



The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 10: Mission Preparation

Preparing to Serve

President Spencer W. Kimball declared:

When I ask for more missionaries, I am not asking for more testimony-barren or unworthy missionaries, I am asking that we start earlier and train our missionaries better in every branch and ward in the world. That is another challenge -- that the young people will understand that it is a great privilege to go on a mission and that they must be physically well, mentally well, spiritually well, and that the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. I am asking for missionaries who have been carefully indoctrinated and trained through the family and the organizations of the Church, and who come to the mission with a great desire. I am asking for better interviews, more searching interviews, more sympathetic and understanding interviews, but especially that we train prospective missionaries much better, much earlier, much longer, so that each anticipates his mission with great joy.^[125]

Protestant mission mobilizer Donald McGavran noted: "The first requirement for church growth on the mission field is for the Church at home to produce and send forth the right kind of seed abroad ... The missionary, as the first seed of the Church, will reproduce his own type of faith and spiritual vigor in the life of his converts ... Vigorous Christians produce vigorous converts ... The first step in church growth is to have missionaries who are vital Christians, who will inspire in converts a true spirit of sacrifice for the Gospel and a burning passion for souls."^[126] Alma taught "every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness" (Alma 32:21). One must be fully converted before one can convert others, and one cannot instill a greater degree of conversion in others than one has personally experienced.

Being an effective missionary requires an integrated balance of gospel attributes, including obedience to God, selflessness, love of the people, ability to understand and relate, and an inexhaustible drive to contact, teach, truly convert, and reap an abundant harvest. The Lord proclaimed: "No one can assist in this work except he shall be humble and full of love, having faith, hope, and charity, being temperate in all things, whatsoever shall be entrusted to his care" (D&C 12:8). While it is possible to complete a full-time mission or serve actively in the Church without these attributes, in their absence we "cannot assist in this work": the fruits will not endure and our efforts will be for naught. As fractional retention and activity statistics from many areas of the world demonstrate, until we develop the required scriptural attributes and "an eye single to the glory of God," we are only deceiving ourselves and playing games at the expense of others. The most important commandment for us is the one with which we have the most trouble. Similarly, the attributes that are the hardest for us deserve the most attention since they are usually the ones that are limiting our progress.

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A Love for the Lost

It has often been said that 90 percent of a mission president's job is motivating missionaries. I may not be in strict agreement with that, but the importance of motivation is undeniable. A wise bishop stated: "Any mission president will tell you candidly that 20% of the missionaries do 80% of the work. Those are the 20% of the missionaries who go to preach the gospel. For the other 80%, the mission is the main experience -- gaining a testimony."^[127] Some missionaries have a strong, nearly inexhaustible inner drive for faithful and fruitful service, while some others who have attended the same church meetings and seminary meetings and sometimes have even been reared in the same family go through the motions while demonstrating little energy or initiative. The first group carries their motivation and resolve within themselves, while even the most inspiring talks and impassioned pleas from mission leaders produce little more than a short burst of energy in the second. I have often observed missionaries from fine families who give moving talks and doctrinally solid lessons and appear in social situations to be ideal "Mormons" in every way, yet squander time in the mission field and never fully overcome their fear of approaching strangers about the gospel. Truly many are called, but few are chosen.

LDS Missionary Department studies document that missionary work ethic and productivity in the mission field correlate highly with having a mother who does not work and with mission expenses that are paid largely or in full by the missionary himself. As many young men approach mission age, the question is frequently whether to serve at all. If one is preoccupied with the

question of whether or not to serve, instead of the question of how to serve effectively from youth, the delay undermines both spiritual and financial preparation for missionary service. Those who have made major personal financial sacrifices by working to fund their missions throughout their adolescence, generally retain greater vision and motivation in the mission field than those who serve missions as the result of a last-minute decision with little planning or sacrifice. While most converts and youth in developing nations cannot fully fund their own missions, there are few reasons for lifetime members in developed nations to arrive at mission age without being able to pay most or all of their personal missionary expenses.

