

Genealogy Conference Talk

By Elder Simmons

It is a wonderful privilege to be among you who are “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Thank you for caring and for responding to the spirit of Elijah.

As President Spencer W. Kimball opened the April 1981 General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he said:

“As the Brethren of the First Presidency and the Twelve have meditated upon and prayed about the great latter-day work the Lord has given us to do, we are impressed that the mission of the Church is threefold:

To proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people;

To perfect the Saints by preparing them to receive the ordinances of the gospel and by instruction and discipline to gain exaltation;

To redeem the dead by performing vicarious ordinance of the gospel for those who have lived on the earth.

“All three are part of one work—to assist our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, in Their grand and glorious mission ‘to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man’” (Moses 1:39). (“A Report of My Stewardship,” President Spencer W. Kimball, *Ensign*, May 1981.)

The recognition of this threefold mission goes back at least to 1939 and the writing of Apostle John A. Widtsoe in his book, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939, 152), in which Elder Widtsoe describes the threefold duty which rests upon the Church, namely:

“To keep the members of the Church in the way of their full duty.

“To teach the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it or accepted it.

“To provide for the dead, through the ordinances of the temple, the means by which the dead, if obedient, may participate in the blessings that are enjoyed by those who have won citizenship in the Kingdom of God.”

In the intervening years since President Kimball's statement, we have become accustomed to today's shorthand: the threefold mission of the Church is: 1) Proclaim the Gospel; 2) Perfect the Saints; 3) Redeem the Dead.

But irrespective of its categorical parts, the mission of the Church is and always has been to invite all to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32).

As stated, God's work and glory are to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. It is essential, if he attains immortality and eternal life, that a man come unto Jesus Christ, because only Christ has the power to grant access and perfect him.

The invitation to come unto Christ pertains to *all who have lived, or will ever live*, on the earth (Church Handbook of Instructions, Book 1: Stake Presidencies and Bishoprics [1998], 9).

All are entitled to the invitation; *all* are entitled to decide; *all* are entitled to the opportunity—whether they now live in mortality or have died without having the opportunity. And the inexpressible and marvelous wonder of it all is that God has made all of this possible in His great plan.

The invitation consists of teaching the gospel and making the *essential* ordinances available. A person accepts the invitation to come unto Christ and be perfected in him by receiving His specified ordinances and entering into the attendant covenants.

Living persons are currently invited to come unto Christ by 52,000-plus full-time missionaries who are proclaiming the gospel and extending the invitation to people around the world. Those who accept the invitation receive the ordinances personally. It will take much time and enormous effort—but it will be done. "The harvest is great, and the lab'ers are few; But if we're united, we all things can do" ("Ye Elders of Israel," *Hymns*, no. 319).

Living members of the Church receive the saving ordinances personally.

An ordinance is a sacred act with a symbolic meaning, administered by one having priesthood authority (Church Handbook of Instructions, Book 1: Stake Presidencies and Bishoprics [1998], 9). Some ordinances are required for exaltation in the celestial kingdom, that is, to return to live with God and become like Him. These essential ordinances include baptism, confirmation, Melchizedek Priesthood ordination (for men), the temple endowment, and temple sealing.

All the ordinances necessary for salvation and exaltation are accompanied by covenants with God. A covenant is a sacred and enduring promise between God and His children. God sets the conditions for the covenant, and His children agree to comply with those conditions. God promises blessings that are conditional on the person faithfully fulfilling the covenant.

So the immense work of inviting living men and women to come unto Christ by receiving the ordinances and entering into the covenants proceeds.

But does God really expect that the invitation be extended to all of those unnumbered millions who have already passed through the veil or who, though living, will die before they hear the invitation? The prophet Joseph Smith would answer that question with a resounding “Yes.” He said:

“Ordinances instituted in the heavens before the foundation of the world, in the priesthood, for the salvation of men, are not to be altered or changed. *All* must be saved on the same principles” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 308; italics added).

*All—living and dead—*must be saved on the same principles. God does not change (3 Nephi 24:6). What he prescribed in the beginning still applies to everyone—everyone who has lived or will live.

