

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 17: Teaching Points from the Discussions

The following points are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the discussions but offer practical observations on selected topics.

Belief in God

Belief in God is a long-term issue with deep roots, which can only rarely be changed by missionaries. There are many witnesses in the world to the existence of God (Alma 30:44), and the testimony of missionaries can rarely overcome an individual's lifelong rejection of the witnesses of nature all about him. However, there are many good people like King Lamoni who acknowledge the existence of a greater power, yet have thought little about God. To the sectarian world, the nature of God is a mystery. Many denominations preach an incomprehensible God who is everywhere and yet nowhere in particular, in whose image nothing could be created, and for who man can be only a distant servant rather than a friend. Without an understanding of God's attributes and perfections, as Joseph Smith noted in Lectures on Faith, there is no means to develop true faith in Him. Our belief in a good, merciful, and just God is unique and empowering. The ancient pagan faiths believed in gods who were often capricious and unjust. Many Christian denominations also preach an unjust god, who they believe will save them in iniquity because they acknowledge their creed as a one-time event or with a deathbed confession after a life of sin, while condemning to eternal punishment unbaptized children and just and honest individuals of other faiths who live more righteously. Some good men and women of other faiths may understand God's justice and perfection, but to the extent that they do, it often represents a divergence from the official teachings of their denominations.

Continuing Revelation through Prophets

Investigators should understand that revelation must be an ongoing process and that the word of God to ancient peoples as contained in the Bible, while it is very important to us, is not fully adequate for us today. We need a living prophet to receive God's ongoing word. The living prophets have never been popular or widely accepted by the world. The creed of apostate religions has always been to pretend to follow dead prophets while persecuting the living ones. The Pharisees of Christ's day claimed to be disciples of Abraham and Moses, while rejecting the living Christ. Christ pointed out that they would have accepted Him if they had truly understood and obeyed the teachings of Abraham and Moses (John 5:45-46). Christ taught that whosoever accepts His representatives on earth accepts Him, and whosoever rejects His earthly representatives rejects Him also. It is easy to nominally acknowledge long-dead prophets, since they are not here to admonish to repentance. False religions can readily take out of context the words of dead prophets who are not there to object. It requires much greater effort to conform one's life to the Lord's teachings through modern prophets, since living prophets ask us to obey specific commandments today.

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The need for continuing revelation through prophets can be demonstrated by asking investigators what would have happened to an individual living in the time of Noah who tried to live righteously and claimed to accept the teachings of Adam, Enoch, and other prior prophets but refused to listen to Noah. If he rejected the living prophet and did not board the Ark, what would have happened to him when the floods came? Today we have many challenges and circumstances which are different from those of ancient peoples. It is as vital for our salvation that we follow the guidance of the Lord's living prophet on the earth today as it was for individuals to follow Noah and board the Ark at the time of the Great Flood. It is not adequate simply to acknowledge the prophet's divine calling: we must obey his words. We should be anxiously engaged in learning and implementing the counsel of the living prophet, the Lord's mouthpiece on earth.

Joseph Smith

Wilford Woodruff taught: "Those who have been acquainted with the Prophet Joseph, who laid the foundation of this Church and kingdom, who was an instrument in the hand of God in bringing to light the Gospel in this last dispensation, know well that every feeling of his soul, every sentiment of his mind, and every act of his life, proved that he was determined to maintain the principle

of truth, even to the sacrificing of his life."[184] The Joseph Smith testimony pamphlet is an excellent proselyting tool, because it teaches most of the points of the first three discussions, from the nature of God and the central role of Christ in the plan of salvation to the apostasy, restoration, and priesthood authority. For this reason, I have often found it helpful to give selected contacts a copy of the pamphlet and ask their opinion about it when I call to follow up.

While teaching the discussions, it is important to establish whether the investigator, like Joseph Smith, has been confused by the multitude of churches teaching discordant principles while proclaiming their own precepts to be true. The conflicting creeds of the more than 30,000 nominally Christian denominations cannot all be true or of God. Does he understand that although a variety of faiths may have varying fragments of truth, only one church can be completely true and that there should be one church for all nationalities and cultures? If so, is it important for them to find the true church? How can they find out which it is? If the investigator does not understand or agree that there can be only one true church and that it is important for us to find that church and obey Heavenly Father's teachings, it is unlikely that significant progress toward conversion can be made until understanding and agreement are achieved.

