

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 18: Convert Retention

The Savior's Teachings on Convert Retention

The resurrected Christ commissioned His disciples: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). The Savior taught that if we abide in Him, we will bring forth "much fruit" (John 15:5) which is to endure: " I have chosen you ... that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16). Christ's disciples are not sent forth to baptize individuals who lack commitment or understanding in order to generate long lists of nominal but overwhelmingly inactive members, but to build a living church of committed and participating believers who have undergone real and life-changing conversion. The Savior taught that individuals must count the cost of discipleship before deciding to follow him: "And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. And this he said, signifying there should not any man follow him, unless he was able to continue; saying, Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you" (JST Luke 14:27-35). Missionaries must help prospective converts to count the cost to ensure that they will be able to continue long-term in full Church activity, even in the face of significant challenges or hardships.

Christ taught that investigators must already be keeping the basic commandments at the time of baptism, rather than merely promising to do so: "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance ... And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matthew 3:8, 10). The Savior declared: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:16-20). Christ also taught "he that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church, for him I will not receive at the last day" (Mosiah 26:28). Other language translations clarify this passage with words equivalent to "hearken" or "heed" instead of "hear." If desiring baptism alone were adequate for church membership, the Lord would not have needed to give Alma these instructions. Prospective converts must not only passively hear, but also must actively heed the Lord's word to qualify for baptism.

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Christ taught that no constructive role is filled by recalcitrant inactives and members who do not live the gospel: "Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 14:34-35). In modern revelation, the Lord affirms: "If ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me" (D&C 98:15). It is incongruous with intelligence to believe that an investigator is willing to forsake everything for Christ and even to give up his or her own life if necessary, when he or she has been unreliable in making even the petty sacrifices of weekly church attendance, daily scripture reading, and so forth for even four weeks before baptism. When the disciples could not cast a devil out of an afflicted man, Christ admonished them: "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21). Similarly, helping investigators to become genuinely converted and to fully repent before baptism requires sustained preparation, meditation, and prayer.

Scriptural Teachings on Prebaptismal Preparation

The prophet Moroni emphasized that individuals are worthy for baptism only when they bring forth not promises, not sprouts, not leaves, but the actual fruits of full repentance, habits of consistent obedience to gospel principles, and righteous living: "Behold, elders, priests, and teachers were baptized; and they were not baptized save they brought forth fruit meet that they were worthy of it. Neither did they receive any unto baptism save they came forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, and witnessed unto the church that they truly repented of all their sins. And none were received unto baptism save they took upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end" (Moroni 6:1-3).

Paul's admonition to "lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Timothy 5:22) is commonly interpreted as a caution only against suddenly bestowing the Melchizedek Priesthood and high leadership callings upon green converts, but Greek manuscripts suggest differently. The Greek word "medeis" used in the phrase is not gender-specific to men, but means simply "no one": "Lay hands suddenly on no one." As the gift of the Holy Ghost is conferred during the confirmation of members of both genders shortly after baptism, Paul's prohibition encompasses and was likely directed primarily toward the rushed baptism and confirmation of unproven investigators. In 220 AD, Origen taught baptismal candidates: "Go and repent, catechumens, if you want to receive baptism for the remission of your sins ... No one who is in a state of sin when he comes for baptism can obtain the remission of his sins."[190]

The Book of Mormon provides an example of a spirit-led missionary program achieving 100 percent convert retention on a large scale. Of the efforts of Ammon and the sons of Mosiah, the Book of Alma states: "Thousands were brought to the knowledge of the Lord, yea, thousands were brought to believe in the traditions of the Nephites; and they were taught the records and prophecies which were handed down even to the present time. And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth, through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them -- yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:5-6). This example of 100 percent convert retention is not included in the Book of Mormon to tease us as an impossible goal: it is the standard we are to emulate.

Modern Prophets on Convert Retention

President Gordon B. Hinckley reaffirmed that full retention is both possible and expected, stating: "I believe it is totally unnecessary that we lose [any of] those who are baptized" (brackets in original).[191] Quality is never an accident, and full convert retention does not occur by chance. In order to achieve the enduring fruits spoken of by the Savior, the Book of Mormon, and President Hinckley, we must follow the instructions the Lord has given us through both ancient and modern prophets. Retention requires a combination of proper teaching, strong fellowshipping which is firmly in place well before baptism, and full prebaptismal preparation. President Faust noted: "President Hinckley's strong, continuing challenge to us is retention, which requires full cooperation between the missionary, the leaders and members."[192]

Missionaries and mission leaders have a responsibility to ensure that new converts are fully prepared and worthy for baptism. President Gordon B. Hinckley has instructed: "A convert is a 'precious person.' He or she will make a tremendous decision in coming into the Church. Retention will primarily be the work of the local wards and branches. However, you have a very, very important part in this. Your missionaries must be sure that conversion is real, that it is life-changing, that it is something that is to last forever and go on through generations ... There is no point in baptizing people if they do not become solid members of the Church. Actual harm, he said, may be done to those who leave old friendships and old ways of doing things only to be allowed to slip into inactivity."[193] President Hinckley challenged missionaries in Bolivia: "Will you please see that every convert who comes into the Church while you are here on this mission is so taught that he or she will grow in faith and that a year after baptism he or she will be ready to get a temple recommend, and as soon as the temple is completed will be eligible to go to the house of the Lord?"[194] The implication is that proper missionary teaching can ensure that almost all converts remain active and qualify for temple recommends. President James E. Faust taught: "Who should be baptized? The answer would seem easy. Should we not baptize all those who want to or are willing to be baptized? The answer is not that simple. It is a great responsibility to bring someone into this Church who has not been adequately taught and who has not received of the Spirit so that through baptism they may become a new person through repentance. Moroni gave a solemn warning about this in Mormon 9:29: 'See that you are not baptized unworthily ...' Some of our young missionaries are so hungry for baptisms they may urge people to be baptized before their investigators understand what they are baptized for. Peter said, 'Repent and be baptized' (Acts 2:38). We must be certain the repentance process is at work. Investigators have a responsibility on their own as they hear the message of the restored gospel, but what I wish to emphasize today is our responsibility to them because it is under the authority of the priesthood that they are baptized and come into the Church."[195]