Joseph Smith acknowledged that that order of things might be thought to be very peculiar:

“But let me tell you that it is only to answer the will of God, by conforming to the *ordinance* and preparation that the Lord ordained and prepared *before the foundation of the world*, for the salvation of the dead *who should die without a knowledge of the gospel*” (D&C 128:5; italics added).

In other words, from before the creation of the world, God had a plan whereby those who did not receive the invitation in mortality could nevertheless accept the prescribed ordinance and become heirs of salvation—and he has given us the mandate to provide that opportunity.

The Lord affirms that the ordinance is effective “whether they themselves have attended to the ordinances in their own *propria persona* [by themselves, personally], or by the means of their own agents [vicariously]” (D&C 128:8).

Deceased persons may receive the ordinances vicariously. Vicarious ordinances become effective only when the deceased persons for whom the ordinances were performed accept them in the spirit world and honor the related covenants. They may accept them or they may reject them. (See 1 Peter 4:6; D&C 138:54.)

The Prophet stated:

“All men who become heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ will have to receive the fulness of the ordinances of his kingdom; and those who will not receive all the ordinances will come short of the fullness of that glory, if they do not lose the whole” (*Teachings*, 309).

He further clarified: “The question is frequently asked, ‘Can we not be saved without going through with all those ordinances?’ I would answer, No, not the fulness of salvation” (*Teachings*, 331).

So how is the invitation extended to the dead?

In 1918 the Lord revealed through the prophet Joseph F. Smith the manner in which the great redemption effort was commenced in the spirit world, thereby extending the invitation to those who had already left mortality. As recorded in Section 138:7–8 in the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ “being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit ... went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” President Smith was allowed to see the hosts of the dead, small and great, and recorded that:

“... the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them; but behold, from the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness ... and thus was the gospel preached to the dead” (D&C 38:29–30).

Since that time, Church members have known that a great missionary effort is being prosecuted in the spirit world, and will continue. Indeed, the Lord revealed that:

”... the faithful elders of this dispensation, *when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel* of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead” (D&C 138:57, italics added).

We are assured that:

“The dead who repent will be redeemed through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God” (D&C 138:58).

So the invitation has been and is being extended to those who have died.

In order for the ordinances to be made available to those who choose to accept the invitation, the dead must be identified.

As President Gordon B. Hinckley has said:

“The exaltation of our father’s family rests upon the completion of required ordinances, if all are to move forward on the road that leads to immortality and eternal life. The

determination of accurate family history records, and the work that follows in the temples, are basic in this vast undertaking which the Lord has placed upon our shoulders” (Phoenix Arizona North/West Regional Conference, January 13, 1991).

From the earliest days of this dispensation, individuals have engaged in family genealogical research. Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, Franklin D. Richards and others did extensive family research. In due time, self-appointed “genealogical missionaries” traveled from Church headquarters to visit relatives, copy family Bibles and other records, visited parish churches and trekked to cemeteries seeking information regarding deceased ancestors. Between 1885 and 1900, it would appear that at least 178 saints became genealogical missionaries (Allen, James B., Jessie L. Embry, and Kahlile B. Mehr. 1995. *Hearts Turned to the Fathers, BYU Studies, Brigham Young University, Provo UT*, 40).

A revelation to President Wilford Woodruff in 1894 caused the saints to focus on *family* research, organizing researched names into specific family units, rather than simply collecting names of ancestors.

The Genealogical Society of Utah was organized November 13, 1894 and began organized searching for valued records worldwide. Rather than expecting people to travel to original record sources, the Church organized teams to bring copies of the records back to the genealogical researchers. The growth of the Society during the early years was modest, but the library collection grew steadily. However limited that actual growth might have been, the vision of this great work had no limitations. In 1912, Nephi Anderson, a Society staff member, said:

“I see the records of the dead and their histories gathered from every nation under heaven to one great central library in Zion—the largest and best equipped for its particular work in the world. Branch libraries may be established in the nations, but in Zion will be the records of last resort and final authority. Trained genealogists will find constant work in all nations having unpublished records, searching among the archives for families and family connections. Then, as temples multiply, and the work enlarges to its ultimate proportions, this Society, or some organization growing out of this Society, will have in its care some elaborate, but perfect system of exact registration and checking, so that the work in the temples may be conducted without confusion or duplication. And so throughout the years, reaching into the Millennium of peace, this work of salvation will go on, until every worthy soul that can be found from earthly records will have been searched out and officiated for; and *then the unseen world will come to our aid*, the broken links will be joined, the tangled threads will be placed in order, and the purposes of God in placing salvation within the reach of all will have been consummated.” (Anderson, Nephi. “Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation,” UGH 3, January 1912:21–22; cited in *Hearts Turned*, 53; italics added).

In this ongoing process, “Of all the activities of the Genealogical Society, probably none has captured the attention of the world at large as much as its vast microfilming program—an effort to gather into one place the public, church, and private records of value to genealogical researchers. Started as a small project during the Great Depression, the microfilm program eventually became a sophisticated mainstay for the genealogical programs of the entire Church. Archivists, concerned over the loss of documents during World War II, were interested in the preservation of their records, and the willingness of the Church to fund microfilming projects offered the means to do so. The program was initially undertaken in countries where Church members had the most ancestry, but eventually burgeoned worldwide” (*Hearts Turned*, 213).

“The massive influx of films to the library in Salt Lake City necessitated the construction of adequate storage facilities” (*Hearts Turned*, 236). The Granite Mountain Records Vault was completed in the middle of January 1964. “Each of six vault rooms can store 885,400 one-hundred-foot rolls of microfilm. Total vault capacity can reach the equivalent of 25 million 300-page books” (*Hearts Turned*, 239–240).

The 3.5 billion images stored in the vault are currently being digitized. By creating digital images of the microfilm, it will be even easier for people around the world to access the records in the vault and do meaningful research online. Under the old system of scanning microfilm, this massive project would have taken more than 100 years, but with new technology, the effort will be complete in a decade (“LDS-owned Granite Mountain Records Vault is moving genealogy files to digital,” *Standard-Examiner* (Ogden, UT), May 1, 2010). Currently, the vault is digitizing over a million images a day.

In partial fulfillment of Nephi Anderson’s vision of the work, in addition to the Family History Library and other centralized library facilities, there are over 4,500 Family History Centers offering free public access to genealogical records from all over the world. These facilities are located in more than 80 countries, where users can search billions of online records and access an LDS circulating collection of 2.5 million microfilms from over 100 countries. There are over 140 online genealogy research courses.

Computerization and digitization and burgeoning technology make ultimate realization possible of the prediction of Archibald F. Bennett, who in 1947 said:

“A universal system of intelligent cooperation will bring together on one record sheet every fact in existence regarding a particular family. The wealth of data will assure accuracy and banish error. Expensive time-consuming duplications in research and repetitions in ordinance will be eliminated. No sooner will a fact be discovered in any part of the world by a researcher than it will be communicated to the Archives center and be assigned to its proper place on some family record” (*Church News*, December 20, 1947, 20).

I have recently completed two years of service as the president of the Family and Church History Mission at headquarters in Salt Lake City. The mission consists of some 400 full-time senior missionaries (senior sisters and couples), 800 church service missionaries, and 70 young full-time missionaries who have been honorably excused from serving proselyting missions. All of these missionaries serve on the headquarters campus, assigned to 20 zones or workplaces in the Family History Department and the Church History Department. In those assignments, they perform a myriad of duties ranging from assisting patrons, to shelving books, indexing, digitizing, etc. The mission does not make policy nor does it make management decisions, but performs the work which the respective departments need accomplished, and the missionaries work hand in hand with the employees and staff in discovering and making available all the tools and information to facilitate this great work. As I have observed the operations of the departments, and as I have visited with and interviewed the missionaries, I have become increasingly and emphatically aware of the exceptional service provided to all.