Many grown men and women have never considered or contemplated the essential and self-evident principle that the fact that there should be one true church for all people was apparent to Joseph Smith as a fourteen-year-old boy. Many declare of their national or cultural church that "we have our own church," betraying nondivine origins. Like Joseph Smith, the pure in heart seek to conform their lives to the will of Christ through divine instruction in His one true Church, rather than seeking a faith built on the works of man that conforms to personal aims instead of God's.

Apostasy and Restoration

Two visual aids are particularly helpful in conveying the concepts of apostasy and restoration. The first demonstrates the Lord's model of communication with mankind through the process of ongoing revelation linking heaven and earth. A timeline representing the history of the world is drawn from left to right on the bottom of a paper turned so that width is greater than length. The words "Heavenly Father" are written centered at the top of the page. Starting at the beginning of the timeline, the names of selected prophets such as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Nephi, and Alma are written. The investigator is asked whether Heavenly Father communicated with these prophets and then how He communicated with them (through revelation). Lines are drawn from the title "Heavenly Father" to the names of each of the prophets, representing revelation. The missionary explains that God sent His son, Jesus Christ, whose name is written on the timeline followed by the label "apostles." It is explained that after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the apostles were sent into all the world, but after a short time, they were persecuted and killed. The line of revelation ends, and a break is drawn. For many centuries, there was no true church upon the earth. Because people relied on their own wisdom for understanding of doctrine, contentions arose, and many separate movements were founded. Lines representing the apostate church are drawn branching into many offshoot denominations. It is explained that in our time, God called a prophet and spoke to him just as He spoke with Moses and other ancient prophets. Joseph Smith's name is written further down the timeline, and lines of revelation from Heavenly Father to Joseph Smith and other modern prophets are drawn. Revelations have continued with inspired prophets called after Joseph Smith up to the current prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, and beyond. Once you are convinced that the investigators understand the model, ask them to explain the apostasy and restoration in their own words.

The second visual aid teaches the concept of the only true and living church. The outline of a temple picture is cut out from an old Gospel Principles book or another source. The picture is cut into five pieces, with three on the top and two on the bottom. The three top pieces are labeled "revelation," "divine authority," and "teachings." The bottom two pieces are labeled "Jesus Christ" and "living apostles and prophets." The pieces are stored in an envelope for convenience when not in use. The temple representing the Church of Jesus Christ is assembled, and it is explained to investigators that the Church is more than just a building, an organization, or a collection of teachings. The Lord's true church is built upon the foundation of (1) Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20) and (2) living apostles and prophets with (3) revelation, (4) divine authority, and (5) teachings. The temple is taken down step by step during the discussion principle on the apostasy and rebuilt during the subsequent discussion of the restoration of the gospel.

This model demonstrates that the difference between the true Church and other churches is far greater than simply a few missing pieces of doctrine. Other churches have no living apostles and prophets, no ongoing revelation, no divine authority, and therefore no direct link with Jesus Christ. They have only some teachings, a small fragment of the complete church, which are corrupted because of the absence of the first four principles and by intermingling with the philosophies of men. Once you are convinced that the investigators understand these essential features of the true Church, ask them to explain the importance of each.

Asking of God

Like Joseph Smith, each investigator must receive a witness of truth by asking of God. Does the investigator understand why one's neighbor, friend, or pastor may not be an accurate or objective source of divine truth? If Heavenly Father is the source of divine truth, only He can confirm truth through the Holy Spirit and His prophets. Joseph Smith took real effort first to study out truth by study and contemplation. When he prayed, he prayed sincerely with willingness to obey the Lord's answer to his prayer, regardless of how difficult it might be. When we pray to know truth, we must be willing to live in accordance with the answer we receive. On many occasions I have heard missionaries instruct investigators to continue to pray for an answer, while failing to recognize the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit that had already borne witness to the investigators. While some receive remarkable revelatory manifestations, for most the witness of the Spirit comes as a "still small voice." A discerning missionary

can tell when investigators are feeling the Spirit and help investigators to recognize its manifestations.

