


# The Law of the Harvest

## Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

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### Section II. Chapter 16: Teaching for True Conversion

#### Importance of Teaching

Gordon B. Hinckley taught: "[If missionaries could really convey the gospel message], at least twice as many people would come into the Church ... I hope this improvement will continue until we learn to really speak to the world."[173] One mission companion had a gift for teaching gospel principles in a simple and personal yet profound way that could convey the insight of the Holy Spirit to both the new contacts and longtime members. He was able to teach and baptize individuals whom I never would have thought it was possible to reach. I had never dreamed that hearing about faith or repentance for the thirtieth time could be so fascinating. The great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, who inspired millions with his practical insight on Christianity, wrote that if you cannot convey a principle of faith in simple terms, "then either you don't understand it or you don't believe it."[174] Walter Hooper called Lewis the "most thoroughly converted man I ever met." To a great extent, our ability to convey gospel principles is a direct reflection of our own personal conversion and the meaning of these principles in our own lives.

#### Prepare to Teach

We are commanded to pray for the Spirit before each visit (2 Nephi 32:9). A prayer within the home can also help bring the Spirit. If we do not receive the Spirit, we are commanded not to teach (D&C 42:14). It is better to reschedule an appointment than to teach without the Spirit.

Upon entering the investigators' home, distractions should be minimized. One should ask to turn off the television or radio at the start of each visit. Eating at investigators' homes is usually counterproductive. Missionaries should let investigators and members know ahead of time that they will not have time to eat. It is difficult to keep the Spirit when individuals are preoccupied with serving or eating rather than directing all energies to the one needful thing, the message of the gospel (Luke 10:38-42). Serving meals can also present a major economic burden to those in developing nations and can be a source of unseen tension in the home. If the investigators still insist on serving something, tell them that a light snack will suffice.

Introductions should be brief. On a first visit, a few open-ended, nonthreatening questions can often help the missionaries to gain insight into how to best meet the investigator's needs. What is the individual's vocational and religious background? What interests the individual about the Church or about faith and spirituality in general? Does the investigator have LDS friends or acquaintances? What are the investigator's goals in life? These and other relevant questions can be asked initially or at a more opportune time, depending on missionary rapport and verbal and nonverbal cues. The home or apartment can also provide clues about the individual's interests and priorities.

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At subsequent visits, the investigator's understanding and preparation must be assessed before beginning a lesson. Open-ended questions are asked to find out how the investigators understand the material covered at the last visit, what progress they have made on interim scripture reading, church attendance, and any other commitments, and whether they have any questions or concerns. The investigator's scripture reading should be discussed as specifically as possible. Individuals who claim to have read but state that they cannot remember what the reading was about have usually not read or have made only a cursory attempt. Discussing the reading as specifically as possible helps the missionary to understand how much reading is really occurring and helps the investigator to realize that the missionaries are serious about the commitment to study the scriptures. Missionaries who skip over investigator's statements about scripture reading without specifically discussing the material often face unpleasant surprises and will find that their investigators and converts rarely develop the habit of daily scripture reading.

The major highlights of the last lesson should be briefly reviewed. If the investigator does not accurately understand or remember the material covered in prior lessons, has significant unresolved concerns, has not read scriptures or attended church, or has not observed other commitments, it is generally ill-advised to proceed with the full discussion. Discussions should only be given when investigators are adequately prepared to receive them. If one chooses not to give a discussion, a short

lesson or brief follow-up visit focusing on the issues of concern is usually appropriate. It is important to attempt to stay on topic, but it is also important to ensure that investigator questions and interests are adequately addressed.

Once the baptismal commitment has been accepted, the investigator's progress toward each of the core commitments (reading scriptures daily, praying daily, attending church weekly, and observing the Word of Wisdom and law of chastity) is discussed at the beginning of each visit. This provides a very good idea of the investigator's overall status and a window into what issues may represent current or potential future challenges. The discerning missionary finds very few surprises, while the less effective missionary is frequently caught off guard with unanticipated disappointments.

Teaching lays the foundation for how investigators will act as members. It takes time and effort for investigators to absorb and apply the teachings and principles presented in the discussions. Few investigators can adequately incorporate the information and commitments from more than one formal discussion per week. Programs in which all of the lessons are crammed into brief intervals of three weeks or less have inevitably been associated with major deficiencies in the teaching process and low convert retention rates. There should be no pressure as to the pace at which investigators are taught, nor should there be any incentive for rushing investigators beyond the pace with which they feel comfortable.