A short time ago, one of our full-time missionaries, Sister Martha Boye, was delighted to introduce genealogists from her hometown genealogy group to the Family History Library during their visit to Salt Lake City. Upon their return home, their group newsletter contained the following report:

“A Journey to the Genealogists’ Disneyland”

“Last week we journeyed to Delaware, Germany, Alabama, Illinois, England, Tennessee, Missouri, Ireland, among many other locations: We being fourteen members of the Genealogical and Historical Society of Kendall County. We did all this by visiting the ‘Family Historians’ Disneyland,’ the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah.

“Imagine visiting a place where there is likely a record of nearly every one of your ancestors for four or five centuries! These records are tucked away in over 2½ million microfilms and thousands of books stored in the library, or available from a vault in a Utah mountain. Recorded on the microfilm are original records from all over the world.”

Their awestruck response to the Family History Library is typical and illustrates the magnificent resource which the Church has made available in this largest library of its kind in the world, open to the general public without charge, accommodating an estimated 1,500 visits each day.

It is clear that the Church is fully committed to honoring its obligation and mandate to invite all to come unto Christ and be perfected in Him. But it is also clear that an equal effort is being made by those who have passed from this life to the next, and who are anxious to accept the invitation in the spirit world as a result of the great missionary effort being prosecuted there. This is impressively demonstrated by remarks given in a zone devotional August 24, 2010 by

Elder Howard Cheney, who has given exceptional and dedicated service for many years to prepare precious records for temple processing (in other words, to *extend the invitation*). Elder Cheney says:

“When someone asks me what I enjoy the most about my mission experience, my answer is that every day I am blessed to do things I cannot do. Each day we serve, if we are observant and sensitive, we may witness miracles that take place in the Lord’s marvelous work of redemption. It would take many hours to discuss just a few of them; however I would like to briefly mention some of those I have been privileged to witness.

“They range from the miracle involved in stupor of thought, forcing us to back up to an error that we have inadvertently made so we may correct it before we move forward, to the miracle of reading languages that we cannot read, and writing that is illegible, yet we are blessed to read it as the need arises. Another significant miracle we see is the Lord providing very special people with very specialized skills at the precise moment when they are needed. (Such as) the volunteer who just happened to arrive when we were processing millions of very old and difficult Spanish records for the temples. Brother and Sister Endrek came to this country where their daughter was a citizen because Brother Endrek’s kidneys were failing. He had dialysis three times a week. He learned from his daughter, who learned from a missionary having dental work done in her office, that we needed help with Spanish. A most coincidental process? Or a miracle? I was amazed the first Saturday that Brother Endrek came to work with me at his ability to read the mid-600 Spain Spanish records. He spoke no English, and I asked his daughter and wife how he could read this so fluently. They indicated that he was a retired professor of languages at the National University of Cordoba in Argentina. He told me that the records were not in Spanish but an ancient pre-Spanish language. He read fluently what the rest of us could not begin to read. Not only was the language difficult but the quality of the records was very poor. He helped us process roughly 4 million names for the temples in this very difficult Spanish. It took about a year, and during the entire time he was receiving kidney dialysis and yet continuing to serve each day. When the work was completed, he was released from this life and taken to be with so many whom he had served.

“When we needed help with Portuguese, Brother Wall, in his 80s, served every day until the project was completed; at the same time, his wife was taken ill and he had to be at home with her. When we had some Russian that we needed to process, Kathy Wellisch, a young woman who had just returned from her mission in Russia and had studied Russian in college prior to her mission, walked in to volunteer.

“When we needed some help with Chinese, Jeffrey Anderson was available, who had served a Chinese-speaking mission and had furthered his reading and writing skills following his mission.

“Sister Heidenthaller came on a mission to help her grandson serve for two years. She came as we needed help with Gothic German. This was the language she learned to write when she was a child. She has aided in the processing of some 18 million German records, and incidental to that has helped with the Scandinavian and French records. She continued to serve after her grandson completed his two-year mission, extending several times. As we were working on the last of our German publication and temple records, she coincidentally was being released almost simultaneously. This same scenario has been repeated over and over again as we have worked to prepare these precious records for temple processing. It has become so common to us that we often fail to see the miracle. The Lord’s hand is visible, if we look, in every facet of His marvelous work of redemption.