What makes the difference between the missionaries and members who experience a fading burst of energy after inspirational pep talks and those who hold within themselves a deep and constant drive to share the gospel? The secret of motivation is charity. Those who have it in sufficient degree do not require external motivation; those who lack it respond only transiently to external motivators. Charity banishes the fear of man that impedes missionary outreach. John taught: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). Charity is love based on Christ rather than on human relationships. It instills perspective and does not allow our caring to be monopolized by a few investigators making little progress while many other individuals have never been approached with the gospel message. Moroni taught that "charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him" (Moroni 7:47).

Each Latter-day Saint must develop charity, which leads us to share the gospel. The number of unreached individuals in the world is virtually unlimited, while each of us has finite time and energy. Jim Rohn stated, "Without a sense of urgency, desire loses its value." As any procrastination on our part will result in the loss of opportunities to our fellow men, the work of sharing the gospel cannot be compartmentalized into brief periods of life when we are serving as full-time missionaries or are assigned to missionary-related callings. Love is the foundation from which all other missionary attributes arise. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart stated: "Neither a lofty degree of intelligence nor imagination, nor both together, go to the making of a genius. Love, love, love: that is the soul of genius." A love of the Lord, a love of missionary work, and a love of people are prerequisites for both the understanding and effective implementation of missionary efforts. George Washington Carver observed: "There is nothing that will not reveal its secrets if you love it enough."

Few individuals who have grown up in active families in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can fully appreciate the depth of spiritual need of the unreached. For many, the gospel and the support system of faithful families, scripture, and church have been a constant rock in life providing meaning, counsel, and direction. Those who converted to the Church at considerable personal sacrifice, as well as those who have experienced the loss of a loved one or serious personal setbacks, may appreciate at least to a small degree the breadth of anguish and depth of need caused by the absence of the gospel message. The love which is central to missionary work requires a change of heart which is contrary to the natural man, "for all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Philippians 2:21).

The burning desire to reach the unreached can be developed only through obedience and great personal sacrifice. The practices of studying the scriptures daily and keeping a journal can keep charity alive in our hearts by helping us to remember our own nothingness and eternal debt to God. The welfare of our fellow men should be a constant object of thought and prayer. Nephi, Enos, Alma, Mormon, and others prayed fervently for the welfare of their brethren (2 Nephi 33:3, Alma 38:14, Enos 1:11, Words of Mormon 1:8, Mormon 8:24). Some of the greatest missionaries of scripture, including Alma, the sons of Mosiah, and the Apostle Paul, developed a love for the lost through personal suffering. Alma wrote: "There could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains ... on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (Alma 36:21). A proper understanding of the gospel, combined with charity, generates a compelling desire to share the gospel with others. The Book of Mormon records that the sons of Mosiah "were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). Similarly, many of the great missionaries of the modern era describe the burning desire to reach the lost keeping them awake at night. Each of us must vicariously feel the suffering of those who have not had an opportunity to receive the full gospel.

We are commanded to "pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ" (Moroni 7:48). Christ taught that we develop His love by sustained obedience to God: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (John 15:10). The reverse is also true: "If you keep not my commandments, the love of the Father shall not continue with you, therefore you shall walk in darkness" (D&C 95:15). When we stray from God's commandments, even in seemingly small things, our love of God -- and of our neighbor -- inevitably wane and our vision becomes clouded, although the change at the time may be imperceptible to us.

The love of God is closely tied to love of our neighbor. LDS leaders have taught that our love for others is measured by the sacrifice we make for them. Christ taught that love is a yardstick of discipleship: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). There is perhaps no greater missionary than John the Beloved, whose modern revelation teaches has remained on the earth to bring souls to Christ (D&C 7:1-8). He taught: "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us ... If a man says, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 John 4:12, 20-21). John taught that the love of the world and the love of God are ultimately mutually exclusive: "If a man love the world, the love of the father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). In this sense, we might better understand the Parable of the Rich Young Man who asked the Savior what he must do to inherit eternal life. The Savior replied: "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." Matthew records that the young man "went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:16-22). The young man had many virtues, but he lacked the most important one of all: charity, the abiding and unfailing love of Christ. Paul

taught: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13:13). The Savior taught: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

Charity can flourish only when barriers cutting us off from the Holy Spirit are removed by surrendering to God the piece of our heart that we have been holding back. A deep love of the unreached, combined with sacrifice, prayer, and hard work, can open the doors for the Spirit to work. Alma taught: "He that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing -- unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God; yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed; yea, and it shall be given unto such to bring thousands of souls to repentance, even as it has been given unto us to bring these our brethren to repentance" (Alma 26:22).