**Teaching Time**

Wide variation exists in missionary teaching patterns. I knew many missionaries serving in Russia who routinely took two to three hours to teach a discussion due to language difficulties and habits of eating large meals in investigators' homes with every visit. Some Latin American missions experience the opposite extreme, with brief five- to ten-minute "doorstep discussions" that make passing mention of key discussion points to contacts who usually fail to understand or incorporate the whirlwind information overload. While this tactic succeeded in running up discussion numbers, the actual meaning of this increase is dubious, since few "converts" taught with this method remained active or acquired even a rudimentary grasp of the principles being taught. The Preach My Gospel manual instructs missionaries that lessons should take only thirty to forty-five minutes and that multiple small visits may be necessary to cover discussion material adequately. The Preach My Gospel manual provides short outlines of the discussions that can be taught in as little as three to five minutes. While such abbreviated summaries can be useful when discussing beliefs with street contacts, when time is short, or when reviewing past lessons, they are not a substitute for full-length discussions and should not be counted or reported as such.

I find that few investigators are able to comprehend adequately and incorporate the discussion material in less than sixty to ninety minutes. With the new four-discussion program, teaching the officially recommended thirty to forty-five minutes results in less instructional time between the missionaries' initial contact with an investigator and baptism than in a single three-hour Sunday meeting block. Most missionaries try to complete the discussions within the allotted thirty to forty-five minutes, since the prospect of return visits to complete a single lesson disrupts continuity and lacks appeal. Few find-out questions are asked as the missionaries race to complete the discussion, leaving the typical investigator with major unresolved issues that are quickly apparent to an experienced observer. At follow-up, investigator hang-ups expectedly relate to unresolved issues and misunderstandings that should have been recognized and addressed in the prior discussion. This highly abbreviated teaching schedule most commonly results in the rushed baptism of investigators who do not adequately grasp the lesson material. If investigators cannot find the time or muster the attention to sit through sixty- to ninety-minute discussions during their initial acquaintance with the Church, how will they possibly find the discipline to attend the full Sunday block meeting schedule for life? Limiting maximum teaching time to only forty-five minutes is also inefficient, especially in areas where missionaries cover large areas and may require considerable travel time.

I believe that sixty- to ninety-minute lessons are most adequate and appropriate. Follow-up and member visits should not take more than one hour. Staying beyond that time is usually counterproductive. A cardinal rule of missionary work is always to leave before the Spirit does so that the investigators eagerly anticipate the next visit instead of feeling anxious for the missionaries to leave.

The missionary discussions contain many essential principles that are new for many investigators and frequently require appropriate find-out questions, explanations, and examples. Investigators must be taught for true conversion and not for deadlines. Shortchanging the teaching of receptive investigators is false economy and fails to adequately prepare investigators for membership. Missionaries have no greater responsibility than to teach the gospel. Receptive and committed investigators deserve to be taught adequately.

Some missionaries teach fine lessons, only to misjudge their time and then ask to be excused at a critical point in the discussion when the allotted lesson time expires or the evening curfew approaches. The Spirit, which has been carefully built up to witness to an essential point, is lost, and the atmosphere upon returning to resume the discussion is not the same. While most such episodes can be avoided by remaining time-conscious, staying on a lesson schedule, and stopping the discussion on a suitable noncritical point if the lesson must be split, missionaries should keep in mind that their investigators' needs usually represent the "weightier matters of the law." It is unwise to abandon a highly spiritual discussion with a receptive investigator before a major commitment or crucial teaching point simply to stay within an arbitrary allotted time.

**Involve Members**

For serious investigators, it is essential to arrange for members to be present for at least two and preferably more discussions or

visits before baptism in order to ensure that meaningful fellowshipping begins long before baptism. In this way, the investigators develop friendships with active members with whom they will have long-term contact and benefit from their teaching and testimony. Local members also receive many benefits, including spiritual blessings, hands-on mentoring in sharing the gospel, and lasting friendships. I find that it is less helpful to bring members on the first discussion unless they are personal friends of the investigator, since the large majority of first discussions never result in a second, and the presence of a member is of questionable benefit for first-time investigators who are likely to have other hang-ups.

**Focus on the Savior**

We must focus on Jesus Christ as we teach the gospel. Nephi taught: "We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:26). All gospel principles ultimately go back to the Savior.

**Teach the Uniqueness of Latter-day Doctrines**

Recognizing that acceptance of Christ's work today through His chosen messengers is vital to our becoming modern disciples of Christ. Bruce R. McConkie stated: "Until we get involved with latter-day revelation, the process of conversion does not begin to operate in any substantial degree in the heart of an investigator. The Lord said to Joseph Smith: 'this generation shall have my word through you ...' (D&C 5:10). That is His decree. They either get it through Joseph Smith or they do not get it, and our whole perspective is: Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith."[175] Missionaries must take every opportunity to emphasize that the doctrines they are teaching, while found in ancient scripture, are understood only because of Latter-day revelation given to Joseph Smith and other prophets in our time. When investigators claim that their church teaches the "same thing," they often betray a lack of awareness of the true beliefs of their prior faith. To the world of sectarian Christianity, basic doctrines of the gospel such as the nature of God, the true definition of faith, the identity of the Savior as the Old Testament Jehovah, the requirements for salvation, the nature of repentance, and the Holy Ghost are all mysteries. Grant Von Harrison wrote of the responsibility to teach investigators to gain a love for the Book of Mormon and the prophet Joseph Smith: "If you fail in this basic responsibility, you will see many people accept the basic doctrines that you introduce, but they will not be inclined to join the Church."[176]

