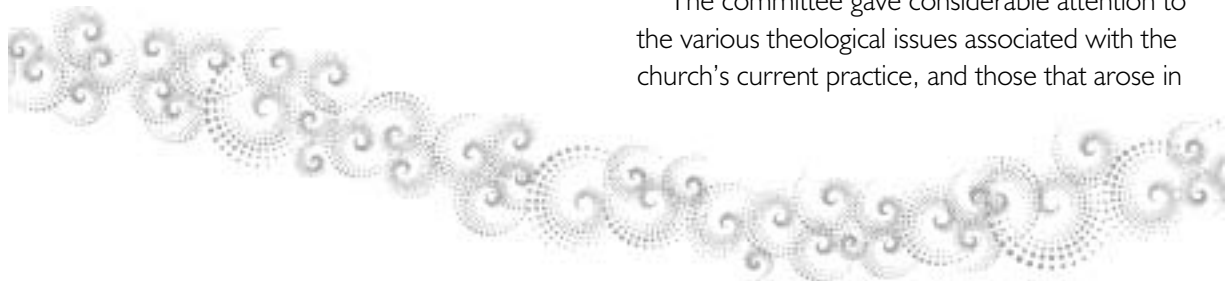
Committee members were particularly conscious of the time constraints of a study of this magnitude, as well as the inability to represent adequately all

points of view on the topic. Despite those challenges, members felt privileged to explore an issue of such significance to the life and mission of the church. The experience deepened our personal convictions regarding the value of the sacraments in the life of the church, expanded our understanding of membership as a serious yet joyful call to discipleship, and gave us an appreciation for historical teachings and practices regarding baptism in the RLDS Church, as well as within the rich heritage of the larger Christian community. We have sought to approach our task conscientiously and with integrity, yet without taking ourselves too seriously.

The committee considered its central task to be that of asking the critical questions and raising key issues, then exploring and researching those issues with as much openness and depth as possible. Four committee meetings were held (three at the Temple in Independence and one on the campus of Graceland College), two subcommittees were established, a survey of the doctrine and practice of baptism and conditions for membership in twelve other denominations was conducted, and each person was involved in personal preparation that included reading scriptures, articles and books; studying correspondence and research submitted by other church members; interviewing members and friends of the church; and writing personal position statements on baptism. Of particular benefit were conversations with the planning committee of the annual Theology Colloquy at Graceland College, chaired by Barbara Higdon. This resulted in the development of the program for the 1993 colloquy on the theme: “Authority, Membership, and Baptism.”

Theological Issues

The committee gave considerable attention to the various theological issues associated with the church’s current practice, and those that arose in



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the reconsideration of that practice. The committee also tried to remain sensitive to the fact that theological issues and pastoral concerns cannot be separated in any final sense.

The Nature of the Church

The practice of rebaptism has been central to RLDS identity in the past. Through this practice we have stated what we believed about ourselves and our mission: that we were the “one true church” restored to its primitive, pristine form by divine action; that our ministers alone had the authority to perform legitimate baptisms; that our baptismal rite was the proper one, being the original form established by Christ, but lost through human faithlessness; and that only it effected salvation to “celestial glory.” Various attempts have been made to soften the impact of this pattern of belief, but it is essentially the ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) that has undergirded our practice.

A majority of committee members held that this vision of the nature of the church was inadequate for the church of the present day. It does not conform to our best present understanding of the nature of God as revealed in the gospel of Christ, nor does it allow us to account for the fact that we continually experience the reality of authentic Christian discipleship in people from other traditions. Moreover, our past understanding of earliest Christianity has proved to be historically deficient: there is simply no evidence that a church existed in the first century that looked like ours. Therefore, the belief

that we are the restoration of the primitive form of Christianity can no longer be sustained.

These recognitions raise profound questions about how we are to understand our identity today. What do we mean by “the Restoration”? How are we to understand our relationship to the wider Christian tradition? What is the church and where is it to be found? Is it to be identified with only one historical entity, a single denomination? Or is the church a far more expansive reality, embracing all those who in every time and place have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? What is the purpose of our remaining a distinctive community if we can no longer speak about ourselves as our ancestors did? What of their sacrifices?

It became clear in our deliberations that often in our tradition, ecclesiology has tended to overshadow Christology (the doctrine of the person and work of Christ). The nature of God and the meaning of the gospel have, in fact, occasionally been obscured by a preoccupation with the nature of the church. Any change in baptismal practice would need to be based on a new awareness of the centrality of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, and a movement away from this preoccupation with ourselves.