Scriptures Cannot Justify Fractional Retention

In spite of the repeated mandates from ancient and modern prophets to achieve full or near-full convert retention, some Latter-day Saints dismiss even very low convert retention and member activity rates as part of a natural and allegedly unavoidable sorting process without even a cursory investigation into the causes and solutions, absolving both missionaries and members of any responsibility for quality teaching, adequate preparation, and fellowshipping of new converts. Adherents of quick-baptize approaches often cite the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:18-23), claiming that the falling away of many converts is inevitable. Yet the Savior gives no indication that the seeds sown on stony ground or among thorns in this parable represent converts baptized into the Church. To the contrary, the Savior describes them only as those who "hear the word": the Parable of the Sower is a parable of sharing the word with nonmembers of the Church. When the Savior is speaking of the Church, He typically refers to it as the "Kingdom of Heaven," a phrase absent in the Parable of the Sower.

Christ's parables of the "Kingdom of Heaven" imply that he is referring primarily to the active membership of the Church as being divided among "wheat and tares" (Matthew 13) and "wise and foolish virgins" (Matthew 25). Even the "foolish virgins" at least showed up to the wedding of the bridegroom, indicating that Christ was speaking about active members. Christ refers to the wheat and tares in the Church "growing together" until the end of the world. In ancient scripture, church history, and the contemporary church, we can find abundant evidence of both wheat and tares among active church membership. While the Church provides teachings and ordinances that are essential to our salvation, simply participating in the social structure of the

Church does not make us celestial people. As modern data indicate, only a fraction of active LDS members consistently observe central directives of ancient and modern prophets to share the gospel regularly, pay a full tithe, read the Book of Mormon daily, and so forth. Christ tells us that we cannot accurately discern between the wheat and tares in our midst, again suggesting that He is referring primarily to the active membership of the Church rather than to inactives. His statement that they will "grow together" until the "end of the world" again suggests that both represent active members, as even the tares have vitality that inactive and never-active members lack.

Knowing that the word will quickly wither in the stony ground of many listeners, it would be foolish to rush individuals to baptism before those who lack even the commitment to attend church for three or four weeks have sorted themselves out from those who have undergone a "life-changing conversion" that will "last forever and go on through generations." The need for the main sorting to occur before baptism is a key reason why the Lord instructs us to preach the word "not in haste" (D&C 60:8,14) and to gather "not in haste, lest there should be confusion, which bringeth pestilence" (D&C 63:24), why the apostle Paul instructs us to "lay hands suddenly" on no one, and why Christ taught of the need for listeners to first "count the cost" and be willing to forsake all that they have before embarking on the path to discipleship. (Luke 14).

There are a few occasions recorded in early Church history and even in the New Testament when individuals were baptized after what appears to be only a brief acquaintance with the Church, as in the case of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. These events occurred at a time of intense persecution during which accepting the Christian faith often meant facing a very real threat of death. Members often had to leave home and belongings to gather with the Saints, and tremendous sacrifice was implied in the act of joining the Church. Many converts came from the Jewish faith and other devout groups that were striving to carefully observe divine laws. Vast populations to reach over wide distances, limited time and resources, and persecution provided temporal urgency. The Bible is missing key portions, and the full background and follow-up of the stories of Philip and others are not presented. The scripture records: "And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more" (Acts 8:39). The dismal retention rates associated with quick-baptism policies suggest that if the Ethiopian eunuch became active in the Church following his baptism, this was likely a greater miracle than Philip being carried away by the Spirit. Missionaries today who employ quick-baptize techniques can similarly expect in many cases that they will "see their converts no more," not because of being miraculously carried away, but because of the rapid inactivity that almost always follows quick-baptize tactics. The teachings of Christ, Moroni, and many ancient and modern prophets teach compellingly that robust and thorough prebaptismal preparation is required. How can one possibly claim that a convert has brought forth the "fruits of repentance" and has a determination to serve Christ to the end when he has not even made the effort to attend church for several weeks and study scriptures daily?

The counsel of President Hinckley and the example of the sons of Mosiah on achieving full convert retention are possible and expected. My personal experience is also that 100 percent convert retention at one year and 90 percent convert retention at two to five years can be consistently achieved by the application of scriptural principles. I have seen excellent retention rates in areas that have previously struggled with "revolving door baptisms" with the implementation of such guidelines. Such results can be achieved anywhere with careful cooperation between missionaries and members and adherence to essential standards.

[190] Danielou, Jean, Origen, trans. Walter Mitchell, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955, p. 54, Homily on Luke 21.
[191] Hinckley, Gordon B., New Mission Presidents' Seminar, LDS Church News, July 4, 1998.
[192] Faust, James E., New Mission Presidents' Seminar, LDS Church News, June 26, 1999.
[193] Hinckley, Gordon B., New Mission Presidents' Seminar, LDS Church News, July 4, 1998.
[194] Hinckley, Gordon B., Bolivia Cochabamba Missionary Meeting, November 10, 1996.
[195] Faust, James E., New Mission Presidents' Seminar, LDS Church News, June 29, 1996.