**Teach with the Book of Mormon**

Jesus Christ personally appeared to all of the main editors and authors of the Book of Mormon and instructed them what to write in the limited space they had to convey a message of infinite importance. In this sense, the Book of Mormon is unique among scripture in that Christ Himself was the Editor in Chief. The Book of Mormon was written for our day. Moroni wrote: "I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing" (Mormon 8:34-35). Having seen our day and having been personally instructed by the Savior Himself, Book of Mormon prophets provide the guidance for our times. Nephi testified that the sincere followers of Christ will recognize the voice of Christ in the Book of Mormon: "And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye -- for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness" (2 Nephi 33:10-11). He wrote that the Book of Mormon "speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth; wherefore, no man will be angry at the words which I have written save he shall be of the spirit of the devil" (2 Nephi 33:5). The way in which individuals receive the Book of Mormon determines whether they are able to receive additional divine truths. Mormon records: "These things have I written, which are a lesser part of the things which he [Jesus] taught the people. And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them" (3 Nephi 26:8-9).

President Ezra Taft Benson declared: "The Book of Mormon is the instrument that God has designed to 'sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out His elect unto the New Jerusalem.' This sacred volume of scripture has not been, nor is it yet, central in our preaching, our teaching, and our missionary work."[177] He taught that the Church is still under condemnation for taking the Book of Mormon lightly and that "the Book of Mormon must be the heart of our missionary work in every mission of the Church if we are to come out from under this condemnation (see D&C 84:56-57)." President Benson emphasized that "we must flood the earth with the Book of Mormon." He noted: "A missionary who is inspired by the Spirit of the Lord must be led by that Spirit to choose the proper approach to be effective. We must not forget that the Lord Himself provided the Book of Mormon as His chief witness. The Book of Mormon is still our most powerful missionary tool. Let us use it."[178] He challenged us: "Would not the progress of the Church increase dramatically today with an increasing number of those who are spiritually reborn? Can you imagine what would happen in our homes? Can you imagine what would happen with an increasing number of copies of the Book of Mormon in the hands of an increasing number of missionaries who know how to use it and who have been born of God? When this happens, we will get the bounteous harvest of souls that the Lord promised. It was the 'born of God' Alma who as a missionary was so able to impart the word that many others were also born of God. (See Alma 36:23-26.)"[179]

In almost every case where true conversion has occurred, much of the converting power has come from the scriptures. President Benson taught: "There is a difference between a convert who is built on the rock of Christ through the Book of Mormon and stays hold of the iron rod, and one who is not. I promise you that you will have more and better converts in every

mission of the Church if you will teach and inspire missionaries to effectively use the Book of Mormon as the great converter."[180] President Benson stated that social, educational, or other converts will not endure the heat of the day, while those built on the rock of Christ through the Book of Mormon will endure. Bruce R. McConkie noted: "When you get into the active operation of your proselyting program, this is a concept you absolutely must have. It has been our traditional course in days past, unfortunately all too frequently, to say, 'Here is the Bible, and the Bible says this and this, and therefore the Gospel has been restored.' Well now, there is no person on earth that believes the Bible more than I do. I read it and ponder its words. I know that what is in it is true. But let me tell you, it is not the Bible that brings people into the Church; it is the Book of Mormon and latter-day revelation."[181]

I substitute Book of Mormon passages for Bible passages whenever possible in the discussions and in teaching, because they are clearer and more powerful than Bible verses, as investigators frequently attest. For the last eight months of my mission, I did not carry a Bible, using the investigators' own Bible on rare occasions when it was necessary to refer to it at all. It was not by chance that this was by far our time of greatest success.

It is almost always better to find an appropriate Book of Mormon scripture in answer to a question rather than to answer in one's own words. Investigators have a right to receive divine instruction rather than personal opinion. When missionaries integrate Book of Mormon scriptures consistently, investigators and members come to realize that they can find their own answers by reading God's word and develop a greater desire to study the Book of Mormon on their own. When passages from the Book of Mormon are read frequently with investigators from the moment they meet the missionaries, many gain a partial testimony and love for the Book of Mormon even before reading commitments are extended.

Overreliance on the Bible and underutilization of the Book of Mormon will fail to teach and inspire investigators adequately. I have seen many converts taught by missionaries with Bible-centric methods begin to question the importance of the Book of Mormon soon after baptism, usually without ever seriously studying it, and fall away shortly thereafter. This relates to several problems with the teaching process.