The committee was in unanimous agreement that the pastoral impact of our work on these questions ought to have a central place in our deliberations. The entire committee was cognizant of the cost to our community of recent doctrinal changes, and aware of the current feeling among many members that we are presently in need of a clearer sense of identity and purpose. We were all in agreement that people need sound, compelling reasons to practice their Christian discipleship from within the RLDS community.



Authority

The question of priesthood authority was of central interest to the committee. As stated above, our practice of rebaptism has been based on the belief that legitimate performance of the sacrament depends on holding a divinely authorized ministry. While this belief in itself is not unique among Christian churches, the RLDS tradition has in the past said that only our ministers could make that claim. The belief that the RLDS Church exclusively possesses a divinely authorized ministry goes back to Joseph Smith's testimony that he received the priesthood through direct divine action.

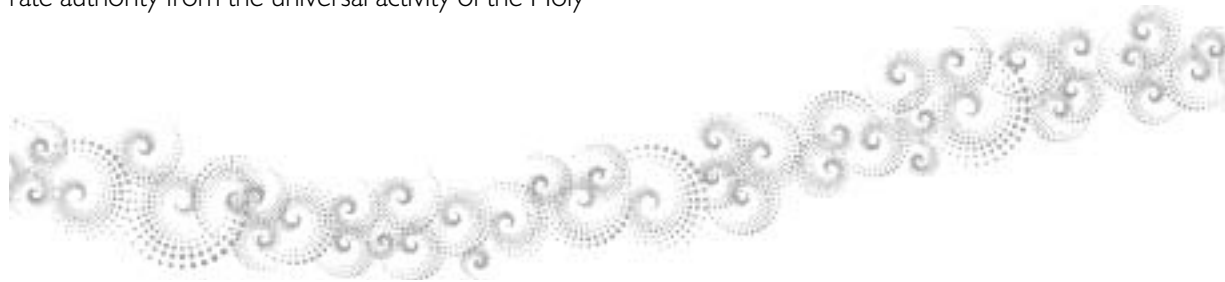
The committee agreed that the church is in the midst of a change in regard to its views of ministerial authority. At issue is not whether the RLDS Church has been authorized by God to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments, but the claim that we are the only denomination that is so authorized. There are several problems with this traditional view. One is that this position does not allow us to acknowledge the validity of commitments to Jesus Christ made in other contexts. For many on the committee, the experience of recognizing true and vital Christian discipleship among people of varying denominational backgrounds runs counter to traditional RLDS perspectives. Furthermore, the traditional view rests on a shaky biblical foundation: there are simply no clear New Testament warrants for it or for the system of priesthood offices that make up the ministerial structure of the church (the New Testament, for example, does not use the term "priesthood" to refer to various ministries in the church, but uses it for the whole body of believers). Moreover, the traditional view tends to separate authority from the universal activity of the Holy

Spirit, an activity that simply cannot be legitimately limited to one historic group. Finally, the traditional model of authority has been explicitly hierarchical, which has often resulted in the devaluation of ministry of all members in the body.

In brief, the majority of the committee found that the traditional RLDS view of priesthood authority presents severe difficulties. A majority of the committee would be unable to support the claim that only RLDS priesthood members possess divine authority.

The Sacrament of Baptism

The committee upheld the value and appropriateness of the current practice of believer baptism (baptism following personal confession of faith), done by immersion, in the RLDS church. Our scriptures, as well as our tradition's strong emphasis on human agency and responsibility, make this mode of baptism fitting. It is particularly expressive, as well, of the nature of discipleship: We see our baptism as a divine act that incorporates us into Christ's life, passion, death, and resurrection. Baptism is an event with multiple meanings: cleansing, new creation, death and rebirth, resurrection to a new way of life, the remission of sins, God's gracious initiative among us, etc. The committee was in agreement that whatever the church may ultimately decide to do about rebaptism, at least in regard to baptism, the church must attach greater, not lesser, importance to it. And the committee likewise accorded high significance to the sacrament, seeing it as more than a ritual of entry into an institution.