“We frequently witness the miracle of a series of coincidences that the odds of occurring simultaneously are one in billions, and yet they do, and as a result we see a problem and are able to solve it.

“One of the most incredible miracles is the impact in the lives of those who work in the field in this marvelous work of redemption. Those who are terminally ill, who continue to work in the wee hours of the morning when they cannot sleep because of the pain, but they feel the sweetness of the Spirit as they work with these sacred records, extracting information that will allow others to experience the precious blessings with these sacred records, extracting information that will allow others to experience the precious blessings of the temple ordinances. Like a sister who was in the process of dying, who said to her home teacher of many years: ‘You have asked me for years if there was anything that you could do for me. I have always said, no, we are fine. Now I will say yes, there is one thing you can do for me. I am extracting some birth records so these people can enjoy the blessing of the temple. I am afraid I may not live to complete the extraction of the sacred data. I would like you to come and learn the process and complete the extraction of this film in case I am unable to do so.’ He learned and completed the data.”

We are being assisted in this work as we attempt to fulfill the mission of the Church—to invite all to come unto Christ.

As taught by the prophet Joseph Smith:

“The Bible says, ‘I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. ...What is the object of this important mission? Or how is it to be fulfilled? The keys are to be delivered, the spirit of Elijah is to come, the Gospel to be established, the Saints of God gathered, Zion built up, and the Saints to come up as *Saviors on Mount Zion*. But how are they to become Saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, *in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead and redeem them* that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fills the mission of Elijah” (*Teachings*, 330; italics added).

The Spirit of Elijah is real—it moves upon people, causing their hearts to turn to their fathers. As they do this great work, they are assisted by those beyond the veil.

In our generation, President Hinckley has said:

“I have been tremendously impressed with the priority which the Lord has given this work.

“The great promise of this work, the work of turning the hearts of the children to their fathers that their fathers might be fully redeemed, was given before the Book of Mormon plates were received, before the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood were restored, before the Church was organized.

“The actual keys of this work were not restored until 1836, after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, when Moses, Elias, and Elijah appeared and bestowed the keys which each held. But the priority of this work, emphasizing the importance of it, was established that night in 1823, thirteen years earlier.

“It is interesting to observe that it was following the restoration of these keys that there commenced a growing interest in family history. The spirit of Elijah, as we speak of it, began to rest upon people, impelling them to look for their ancestral roots. In 1844, the New England Historic Genealogical Society was organized. It was the first of its kind in America, and has continued as a strong and viable organization. It was followed by many others, as millions of people looked back to their fathers. Most have regarded their work as a matter of curiosity. But there has been a purpose in it, unknown to many, but plainly evident to us. It concerns the redemption of the dead. It is concerned with their eternal welfare and their progress along the road that leads to immortality and eternal life.

“In that process there must be a twofold effort—the research needed to establish the identity of these individuals, and the administration of ordinances by vicarious agents working in their behalf. The first is concerned with family history research, the second with temple activity. Family research would serve no other purpose than the satisfaction of curiosity if the temple work did not follow. Likewise, only a portion of the purpose of temples would be met if there were not family history research.

“Ordinances for the living, of course, could go forward. But the Lord would be a respecter of persons, discriminating in favor of a few, unless there were means by which the opportunities for these ordinances could be extended to all” (Jordan River Temple Workers Christmas Devotional, November 27, 1994).

We have reviewed the mandated mission of the Church—

To invite all to come unto Christ and be perfected in Him.

Only He can perfect us, so we invite all to come—living and dead—by proclaiming the gospel and providing His ordinances.

The Church is doing all in its power to enable us to find our dead, and the dead are assisting in this work. But even though the Church, as an organization, provides the most accurate and complete data and the finest and most efficient technology, *we* are the Church, and if the mission of the Church is accomplished, *we* must accomplish it.

So we return to where we began:

It is a wonderful privilege to be among you who are “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

May the Lord bless you in this great work!