The prior missionary discussions encourage investigators to "contemplate that which you have read, comparing truths in the Book of Mormon with truths in the Bible." This instruction implies that the Bible is used as a standard for verifying the truth of the Book of Mormon and, by implication, constitutes a superior authority. While the Preach My Gospel manual no longer contains this instruction, some missionaries continue this practice which presents a stumbling block for many investigators. Scriptures teach us that this approach is exactly backward, since the Book of Mormon establishes the veracity of the Bible (1 Nephi 13:40). As a fourteen-year-old boy, Joseph Smith recognized that "the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible" (JS-H 1:12). The Book of Mormon is the only book of scripture that the Lord endorses as independently containing the "fullness of the gospel" (D&C 20:9, D&C 27:5).

Joseph Smith stated: "If Mormons believe in the Bible, we are the only people on earth who do, for there are none of the other sects of the day that do." Studies have shown that a large proportion of sectarian ministers do not believe in the literal resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and other fundamental doctrines of the Bible. Many ministers proclaim that the Bible contains the final word of God and represents the ultimate authority, while they simultaneously deny or ignore basic Biblical teachings. Many basic doctrines such as the degrees of glory and vicarious baptism, while mentioned in the Bible, are not taught or understood by other faiths. Sectarian views of the Bible are filtered through the orthodoxy of the apostate church and its creeds. Scriptures warn us not to underestimate the power Satan has over many because of false interpretations of the Bible. Nephi saw in his vision of the latter days: "Because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book [the Bible], which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God -- because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them" (1 Nephi 13:29). When we use the Bible as the foundation of our teaching, investigators can go to priests, ministers, or acquaintances and receive widely different interpretations of the same passage. Sectarian churches purport to show by taking selected, often poorly translated, Bible verses out of context and twisting their interpretation that the Book of Mormon does not agree with the Bible. Why would we want to increase Satan's power by perpetuating misconceptions about the Bible? We must instead direct attention to the source of Bible writings: the Savior and his ongoing revelations to mankind. When we teach with the powerful passages of the Book of Mormon, there can be no appeal except to God.

Many Bible verses represent poor choices for explaining doctrine. In both the old and new discussions, John 3:16 is the first scripture cited: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The Preach My Gospel manual omits the second part of verse 16 and skips to verse 17, although the whole passage is often read by missionaries and investigators in actual teaching situations. While the intention is to demonstrate God's great love and to build on common beliefs with investigators, missionaries are unwittingly pulling the carpet out from under their feet. This same verse is widely used by Protestant denominations to "prove" that all that is required for eternal life is to express belief. Investigators who understand the verse in this manner may interpret it to mean that there is no need to belong to a specific church, obey the commandments, or have the missionaries return. While the gospel writer used the word belief to describe a degree of commitment and obedience far greater than implied in modern uses, misunderstandings can be avoided by using scriptures from the Book of Mormon that speak powerfully of God's love but cannot be perceived to trivialize the conditions of salvation.

Prior discussion protocols advocated that missionaries recommend the story of Christ's visit to the Americas in 3 Nephi 11-14 as the investigator's initial Book of Mormon reading. Proponents typically reason that Christ's visit to the Americas represents the

highlight of the Book of Mormon. I have found that recommending these chapters for initial reading is often problematic. First, it may convey to investigators that other portions of the Book of Mormon that do not involve the direct teachings of Christ are less important than those that do. This is untrue and may make the investigator less inclined to read other portions of the Book of Mormon. Nephi, King Benjamin, Mosiah, Moroni, and other prophets talk about Christ far more than the epistles of the New Testament. The Lord proclaims: "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38). Helping investigators to understand this initially can prevent considerable difficulties down the road with those who pretend to acknowledge Christ while disregarding His prophets. The second and more serious problem with this approach is that chapters 12 to 14 are almost verbatim for chapters in the New Testament with only subtle differences, which for many investigators does nothing to help them develop a testimony of the Book of Mormon. Some intelligent, well-read investigators to whom I recommended the standard Third Nephi selection quickly concluded that many parts of the Book of Mormon were simply copied from the New Testament with minor changes. While in fact Christ gave some common teachings to his disciples in Israel and in the Americas because of their importance, one can understand how an investigator could get the impression that passages were simply copied with minor alterations. It is at best an anticlimax, and at worst testimony-threatening, to build investigators up for reading the Book of Mormon by emphasizing that it contains new witnesses of Jesus Christ, only to recommend passages that cite the old witnesses of the Bible almost verbatim. Only a tiny fraction of Book of Mormon chapters are redundant with the Bible, and recommending chapters for initial reading of which the large majority are redundant leaves investigators with an unfortunate and misleading impression. For these reasons, I do not suggest recommending 3 Nephi 12-14 early on for investigators with Christian backgrounds. I have found it to be much more effective to recommend powerful and unique sections such as King Benjamin's speech (Mosiah 2-5), Alma's discourse (Alma 5), the seed of faith (Alma 32), and many others. Try recommending a variety of selections throughout the Book of Mormon, and develop your own recommendations based on what works best for you and your investigators. It should always be kept in mind that the Savior Himself designed the sequence of material in the Book of Mormon. Do you suppose that there is a reason for the very first account given in the Book of Mormon being of a prophet prophesying the destruction and captivity of the people if they did not repent? Of a man therefore praying in behalf of his people and thereupon receiving his own testimony?

