The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 21: Understanding the Conversion Process

The process of conversion through the Holy Spirit occurs in the investigator's heart only to the degree that he or she puts forth consistent effort to obey divine commandments. Contrary to popular misconceptions, conversion is not a passive event that occurs when an investigator's heart is touched and he feels the Spirit. The Spirit can testify to an investigator of truth, but only the investigator can put forth the effort to nourish the seed through repentance and obedience that leads to true conversion and brings forth the fruits of the Spirit. James wrote: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). Even Paul and Alma the younger, whose conversion were facilitated through miraculous means, put forth great personal effort. Gospel habits must be firmly in place before baptism, or the converts will never receive the Holy Spirit that is crucial to conversion and retention. Those with gospel habits of daily scripture study, weekly church attendance, and active service are able to maintain their own spiritual nourishment through fellowshipping of the Spirit, while those without them can only rarely be adequately fed spiritually even by the intensive efforts of local members. The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-11) teaches that lasting conversion cannot be passively conveyed but requires active effort. Habits of obedience to basic gospel laws provide the key to keeping the oil of the Holy Ghost burning brightly in the lamps of both new converts and longtime members.

If there were even a grain of truth to the quick-baptize mantra that we should "baptize investigators quickly and get them the Holy Ghost before Satan gets to them," we would expect to see uniformly excellent retention areas where accelerated baptism tactics are practiced instead of the 20 to 30 percent rates (and sometimes far less) seen in actual practice. Such expressions also convey a deep misunderstanding of the workings of the Spirit. The confirmation prayer does not command the Holy Spirit to come upon new members, but rather commands the members to actively seek after and "receive the Holy Ghost" by living their covenants. Without consistent effort to study scriptures and bring one's life into harmony with divine commandments, most never receive it. The fear of losing the baptism if the investigator "changes his mind" conveys deep insecurity that is a hallmark of poor teaching and inadequate prebaptismal preparation. Proponents of quick-baptize practices understand neither the workings of the Holy Spirit nor the conversion process and are often driven by impure considerations contrary to the desire of those with an eye "single to the glory of God" to build the Kingdom of God through quality teaching leading to lasting conversion. Time is not a threat to true conversion. In view of the consistent history of crisis-level inactivity left by quick-baptize tactics, those who feel that they have been "moved by the Spirit" to baptize converts without a consistent record of obedience to gospel laws and firm gospel habits should ponder whether the spirit they heed is indeed a holy one. To the extent that convert retention rates in a given area, mission, or ward do not measure up to the divine standard of full retention, it almost inevitably reflects a deviation from scriptural principles.

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The Member Responsibility

President Gordon B. Hinckley taught: "It is an absolute imperative that we look after those who have become a part of us."[205] He stated: "Every one of us has an obligation to fellowship those (converts), to put our arms around them, to bring them into the Church in full activity. It is not enough just to go to Church on Sundays; we must reach out each day. I wish with all my heart that in Costa Rica every man, woman, and child who was baptized would remain faithful and active. And that can happen if all of you make up your minds to reach out and help the new convert. There is no point in the missionaries baptizing people only to have them come into the Church for a little while and then drift off. You have remained faithful, and I thank you for that, but again urge that you make an extra effort to reach out to those who have recently been baptized ... They need your help. God bless you to fellowship the new convert. That is so very, very important. That is a principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only as we reach out to help others are we truly Latter-day Saints."[206]

Fellowshipping is a vital element of any effective retention program. Inadequately fellowshipped converts may stray from the Church when challenges are encountered that a well-fellowshipped convert could have withstood. Members have a responsibility to offer a good example and warm and timely fellowshipping beginning well before baptism. Delayed or inadequate fellowshipping of the new convert and the poor example of active members who do not live the gospel in daily life can both contribute to convert loss. Early involvement of members in the fellowshipping process requires appropriate communication and initiative from the full-time missionaries.