Prayer

Whether the investigators pray vocally at the end of the first discussion is an important predictor of future success. If missionaries cannot get investigators to pray at the conclusion of the first discussion, chances for a return visit and for future progress with the investigator are significantly reduced. Therefore, every effort must be made to help the investigator to pray at the end of the discussion. Few missionaries are able to get more than a minority of their investigators to pray at this time, generally because the investigators are not prepared adequately and the commitment is not presented properly. I have found that the application of a few simple steps can consistently increase the percentage of investigators who pray verbally at the conclusion of the first discussion to over 80 percent.

A chart of the four steps of prayer (addressing Heavenly Father, giving thanks, asking for blessings, and closing) is introduced to the investigator. The missionary asks the investigator who we pray to (Heavenly Father). Then we give thanks. The investigator is asked what he or she is thankful for, and several responses are written down on a piece of paper following the respective prayer steps. Common responses include one's family, work, health, life, the day, the gospel, and so forth. The investigator is then asked what blessings he or she needs in his life, and a few of the mentioned blessings are jotted down. Many investigators mention needs such as blessings for their family, help in finding or learning truth, health, safety, and so forth. The investigator is then asked how we close a prayer (in the name of Jesus Christ, with "amen" signifying agreement). The investigator is encouraged for his or her replies. At the end of the discussion, it is easy to encourage the investigators to pray. The common objection that they do not know how to pray has been preemptively diffused. The missionary can remind the investigator that they have already come up with all of the elements of prayer. Missionaries must exude confidence that the investigator can pray. Although the investigator is not limited to his list, he can use this as a reference. The investigator may need to be prompted slightly, but the overwhelming majority will offer a prayer. The investigator should then be commended for praying.

Faith

Investigators must be taught the distinction between true faith and mere belief. Joseph Smith taught that faith is a principle of power that requires sacrifice and commitment that transcend mere belief. Ezra Taft Benson taught: "Unless we do His [Christ's] teachings, we do not demonstrate faith in Him."[185] My father defined faith as "the will to do right." I believe it is, even when it requires great personal sacrifice.

Gift of the Holy Ghost

Investigators should be taught to distinguish between the Holy Ghost, the Light of Christ, reason, and personal feelings and emotions. Knowing that something is right or wrong is not a function of the Holy Ghost, but of the Light of Christ: one's conscience. The Holy Ghost distinguishes between true and false (Moroni 10:5) and provides other gifts of the spirit. The Holy Ghost is not automatically received when the gift of the Holy Ghost is conferred on us. The scriptures provide some examples of exceptional individuals who were sufficiently prepared that they immediately received the Holy Ghost after confirmation. Most of us have to work hard after baptism to receive and retain the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is not commanded to come to us: we are commanded to actively "receive the Holy Ghost," or to seek, find, and keep it through our diligence and obedience.

Sabbath Day

Observance of the Sabbath is a core commandment that should be taught to all investigators at the time that they express a desire to work toward baptism, since obedience to this law is necessary for the investigators to receive the Holy Spirit. Observance of the Sabbath includes more than simply attending church meetings. It means that we do not buy or sell things on Sunday, work in our garden, or engage in paid employment when at all possible. Harold B. Lee taught: "May we not hope that in addition to our worshipful activities on the Lord's Day we might also on that day reduce the drudgery of the home to a minimum, and that outside the home only essential chores will be performed. Make this a day of prayerful, thoughtful study of the scriptures and other good books ... My experience has taught me that the prompting of the conscience to a faithful Church member is the safest indicator as to that which is contrary to the spirit of worship on the Sabbath Day."[186]

Prospective converts should understand that the spiritual necessity of attending church meetings transcends the value of the information conveyed. Christ taught that taking the sacrament regularly is vital to salvation: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:53-54). Spencer W. Kimball taught: "We do not go to Sabbath meetings to be entertained or amused; we go there to worship the Lord. It is an individual responsibility, and regardless of what is said from the pulpit, if one wishes to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth, he may do so by attending his meetings, partaking of the sacrament, and contemplating the beauties of the Gospel. If the sacrament meeting is a failure to you, you are the one that has failed. No one can worship for you, you must do your own serving of the Lord."[187]