The effectiveness of missionaries in motivating investigators to read the Book of Mormon is a largely a reflection of the conviction of the missionaries themselves. Missionaries can testify all day about their belief in the Book of Mormon, but if they do not extensively integrate Book of Mormon scriptures into their teaching and finding dialogues, they are unlikely to be successful in inspiring investigators to diligently read and study the book for themselves. Testimonies of the power of the Book of Mormon should be specific and personal. When some missionaries describe how they began to seriously read and study the Book of Mormon only shortly before their missions or after arriving in the mission field, they unwittingly demotivate investigators and undermine gospel teaching. If missionaries who were raised in the Church did not have the conviction or drive to study the Book of Mormon earnestly until their missions became imminent, one wonders how investigators they teach could gain a deep and immediate desire to become lifelong students of the Book of Mormon.

**Focus on Commandments**

Keeping the commandments is and must be the main difference between members of the Lord's true Church and members of other churches or social groups. If investigators are not faithful in keeping small commitments, such as reading the Book of Mormon daily and attending Church each week, will they be faithful when their faith is tried by more serious challenges? Missionaries should take every opportunity to reinforce the commitments and emphasize that they are not one-time events but require daily effort and consistency. Only as investigators put forth effort to consistently adhere to gospel laws do true conversion and subsequent spiritual growth occur.

The core commitments that form the basis of faithful gospel living and are the basis for every missionary visit, whether with investigators, new converts, members, or inactives, include:

1. Daily prayer morning and evening and, where possible, midday also
2. Daily reading in the Book of Mormon for half an hour (Ezra Taft Benson)
3. Weekly church attendance and participation
4. Keeping the Sabbath Day holy (this involves much more than simply attending church)
5. Living the Word of Wisdom
6. Living the Law of Chastity (in words, thoughts, and deed)
7. Repentance of sins
8. Paying tithing and serving in the Church (for members)

When these commitments are not vigorously emphasized and enforced as requirements for baptism, many converts become content with nominal social activity in the Church while failing to observe other gospel laws. While activity in the Church is vital, little is achieved by building congregations of members who are not studying scriptures daily, keeping the Sabbath day holy, and living other commandments that are necessary to gain and retain the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Such individuals may demonstrate the appearance of growth by mastering church jargon and procedural tasks, while in fact failing to draw close to Christ. A new convert who practices consistent habits of meaningful daily family scripture reading, daily prayer, and full observance of the Sabbath is spiritually light-years ahead of a lifelong member who has been active in the Church for decades, served a mission, held many leadership positions, but neglects daily scripture reading and other gospel habits. The true strength of our testimony is demonstrated by our daily sacrifices.

**Share Testimony Effectively**

There is a difference between testimonies born of righteous living and deep conviction which motivate us to action and those

that merely go through the motions. Effective testimony bearing generally incorporates the following features:

1. Effective testimony is directed not simply to convincing the listener that the Church, or some principle, is true, but toward motivating the listener to keep specific commandments.
2. Effective testimonies tell how the bearer received a personal knowledge that the principle is true.
3. Effective testimonies share a witness of specific fruits that living the principle has brought into one's own life.
4. A "living testimony" must be radiated in our conduct. It is impossible to effectively testify about a principle which one is not living. Our lives must glorify the Savior and give powerful evidence of our faith.

**Find Out: Assess Understanding and Conviction**

Current discussions cover large concepts of the gospel in a very abbreviated format that require the addition of personal testimony, scriptures, experiences, examples, and discerning find-out questions on the part of the missionary and effort on the part of the investigator. When the discussions are presented without expanded clarification of important points and very specific, discerning find-out questions, it is unlikely that investigators will adequately understand or implement the principles taught. Before moving on, the investigator's understanding of each principle should be assessed with open-ended questions.

Due to the emphasis on building from common beliefs, many assume that investigators with a Christian background understand many gospel principles because of the use of a shared nomenclature. In reality, the restored gospel teaches a far greater depth to these principles than most members of other faiths appreciate. These principles should not be glossed over, since missionary teaching serves as the foundation of understanding for new members. When investigators state that they "already know" about faith, repentance, and other principles, this usually demonstrates not that they have mastered the topic, but that they do not understand it.

Investigators may demonstrate one of three levels of understanding:

1. Vague or inaccurate understanding. The investigator cannot accurately restate the pertinent points of the principle which was taught. The investigators may give vague answers parroting some of the major themes which were discussed but without adequate detail, or the answer may contain erroneous information.
2. Abstract understanding. The investigator can accurately restate the pertinent points but is unable to apply them to meaningful real-life situations or give original examples.
3. Understanding with insight. The investigator can accurately restate the points which were discussed and can give original examples and apply his understanding to real-life situations.