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A majority of the committee favored accepting other Christian baptisms as valid expressions of the sacrament. As to the mode of baptism, some argued that given the highly symbolic nature of the sacramental act, it was theologically inappropriate to maintain that only baptism by immersion could be considered valid. Some historical evidence suggests that immersion, affusion (pouring), and aspersion (sprinkling) were all practiced as early as the first century. Moreover, the mode of symbolizing cannot be considered more important than the thing symbolized. Each type can become the vehicle by which the Holy Spirit brings about new creation in those who have faith.

Among those committee members who favored the reception of other Christian baptisms, several options were discussed. One option was to accept only believer baptisms, that is, only those baptisms that were performed on confession of faith. Another option was to accept all baptisms, but in the case of infant baptisms, to accept only those that were followed by confirmation and active participation in the life of that denomination.

In either case, there was unanimous agreement that some rite of entrance still would be needed. The majority of those who favored the reception of other baptisms held that the new members still should be confirmed. A minority of those who favored the reception of other baptisms argued that it was inappropriate to confirm them, if this was understood as the imparting of the Spirit, because, in effect, it would be claiming that the Spirit had not been at work in their lives and discipleship to this point. But even those opposed to calling the rite “confirmation” still envisioned some use of the laying on of hands in the setting of public worship. From

this discussion, it became evident that the committee was still affirming the belief that the RLDS Church had an authority and special identity worth preserving; thus, for all those who favored the reception of other Christian baptisms, some public act would still be needed to help those who come from other Christian traditions affirm before the body their intentions to join in the great and marvelous work.

There was agreement, however, that infant baptism does present some difficulties. In light of the Book of Mormon’s strong condemnation of the practice, and further, in light of the RLDS tradition’s high valuation of human freedom in relation to God, it seemed inadvisable to some on the committee to accept infant baptism as an appropriate expression of commitment to discipleship. There also has been a tendency in the RLDS tradition to see the purpose of baptism almost solely as the remission of sins, which makes infant baptism seem illogical.

Nevertheless, others argued that the Book of Mormon’s position was aimed at a particular theological position associated with infant baptism (i.e., that unbaptized infants would be damned), and thus could not be used for a wholesale condemnation of the practice. Many traditions that baptize infants do so for sound theological reasons. For example, Methodists base the practice on a theology of the prevenient reality of grace (that is, that God’s grace is actively seeking us out before we are even aware of it), and the Reformed (Calvinist) traditions do so on the basis of the biblical idea of the divine establishment and maintenance of the covenant. In these cases, different ways of reading the biblical testimony result in practices different from our own. Clearly the fruits of the Spirit are in evidence in many people who have been baptized as infants and confirmed as young adults, and who take their discipleship seriously. And some of the commit-



tee maintained that the traditional RLDS position has been inadequate because it reduces the many rich meanings of baptisms to one meaning (i.e., the remission of sins) and does not take the universal and social nature of sin with full seriousness (reducing sin merely to those sinful acts committed by an individual). Given the principles established in the above sections of this report, some on the committee would be willing to allow the full validity of these forms of Christian commitment.

Those on the committee who favored the reception of other Christian baptisms were agreed that further intensive, serious, and sensitive study will have to be given to the question of infant baptism. There are some points of contact between our practice of blessing infants and baptizing older children (age eight and up) and the practice of many denominations of baptizing infants and confirming older children and adolescents. These points of contact deserve further exploration, because, as some on the committee suggested, they are not as different as they may seem at first glance.

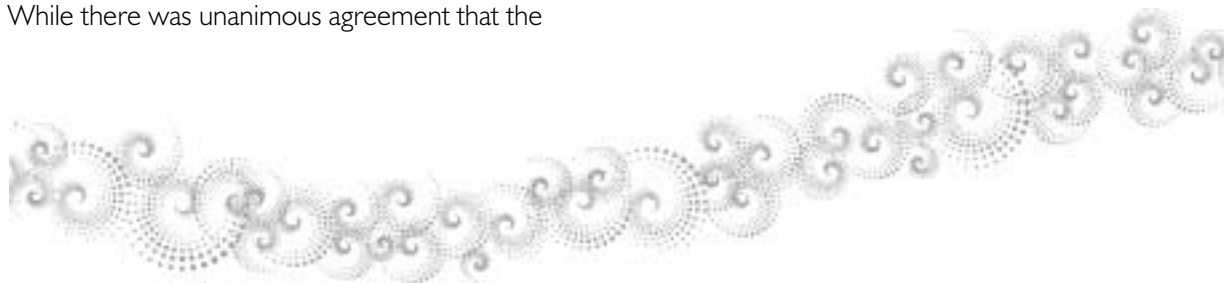
The committee also wants to make it very clear that at no time did any member suggest that a change in our practice be made simply to make joining the church “easier.” The fundamental issue for those who favored accepting other Christian baptisms, as well as for those on the committee who favored retaining our present practice, was how to be faithful to the truth of the gospel. That was the overriding motive and concern of the committee’s deliberations.