The Missionary Responsibility

Member fellowshipping, while important, is not enough to retain converts unless they have been properly taught and prepared by the missionaries. The retention process does not start at the moment of baptism and confirmation. It begins much earlier, the moment that missionaries first walk in the door. I have never known of any ward or branch that was able to achieve consistently acceptable convert retention rates even with excellent fellowshipping efforts in spite of accelerated baptism programs practiced by full-time missionaries. With personal knowledge of the converts' challenges and executive decision-making authority about baptismal readiness and other important processes, LDS missionaries play a central role in convert retention. Missionaries control the quality and content of the teaching of converts, the preparation of converts at the time of baptism, the period over which converts are taught before baptism, and the degree to which active members are involved in the teaching and fellowshipping process prior to baptism. Missionaries make the ultimate decision about when investigators are ready to be baptized and perform the baptismal interview. The bishop and ward mission leader are denied any opportunity to evaluate the readiness of prospective converts for baptism, and so the ultimate responsibility for the state of the convert at the time of baptism lies almost exclusively with the missionaries.

For many years, most discussions of convert retention centered so exclusively on member fellowshipping efforts that many lost perspective that any other factors were involved. Many missionaries and leaders in accelerated baptism areas expressed the notion that "our job is just to teach and baptize. What happens after is the members' job." One returned missionary who had served as an assistant to the president in Chile candidly acknowledged: "The quality of prebaptismal teaching was never much of a focus. Many hoped that by simply baptizing large numbers of people, enough of them would remain active to build the Church. My mission president in the late 1990s tried to turn things around and focus on quality prebaptismal teaching and convert retention and not just baptismal numbers, but he was one of the first I know of to do so."

If trained missionaries who have full time to dedicate to the single purpose of finding and teaching potential converts are unable to get the investigators to attend church regularly and obey basic gospel laws for even a few weeks before baptism, is it reasonable to expect overwhelmed and undertrained local members to succeed at getting these "converts" to become active and obey gospel laws for life? Accelerated baptism programs result in converts who require not simple member fellowshipping, but comprehensive teaching and activation. The common rationalization that members should "fellowship new converts into full activity" is problematic, since most of the investigators are not "active investigators" at the time of baptism.

Former ward mission leader Kent Clark wrote:

Every missionary related meeting I attend is focused on what we can do about [the retention] problem. Unfortunately, it is all directed to efforts after baptism, instead of attacking the root of the problem which begins long before. We must abolish the evils of the spiritual dole and re-enthrone the personal responsibility of the investigator as the ruling principle of missionary work. It has always seemed curious to me that as a church we fervently embrace self-reliance and personal responsibility in matters of money but ignore them in the conversion process. If we pick the investigator up, carry him to the baptismal door, lift his arm and when he makes one feeble knock, i.e. attends sacrament meeting a single time, and immediately thrust him through, why are we surprised that many don't keep walking? ... If we want active converts then we must focus our attention on baptizing active investigators. To me this seems so obvious it hardly bears mentioning, but when I dared express some of these ideas in a stake missionary correlation meeting the arguments and denials from the full-time mission were fervent and passionate. "We're just following the prophet!" they repeated over and over. But page 234 of the official church Missionary Guide contains excerpts from a letter sent out from the First Presidency concerning who is qualified for baptism. It states that a prerequisite to baptism is that the investigators "attend regular Sunday church meetings and feel united with Church members." Nowhere does it state that this is accomplished by attending a single time. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anyone feeling such unity after two or even three Sundays.[207]

Missionaries have a responsibility to baptize only active converts who have firmly established gospel habits of weekly church attendance, daily scripture reading, and prayer and have fully overcome substance addictions. There are times when participating members fall away, and dedicated reactivation work is required in such cases. But it is an entirely different situation when converts are baptized without meeting scriptural standards only to fall away rapidly.

[205] Hinckley, Gordon B., Ensign, May 1997.
[206] Hinckley, Gordon B., Member Fireside, San Jose, Costa Rica, January 20, 1997.
[207] Clark, Kent, "Mission Vision: Personal Thoughts on Missionary Work in the Church Today," Sunstone Symposium, Los Angeles, California, March 5, 1998.