Anything less than understanding with insight is inadequate. One should never assume that the investigator has understood or incorporated a teaching point simply because he has heard it and has not asked questions or raised objections. Such assumptions are often unfounded and frequently lead to disappointment. Missionaries who are skilled in find-out techniques rarely face unpleasant surprises, while those who make unfounded assumptions are constantly bewildered as to why they are having difficulties with their investigators.

Effective missionaries ask specific find-out questions to accurately assess the investigator's understanding and acceptance of doctrines taught. When areas of lack of understanding are identified, they focus on remedying these deficiencies and help investigators to develop the gospel habits of daily scripture study and regular church attendance, rather than pressing onward in spite of unresolved issues.

When multiple investigators are being taught, it is necessary to ensure that each individual understands the principles. This does not need to take an inordinate amount of time, nor should each person be asked every question. When investigators demonstrate varying levels of interest, understanding, or acceptance, the missionaries must determine whether it is most appropriate to focus on the most interested individuals or to attempt to accommodate everyone. Often missionaries will be able to pick up on nonverbal cues if certain individuals are uninterested or feel uncomfortable when asked questions in a group setting, and the wishes of such individuals should be respected. If one individual is particularly skeptical or disruptive and not responsive to missionary explanations, focusing on the most receptive individuals can allow progress and avoid confrontation or disruption. If the investigators are on track for baptism, it is imperative to ensure that each individual fully understands the principles taught, agrees with them, and is implementing them. It is more important to ensure that each individual is fully prepared and worthy for baptism than to meet arbitrary goals for families or friends to be baptized simultaneously.

**Adapt to Investigator Needs**

The prudent missionary does not simply follow a cookbook but adapts the lesson as appropriate for the investigator's needs, background, interests, and time available. He is alert to verbal and nonverbal cues that help him to assess the investigator's interest and understanding and to identify challenges. He is respectful of the investigator's time and other responsibilities. He actively assesses the situation and is flexible in changing plans as necessary during the visit to best meet the investigator's needs. After each teaching session, he and his companion evaluate what went well and where opportunities for improvement exist. They carefully discuss each investigator to identify potential hang-ups and to determine how to best meet that individual's needs on future visits.

**Baptism**

As a missionary, I found that most investigators would sail smoothly through most of the second of the six discussions at the time, which emphasized the role of Jesus Christ and the first principles and ordinances of the gospel, culminating in a challenge for baptism. The investigators would typically express agreement with all points of the discussion until we arrived at the crucial question: "Will you be baptized on [date]?" The common reaction was one of bewilderment: "But I've already been baptized!" Upon investigation, most other missionaries in my mission, as well as many acquaintances who served in other areas of the world, reported the same problem with alarming frequency.

Many of our investigators with Christian backgrounds were familiar with the basic concepts of faith, repentance, and baptism, although they may have understood them somewhat differently. They agreed with the concept that baptism was necessary but did not understand why they had to be baptized in the LDS church after accepting baptism in another denomination. The principles of priesthood authority, apostasy, and restoration were not taught until the third discussion at that time, while the baptismal commitment was presented in the second. The discussions failed to lay a logical foundation for other Christians, who felt violated or threatened when asked to make a membership commitment to the LDS Church without first being taught and accepting the principles of apostasy, restoration, and divine authority.

The error of asking investigators who did not understand and accept these concepts to commit to baptism on the second discussion was in most cases unrecoverable once the investigators built up barriers with the surprised reply that they had already been baptized. Our solution was to switch the order of the second and third discussions, teaching the principles of apostasy, restoration, and divine authority at least one visit before the baptismal question was ever asked, to address potential concerns preemptively. We extended the baptismal commitment only in the third discussion and emphasized that baptism performed by those without authority was not recognized by God, before ever reaching the baptismal commitment. The results were remarkable; the percentage of our investigators who accepted the baptismal commitment rose dramatically. I never again heard an investigator respond to the baptismal commitment with the statement that he or she had already been baptized.

More than a decade later, the official lessons have placed the principles of authority, apostasy, and restoration in the first discussion, as it had been half a century earlier, so that investigators are taught these principles before the baptismal commitment is presented. The problem of investigators stating that they "have already been baptized" has become less common, but it still occurs when investigators are inadequately taught or when missionaries have not appropriately verified understanding and agreement. Clear and proper teaching of these principles is necessary to help the investigator gain an appreciation for the blessings of the restored gospel and to diffuse concerns preemptively.

**When Should the Baptismal Commitment Be Extended?**

Most missionaries using the Preach My Gospel manual still report low acceptance rates when they ask investigators to commit to baptism. Missionaries are instructed to extend the baptismal commitment at the end of the second discussion unless they specifically feel guided by the Spirit not to do so. Yet no attempt is made to help missionaries understand or evaluate the factors that impact responsiveness, and so such failures are not surprising.