Doing the Right Things

When I started my surgical residency, a friend gave the advice: "Always do the right thing for your patient, no matter how tired you are." A memorable faculty surgeon taught the motto "TTLYM" -- treat them like your mother. These counsels are just as applicable to the mission field as to medicine. Problematic scenarios that generally lead to predictably poor results, such as a poorly prepared investigator being rushed to baptism to meet an artificial baptismal date, a monthly goal, or a missionary transfer date or the baptism of itinerants shortly before they leave an area, all sacrifice the investigator's ultimate spiritual welfare for personal considerations. In each of these examples, the missionaries demonstrate a lack of charity. When we have charity, we are driven by a desire to always do the right thing for our investigators. Our investigators' best interests are never sacrificed for programs, goals, quotas, or secondary gain. We treat each individual in the manner that we would like our mother, our best friend, or ourselves to be treated under similar circumstances.

Become a Missionary

The true test of a missionary is not simply in accepting the mission call, but in the dedication with which he or she serves daily. The decision to serve diligently should be made once and adhered to, rather than having to be decided each day. Elder David A. Bednar noted that "our rather routine emphasis on going misses the mark ... The issue is not going on a mission; rather, the issue is becoming a missionary and serving throughout our entire life with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength. It is possible for a young man to go on a mission and not become a missionary, and this is not what the Lord requires or what the Church needs. My earnest hope for each of you young men is that you will not simply go on a mission -- but that you will become missionaries long before you submit your mission papers."[\[128\]](#)

The Better Part

When many missionaries think of mission preparation, one of the first questions is what to bring. This question is primarily self-centered with the focus on personal comfort. The physical aspects can dominate and crowd out the "weightier matters of the law." Christ taught: "Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek) ... But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:31-33). Many well-meaning parents, friends, and family members, like Martha in the New Testament, worry more about serving physical needs or wants than the better part: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Few things are less significant to missionary work than personal belongings. Instead, we must "treasure up in [our] minds continually the words of life" (D&C 84:85). The Lord warns us of the consequences of focusing on the temporal: "Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen? Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world" (D&C 121:34-45). The question that newly called missionaries should be asking instead of "what should I bring" is "how can I be most effective in bringing souls to Christ?" For the devoted missionary, no bed is too hard and no culture is too challenging. All energies are directed toward the task of reaching souls.

Determination and Mindset

By one's mindset and determination, much of the foundation for missionary success or failure is laid before one arrives in the mission field. Those determined to reap an abundant harvest can typically do so, while those who lend credence to the myths that "it doesn't really matter how many conversions there are" or that "the Lord is in control, so it isn't so important how I work" are easily neutralized. It matters a great deal how effective we are in proclaiming the gospel when the lives of our brothers and sisters are changed through repentance and conversion. If our own souls are precious, surely the souls of our fellow men and women are as precious as our own, not as statistics, but as unique individuals precious in the sight of our Heavenly Father. How successful would Ammon have been if he had decided that he already had too many member visits and discussions on his schedule to go out and do more contacting? Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated: "We are not getting the results we ought to get. We are not getting the numbers of baptisms that in my judgment the Lord expects us to get. To a degree, at least, we are grinding our wheels without going forward ... Perhaps what is wrong is that we have not desired faith with all our hearts to bring souls into the kingdom. Perhaps we have not made up our minds that we can and will bring people into the Church. Now, very frankly, whether we gain many converts or few depends in large measure upon our frame of mind."[\[129\]](#)

President Ezra Taft Benson declared: "New missionaries need to know exactly the purpose for being in the mission field which is to save souls, to baptize converts, and to bring families into the church."[\[130\]](#) Similarly, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught

missionaries: "Behold how great is your calling (D&C 112:33) ... You are not sent here to take pictures. You are not sent here to play. You are sent here to find and teach. That's our opportunity, our challenge, and our responsibility. You'll never rise higher in all your lives than you will do while you are in the mission field. That may sound like a strange thing. I said that once in Argentina many years ago, and about ten years later I received a letter from a young man who said, 'When I was on a mission in Argentina, you came there and you put a hex on me. I haven't been able to lift it. I have been no good ever since. I failed in school, I failed in my work, I failed in my marriage.' I didn't put a hex on him. I simply told him that he would never stand taller, never rise higher, than while in the service of the Lord, and his subsequent life demonstrated that."^[131]