Scripture and the Nature of Doctrine

The committee was very aware of the role scripture plays in any discussion of doctrinal issues. While there was unanimous agreement that the

church’s position on baptism should be grounded in scripture, there was disagreement on how scripture should actually operate in the discussion. The movement from scripture to doctrines and practices is not always smooth, and while all affirmed that scripture contains or bears witness to revelation, not everyone could agree on the actual content of that revelation. Committee members agreed that the paradigms by which we interpret scripture largely will determine the result. It was agreed by a majority that the New Testament ought to have a central role in shaping our understanding of baptism. The role of Doctrine and Covenants 20 was considered to be ambiguous by some on the committee. Though this section is one of the primary texts used to support rebaptism, its declaration that God is simply doing away with all previous covenants seemed an inadequate way of portraying the God revealed in the gospel. Does this mean that God cannot be trusted to keep covenants? Is God to be understood here as being unfaithful or whimsical? What, then, happens to the constant biblical affirmation of God’s faithfulness? Moreover, the difficulties expressed above in regard to the primitivist and restorationist beliefs of the church apply equally to the message of Doctrine and Covenants 20. Thus for some, the question of rebaptism has to be approached not on the basis of individual passages of scripture, but on the basis of the whole scriptural witness to the nature and character of God, as that is understood in the present experience of the church.

The question of rebaptism is doctrinal in nature. Therefore, what doctrines are and how they function in the life of the church is an important



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theological issue. Furthermore, understanding how doctrines develop and change is equally vital. That they do develop is a fact. For example, at one time the Restoration movement believed in and practiced vicarious baptism (baptism for the dead). But the Reorganization later repudiated it; briefly put, the RLDS Church made a doctrinal change. This example establishes a precedent in our movement for reevaluating and changing beliefs and practices. One of the church's theological tasks is to be clear about the grounds on which it makes changes in doctrine.

Serious questions have to be asked. What do we mean by doctrinal constancy, doctrinal development? What is the relationship of doctrine to practice and experience, and to previous revelation? Are there unsound reasons to change doctrines as well as sound ones? And in the RLDS tradition, what is the relationship of the president's prophetic function to the issue of doctrinal change? There was some discussion of the need for more clear doctrinal boundaries in the contemporary church, and the committee was in general agreement that a clearer sense of what we believe, teach, and confess as a body is needed.

Doctrine is intimately connected to identity; it has a sociological, as well as strictly theological, function. The committee members were aware of the sociological implications that past doctrinal changes have had for the church. We devoted considerable discussion to the pastoral ramifications of changing our position on rebaptism, as well as the implications of not changing it. On this basis we unanimously decided that a long-term period of denomination-wide study would be appropriate.

In some respects, the theological underpinnings of our present practice have already disappeared, but in any case, the church as a whole needs to resolve this issue. In the process we may very well

come to a new doctrinal consensus, and thus a new sense of our identity and mission.

We need in this process to be able to help members rediscover why their membership in this movement ought to be viewed as special.

Pastoral Care

Throughout its deliberations, the committee had foremost in its mind the pastoral well-being of the church. *We unanimously agreed that the committee must not understand its role as coercive in any way.* We have all solicited the opinions of other members, and we have received many letters from church members concerned about the issue. Our ultimate hope has been to help the church rediscover its own theological task, not to impose theological conclusions on the body. And more than anything else, we all longed for a richer, deeper expression of Christian discipleship—in short, a new appreciation for our baptism into Christ—to be the outcome of this study. Many on the committee expressed that while they knew where their heads were on this issue, they were unsure where their hearts were. But if the genuine concern committee members expressed toward each other despite differing opinions is an indicator of what can happen to the whole church, then we have reason to be hopeful for the course church-wide study of this issue will take.

