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The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: VII. Our Baptism Takes on New Meaning

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The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living

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VII. OUR BAPTISM TAKES ON NEW MEANING

To some people baptism has little meaning. At best it appears to them simply as a religious ceremony, an initiatory rite, to distinguish a member of a religious sect from a non-member. They see little if any connection between baptism and religious living.

Even among Latter-day Saints we are prone to think of baptism as an event which transpired in our childhood or as a commandment to be fulfilled by converts of the Church now as always. Often our own baptism lacks significant, vital meaning to us today.

Some of us are deeply grateful to Book of Mormon writers for the light they throw upon the subject of baptism. For it is there, for the first time, that insight is given into the full meaning of our baptism. Yes, the Nephite Scripture adds much to Biblical teachings on this subject. In fact Book of Mormon references to baptism confirm the assertion of its authors that this book contains the Gospel of Jesus Christ in plainness and simplicity. (See I Nephi 13:35, 36.) It is the purpose of this article to point out what we think are some Book of Mormon contributions to our un-

derstanding of baptism, for here as always the religion of this book is functional and dynamic.

New Testament Ideas of Baptism

The other day a Bible scholar of a liberal Protestant faith said that if baptism were so important it would have been stressed more often by the Savior and His disciples. Direct statements about baptism and its meaning are not too numerous in the New Testament although great importance is placed upon it by some of them. We learn that Jesus suffered himself to be baptized "to fulfill all righteousness." Just what is meant by that we are not told in the Gospels. We learn, too, that "except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3.) John the Baptist baptized "with water unto repentance" (Matt. 3:11), and Peter declared, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:37-39.) The Savior's last admonition to the Twelve, according to Mark, was, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel

to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” (Mark 16:15, 16.) Paul adds some meaning to the symbolism in the ordinance of baptism by comparing it with a burial and resurrection.

From these and other New Testament references we learn of the necessity of baptism in order to receive (1) the remission of sins, (2) entrance into the kingdom and (3) the gift of the Holy Ghost. Beyond this the Biblical record does not seem to go.

Book of Mormon Contributions

It is in the Book of Mormon that baptism is given a key and meaningful position at the very heart of Christian living. Let us illustrate. Alma (the Elder) had converted several hundred persons to Christ. They applied for baptism. Before performing the ordinance, Alma taught them its meaning in thought-laden and inspiring words:

“. . . 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?” (Mosiah 18:8-10.)

Our Witness to a Covenant

The great teaching in the Book of Mormon on baptism is this: Baptism is a witness of a covenant or an agreement between Deity and us. There are two parties to a covenant and, to be binding, conditions must be fulfilled by both parties to the agreement. Deity promises us what the New Testament teaches—forgiveness of sin, entrance into the Kingdom, and the Holy Ghost. The Nephite record makes it clear that our part is even more than repentance—it is to stand as witnesses of the Lord at all times, to serve him, and keep his commandments as Alma’s words attest.

Baptism is to launch us into Christian living in every day life, “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light . . .” Alma’s converts understood him, for “they did walk uprightly before God, imparting to one another both temporally and spiritually according to their needs and wants.” (Mosiah 18:29.)

The Meaning of Christ’s Baptism

Earlier in the Book of Mormon, Nephi teaches this same doctrine with a remarkable application to the baptism of Jesus. The reader will

recall that when Jesus came to John to be baptized of Him, "John forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?"

And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness."

Just what Jesus meant by the expression, "to fulfill all righteousness," is not clarified in the Gospels. Some of us had thought with John, that Jesus had no need of "baptism unto repentance" nor into His own kingdom. We assumed He was baptized simply as a matter of form and to set us an example.

Nephi has changed our minds on this subject. He knew and gives us a beautiful and new interpretation of Christ's baptism.

He writes, ". . . I would ask you, my beloved brethren, wherein the Lamb of God did fulfill all righteousness in being baptized by water? Know ye not that he was holy?"

Then Nephi proceeds to answer his own question: ". . . notwithstanding he being holy, he showeth unto the children of men that, according to the flesh, *he humbleth himself before the Father and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments.*" (II Nephi 31:6-7.)

Christ's baptism was not just a formality. Neither was it simply an act of conformity to encourage our obedience. Nephi leads us to believe that it had real meaning and significance to the Savior, Himself—

his witness to the Father of his covenant to do his will.

"To fulfill all righteousness" means nothing less than to do the will of God for He is a God of righteousness. Christ's baptism was His witness to His Eternal Father and to us of His dedication to the Will of God and to righteousness.

Baptism means to give as well as to receive. It is our witness to dedicate our lives to the Will of God and his Son. Nephi invites us to share in the covenant of baptism with the Savior:

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism—yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; . . ." (II Nephi 31:13.)

Mormon's epistle to his son, Moroni, on infant baptism further illustrates the dynamic concept of baptism taught in the Book of Mormon. After calling infant baptism "putting trust in dead works," Mormon writes,

"And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meek-

ness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God.” (Moroni 8:25, 26.)

As one reads these words of Mormon, one thinks no more of the ordinances of the gospel as ceremonial performances, necessary to salvation merely because so commanded. They even become more than symbols and tokens. They become our living witness of our devotion to Christ in word and deed and the assurance of the companionship and guidance of the Father, the Son, and the Comforter.

The Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant

Another entirely original and deeply significant meaning of our baptism is made in the Book of Mormon in the very last book by Moroni. It is here for the first time in any scripture that we find the sacramental prayers, the blessings of the bread and the water.

In those simple yet profound prayers we find not only a memorial to the sacrificial love of the Savior, but also our own deep response to

that love. The words in the prayer, “and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them,” (Moroni 4:3) are almost identical with those used by Alma to teach the meaning of baptism. (See Mosiah 18:10.)

We partake of the sacrament to reaffirm our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to witness again, as we did in our baptism our “faith in Christ our Head.”

Wherever baptism is discussed in the Book of Mormon, it is in the spirit of our obligation and covenant to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. From Nephi to Alma to Mormon and Moroni the teaching is the same. This emphasis is unique and may truly inspire finer gospel living if we capture the meaning and spirit of baptism as taught in the Nephite record.

Readings on baptism in the Book of Mormon:

II Nephi 31; Mosiah 18; Alma 7:14-16; Moroni 6:1-4 and 8:—.

Compare also Doc. and Cov. 20:37 with Moroni 6:1-3.

“Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

“For he that is dead is freed from sin.

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.

“Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”

(Romans 6:6, 7, 12, 13.)