The Word of Wisdom

Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted: "According to one study, 75 percent of adult converts in North America had to give up at least one of

these substances mentioned in the Word of Wisdom -- tobacco, alcohol, coffee, or tea -- and 31 percent had to give up smoking, a very addictive habit. The study also showed that almost all converts -- over 90 percent -- had a very high desire to avoid these substances after their baptism. However ... one third to one half of them reported that they had experienced 'occasional,' 'frequent,' or 'complete' lapses into their abstinence."[188] Tobacco use is much more prevalent in Europe, Asia, and Latin America than in the United States, while tea is ubiquitous in Europe and Asia. Most investigators acknowledge that smoking and drinking are wrong but cite the force of addiction.

Word of Wisdom problems represent a major obstacle to baptism and to long-term convert retention. In the old discussion series, Word of Wisdom issues were brought up only at the end of the fourth discussion, when the investigator had already completed two-thirds of the entire discussion series and two discussions after the baptismal commitment was obtained. In the Preach My Gospel discussion series, Word of Wisdom issues are typically brought up only in the final discussion before baptism! These issues often take time for investigators to overcome. Many missionaries run out of material to teach while the investigator continues to struggle with overcoming an addiction, and some investigators are never baptized in spite of completing a full series of discussions.

I often find it helpful to bring up the Word of Wisdom restrictions on smoking and alcohol on the first or second visit with an interested investigator, recognizing these habits as potentially serious stumbling blocks that must be addressed early. Substance addictions also impair the spirit, and progress is often limited when the investigator has numbed his spirit with nicotine or other drugs. There is no point in sailing smoothly through the early discussions only to find out much later that the investigator wants to take several months to try to stop smoking. Mentioning the Word of Wisdom early also saves face for the investigator, because they have a longer time to quit and are able to get more support along the way. Most individuals know from their conscience that alcohol and tobacco abuse are wrong, and so raising these issues even before investigators have gained a testimony rarely leads to objections.

In most cultures, abstinence from tea or coffee should not be pushed until the baptismal commitment is obtained, although some individuals will discontinue drinking them as soon as they learn that the missionaries abstain. These substances, while still addictive, are usually significantly easier for investigators to give up than alcohol and tobacco. It is also more difficult for many people to understand the need to give up these substances until they have received a testimony.

Because many investigators never conquer substance addiction, no baptismal commitment should be considered firm until the Word of Wisdom is being fully observed for sustained periods. All prospective converts should be expected to abstain from substances forbidden by the Word of Wisdom for at least four weeks prior to baptism to ensure that addictions are firmly overcome. Shorter periods lead to high relapse rates.

Missionaries serving in Europe or Asia where tea is widely consumed should be aware that many of the commercially available "herbal teas" are actually mixtures of herbs with yellow, black, or green tea. Many missionaries have unwittingly consumed large quantities of forbidden tea in investigators' homes by assuming that all "herbal tea" is safe. If an investigator offers "herbal tea," the missionary should always look at the box to ensure that tea extract is not one of the ingredients before accepting.

The Word of Wisdom offers benefit to all. Heber J. Grant taught: "No man who breaks the Word of Wisdom can gain the same amount of knowledge and intelligence in this world as the man who obeys that law. I don't care who he is or where he comes from, his mind will not be as clear, and he cannot advance as far and as rapidly and retain his power as much as he would if he obeyed the Word of Wisdom."[189]

"I believe it is totally unnecessary that we lose [any of] those who are baptized." Gordon B. Hinckley

[184] Woodruff, Wilford, Journal of Discourses, 2:192.
[185] Benson, Ezra Taft, Come Unto Christ, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1983, 132.
[186] Lee, Harold B., Decisions for Successful Living, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1973, 148.
[187] Kimball, Spencer W., Conference Report, April 1944.
[188] Oaks, Dallin A., "The Role of Members in Conversion," Ensign, March 2003.
[189] Grant, Heber J., Conference Report, April 1925.