



The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 23: Special Cases in Convert Retention

Baptism of Children without Active Parents

The baptism of minor children without parents or other close family members active in the Church demands careful contemplation. Many sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds and some fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds are sufficiently independent to maintain their faith in the absence of family support. Many members baptized in their mid to late teens as the only members of their family have become strong members, served missions, and married in the temple. However, few children under the age of fourteen are able to remain active long-term in the absence of ongoing parental support, example, and teaching. Most young children who remain active have other active Church members in their immediate or extended family, or at a minimum a strong commitment of nonmember parents in ensuring that they attend church each Sunday and adhere to gospel standards.

There are very few instances where baptism without parental involvement is appropriate for children under age fourteen. Cases of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds must be carefully considered individually to ensure that each prospective convert is attracted not merely to the social elements but to the spiritual offerings of the restored gospel, has demonstrated sustained commitment to the Church, and has firmly established gospel habits. Child baptism proponents present a false dichotomy between immediate baptism and no baptism at all, yet many with genuine commitment are able to remain involved in the Church until reaching the age of emancipation when parental consent is no longer required. If prospective converts truly meet the scriptural requirement of having demonstrated a firm determination to serve Christ until the very end of their lives, they can wait weeks, months, or even a few years for baptism.

Waiting for baptism often helps to solidify conversion and commitment while weeding out uncommitted souls who would not have remained active in spite of baptism. Belgian leader Wilfried Decoo described his own experience: "Since I was a minor when I first expressed a desire for baptism, and my parents would not approve, I was required to wait three years. During that waiting period my knowledge, commitment, and testimony of the gospel only increased, while the sanctity and importance of the baptismal ordinance loomed ever larger in my mind."[\[226\]](#) Another former bishop wrote: "I was in the same situation as a youth, wanting to join the Church, but having parents who were almost hostile toward the Church ... After two and a half years of persistent study and having the lessons with three sets of missionaries, studying pro and anti materials, and interesting my friends and their families to join the Church before me, I finally got my parents' permission and was baptized a week before I turned eighteen. While it was agonizing at the time, I am grateful for the deep study I did while I was a 'dry Mormon.'"

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Baptism of Transients

Opportunities to teach and baptize transient students, workers, and visitors planning a return or move to a distant area within the next three months raise difficult issues. Recognizing the vital role of fellowshiping in convert retention, the baptism of an individual who is almost immediately transplanted to an area where he or she has virtually no fellowshiping support is a recipe for failure. Even the baptism of local investigators before an extended vacation or long trip can be problematic. Missionaries often shortchange the teaching process as they rush to baptize investigators before they leave, since they receive no "credit" for baptisms performed in other areas and face no personal consequences if the convert is not retained. My audits have found that few such converts become active or participating members unless there are other family members or close friends who are active in the Church.

I believe that it is rarely appropriate to baptize short-term transients returning to an area where the Church is already established. In most cases, it is best to help the investigators to establish firm gospel habits that will provide spiritual nourishment and transition their teaching to missionaries and members in the new area so that they can be baptized and fellowshiped in the ward in which they will participate. Investigators who have experienced genuine conversion can wait for baptism to be performed in their home area by missionaries and members who will be able to appropriately fellowship, nurture, and involve them. Rare exceptions exist in which baptism can be appropriate shortly before moving, but such situations should be thought through carefully, and the convert must be thoroughly prepared for the challenges to come.

The question of baptizing transients from areas without established Church units is more complex. It is not possible for individuals to fully meet the expectations of Church membership without an organized congregation in their home area. The concept of baptizing such individuals in the hope that they will serve as the nucleus of the Church at some future date when a congregation is established in their home area seems attractive, but the desired outcome is rarely achieved. As a missionary in Russia opening a new city for missionary work, I found that none of the members previously baptized in other areas became fully active when a branch was opened in their area, and few attended even occasionally. In case studies of new cities opened in other areas, I have also found that participating membership overwhelmingly comes from new converts rather than previously baptized members. Harm may be done by saddling new congregations with major inactivity problems from their very inception.

Careful consideration and reliance on the Holy Spirit is necessary, since there are situations where the baptism of individuals from areas without congregations is appropriate and necessary. In some countries, the Church must have a certain number of members in a city to receive government approval to open a congregation or send missionaries, and baptism of transients may help permit later Church expansion. Some converts make extraordinary sacrifices to maintain contact with the Church. One of the best missionaries I have known was a young soldier named Igor who was baptized while serving in the Russian Army in Germany. He returned home to a small Ukrainian city named Kirovograd with no missionaries, waited the requisite year, and then submitted his papers after making extraordinary efforts to make contact with a mission headquarters hundreds of kilometers away. He was a wonderful and effective missionary and went on to marry a returned Russian sister missionary in the temple and to serve faithfully in the Church.

In spite of the difficulties, I believe that in most cases, the benefit of the doubt should favor baptism for investigators who live in areas where the Church is not yet established. In every case, it is necessary to ensure that prospective investigators from such areas have undergone a life-changing conversion and are prepared for the challenges they will face.

[226] Decoo, Wilfried, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," *Dialogue*, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 97-113.