Results of the Graceland Theology Colloquy

The second Graceland Theology Colloquy met November 5–7, 1993, at Graceland College to explore the theme "Authority, Membership, and Baptism." Through papers and discussion groups, participants considered the various theological questions connected with current RLDS baptismal

practices. Colloquy addresses and presentations are being collected for publication under the auspices of Graceland/Park Press.

The following is a sample of the suggestions that came from colloquy participants.

The Joint Council:

First Presidency
 Council of Twelve
 Presiding Bishopric

1. The church will need to continue to encourage and promote at the local and national levels the kind of dialogue that occurred at the colloquy.

2. The Committee on Issues Regarding Conditions for Membership, or one like it, needs to continue its work on the issues of authority, membership, and baptism.

3. The church must be careful not to be trapped by a time-line as it pursues more light on the issue of its baptismal practices, and must be careful not to search for a quick fix.

4. More World Church officers need to be involved in this dialogue.

5. Every attempt must be made to allow for a variety of perspectives to be voiced.

6. While we need to take our time as a church in dealing with these issues, we must be encouraged not to wait too long to deal with them.

7. Greater attempts must be made to make connections with the wider Christian tradition; real and direct liaisons with other Christian traditions need to be sought out.

8. We must give scripture a central role in our attempts to deal with these questions.

9. More discussion of the nature of salvation is needed.

10. A balance of well-stated positions is needed.

11. A desire for justice must undergird all that we do.

12. Models for dialogue will be needed as the church attempts to wrestle with these questions.

Affirmations

The committee reaffirms that our present practice of blessing infants and baptizing and confirming youths and adults who have declared their allegiance to Jesus Christ is a faithful expression of the gospel.

We also affirm the centrality of baptism to discipleship and that the true nature of discipleship is expressed in the event of baptism. We are baptized into Christ's life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and coming again. Discipleship is a process of continually rediscovering the meaning of our baptism. Our true identity as human beings created to bear God's image is given to us in this sacrament.

We also affirm the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life. The sacraments re-present the gospel to us. They retell the story of God's mighty acts and incorporate human beings into the drama of redemption. They are a means of grace, the means by which God reaches out to the church and to the world. They are the way we declare who God is: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things. And they are the way we state who we are before God: those whose lives are being transformed by God's grace and boundless love.

We also affirm that the RLDS tradition has been divinely established and authorized to proclaim the gospel of peace and administer the sacraments of God's reconciling love.

Recommendations

1. In addition to encouragement of continued study by World Church leaders, we recommend an open discussion of the topic of baptism, rebap-



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tism, and conditions of membership throughout the church. We feel such a discussion is appropriate and timely, and a sign of denominational strength and maturity.

2. It is appropriate that theological and doctrinal positions, and accompanying practices, be reexamined in light of careful interpretation of scriptural texts and the historical context in which they were given.

3. We recommend the development of a study text that addresses the historical and theological background and significance of baptism, as well as a representative variety of positions on baptism and rebaptism on other denominations and our own. The text should be in terminology that does not compromise the complexity and necessary analysis but communicates to students of different educational levels and cultural backgrounds. (An outline for recommended text was provided to the First Presidency. It should be a text with exercises, questions, and an affective approach. It would be helpful, for example, to have class participants write their own position on baptism, or attempt to write the position of someone on the other side of the issue. Good listening exercises and activities will be essential. The text could be developed with consensus-building skills reflected in the activities.)

4. We also recommend that this study text be commended to the whole body, and that the whole church undergo a two- to four-year period of prayerful and careful study of this text and attendant issues.

5. We recommend that the issue of rebaptism and membership not be decided, at least at this point, in the legislative and administrative processes of the church, but through a process of consensus building in a "grassroots" method that gives greater

emphasis to the entire community's participation in working to achieve consensus.

6. We recommend further the production of a study guide to accompany the publication of the papers from the 1993 Theology Colloquy on "Authority, Baptism, and Membership," and that this resource be used in addition to the aforementioned study text.

7. It is critical that the church provide resources (worship helps, articles in the *Herald*, etc.) that affirm the importance of the sacraments, especially of baptism, to our discipleship, and affirm, moreover, the nature of Christian discipleship as a life-long process of following Jesus.

8. We recommend consideration of extending the period of service of a Committee on Conditions for Membership. Such a committee could assist in follow-up of recommendations for further study, for resource development, and for facilitating the process of exploring this issue throughout the church.

Issues Regarding Conditions for Membership Committee

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