Words, Thoughts, and Desires

Words and thoughts reflect true priorities and desires. A dedicated missionary consistently centers his desires and thoughts on the Lord's work and always seeks to be more effective. An astute missionary companion noted that "you can tell a lot about missionaries by the things they talk about when they get together." Effective missionaries share experiences, information, and ideas about missionary work, while others talk about entertainment, meals at nice restaurants, or postmission plans. Self-improvement comes naturally when the Lord's work is put above one's own. Our willingness to sacrifice personal desires and think the Lord's thoughts rather than our own is a strong indicator of personal conversion.

Scripture Study

The time to learn the scriptures is long before the mission call. Missionaries who seriously study the doctrines of the restoration, master the scriptures, and memorize hundreds of verses before their missions as President Benson instructed are able to hit the ground running. Missionaries who have not consistently studied the scriptures prior to their missions lose much valuable time in the field in search of basic understanding. Righteous habits and correct understanding of the gospel are not acquired overnight. Many individuals accept and promulgate a philosophy that spiritual needs can be met by reading only one or two verses of scripture per day. The intent may be to encourage those who are not reading scriptures regularly to read some small amount, but the usual effect is to generate complacency with little or no real effort at scripture study. Full nourishment is necessary for us to endure the heat of the day of mortal challenges and temptations. We cannot abide the conditions of salvation or teach them to others without understanding them ourselves.

It is not enough simply to read the scriptures. They must be written on our hearts and guide our conduct and actions. Missionaries must become fluent with the scriptures in the local language. A missionary's knowledge of scriptures is of little benefit to others if he cannot freely share passages with investigators and members.

Follow the Spirit

The Spirit speaks both to mind and heart (D&C 8:2) and can no more speak to the mind in an environment of illogic than it can speak to the heart in an environment of contention and dispute. Exclusive focus on reason at the expense of spiritual feeling is equally ineffective. True spirituality demands both mind and heart, reason and feeling, logic and love. Truth, reason, and enlightenment come from the same divine spirit as the burning within the heart. The Lord can fully answer our prayers only when we have made an earnest attempt to study, contemplate, and understand. The Spirit can enlighten us to its full potential only when we have done our part to investigate, study, and ponder and when we sacrifice our personal desires to God's will.

Obedience: The Key to Testimony

Developing a testimony takes time, and testimonies exist in varying degrees and strengths. Elder Heber J. Grant stated: "I may know that the Gospel is true, and my wife may know it; but I do not imagine for one moment that my children will be born with this knowledge. We receive a testimony of the Gospel by obeying the laws and ordinances thereof; and our children will receive that knowledge exactly the same way; and if we do not teach them, and they do not walk in the straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life, they will never receive this knowledge."^[132] The real measure of testimony is the extent to which obedience to the gospel is reflected in our daily lives. The Savior taught that a testimony is acquired through obedience: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). The best and only way to come to understand the truth of any gospel principle is to live it. Alma describes how our faith can grow from belief into a perfect knowledge by nurturing the word through obedience to the gospel (Alma 32). There is a greater difference between the missionary who is 100 percent obedient and a 95 percent missionary than between a 95 percent missionary and a 50 percent missionary. The Lord can trust missionaries who are consistently faithful to work miracles like Paul, Nephi, and Ammon, while those whose obedience is inconsistent never reach their full potential in bringing souls to Christ.

True Faith, Expectations, and Reality: Emotional Preparation for Serving Effectively

Emotional preparation for frequent rejection is one of the most important preparations for missionary service. The scriptures are replete with directives to share the gospel without regard for the fear of man, and all those who heed the ridicule of those in the "great and spacious building" stray from the straight and narrow path (1 Nephi 8:33-34). Many missionaries are discouraged that more people do not accept their message. Frequently, the problem lies not in their techniques, but in unrealistic expectations and in not meeting enough people. Most missionaries expect to baptize a relatively high percentage of those whom they meet and teach. Many state that they have "faith" that all of their investigators will desire to be baptized, that all of those who commit

to baptism will carry through, and that all those who are baptized will remain active and strong members of the church throughout life almost regardless of the quality of teaching or demonstrated level of commitment. "Faith" that does not allow for the moral agency of others is deficient. Inspirational stories of miraculous success with seemingly little effort can fuel unrealistic expectations.