The instruction to solicit the commitment for baptism at the end of the second discussion may be premature for most investigators. My research has found that few investigators have read more than several pages in the Book of Mormon or have prayed and received a testimony at the time missionaries ask for a baptismal commitment. Very few have any meaningful idea of the expectations of Church membership and are ill prepared to "count the cost" as the Savior instructed prior to committing to follow him (Luke 14:27-33). Most investigators have not attended church even once before the baptismal commitment is extended. How many would propose marriage to an acquaintance before even going on a date? Then why do we ask investigators to be baptized before they have attended church? These factors contribute to both low response rates to the baptismal commitment and to low retention rates even when baptism occurs. While the ostensible intent of such approaches is to ensure that missionaries are consistently inviting investigators to follow Christ, premature invitations to lifelong commitment before the conversion or repentance processes have begun in earnest typically backfire and lead to the loss of receptive people who could be baptized and retained with more and better preparation.

I have found that it is rarely appropriate to extend the baptismal commitment until investigators have attended church, read in the Book of Mormon, received a divine witness by the Holy Spirit, and demonstrated understanding of the principles of divine authority, apostasy, restoration, and one true and living Church. Missionaries should know whether investigators understand that the Church is true and are willing to observe divine commandments before extending the baptismal commitment.

At the time a baptismal commitment is requested, the basic expectations of Church membership should be discussed (see the previous Focus on Commandments section). If missionaries have been teaching the message of repentance, most of these points should have been covered well before the baptismal commitment is presented. If missionaries begin teaching the discussion with the baptismal commitment and determine with preliminary find-out questions that the investigators are not ready for the baptismal commitment, it is appropriate to defer the baptismal commitment to a later discussion and adapt the lesson to focus on foundational principles and basic gospel laws.

It is not necessary to set a baptismal date at the time the commitment is extended. The major issue is the investigator's desire to work toward baptism by living gospel laws. If a tentative date is agreed upon, the investigators should understand that this date will be adjusted depending on their consistency in implementing the gospel habits that demonstrate the fruits of repentance. By implementing these principles, my companion and I found our acceptance rate for the baptismal commitment rise from less than

one-quarter to over 80 percent. With appropriate preparation and insight, the investigator's response to the baptismal commitment should almost never be a surprise.

**Lessons from the Area Book**

Several times on my mission, I was assigned to serve in areas where previous missionaries had little success. After reviewing the area books where prior missionaries kept records of their activities, I began to understand many other reasons for low missionary success besides the "hardness of people's hearts." Records were revealing about what missionaries had or had not been doing, revealing four red flags in areas where missionaries had experienced low success:

1. Poor record keeping in general. What the missionaries had been doing was not clearly documented. Schedules were largely empty with only a few appointments, mostly with members and stale investigators, while very little contacting was being done.
2. The relative paucity of fresh contacts. There were often only a handful of contact telephone numbers, even in areas where missionaries had served for many months. Even these had often not been followed up promptly. I sometimes wondered what the missionaries had been doing with their time, since few discussions had been taught and there was scant evidence of finding or contacting activities.
3. Few investigators relative to the time the missionaries had served. Some area books might appear thick, but usually these went back many months.
4. A pattern of inappropriate discussions that was obvious even from the sparse documentation. Often, missionaries would push ahead with the discussions with investigators who had not resolved prior concerns or observed earlier commitments. Investigator records frequently contained notes like these:

"We finished the last discussion. John is still having trouble believing that there is a God who loves him."
"Mary had difficulty accepting the principle of tithing ... she has not yet been to church."
"We talked about eternal progression [4th discussion] with the Jones family. They are not reading regularly in the Book of Mormon and are having trouble believing in modern prophets."

Major investigator hang-ups should have been resolved early. When such difficulties were not resolved, the missionaries should have invited the investigators to come to church to learn more when they were willing to put forth greater effort, rather than pressing forward without resolving the underlying issues.

Many missionaries were frustrated at completing all of the discussions with investigators who were not attending church or regularly reading scriptures and who had never accepted the baptismal commitment. One exasperated elder asked, "We've taught them all that we have and they still haven't committed to baptism. What now?" The problem was rooted in the practice of improperly teaching discussions for which the investigators were not prepared. It is inappropriate to continue with new discussions when more basic material is not accepted or commitments are not being kept. Introducing new material generally overwhelms doubtful investigators further, rather than resolving existing concerns.

These practices were adopted by missionaries who are interested in filling up their schedules with visits of any quality rather than acting in the best interest of the Lord and the people they were called to serve. The proper question when scheduling discussions is not "how can we fill up our schedule to minimize or avoid contacting," but rather "are the investigators adequately prepared to hear and accept the next lesson." If we will "treasure up in our minds continually the word of life," it will be given to us "that portion that shall be meted unto every man" (D&C 84:85). The portion that is meted is "according to the heed and diligence which they give unto [Christ]" (Alma 12:9). It is counterproductive and contrary to the spirit of the Lord to mete out to individuals more than the portion that their heed and diligence allow.