Missionaries can become discouraged when results do not measure up to their expectations, and many slacken their efforts to minimize further rejection. When missionaries have excessive expectations for early acceptance and are poorly prepared to cope with rejection, they often waste valuable time by repeatedly visiting investigators who are not keeping commitments, while failing to put forth adequate ongoing contacting efforts. Beyond a certain point, additional effort with the same individuals generates diminishing returns. Missionaries who are content with contacting a handful of people each day never rise above mediocrity.

While much can be done to improve finding and teaching effectiveness, frequent rejection is a fact of life for even the best missionaries in almost every mission. Traditionally, only a fraction of investigators at each major decision point typically progress. Only a small fraction of those who promise to attend church actually show up, and most missionaries find that 40 to 70 percent of first and second discussions fall through. In the early 1990s, the Church Missionary Department reported that only about one-fifth of first discussions lead to second discussions, only a fraction of investigators commit to baptism, and only one-fifth of baptismal commitments are carried through. Other research demonstrates that only one-quarter of international converts remain active for any meaningful period. Much can be done to improve progression at the later points. I have consistently found that over 80 percent of baptismal commitments are accepted, a similar percentage materialize, and 80 to 90 percent of baptized converts remain active with application of the principles described in this book, leading to exponentially greater long-term success. Yet virtually all missionaries experience a high degree of rejection in the early stages as part of the scriptural "sifting" of those who hear the gospel message.

All effective missionaries are undeterred from sharing the gospel and maintain consistent high effort in the face of frequent rejection. They expect to contact thousands and teach many in order to bring a single contact into the church. The Savior taught that we will experience rejection just as He did: "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20). Mission President Charles Creel instructed missionaries: "If you aren't being rejected many times each day, you aren't doing much missionary work." The gospel polarizes people, and those who accept or reject the gospel are passing judgment on themselves and not on the messengers. We must be sensitive to local customs and individual needs and feelings so that the rejections that inevitably come will be for the gospel's sake rather than because of our own lack of preparation or sensitivity.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell noted: "Too many of us seem to expect that life will flow ever smoothly, featuring an unbroken chain of green lights with empty parking places just in front of our destinations!"^[133] President Howard W. Hunter taught: "This faith and hope of which I speak is not a Pollyanna-like approach to significant personal and public problems. I don't believe we can wake up in the morning and simply by drawing a big 'happy face' on the chalkboard believe that is going to take care of the world's difficulties. But if our faith and hope are anchored in Christ, in his teachings, commandments, and promises, then we are able to count on something truly remarkable, genuinely miraculous, which can part the Red Sea and lead modern Israel to a place 'where none shall come to hurt or make afraid.'"^[134]

The real faith is in persistently putting forth our best effort, come what may, to teach others to love and live the gospel. With consistent effort over time, such effort is inevitably rewarded. In facilitating the miracle of conversion, the most important lessons are those that prepare our hearts and minds to put our hands to the plough and to serve with all our might. Jim Rohn stated: "Don't wish it was easier; wish you were better. Don't wish for less problems; wish for more skills. Don't wish for less challenge; wish for more wisdom."

^[125] Kimball, Spencer W., Ensign, October 1974: 7.

^[126] McGavran, Donald Anderson, Church Growth and Christian Mission, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, 113.

^[127] Bishop James Donaldson, Crestmoor Ward, Denver Colorado Stake, circa. 1996.

^[128] Bednar, David A., "Becoming a Missionary," Ensign, November 2005.

^[129] McConkie, Bruce R., Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 21, 1975.

^[130] Benson, Ezra Taft, Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 1976.

^[131] Hinckley, Gordon B., The Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1997, 362.

^[132] Grant, Heber J., as cited in Collected Discourses, vol. 4, April 6, 1894.

^[133] Maxwell, Neal A., Ensign, November 1989: 82.

^[134] Hunter, Howard W., Ensign, October 1993.