After a few telephone calls to determine the level of interest of old investigators and contacts, we generally had the area book down to a fraction of its former size. Many individuals were sad that elder or sister so-and-so was gone but expressed no real interest to continue learning about the gospel. Such responses are indicative of inappropriate teaching centered on personal relationships rather than on the gospel of Jesus Christ. In areas that prior missionaries had labeled as "hard-hearted," my companions and I always found it remarkable how much more receptive we found the local people to be as we consistently got out of doors to make new contacts and kept an active turnover. Increased contacting, appropriate teaching, and prayer were associated with greater success, and the congregations started to grow again.

**Addressing Concerns of Critics**

Anti-LDS literature and concerns of critics need to be addressed, because they are ubiquitous and are encountered repeatedly by missionaries worldwide. The impact of critics on Church growth is small compared to the impact of our own faithfulness, obedience, and implementation of correct principles in our own missionary efforts, as suggested in D&C 103:5-10. My research suggests that the implementation of appropriate and effective finding and retention programs founded in gospel principles can each increase real growth by three- to fourfold (and approximately tenfold in combination), while the detriment of anti-Mormons can be generously estimated at less than 50 percent. Nonetheless, the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi attributes the small size of the worldwide Latter-day Saints Church to the activities of the "great and abominable church" (1 Nephi 14:10-12), which undoubtedly encompasses anti-LDS agitators.

Just as Book of Mormon missionaries experienced far greater success among the Lamanites than among the Nephite

dissenters, attempts to reclaim hostile ex-members are rarely successful today. This is not because the claims of critics are difficult to answer; to the contrary, I have not found a single significant claim of critics that can endure the scrutiny of honesty, sound reasoning, full historical context, and scripture. It is rather because those affected by critical literature have often closed their minds to any possibility of a faithful solution before allowing an audience. Following King Lamoni's miraculous conversion, all those who heard his testimony believed and were converted, but many refused to listen (Alma 19:31-32). Even the Savior experienced little success in his ministry among the Pharisees.

Anti-LDS literature is problematic precisely because it dissuades many individuals before they even allow defenders of the faith an audience. One former mission president observed that once the poison of anti-Mormonism gets into the system, it is very difficult to reverse. Even when individuals are willing to discuss concerns, answering one concern often results only in the presentation of a litany of others. When concerns are addressed to the individual's satisfaction, most disaffected members still fail to return to church. Alleged concerns sometimes have little to do with the real difficulties. Some individuals like to drink beer or to spend Sundays playing golf and cite criticisms to rationalize chosen behavior patterns.

Yet scriptures also teach that many honorable men and women have been "blinded by the craftiness of men" (D&C 76:75) and misled by church critics. It is not for us to judge the worthiness or motives of those willing to seek answers to their questions. Some of the most destructive "answers" I have ever seen have come from committed but insensitive members who seemed to be more intent on "proving" that the questioner had some underlying spiritual problem than in providing a rational reply. The fact that an individual is willing to seek out and listen to a reply places him far ahead of most of those troubled by the claims of critics.

Prevention is the first line in dealing with anti-Mormonism. This includes a focus on each member and investigator's daily study of the Book of Mormon, with families where possible, personal and family prayer, church attendance, and personal worthiness. When these habits are not in place, individuals are unlikely to have the guidance of the Holy Spirit and are much more vulnerable to the false claims of critics. Those with limited spiritual maturity and historical knowledge of the Church, such as investigators, are particularly vulnerable to anti-LDS claims. Investigators preparing for baptism and new converts should also be prepared for adversity by being made aware that there are many false accusations circulating about the Church.

Austin Farrar noted: "Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."[182] While the practice of reducing all questions to a testimony of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon can be a valid starting point, the inability to provide specific answers to repeated questions can be unsettling.

The average member or missionary does not need to know the answer to every question of critics, nor do criticisms and their answers usually represent a good use of study time. However, it is valuable to be aware of resources for dealing with such concerns. When one does not know the answer to a question, local members or leaders may be helpful. The Foundation for Apologetics Information and Research (FAIR) maintains a Web site at www.fairlds.org with answers to critics, extensive resources for defending faith, and an online response team that can provide assistance with addressing difficult concerns. FAIR has no administrative connection to the Church, and answers may be helpful but should not be viewed as official.

Awareness of some of the tactics used by critics of the Church can be helpful in understanding how to combat them. Such points are nicely addressed in the book Guess Who Wants to Have You for Lunch? A Missionary Guide to Anti-Mormon Tactics & Strategies published by FAIR.[183] Wider awareness of challenges in defending faith and the resources available for answering them are necessary to achieve faster and more accurate responses to investigators and members tainted by anti-Mormon literature during the very limited time window in which some receptivity to faithful answers may be preserved.

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